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# Presentation 4

## Myanmar Laquerware and Its Prospects

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### Abstract

There are many aspects and dimensions to do research on Myanmar lacquer. Myanmar lacquerware has been studied by both local and foreign scholars from artistic and historical points of view. This research highlights the history of Myanmar lacquer, lacquer industry, and its prospects. Myanmar lacquer has a long history and remains as an active cultural phenomenon. But there are very few people who make a living from the lacquerware business. The main problems are the lack of market and scarce resources (labour and raw materials). This research's objectives are to be able to preserve the traditional Myanmar lacquerware industry, to make it widely known internationally about the process of making Myanmar lacquerware, and to cherish the intangible cultural heritage of Myanmar. It also aims to show and record the current situation of lacquerware industry and to find ways of helping lacquer industry survive the challenges it faces today. In this research, a review of the relevant books, library survey, and field study are done, in addition to interviews with lacquerware makers, taking photographs on many aspects of Myanmar lacquerware, and foreseeing its prospects. The research areas focused on are Bagan and Kyaukka village.

**Key words:** lacquer in Myanmar, Bagan, Kyaukka village, industry, production

### Introduction

Myanmar is one of the seven countries that produce lacquerware in the world. The lacquerware industry is a rare and endangered art form that exists only in Asia: China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Lacquer art originated in China 3000-5000 years ago, spreading to Japan and Korea, and later to Southeast Asia. In relation to Myanmar lacquerware industry, three areas are particularly prominent. These are Bagan in Mandalay Division, Kyaukka Village in Sagaing Division and Shan State. Among them, I intend to do research especially on two areas: Bagan and Kyauka.

The objectives of this research are to be able to preserve the traditional Myanmar lacquerware industry, to make it widely known internationally about the process of making Myanmar lacquerware, and to cherish the intangible cultural heritage. And then, this research aims to present the current situation in Myanmar and to find ways of helping lacquer industry survive the challenges it faces today. There are three research questions in this research.

- What is the origin and transmission history of lacquer art in Myanmar?
- What are the threats to the lacquer industry?
- What are the prospects for the lacquer industry?

Therefore, this research is based on interviews and analysis of literature written by both local and foreign scholars.

## Research Methodology

This research was conducted by paranormal method and collected some published data through the study of local and foreign research books which are also used for literary analysis.

## Background History

According to the list of ten types of Burmese traditional art, lacquer ware has existed in Myanmar for a long time. At the present, researchers are still trying to figure out who got it and when did it start in Myanmar. The word "lacquer" needs to be defined to be as close and as possible. According to the Burmese dictionary, "Yun" means the Yun people; lacquerware and etch coloured design on lacquerware. (Burmese Dictionary, 1979, pp.227-228) The Yun ethnic are Mon people who settled in Yodaya (Thailand) through southwestern China and Shan-Bamar, Shan-Chinese, Lao Shan and Thirty Shan tribes, including the Khamti Shan, and Haribunjaya (northern Thailand, present- Lamphun) and Cambodia. It is said that they are Mon-Khmer people from Laos. (Dagon God, 1996, pp.171-172) Concerning lacquerware, 11-13 BC is said to have flourished during the Qing Dynasty, with Changsha being the most prosperous. Through that, Cambodia, Lao and it is thought to have spread to other parts of the country. (Khin Kyi Kyi, 1968, p.50)

Relating to origin, most scholars have three theories about how Burmese lacquer ware was acquired. The first idea is said to have come from China. However, it is a general assumption as no solid evidence has been found. Taw Sein Kho and U Lu Fe Win thought that it was the conquest of Mon region during the reign of Anawrahta in 1058 A.D. and the resultant brought in of artisans and scholars along with the Pitaka. Bagan lieutenant U Tin also said he supported the proposal. However, in the list of war captives from Thaton, lacquerware artists were not found. The last theory is that it could not be earlier than the 16th century. King Bayinnaung (1551-1581 A.D.) conquered Shan States, Zin Mae and Ayodhya and he brought in craftsmen, including lacquer artists. However, all three hypotheses are general, not based on solid evidence. It can only be said that they are opinions.

