

Interview with Taizo Ohta, Chairman of the Executive Committee of FactorISM (Feb. 14, 2024)

Local Factories as Magnificent Entertainment Venues

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Introduction

JS: We introduce an energetic and highly motivated start-up in almost every issue, and we think your FactorISM is an innovative development that would be of great interest to our readers. Could you briefly introduce yourself and tell us how it can about?

Ohta: My company is named Kinjo Rubber and is 88 years old. We produce mainly rubber and plastics in Yao city in Osaka Prefecture. FactorISM is a voluntary project to set up workshops or exhibitions to show manufacturing works to the children in our region. Yao started up a consortium in 2018 to promote appreciation of the region and its manufacturing culture to local children. A variety of companies have staged workshops as a result. We thought it important that children can see how manufacturing works in a real factory and experience the process of manufacturing by themselves. So we started FactorISM in 2020 in order to promote our working venues among as many people as possible.

JS: This sounds quite unique. What was their response?

Ohta: At the beginning of our project, we focused our efforts on children. It seemed, however, that the local residents, including the children, did not know very much about the factories in the region. By opening up our factories to them, we hope for a deeper linkage with residents, and that by learning about our companies the children of the region will become interested in manufacturing and perhaps be future players in technology.

Factories as Entertainment

JS: In your project, children can have a tour of your factories and observe real manufacturing work. This must be very entertaining for them. Are they enjoying



Taizo Ohta

it?

Ohta: In our company, to give an example, we make many kinds of rubber products, some for daily use like rubber bands and tires, and others that can be stretched enormously or can contain electric wiring. We conduct chemical experiments for these products in which children can become more familiar with the materials involved. In some others, the children can experience welding or by pushing a button on a big pressing machine weighing around 100 kilograms they can make a product to take back home. In short, they can enjoy our routine factory work as a real experience and take away their own produced goods. This is a form of entertainment.

JS: Among the participants, are there many local people or people coming from other regions as well?

Ohta: There are, of course, many from the neighborhood near our workplaces and factories. But we are working across a wide area including 11 regions of Osaka, and we also have people coming even from the middle part of Japan, such as Gifu, or the northernmost part, Hokkaido. So people come from all over Japan.

JS: So this is a project for stimulating young people's interest in future manufacturing by observing the manufacturing process or experiencing it, rather than just listening to talk?

Ohta: Yes, it is. In earlier times, we could see factory workers actually performing their trade, such as cutting metal, and manufacturing was closer to our daily life. But now I think our distance from manufacturing has widened due to safety restrictions and the need for confidentiality in some production processes. If you know very little about manufacturing, you are unlikely to choose it as your future job. Our daily manufacturing work is now made possible with wonderful technology and experiencing it is extremely interesting. We want to make this well known among young people

by opening up a factory. This is our mission. Craftmanship and technology can be transferred to the future generation through this project, we believe.

JS: Manufacturing, in particular among SMEs in Japan, is increasingly facing difficult times. Are you also trying to enhance their motivation with this project?

Ohta: Yes. People working in daily routine manufacturing are generally not well motivated, but we believe that they will become so as they get to understand that their goods are very valuable and are the result of excellent technologies. And we think such motivation would lead to pride in their profession.

JS: You started this project in 2020. That was when the pandemic started, so it must have been a bold thing to do.

Ohta: Yes, we took the risk. The most important part of our project is to provide a physical experience of manufacturing, by watching the process, touching a product and working on the actual production. This contradicted the government's health guidelines at the time to refrain from going outside or gathering with many other people. So we took advantage of online communication with a virtual factory tour, providing the audience with photos taken with smartphone cameras and videos of working people in factories, and by organizing talks with factory owners. The pandemic was a challenge, but we started FactorISM in the midst of the crisis in 2020 after having thought about what we could do in tackling it.

JS: You were successful in attracting as many as 20,000 people to your project, a truly big impact. Does that mean there were so many people who found manufacturing wonderful?

Ohta: Yes, it does. The photos and videos of our factory's routine work in manufacturing clearly showed viewers how our products are made. They knew only the completed goods, but could now closely observe the manufacturing site itself, and thus many joined the online event.

JS: Were the participating companies in your event mostly manufacturers in Yao?

Ohta: The majority of them are from Yao, but many companies joined the event from other areas in Osaka and the Western part of Japan. People sharing their motivation with us are increasing and in 2023 we had 83 companies participating in our event.

JS: Your company was founded 88 years ago and has continued through the generations. Are the participating companies mostly your friends or colleagues?

Ohta: We are a chemical maker, but among those participating companies some are metal processing or resin molding firms. We produce parts and components for household appliances. A wide range of companies like auto-parts producers or soap and shampoo manufacturers or makers of other daily-use goods come together to join our event. Some are second- or third-generation companies like us and some are start-ups. Such great diversity among the participating companies is a characteristic of our event.

From Entertainment to Business

JS: Do these encounters in this entertainment venue lead to business deals?

Ohta: I think our event occasionally results in business, but that was not our original intention. To give an example of a case involving our company, Kinjo Rubber: when the chairman of Snow Peak, a well-known camping supplies maker in Niigata Prefecture, saw our technology and production process in our FactorISM event, it resulted in collaboration and product development of a shade for lanterns that we eventually sold.

