



Why *Shashi*?

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Of what value are *shashi* and do these artifacts of corporate Japan warrant their own journal? On the surface and in some circles *shashi* are specious historical sources. Some are un- or lightly documented, most lack references or footnotes altogether. Yet *shashi* often provide a depth of information that can only come from the inside. I would argue that *shashi* are valuable. They are a treasure trove of company and often early, industry- specific information. Their level of detail, perhaps at times bordering on antiquarianism, gives the historian bits and pieces of the past that are often lost and missing from more “scholarly” sources. I believe this is the crux of the problem for *shashi*, or at least their reputation for some. *Shashi* are not scholarly sources, perhaps more accurately stated, *shashi* were not intended for a scholarly audience. They are internally produced histories written for employees and as gifts for a limited number of company outsiders. Occasionally *shashi* would also be sold, but they were technically “not-for-sale” publications. If you keep this in mind, you'll begin to understand *shashi*.

As noted by Murahashi Katsuko, one of the world's leading authorities on *shashi*, not all *shashi* are created equal. Dating back to the Meiji era, prewar *shashi* are typically “better” than their postwar cousins. Prewar *shashi* researchers and authors were the company's most highly educated and qualified employees. At times, well-known writers and scholars would also be invited to write prewar *shashi*.¹ This is not typically the case for postwar company histories.

Most of the *shashi* I have used deal with the iron industry and many, most, are postwar publications. Some contain errors and contradictions that a careful reader will see. Whether pre- or postwar, *shashi* are narratives. Postwar iron industry tomes present the “facts,” often with a healthy dose of self-aggrandizement for key company or industry figures. It is not unusual for them to reiterate the errors found in traditional histories.² On the positive side, they provide more than the basic story. There is a significant accounting of the history of a company, the industry, many of the players, and often the socio-political environment at a given time. They delve into the minutia of businesses and the actors, which partially accounts for their length. Minutia that is often mentioned in passing, however, also provides the patient historian with a plethora of details that can lead to more significant discoveries and more anecdotes than any single essay can stand. *Shashi* are fascinating to read and analyze.

For this author, *shashi* truly come into their own in the appendices, the *shiryō* sections, that are typically populated with primary source documents--at times direct reproductions--and statistical information that are otherwise unavailable. In some cases, the documents found in the appendices were destroyed or taken by company officials after the

¹ Maureen H. Donovan, “Japanese Company Histories Interest Group,” *Journal of East Asian Libraries*, 124 (2001) 51.

² It is not always clear whether these works are repeating the traditional history or are the source of that history.

shashi was published; other documents did not survive the ravages of time; while still others are locked away in some corporate archive. Also found in appendices and throughout the text are photographs, maps, and technical drawings that are equally invaluable resources.

This is another important function of *shashi*. Although some Japanese companies have made their archives available to researchers, most are not. In addition, many small companies that produced *shashi* no longer exist, and the contents of their archives have long been scattered. Whether pre- or postwar, *shashi* provide researchers with access to corporate histories, documents, photographs, and data that would otherwise be inaccessible.

To answer the questions I posed in the beginning, *shashi* are valuable sources and they do warrant their own journal. Placed in the context of their publisher's intentions, *shashi* are important repositories of the past. As researchers gain a greater understanding of *shashi*, their strengths and their limitations through a journal such as this, I would hope that more scholars would turn to *shashi*, whether as source materials or as the subject of research itself. And the good news is that *shashi* are available to audiences far wider than intended thanks to the efforts of small, dedicated group of librarians.³



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³ The Ohio State University, the University of Pittsburgh and University of Chicago have extensive *shashi* collections.