The following is a list of the earliest available evidence of Myanmar lacquerware:

- King Kyansittha's palace inscription in lines 1 to 5 mentioned that "Brahmins and architects paid homage to the Lord by gold flowers in scroll, oil lamp and food offerings in a daunglan." (Than Tun, 2003, p.59) Daunglan is a tray, roughly three feet wide and six to twelve inches high, which is made from a framework of coiled bamboo. The lacquered top is off finely woven matting, supported by numerous small, vertical rungs of bamboo, set in a base of the same materials.

- Lines 19-20 of the Shwe Kuncha pagoda inscription inscribed in 1223 AD, there was evidence on the use of lacquer along with vermilion and orpiment in applying images, which were put in the reliquary chamber. (Epigraphia Birmanica, Vol.1, 1972, p.144)
- Sawhlawun pagoda inscription inscribed in 1236 AD described that Bagan peoples had used the lacquer in combination of orpiment and vermilion. (Epigraphia Birmanica, Vol.1, 1972, p.148)
- At the Mingala Zedi, built in 1247, were eighty images. Among these images, some sit on the pedestal which was decorated with lacquer betel boxes and lacquer cups. (Nyunt Han, 1996, p.20)
- Pieces of the old lacquer cup were unearthed in the compound of Laymyethna monastery, near Minnanthu, Bagan. These artifacts were dated at about the 12 century A.D. (Than Hteik, 2004, p.10)

Therefore, there is no denying that Myanmar lacquerware has existed since Bagan period, and then it gradually developed through the ages of Taungoo, Inwa and Nyaungyan, reaching zenith in Konbaung Period. Bagan Period lacquerware lacked decorative paintings and but were of only plain black. In Inwa Period, there were painting began to appear on lacquerwares. During the Nyaungyang Period on the surface of lacquerwares were engraved with a fine iron stylus. In Konbaung Period, the art of lacquerware developed to Shwezawa (gold leaf lacquerware), Thayo (relief moulded lacquerware) and Hmansishwecha (glass and gold-inlay lacquerware).

### Industry and Production

According to records, thirty-three villages where lacquerware industry is operated in Myanmar are Linkhay, Kyaington, Innlay (Heyarywama), Moene, Pindaya, Ywangan and Pinlaung in Shan State; Kyaukka, Htanaungwun, Maunghtaung, Ywathayar, Siputtara, Kyaboe, Baukthindon, Meoh, Sitha, Malwe, Leindaw, Wetthe and Bamauk areas In Sagaing Region; Bagan, Nagu, Nyaungoo, Myingabar, Innwa and Mandalay In Mandalay Region; Sale, Pyalo and Myintchay In Magway Region; Kamarse, Bago and Pyay in Bago Region; Mrauk-U area in Rakhine State. However, in some parts of Shan State; it can be said that there are as many lacquer workers as there are in Bagan-Myingapa in Mandalay Region and Kyaukka in Sagaing Region. Other lacquerware product regions are not famous as there because they did not produce varieties of lacquerwares.

According to records, lacquerware was used as Royal objects during the reign of Burmese kings, but later it became popular use. If we look at the production of lacquerware, we can see that there are four types: Royal objects, Religious objects, personal ornaments, and musical instruments. Royal objects include palace pillars, umbrella, ceilings and bedstead which were usually decorated with incised lacquer, gold-leaf lacquer and relief-molded lacquer. In addition, lacquer ware has become an integral part of the gift exchange in diplomacy. According to English Envoy Michael Symes who came to Myanmar in 1795 and 1802 wrote about Myanmar art as follow:

*In many countries, the art of lacquer ware is regarded as minor art. But Myanmar laureate art was started from 300 years ago. And it is a pride of*

*Myanmar. Myanmar kings presents silk, jewelry, and lacquerware as gifts.*

Other royal utensils were hsun-ok, betel box, pickled tea box and bi-it or cosmetic box. Small cosmetic boxes were used to keep powders and other beautification materials.

