



## From the Editor's Desk

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Shashi: The Journal of Business and Company History*.

The party platform in George Orwell's *1984* was, "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." While Orwell was pointing to far more ominous tears in fabric of society than vanity publications like the company histories of Japan, it is nevertheless an apt description of the value and pitfalls of *shashi* (which literally means "company history".) *Shashi* are about the control of information.

To give a personal example, I recently wrote a book chapter about flip-flops (forthcoming from Berg Press), a product of the mid-twentieth century. I rarely work on anything later than the nineteenth century so I had assumed that anything so recent would be as easy to track as monster truck ruts, but flip-flops, a product created within living memory, proved elusive. There were no *shashi*!

Flip-flops are essentially ephemera, a cheap product that weren't meant to last longer than your vacation to the beach. They caught on because like plastic forks, they were inexpensive and functional so they didn't make much impact in newspapers or magazines until years after they were introduced, when they were already ubiquitous. First manufactured in Japan, I could not find a company that admitted making them in the 1950s, although Mitsubishi and Sumitomo were very prompt and courteous in answering my inquiries to the negative. Flip-flops were probably made by small workshops around Osaka and Kobe, and then amalgamated for export by these larger trading firms. That is why there were no *shashi* for flip-flops.

It is probably belaboring the point, but let me document some of the difficulties caused by the lack of *shashi*. There were some historical discussions about flip-flops in shoe history books, but they were not very good - each repeated the hearsay of the last so one ended up with Escher-like repeating narrative staircases with no foundation. I thought maybe oral history would provide the answer. My interview with my mother sums up this avenue; "They were just suddenly there." We give little attention to the ephemera in our lives. I even tried following up other oral reports like one recorded by Edward Tenner. His informant remembered flip-flops being popularized in the 1950s by a photograph of a flip-flop wearing Harry Belafonte stepping out of his hotel in Kyoto.<sup>1</sup>

When I couldn't find the picture, I sent a letter on university letterhead to Belafonte's representation, the William Morris Agency, asking if he or anyone in his organization could tell me if such a picture existed. Three months later I received the following email:

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Tenner, *Our Own Devices: How Technology Remakes Humanity* (New York: Vintage 2004), 68.

*Thank you for sending your query letter to us with a view towards representation. Unfortunately we do not think your material would be a good fit for WME at this time.*

I tried contacting companies in the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Many never bothered to respond. Some responded but handed me off to some PR person who then never responded. Perhaps most frustratingly, the archivist at what I will call Company J was helpful, or rather, wanted to be, but had to receive permission from legal, which, as this goes to press, a year and a half later, has yet to provide the necessary okay for the archivist to give me potentially inflammatory and commercially risky information about sandals produced over sixty years ago. Although these dead ends seem more Kafkaesque than Orwellian, in their own way, intentionally or not, these companies, even if through lack of action, controlled information. I was left to piece together my story through magazines and newspapers. It all would have been so much easier if there had been *shashi*.

I did use several *shashi* in this project, which had been compiled by various rubber and synthetic rubber companies, as well as trade organization publications, which are sort of meta-*shashi*. However *shashi* are often the history of the victors, or at least victors at the time they were written. Rubber production often occurred in small workshops around Kobe that did not produce *shashi* and thus have been written out of standard history. And herein is one important caution about company histories: “Who controls the present controls the past.” This quote is prefaced by the words “the lie that passed into history became truth.” And this is the danger. For example, a certain company claims to have invented *jika tabi*, split-toed cloth footwear with rubber soles, worn even today in Japan by manual laborers like construction workers and gardeners, in 1918. This has become a widely accepted fact but a search of newspaper advertisements, however, shows that they existed well before that, at least as early as 1902. Similarly, flip flops as defined as a thong shoe of an entirely rubber or rubber-like substance seem to have originated in Japan but because they were probably first produced in small workshops by the time large firms that produced *shashi* took over, their origins were effectively obscured.



In the United States, according to the Supreme Court, corporations are people too. Although I meant that with irony, nevertheless, all of us who work with *shashi* know they are fascinating look at a certain kind of corporate psychology. They describe a hagiocracy where competitors and failures are shadowy or don't exist at all. Company histories can be found everywhere, but nowhere else have they reached the level of convention that they have in Japan. This says something about corporate culture in Japan too, although what, I will leave for our authors to identify.

Whatever their faults, *shashi* are priceless tools for the historian because they provide information on the very things I was unable to get access to from the American, Australian and other companies. Companies that were once great go out of business and their records are lost. In Japan, especially, natural disasters like earthquakes and fires and man-made ones like warfare have destroyed many of these records. As the articles in this and future issues show, the historical record is richer for *shashi*. After all, as Orwell wrote in the same book, “The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon.”

Some of the issues I have cataloged here have been taken up by our authors in this issue. First, however, in typical *shashi* style, we open with essays in honor of the founding of our publication written by the chair of the Shashi Study Group and Japanese editor, Hiroyuki Good, and board member David Wittner. Our academic articles show that my references to Orwell are more than just literary pretension. Charles Andrew's examines the means and control of communication and its impact on the flow of information. Ann Sherif shows how local and national newspapers, which we usually consider a source of objective information, subjectively record their own pasts. We also have an extensive research notes that we hope will be of use to new and experienced researchers alike.

Issue Two will be a special issue on Shiseido. We welcome articles, research notes or other format on any *shashi* topic in written in Japanese or English, but would especially welcome those on Shiseido or other cosmetic companies, for publication in 2013. With your help, perhaps we can publish our own journal *shashi* in a few decades.



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