

'Turning the Shimanami Kaido into the Japanese maritime industry's largest focal point'



Interview with Onomichi mayor Yuko Hiratani

When Onomichi merged with Innoshima, Mukaishima, and Setoda, it became the city in Japan with the largest number of employees working in the shipbuilding and related industries. As a result, it adopted 'The Maritime City of Onomichi' as its slogan, and held 'Sea Festa Onomichi -- Sea Festival 2012 Onomichi/Fukuyama/Mihara --'. Onomichi mayor Yuko Hiratani explains, "There are a wide variety of shipyards in Onomichi, but we also have marine equipment manufacturers and shipping companies, which is one noteworthy feature of Onomichi as a maritime city." In conjunction with Imabari, with whom it has concluded a sister city partnership, the city is attempting to turn the coast along Shimanami Kaido (coastal highway) into the largest focal point of Japan's maritime industry, indicating plans to boost the status of its maritime industry within the Seto Inland Sea region.

*** The largest number of shipbuilding employees in Japan**

Kaiji Press: What prompted you to adopt a slogan of 'The Maritime City of Onomichi'?

Yuko Hiratani: Onomichi has long been a port-of-call of Kitamaebune (cargoship) trades along the Sea of Japan, and has developed with a focus on the sea. It has also continued to develop its shipbuilding industry. When we had our municipal merger, we merged with Mitsugi and Mukaishima in 2005, and then with Innoshima and Setoda the following year, creating the current Onomichi that you see today. Once the integrations were finished and we looked at corporate and operational statistics for 2006, it was apparent that we had the largest number of shipbuilding industry employees of any city in Japan.

With 4,053 employees, Onomichi is the only city to have in excess of 4,000 shipbuilding industry workers. Nagasaki is in second place with 3,985 employees, followed by Kobe in third with 3,691 employees, Imabari in fourth with 3,481 employees, and Tamano in fifth with 3,388 employees. We realized after compiling data that we had so many people working in maritime and related industries that it was actually one of Onomichi's core industries. While the large majority is centered on the shipbuilding industry, development of our marine equipment and shipping industries is also creating jobs, so we thought that this awareness of having a large amalgamation of shipping industry-related companies should most definitely be part of our urban development plans.

KP: When did you begin to feel that Onomichi was becoming a city of maritime-related industries?

Hiratani: I'm originally from Iwashijima, which is obviously surrounded by the sea. For junior high, I went to Mukaishima Junior High School, right across from which was one of Hitachi Zosen's plants. Even from the classroom, we could hear the clanging of the shipyard. We could also see launching ceremonies from the school, and hear the rumbling of the newbuilding ships as they slid down the building berth. It was common to hear my friends say, "My dad works at the shipyard," or hear that a neighbor worked in some shipbuilding-related job. It was around then that I began to think of it as an extremely large industry in terms of employment numbers.

*** Working with Imabari to create Japan's largest accumulation of maritime-related companies**

KP: Why did you decide to call Onomichi a maritime city?

Hiratani: After the municipal merger, people would ask me, "What kind of city is Onomichi?" which led me to conclude that shipbuilding was the city's core industry when considering Innoshima, Mukaishima, and Setoda. Then people would say, "Well, why not call it a 'shipbuilding city'?" but I felt that focusing solely on shipbuilding was too narrow a scope, and that 'maritime city' felt more accurate. By using the phrase

'maritime city', this allows us to include not only those that work in our shipbuilding, marine equipment, and shipping industries, but every person that works in any of our maritime industries, such as the Japan Coast Guard and those that work in seamanship training and related fields. On top of that, we also have the Onomichi Maritime Office of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport & Tourism's Chugoku District Transport Bureau. One of the five largest branches of the Maritime Transport Bureau was the Onomichi Maritime Transport Bureau (now the Onomichi Maritime Office). One feature of Onomichi is this wider scope of meaning as a maritime city, which allows us to include those kinds of jobs as well.

I believe that 'maritime city' fits Onomichi perfectly. Had we used the phrase 'shipbuilding city', it probably would not have gained much recognition. While it is true that a municipality deciding to call itself a maritime city places pressure on us, I believe it was the most appropriate phrase for Onomichi.

Still, the phrase 'maritime city' is somewhat unfamiliar to those not involved in the maritime industry, so we must keep using the phrase 'The Maritime City of Onomichi'. I believe that it was our persistence in calling ourselves a maritime city that allowed us to hold Sea Festa Onomichi 2012.

KP: Imabari has also begun to call itself a maritime city.

Hiratani: We have concluded a sister city partnership with Imabari, which is located on the other side of the Seto Inland Sea and is connected via the Shimanami Kaido. Imabari is also a maritime city, and by having the two cities come together to develop the idea of a maritime city, we hope to make the Shimanami Kaido the largest focal point of Japan's maritime industry. By this, I don't mean just working to develop Onomichi as a maritime city, but I would also like to work together with our sister city to create Japan's largest collection of maritime industry-related companies. I use the phrase 'maritime city' to refer to this as well.