Religious items include Hsuntawhtan, Hsunok, Yundaungpaung, Thabeik (alms bowl), chest of drawers, thabeiktin kalat (saler to rest alms bowl), Hsunchaing (tiffin box), laphetok (picked tea box), tasaung (fane), take, manpaya, sadaik (chest- to store their scriptures of palm-leaves or parabaiaks). Personal ornaments were daunglan, saytaung (medicine box), yetagaung (water goblet), hnyeyekhwat (lacquered drinking cups), laphetok (picked tea box), saylaikban (cheroot tray), sayit (medicine box), thonechaunghtaukbyat (plate with three legs) and yunsarpwe (lacquer table). Musical instruments were gold gilded glass inlaid traditional drum circle or orchestra, oboe, and xylophone. (Ei Ei Han, 2003, p.6)

Lacquerware techniques has been handed down from generations to generations through traditional apprenticeships. Production of lacquer ware in Bagan can be roughly categorized into three types: traditional lacquerware, Shwezawar (gold lacquer) and sayyun (Japanese lacquer). Lacquerware products range from small gifts or souvenirs to large items. Anyhow, there are also daily use items and accessories. Some examples of Traditional lacquerware are yekhwet (drinking cups), Hsunok (Alms boxes), Kunit (betel boxes), saylaitban (cheroot trays) and cosmetic boxes etc. Shwezawar (Gold lacquerware) is mostly found in religious objects and buildings in the way of Buddha images, wall decoration, Sadaik etc. Sayyun is also called Japanese lacquer. It is a mixture of modern technology.

There are four classes of lacquerware in relation to quality and value as follow:

First Class – Shwezawar (Gold lacquerware) (p.1)

Second class - horsehair lacquerware (P.2)

Third class - ordinary lacquer (P.3)

Fourth class – Sayyun (Japan lacquerware) (P.4)



Shwezawar (Gold lacquerware) (p.1)

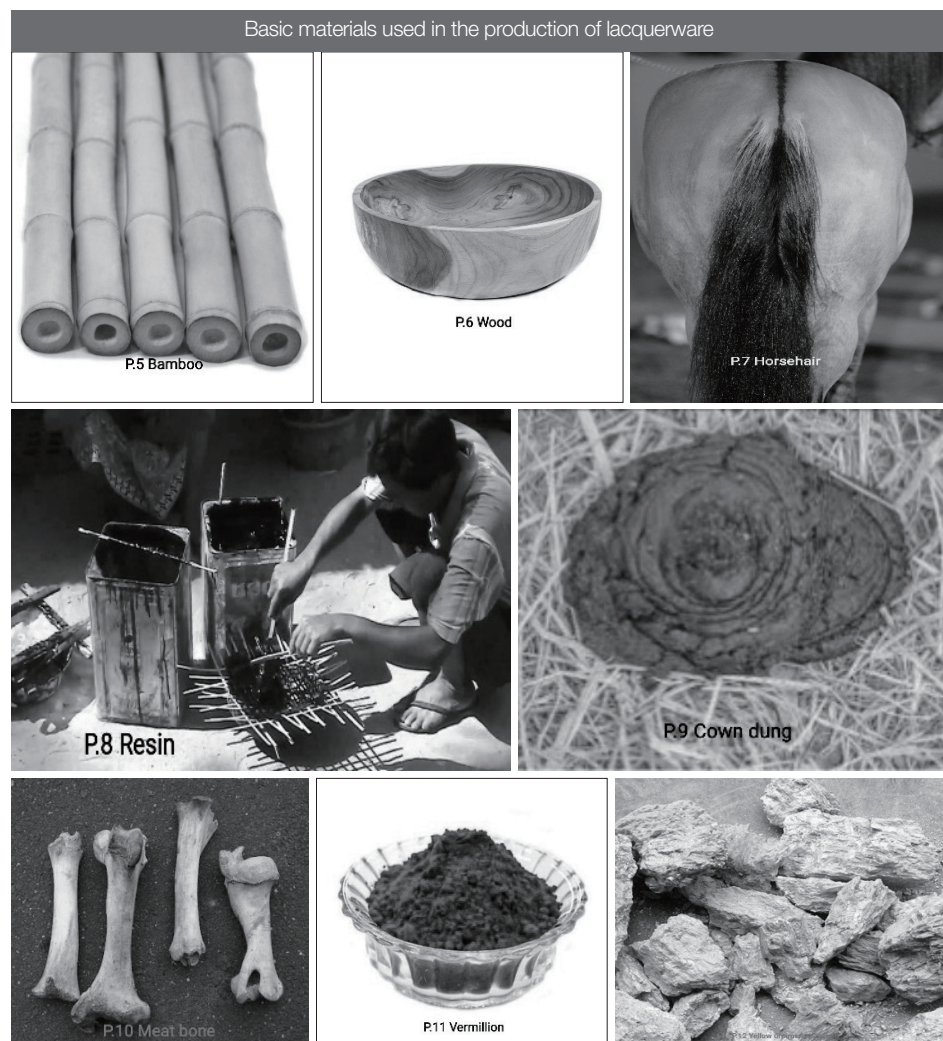
horsehair lacquerware (P.2)