There have also been some business opportunities realized by collaboration among some of our supporters for this event, as well as participants. Even when we have no particular product for B2B business, such collaboration occasionally leads to greater opportunities. In the case of a maker selling completed goods, this could result in increased sales and eventual expansion.

FactorISM as a Bridge Between Japanese SMEs & Foreign Companies

JS: Are you aiming at future business alliances with companies abroad?

Ohta: That is exactly what we are aiming at now. Osaka will stage the World Exposition in 2025 and participation in this is one of our mid-term management goals. We are now working on promotion of our event in this exposition. We want to highlight the quality of Japanese manufacturing for the 10 million or 20 million visitors to the exposition from all over the world. To prepare for this, we have been working hard on translation of our Internet site and materials into English since 2023. We are now working on collaborating with university foreign language faculties to expand the availability of English language in towns or among tourist guides.

JS: Will you participate in the World Exposition in Osaka in 2025?

Ohta: Yes. We are also planning to organize a factory tour for visitors to the Exposition to show them our site and our routine manufacturing process. We plan to set up many satellite booths to showcase venues all over the Kansai district neighboring Osaka. In these booths, we will try to give attractive presentations on what Japanese manufacturing looks like for visitors.

JS: Do you have many inquiries about how to start similar projects from around Japan?

Ohta: Yes, we do. In many cases, people would like to come and see FactorISM events on the first day. Many administrative officials come to join our workshop or our open factory from all over the country. We also have requests from them to give them presentations on our work.

Management of FactorISM

JS: How do you manage FactorISM as chairman of its Executive Committee? How is it financially managed?

Ohta: Our Executive Committee generally consists of volunteers keen on encouraging the activities of FactorISM. I am executive director of the committee. There are some other assignments among our members, such as an event producer in charge of the whole project or a secretary-general in charge of supervising clerical work. We manage FactorISM by ourselves through such clearly defined job assignments among us.

As for finances, we are not particularly endowed with a sufficient budget. There are many of our activities that are partly financed by each of our own company's budgets. To be honest, although each of us bears a financial burden as much as possible, the rest of our finances come from fees paid by the participating companies and cooperation fees from collaborating companies. We allocate such revenues among our different activities and manage the total business as FactorISM, cooperating among ourselves to achieve an efficient use of the budget. In this regard, one future urgent issue is how to increase our revenue.

JS: Each of you works on your own company's business and this is your voluntary activity.

Ohta: Yes, and there are even some who do not mind spending more money and time for this volunteer activity rather than their own company's business.

JS: I guess if you can promote this well among the media, you could get more revenue?

Ohta: Yes, that is true. So we have been working continuously on publicizing our events using SNS on our own. We do our best to create a virtuous cycle between our own promotion via SNS and using the mainstream media.

JS: Utilizing SNS is very important, and would your website also need enriching?

Ohta: Yes. Because potential clients overseas would initially look at Instagram or see our website when searching for partners, I think we must improve our own content, while trying also to meet the standards of various languages, including English and Chinese. At the moment, we have seen an increase of around 20 participating companies every year, so in 2024 I think we could have more than

100 companies participating.

JS: Can you use movies for promotion?

Ohta: Yes, I think movies would be extremely important sources of information. For example, we produce movies on behalf of FactorISM by ourselves and also provide a service to promote movies for our client companies. We are thus working on increasing the channels or opportunities for issuing our information and views.

JS: Would involving traditional Japanese craft companies in your promotion of FactorISM expand the interest of companies abroad in your activities?

Ohta: I think companies like traditional teacup producers or metal-processing firms that began as knife sharpeners, which both have a long history in Sakai city in this region, would naturally join us. In other words, regardless of the size of any factory, what is important for us is how we can connect with other companies or factories. I think we should showcase all kinds of manufacturing venues including those of traditional crafts, not just contemporary industries like our own.

Future Ambitions

JS: Finally, we would appreciate it if you could tell us your future plans and ambitions.

Ohta: Participating in the Osaka World Exposition in 2025 is our big mid-term goal, as I said. We are thinking about creating substantial promotional contents to attract visitors to the exposition from all over the world. This is the first step. As our next step, we would like to enhance our name by promoting our routine work through our factory tours or industrial tourism. This would lead to increased sales of our products and above all our working members' satisfaction in their professional life. The professional pride resulting from this would bring us a sustainable future where manufacturing craftsmanship will be handed on from generation to generation after 2025.

JS: If you mentioned your possible contribution to the global environment in your activities, would it raise

the world's interest?

Ohta: In 2023, we began an attempt to make our factory's end materials valuable by creating artistic pieces out of them. Likewise, we are also working on a project that takes the environment into account as a part of FactorISM, and we will be engaged in a big subject on sustainable manufacturing consistent with environmental concerns.

JS: Your members working on FactorISM are mostly young, and this is a blessing. But regardless of age, can anybody join your project?

Ohta: Yes. Gender, age, and above all nationality do not matter in FactorISM. We want to welcome anyone interested in experiencing manufacturing to our factory, a magnificent entertainment venue. **JS**

Written and translated by Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, with the assistance of TapeRewrite Corporation.