

Small shops in Tokyo neighborhoods keep crafts alive

By Linda Lombardi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — The Japanese capital is home to many modern creations: high tech, animation, youth fashion. But in the small crafts shops crowding the area known as Yanasen, visitors can watch artisans preserving traditional crafts, or updating them.

Yanasen (a combination of three neighborhood names: Yanaka, Nezu, and Sendagi) is in Tokyo's old downtown. Some of its shops go back generations, while others are new.

On the Yanaka Ginza shopping street, Midori-ya, in business since 1908, sells items handmade from bamboo, including chopsticks and baskets, as well as more modern cellphone charms, earrings, and figurines. Further down the street, a tiny storefront houses the young artists of Ito Manufacturing, who handprint t-shirts with their own illustrations and make custom *hanko*. A *hanko* is a personal seal traditionally used instead of a signature; Ito gives it an up-to-date twist with cute illustrations of animals, including pandas, a French bulldog, and a cat drinking beer.

In many of the neighborhood shops, the craftspeople can be seen at work. At Shibata Shoten, look past the display of paper lanterns and you'll see lantern painter Keiichi Shibata at his work table. The shop, started by his great grandfather, has been in business for about a hundred years in various locations around the neighborhood. It used to make paper umbrellas, for which there's little demand nowadays. The lanterns can be painted with a customer's name and family crest, and while Shoten says the samples on display are his mistakes, you'd never know it to look at them.

Then there's the woodworking shop Ito Furoten, which started out making



wooden baths around 1925 (*furo-ten* means "bath shop"). Azusa Miyahara, the fifth-generation owner, says not many women do this kind of work, but her father had only daughters, so he passed the business on to her 10 years ago.

The tradition of soaking in a bath is still strong in Japan, but tubs now are often made of other materials. So while Miyahara still makes wooden ones on order, the shop has branched out to include trays, vases, stools, and other items.

Grief, rage at 36-year sentence for ferry captain

By Hyung-jin Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Enraged parents wept and screamed as a judge sentenced a South Korean ferry captain to 36 years in prison for negligence and abandoning passengers when his ship sank earlier this year, killing more than 300 people, mostly high school students.

The highly anticipated verdict came on the same day officials called off searches for the final nine victims and reflects the continuing grief and finger-pointing over one of the worst disasters in South Korean history.

Relatives of the victims immediately criticized the sentences for Capt. Lee Joon-seok and 14 other crew members as too lenient. Lee was acquitted of a homicide charge, which could have carried a death sentence, because the court said there wasn't proof that he knew his actions would cause such a massive loss of life.

"Do you know how many children are dead?" one relative shouted out during the sentencing, according to Kook Joung-don, a lawyer for the relatives. "This isn't right," another screamed.

The intense anger points to the lack of closure many feel over the sinking. The tragedy shocked a country that had grown used to thinking of itself as an ultra-modern economic, diplomatic, and cultural powerhouse — a country that had left behind a string of deadly, high-profile accidents blamed on failures of infrastructure and regulation as it rose from poverty, war, and dictatorship.

More than half a year after the ferry sank, the country still grapples with recriminations over claims that authorities' incompetence during rescue efforts — along with the greed, corruption, and lack of interest in safety of government regulators and the ship's owners and operators — doomed the victims.

Most of the ferry passengers were teenagers taking a school trip to a southern island, and many student survivors have said they were repeatedly ordered over a loudspeaker to stay on the sinking ship and that they didn't remember any evacuation order being



COURT RULINGS. Lee Joon-seok, the captain of the sunken South Korean ferry Sewol, is seen at the Gwangju District Court in Gwangju, South Korea, in this June 10, 2014 file photo. Enraged parents wept and screamed as a judge sentenced the ferry captain to 36 years in prison for negligence and abandoning passengers when his ship sank, killing more than 300 people, mostly high school students. (AP Photo/Yonhap, Hyung Min-woo, File)

given before they helped each other flee the vessel.

Lee has said he issued an evacuation order. But he

told reporters days after his arrest that he withheld

the evacuation order because rescuers had yet to

arrive and he feared for the safety of the passengers in

the cold, swift waters.