Shwezawar (Gold lacquerware) (p.1)

horsehair lacquerware (P.2)

Basic materials used in the production of lacquerware are bamboo (TinWa Cephalostachium Pergacile or myinwa – Dendrocalamus Strictus) (P.5) or wood (baing – Tretramelesnudiflora, let-pan – Bambaxmalabaricum and teak) (P.6), horsehair (P.7), Thitsi (resin) (P.8), Naukchay (cow dung)(P.9), Amethayoe (meat bone)(P.10), clay, vermilion (P.11), yellow orpiment (P.12), indigo, gold plate, Ingyinkyaukhmont (Ingyin stone powder)(P.13), Htanaungse (acacia gum) (P.14), Tamase (neem gum) (P.15) and teak charcoal (P.16). (U San Yu, 2 Nov 2020)





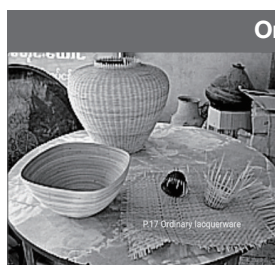


In preparing the base (Aphyuhtee), there are 11 steps to go through as follow:

1. Cutting bamboo near the joint
2. Carve into bamboo pieces
3. tips of bamboo slats are cut off to be equal
4. cutting of joints
5. splitting bamboo slats into strips
6. dividing tips of bamboo strips
7. trimming bamboo strips into long trim strips

After long elegant strips of bamboo are got, it is to make four kinds of base material. These are 1. Making coiled object, 2. Making woven object, 3. Making twisted object and 4. Making body object. Lacquerwares are usually decorated in five colour such as black (resin), red ((mercuric sulphide), yellow (saydan), blue (mene -indigo) and green (mix thisi and sayden). Thisi (resin) is the essential material in lacquerware industry. (U San Yu, 2 Nov 2020)

According to the design on the base fabric (Aphyuhtee), there are six types of lacquerware. These are ordinary lacquerware (Yoeyoeyun), incised or stylus lacquerware (kanyityun), gilt lacquerware (Shwezawayun), relief molded lacquerware with meat bone (Thayoyeyun), glass mosaic and gilt lacquerware (Hmansishwechayun) and Lacquered image of Buddha (Man or Manphaya).



**Ordinary lacquerware (Yoeyoeyun) (P.17)**

Ordinary lacquer is made of both bamboo and wood. Only black and red are used for ordinary lacquerware. Especially home appliances and common objects for religion are ordinary lacquerware. (Khin Maung Nyunt, 1996, p.16)

#### Incised or stylus lacquerware (kanyityun) (P.18)



Red or black lacquerware draw a design without pattern with a stylus. If artisan is a skilled worker, we cannot predict the beginning and end of the collection. The designs for floral, Pictures, Landscapes and Buddhist stories drew on the plain lacquer with stylus and then add the colour. (U San Yu, 2 Nov 2020)

#### Gilt lacquerware (Shwezawayun)

The lacquerware decorated with gold leaf is called gilt lacquer. The required pattern is drawn on the black lacquer material and add with a mixture of neem gum and yellow orpiment powder. After applying the thisi (resin), on illustrated objects affix gold leaf. According to Bagan U Khin Maung Gyi, Shwe Zawayun started after the First World War. (Khin Maung Gyi, 1981, pp.31-32) But according to Dr Khin Maung Nyunt, in the days of the Myanmar kings, shwezawa ware was made exclusively for religions and royal use. We can see that the two statements are different. According to lacquerware documents, I would like to agree to Dr Khin Maung Nyunt's statement. Today this is the most expensive lacquerware, due to the price of gold. Several ancient temples and monasteries in our country have walls and ceiling covered with panels of shwezawa work.