While we have become sister cities with Imabari, our connection didn't start out as one related to maritime cities. We formed a sister city partnership because Imabari was the city on the shore opposite us in Shikoku. Now, however, Imabari hosts the Imabari Maritime Exhibition, also known as Bari-Ship, whose participants include maritime-related companies from Onomichi, allowing the two cities to further interact with each other.

*** One feature is Onomichi's wide variety of shipyards**

KP: What other noteworthy features does the Maritime City of Onomichi boast?

Hiratani: Hiroshima governor Hidehiko Yuzaki was elected based on his 'Setouchi Uminomichi Plan' (Seto Inland Searoad Concept) campaign promise. The idea of that concept is to entice tourism by tapping into the appeal of the Seto Inland Sea. This

searoad concept links Onomichi with Hiroshima from a policy point of view, both in the sense of advancing our maritime industry and tourism resources related to the sea. Prefectural policies can be rolled out in Onomichi in a variety of forms. The governor may never come up with his Setouchi Uminomichi Plan if we didn't use the expression 'maritime city' or there wasn't this shared sense of Onomichi being a city connected with the sea.

KP: What are some defining features of Onomichi compared to other maritime-related cities?

Hiratani: With regard to the shipbuilding industry, while some may use the blanket term of 'shipbuilding', the truth is that we have a variety of different categories. We have many shipyards, such as Onomichi Dockyard and Naikai Zosen, from those that construct large ships to those that build small and midsize ships equipped with special technologies.

Construction techniques for aluminum ships require special technology due to the difficulty in welding. Shipyards such as Tsuneishi Facilities & Craft and Setouchi Craft specialize in aluminum ships. The Awaline Kirara, a catamaran passenger ship constructed by Tsuneishi Craft for Awashima Line, was awarded 'Ship of the Year 2011' in the small passenger ship category. Ishida Shipbuilding also constructs small ships, and uses special techniques to construct specialized ships. As for ship repairs, we have Universal Shipbuilding's Innoshima yard, Sanwa Dock, and Mukaishima Dock. There is also Okada Zosensho that constructs Japanese-style ships.

While the ships constructed here are not that large, Onomichi is a city with a wide variety of characteristic shipyards that possess special technologies. While this may be something you would have to come to Onomichi to understand, the islands here are not actually that far apart from each other, meaning you can see ship blocks coming and going right in front of your eyes. Onomichi is the only place, I believe, where you can experience this.

We also have the Onomichi Marine Institute, and our maritime city concept includes crewmember training as well as the promotion of marine leisure.

You could also say that our seven fishery cooperatives are another feature of Onomichi, as are our plentiful fishery resources. While this may be surprising, Onomichi has one of the highest catch rates in Hiroshima. For example, we produce the highest output of red sea bream (high value fish) in the prefecture. We are also number one or two in terms of clams and octopus, and number two for cutlass fish.

*** Hoping more people to get to know the Seto Inland Sea**

KP: What kinds of things are you focusing on to support Onomichi as a maritime city?

Hiratani: I believe that the municipal government's main job should be to provide support on the software side of things. As such, we provide support to Innoshima Technical Center and engage in advertising for the Sea Festa. We also want children to be interested in the sea. Long ago, Japanese pirates would sail the seas with unrestricted freedom all the way to the mainland, and I believe it will be necessary to embrace a similar exploratory spirit going forward.

KP: What things do you hope to focus on from here on?

Hiratani: I'd like to see more involvement with ships. We are privileged to live in this area called the Seto Inland Sea, and I want to be able to share it with as many people as I can. The challenge we as government officials face will be how to use our resources to develop our industries, and whether or not we can use that to help our tourism industry.

At the Port of Hiroshima, there is a cruiseship called Galaxy operated by Setonaikai Kisen that doubles as a restaurant. I'd like to see a similar ship come here to Onomichi. The year 2014 will mark 80 years since the Seto Inland Sea was designated as a national park. Being able to enjoy the Galaxy, whose home port is Hiroshima, here at that time would be a great symbol for the city. Being able to enjoy a meal during a day cruise would be a wonderful thing. It would be great if something like that could further serve to connect the maritime cities of Onomichi and Imabari.

My plan is to come up with ideas with the help of all those within the maritime industry so that we can engage in efforts that are profitable.



Profile

Yuko Hiratani

Born in 1953 in Iwashijima, Mukaishima-cho, Onomichi-city. Graduated from the Department of Education, Yamaguchi University in 1977. Became an instructor at Onomichi Yoshiwa Junior High School in 1984. Became teachers' consultant for the Onomichi education board in 1991. Became head of education section for Onomichi education board in 1998. Became head of Hiroshima Geihoku education office in 2002. Became head of Hiroshima Kure-Kamo education office in 2003, and later the same year became head of Onomichi education board. Took current position in 2007.