The Gwangju District Court in southern South

Korea concluded in its verdict that Lee had issued an

evacuation order and that he left the ship after rescue

boats arrived on the scene.

An official from the Justice Ministry, who requested

anonymity because of office rules, said Lee, 69, will

technically be eligible for parole after serving

one-third of his prison sentence.

The court sentenced the ship's chief engineer to 30

years in prison, and 13 other crew members got

sentences of between five years and 20 years in prison,

the court statement said.

The engineer, Park Ki-ho, was convicted of homicide

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YANASEN'S ARTISANS. Takahiro Yoshihara (top photo) makes a candy beetle at Amezaiku Yoshihara in Tokyo. At Amezaiku Yoshihara, people can buy a ready-made item, including many variations on the shop's rabbit mascot, but the real deal is to pick a creature from the catalog to be custom made on the spot. Customers watch as the craftsman takes a glob of sugar syrup, adds a drop of coloring, and quickly works it into an incredibly detailed little creature, using only fingers and a small pair of steel scissors. Pictured in the bottom photo is Azusa Miyahara, sitting in her woodworking and bath-building shop, Ito Furoten, in Tokyo. Miyahara, a fifth-generation owner, says not many women do this kind of work, but her father had only daughters, so he passed the business to her ten years ago. While she still makes wooden bathtubs when they are ordered, the shop has branched out, offering trays for serving sushi, long-handled buckets traditionally used for cleaning graves, stools to sit on for washing before soaking in a tub, and round wooden vases. (AP Photos/Linda Lombardi)

Passersby can watch her at work, surrounded by tools and materials.

Other neighborhood shops feature items made of fabric or paper; perhaps the best show is one that uses sugar. Amezaiku — the craft of making elaborate candy figures individually by hand — used to be a common traditional entertainment. Now, it's a rare skill.

At candy-maker Amezaiku Yoshihara, people can buy a ready-made item, including variations on the shop's rabbit mascot, or pick a creature from a catalog to be custom-made on the spot. The craftsman takes a glob of sugar syrup, adds a drop of coloring and — using only fingers and a small pair of steel scissors — quickly works it into a detailed little creature. He has only a few minutes before the sugar hardens.

"Children who watch the magical event of the candy being made stare open-mouthed," says the shop's English flyer, but when I watched Takahiro Yoshihara pull the sugar into the legs and horns of a Japanese rhinoceros beetle, the kids weren't the only ones gaping.

South Korea ends ferry wreckage searches

By Hyung-jin Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea last week ended underwater searches for nine bodies still missing from April's ferry disaster that killed more than 300 people in one of the country's deadliest disasters in decades.

The announcement came hours before a South Korean court issued verdicts on the ship's crew members charged with negligence and abandonment of passengers in the disaster.

Searches for bodies and ferry wreckage have been underway since the *Sewol* sank April 16 on a trip to a resort island. About seven months after the sinking, 295 bodies have been retrieved but nine people are still missing. Most of the dead were teenage students on a school trip.

Oceans and Fisheries minister Lee Ju-young told a televised news conference that the searches will stop because there is only a remote chance of finding the missing bodies. "The government's conclusion is that searches by divers have reached its limit," he said.

Lee said cabins in the ferry have collapsed and winter is coming, placing divers in a "very dangerous situation." Lee said family members of the missing people have asked the government to stop the underwater searches.

"As our loved ones remain trapped in the cold waters, this decision is unbearably painful for us. But we request that the search operations to be stopped from now" because of safety concerns, a relative of one of the missing tearfully told a separate news conference, according to a report from the YTN television station.

Two civilian divers died after falling unconscious during searches, according to Lee's ministry. Lee said he feels sorry for failing to keep a government promise to find all the missing bodies.

He said the government will decide whether to raise the ship after discussing it with experts and the family members. The families have worried that raising the ship would damage the bodies or allow them to be swept away.

The ferry sinking has caused an outburst of national grief and anger, with authorities blaming the disaster on excessive cargo on the ship, poor rescue efforts, negligence by crew members, and corruption by the ship's owners.

Associated Press writer Kim Tong-hyung contributed to this report.