#### Relief molded lacquerware with meat bone (Thayoeyun) (P.20)



P.20 Thayoeyun

Thayoeyun is made by mixing thisi (resin) with thayoe. Thayoe is made of grind roast the bones to a fine powder. According to Dr. Khin Maung Nyunt, thayoeyun have originated in China around 7th and 11th century. However, it is said to have disappeared during the Ming Dynasty. (Khin Maung Nyunt, 1996, p.17) At present, that kind of lacquer ware is still being made in Bagan.

#### Glass mosaic and gilt lacquerware (Hmansishwechayun) (P.19)



P.19 Gold and gilt lacquerware

Glass mosaic and gilt lacquerware are very delicate and expensive due to the skill of the artisan and amount of time and labour involved. The required pattern is affixed coloured glass and gilded on the black fabric of lacquerware. This type of lacquerware can be found as throne, Sadaik, covers of folding manuscript and palm leaf manuscript, drum circle or orchestra, oboe and xylophone, shrine and Kumtaung etc. (U San Yu, 2 Nov 2020) There is no evidence as to when glass and gold-inlay lacquerware began. The earliest known evidence, however, is a covers of palm leaf manuscript dated 1794. (Fraser Lu, 1985, 31)



### Lacquered image of Buddha (Man or Manphaya) (P.21)



It means the light and hollow Buddha image made of lacquer. In making dry lacquer image, it was first molded the image in clay or bamboo wickerwork. Then, the molded image was to apply with a coat of straw ash and water. Monk's robes and turbans of elders were to be soaked with lacquer and to wrap the molded with these clothes repeatedly. And then, cotton or silk clothe soaked with lacquer is applied layer by layer repeatedly, making relics figure with hollow. (Than Tun, 2011, p.46) Manphaya was first worshiped during the Southern Chinese Dynasty (420-589 AD).

It then arrived in Japan during the Hakuho period (645-729 AD) and began to work on the Manphaya. It is said to be the most popular in Tempyo reigns (729-766 AD). The earliest Manphaya in Myanmar was dated 10 September 1765 in Nyaunggan, Budalin. There is another Manphaya dated 2 December 1772 at Pindaya Yan Aung Monastery. The villages made Manphaya in Myanmar are in Shwebo and Ye Oo areas especially Kuphyu Sitha, Nabatsaing, Hpalanhkon, Malwe (now: Hinthar Village), Mae Oh, Ywa Thit, Lin Sarek Kone, Lein Daw Inpahto. It is said that the main source of (Thitsi) resin for Manphaya industry was obtained from Kaduma village, ten miles from Kuphyu Sitha. The technique of the Manphaya is bequeathed from father to son. It is said that since 1929, the Manphaya industry has faded. (Than Tun, 1983, pp.54-62)

### Production Process

#### First step (Basic Materials)



Basic materials used in the production of lacquerware are bamboo and wood. There are three basic types of lacquer ware made of bamboo as follow:

1. wrapped thin bamboo around the coil (rope)  
(Example: flowerpot, Yetagaung, Daunglan, Bowl cover, etc.)
2. knot three thin bamboos together and coil  
(Examples: betel box, water cup, rice bowl, etc.)
3. weaving the necessary patterns with very thin bamboo  
(Example: small objects or materials)

Basic lacquer ware made of wood are tea trays, box, table, etc. (Khin Maung Gyi, 1981, pp.31-32)

### Second step (Black Materials)



The base material is coated with Thitsi (resin). It is called thayo kaing (grouting) or lacquer. After coated thitsi, it is kept in the basement for three days. This is also called taikthwin (put into underground chamber to dry resin). After three days, it is taken out of the basement and recoated by thitsi, and kept in the basement for another three days. Then, it is to make smooth the inside of the material by putting it on the manual spinning wheel. After that, thayoe mixed with cow dung powder and thitsi (resin) was coated and stored in the cellar for three days.

At the end of three days, the material is rubbed with a light brick and it dries. Then after coating with a kind of thayoe made of mixed rice husk's ash and thitsi, it is kept in the basement for three days. Then, it makes to smooth by manual spinning. Finally, it is coated with genuine/pure resin and left in the basement for three days. In order to obtain such a good black material, it is necessary to enter and exit the basement five times.

