

The niche purveyors of Japanese *monozukuri*

While Japan has faced stiff regional competition in recent decades, it has retained a competitive advantage thanks to the SME manufacturers which have excelled in developing niche technologies often impossible to imitate. Working behind the scenes and guided by the *monozukuri* craftsmanship philosophy, these niche players may be small, but they play a huge part in international supply chains, providing high-tech parts and components for tier one companies in Japan and across the globe.

One such niche player is fusemaker SOC Corporation, whose commitment to innovation has enabled it to gain the trust of high-end customers in a range of industries, including Mitsubishi Motors. Having supplied fuses for Mitsubishi's i-MiEV electric vehicles (EVs) series, SOC Corporation aims to play a big role in the EV revolution through the provision of its high-performance fuses.

"We are currently putting most of our efforts into EVs," says SOC president, Ms. Kayoko Arikawa. "However, we strive to create a more balanced portfolio by catering to different sectors. Since our

main focus is developing fuses, we aim to deepen and expand our presence in the different sectors."

Indeed, with the changing global market landscape, diversification is necessary for Japan's niche players. While Mitsui Matsushima Holdings (MMH), whose business had traditionally focused on the coal industry, may not be a small company, its diversification efforts have involved acquiring niche companies in a range of industries, including electronics and semiconductors.

"The market is ever-changing but having strongholds in the niche market helps us to promote the best features of our products and show adaptability towards market needs," says president of MMH, Tai-shi Yoshioka. "The target is not only diverse areas but most importantly focusing on the areas of *monozukuri* manufacturing companies."

One concept found at the core of all Japanese niche manufacturing companies is this *monozukuri* philosophy that underpins the high quality for which Japan is famous. Yasuo Tanaka, president of rebar processing machine man-

ufacturer, Toyo Kensetsu Kohki, gives his take on *monozukuri*.

"*Monozukuri* starts with working together with our customers to find out what their problem is, identifying it, and then our mission is to give shape to the solution for that problem," he says. "Our relationships define what we need to manufacture for our clients, and we manufacture what each client needs at the cheapest cost possible and then provide those machines for our customers. That is the baseline for *monozukuri* and we have more than 100 types of machines for cutting and bending."

Like SOC, SPK Corporation, a company specializing in the trading of automotive parts, has its sights set on the shift to EVs, with its vision to become "a comprehensive trading company for mobility". While it continues to grow its support for the EV market by providing vital components, the company aims to strengthen its global presence through its new 'GSPEK Premium' brand, as well as collaboration with overseas firms to enhance its technological capabilities.

"We will continue to grow the automotive parts business, while also increasing our global footprint," says president, Kyoichiro Oki. "We are recently working very closely with overseas manufacturers, particularly in Europe. We are learning from their technology and by collaborating with those manufacturers, we are promoting new development."

When it comes to niche, it doesn't get any more niche than space recycling, which is now the goal for recycling firm Chubu Nihon Plastics (CNP). Having cemented its reputation as a leader in the recycling and pelletizing of plastic waste, CNP has now extended its astronautic ambitions beyond earth.

"Our ultimate goal is to save planet earth and be eco-friendly. We are a recycling company that is continuing to advance toward cosmic-scale recycling up to space debris," says CNP president, Makiko Yukishita. With lofty goals like this, the sky is certainly not the limit for Japan's niche players as they look to channel *monozukuri* to meet the global market needs of now and the future.