

## JAPANESE COMPANY HISTORIES: CHARACTERISTICS AND CULTURAL VALUE



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### 1. Preface

In Japan, it is very common for companies to compile books about their history, marking stages such as an anniversaries of thirty years, fifty years, one hundred years and so on. Company histories are also published in countries other than Japan, for example, the United States and Germany. Those books are generally written by independent scholars or journalists based on research into the company's business management from historical viewpoints. On the other hand, there are some peculiar aspects about Japanese company histories:

- (1) Such a company history is compiled and published by the company itself;
- (2) It is usually intended for educational purposes of directors and employees, public relations, record keeping, and the like;
- (3) Writers are company employees, scholars, journalists, novelists and so forth;
- (4) Publishing companies are not limited to particular types of industry, and such publication is not affected by economic situations. In recent years, publishing a company history is not "a temporary boom" but is a common and routine activity of companies.

### 2. Definition and Function of a Company History: "What is a company history?"

It is a common understanding in Japan that a company history is "a history book compiled by a business company on its history and delivered in its responsibility". But the definition of a company history varies depending on academic researchers and libraries collecting them. There are no authorized definitions.

The functions or purposes of a company history vary widely by company. In the past, the purposes of compiling a company history were mainly anniversary mementos or public relations. But, recently management education, employee education, and public relations are regarded to be three major functions of a company history.

### 3. Characteristics of a Company History as a Publication

In most cases in Japan, a company histories are published privately and not for sale. They are then distributed as gifts by the companies at their discretion. Since company histories are not distributed through normal commercial channels, it is very

difficult to learn of their existence. It is really an example of gray literature.

There are no accurate statistics of company histories. It is unknown how many company histories have been published so far or how many company histories are being published every year. But, there are some sources of information. Libraries of universities and other special libraries have developed library catalogues and other materials. According to our survey, the cumulative number of company histories compiled in Japan so far is much more than 10,000, and the number of companies that have published corporate histories was about 6,000 as of 10 years ago. Perhaps the number of company histories published every year may be about 300.

#### **4. Value of Company Histories as Reference Source**

##### **(1) What is different from other information about companies?**

A variety of information materials that are published by business companies, such as Business Reports, Securities Exchange Reports, Corporate Profiles, publications for Public Relations, and so on. In addition, newspapers and magazines continue to produce mountains of information. A large number of books are also written about companies. How is a company history different from these materials?

Firstly, we can say that a company history is an encyclopedia containing a full picture of a company's historical business information. The other sorts of materials mentioned above are more or less fragmentary and temporary in nature. In contrast to this, information contained in a company history is comprehensive and durable in nature.

Secondly, a company history is a product of voluntary information disclosure by an enterprise and is a manifestation of the company's "Business Culture." While contents of Business Reports and Security Exchange Reports are mostly financial data in compliance with legal requirements, a company history is based on internal information of a company and is compiled according to the intention of a company. A company history describes the "management culture" in relation to business vision, corporate culture, business behaviors, organizational structures, product development, marketing policies, and the like. Understanding of management culture will be very useful to analyze the current information of the company.

Thirdly, a company history is often re-written as the time passes. History can vary depending on the interpretation of what happened in the past. Therefore, people's interests and points of view change with the times or according to a standpoint of looking at a fact. That's why it is necessary to re-write a company history periodically.

Fourthly, it is a recent trend that a company publishes multiple history books at the same time. Examples of such histories are "an orthodox history" centering on analysis of business management including all important matters, "a popular

edition” that is made easy to read and understand the company history briefly, “a visual version” with photos and illustrations, “a comic book” including comics and narratives, “a movie version”, “a history written in English” for foreigners, and “a computerized version in CD-ROM or on the Internet.” They are intended for specific purposes and targeted to a particular group of people.

## (2) Usefulness of a Company History as Library Items

The first point is the value of a company history as a case study textbook of corporate strategy. It provides comprehensive information about a company over decades, or even more than one hundred years. In fact, it is a treasure house of case studies of corporate management.

The second point is the value as public archive containing historical information, statistics, photos, and illustrations. Everybody can see original materials directly.

The third point is that you can get time-series data. For instance, if you need time-series data of financial statements, number of employees or other information, a company history will be a handy reference source. In some cases, a company history has more information than mere history of the company. For example, “Centennial History of Nippon Oil Company” contains historical data of oil products in Japan dating back to early 1900. “Fifty year History of Bridgestone” and “Thirty-year History of Japan Synthetic Rubber Company” contain the statistics of rubber.

The fourth point is that you can read about important events including related facts and background. A company history will come in handy when you want such information.

The fifth point is, a company history can be a good textbook of industrial history, economic history, or history of technology. For example, “Fifty-year History of Sumitomo Trust & Banking Company” is really a history of trust bank in Japan. “Centennial History of Asahi Mutual Life Insurance Company” is not only a corporate history of the company but a history book on life insurance in Japan. As such, a company history published in Japan is frequently a history of an industry. In the case of manufacturing companies, many company histories have detailed descriptions of technical developments. They can serve as a history of technology.

The sixth point is that a company history can be a textbook of cultural history or manners and customs in Japan. In the case of companies that have a long history or household products, company histories can give you far more useful information about culture and customs than ordinary textbooks. For example, the history of Kao Corporation is “a history of washing”. That of Shiseido, which is located in Ginza, Tokyo, is “a history of cosmetics” and “a history of Ginza” as well.

## 5. How to Access Company Histories

### (1) How to access Company Histories

You may want to know which companies have published a company history. To know the overall picture of company histories, a book titled “Union Catalogue of Company Histories” will come in handy. This has a list of about 9,000 company histories and about 1,400 histories of economic organizations owned by 50 representative libraries as of March 1992. It covers almost all histories published up to early 1990’s.

To know new publications, “Union Catalogue of Company Histories and Economic Organization Histories” is convenient. The Kanto District Branch of the Japan Special Libraries Association (専門図書館協議会関東地区協議会) has been updating this catalogue semiannually since 1977. It is also a good policy to use OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue). I recommend the OPACs of the Kawasaki Library of Kanagawa Prefecture and of Ryukoku University. I have included a list of libraries that have large holdings of company histories.

### (2) How to get a Company History

To obtain a real copy of a company history, there are two ways:

One is to get a copy from the publishing company.

The second way is to purchase at a secondhand bookstore.

In case you ask a company to contribute a copy, please address your request to Public Relations or any department in charge of corporate history. Unless you specify an addressee correctly, the mail will not reach the right department.

Company histories are distributed according to the publishing company’s intention, usually free of charge. But, actual expenses may be charged if a requesting organization is not very familiar to the publishing company. In addition, since publishing a company history is very expensive, more than 30,000 yen may be charged in some cases. In such a case, you should go to a secondhand bookstore. It may be far cheaper. Prices of most of company histories at secondhand bookstores range from 3,000 to 5,000 yen. Rare ones would be more expensive. The most expensive one I know was 450,000 yen.

Secondhand booksellers usually publish an inventory catalogue. You can ask them to send a catalogue when it is updated. They will accept your request to register your name in the mailing list. Recently, most of secondhand booksellers have their homepages. Please try and access those shops. I have also included a list of such secondhand booksellers.

Although a company history used to be a sort of gray literature, librarians have worked to summarize necessary information about company histories. Current

information is limited to nominal aspects. I plan to develop a company history database for retrieval so that you can search information according to a keyword of the contents.