### Wax Polishing



When the above work is completed, the lacquer is smoothed and polished with stone powder. Then it is rubbed with teak charcoal powder to make it finer. After the polishing, the inside of the lacquer is painted red with a mixture of wood resin and vermilion. It is said that the inside of most lacquer ware is usually painted red.

### Engraving, Etching and Colouring



Firstly, the outline of the design is engraved freehand on the surface of each item. This work is usually done only by men. Women do not do it. Designs are coated red which is got by

the admixture of resin and vermillion. Then kept it in the basement for three days to dry. At the end of three days, the lacquer is rubbed with wet rice husks.

This needs to be done three times in the same way. After that, it is applied with acacia gum or neem gum to design with a color and dried in the open air. When dried, it is outlined in green colour using stylus. After that, resin is applied to the wood and rubbed with a cloth to keep it clean, and left in the basement for five days. After five days, the necessary colour are painted. As This painting work is done by only women, and man are found never done it.

### **Decoration and Ornament of Lacquerware**

Four basic styles of traditional Myanmar painting are used on lacquerware. The four basic styles are Kanote, Kapi, Gaza and Nari. These words are Pali words. The kanote style depicts convoluted lotus stems, buds, blossoms, or scroll work with floral motifs or arabesques. Any beautiful floral drawing or intricate design may be called kanote. Kapi depicts apes, monkeys and the like, and action and movement portrayed in a drawing may be called kapi. Gaza depicts elephants, horses, cattle or any massive objects such as mountains, rocks or tree trunks, and Nari depicts human figures. There is no perspective (i.e. near and far, light and darkness, low and height) in ancient Myanmar art. The required effect is achieved by means of lines and colours. The artist draws a design freehand to express an idea. (Khin Maung Nyunt, 1996, pp.117-118)

Motifs on lacquerware are lotus, orchids, mythical animals, demons, and devas. Favourite symbols are the nine planets and the twelve zodiac signs. Scenes and episodes from the Jatakas (stories of Buddha's lives), well-known folk tales and fables, pagoda legends and Nat (spirit) stories are depicted in panels. Enough space is left on the object for inscribing the artist's name and the date, or other words should the buyer wish to have a name inscribed.

### **Lacquerware Market**

There are many ways for selling the lacquerware, but two noted ways are primarily at shops and stores and especially at pagoda festivals. Some are sold through traders or merchants. Therefore, in Nyaung Oo, the place where people buy and sell lacquerware is still called Yun Dan Yap. Regarding lacquer trade, there are three classes of people in the lacquer industry. They are:

1. Manufacturer/producers,
2. Producer- distributor,
3. Retailers.

Today, the rich are opening stores with their own production.

### **Prospect of lacquerware**

Today, the number of people who earn their living by lacquer work is declining and the number of lacquers working areas is also dwindling. The reason is due to a number of problems such as the availability of raw material, shrinking market, shortage of skilled labor and scarce capital. One outstanding problem in addition to these is the exploitation of the wealthy peoples on the lacquer workers. For these reasons, lacquer workers are moving to other lucrative industries. Also, equally important problem is getting raw materials is more difficult than getting capital money. As everyone knows lacquer market is shrinking due to the widespread introduction and quick prevalence of easy-to-use plastics and long-lasting steel products. These two materials are replacing the traditional lacquerware very rapidly and effectively killing it. Lacquer industry is now encountering the survival struggle.

To achieve the survival struggle, we need a strategy in that the following steps should be taken to solve these problems: 1. Banks need to provide systematic generous concessional loans as capital to lacquer operators, 2. Establish a systematic lacquerware association to make raw materials easily available locally and 3. To upgrade the lacquer training schools to provide free training to produce skilled workers.

### **Conclusion**

There is no denying that the Myanmar lacquer industry has flourished since Bagan era. It can be said that the most prosperous period for lacquer ware industry was in Konbaung period where the lacquer technique has developed to the highest in the colonial period, the Lacquer School was opened in 1924, as a means to preserve the traditional culture of Burmese people and for being part of colonial economy. From 1924 to 1956, the school gave a three years course to which about 30 students were admitted to each batch. It was changed to a two-year course in 1962 and continues to this day. It takes many steps and a lot of time to get a lacquer ware, but it does not earn a decent income and raw materials become scarce and expensive. Due to the lack of a good market, lacquerware and the lacquer industry have become a culture that must be preserved.

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