

The Trials and Tribulations of Accessing Corporate Archives in Japan

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A lack of accessible corporate archival material has long been a challenge for researchers of Japanese business history. This note digs deeper into the key issues associated with accessing company archives in Japan and proposes several research strategies. It does so by documenting and analyzing attempts to access company archives as part of my own research into the absorption of foreign knowledge and technology in the Japanese rubber industry between 1900 and 1965. The assumption is that the lessons from this research project are applicable to corporate archive access issues in Japan more broadly.

Identifying the Relevant Firms

My research focuses on the tire and footwear segments of the rubber industry and hones in on the two key production clusters of Kobe (Hyogo Prefecture) and Kurume (Fukuoka Prefecture). Rubber manufacturing production in Japan began in earnest when British trading company H. & W. Greer established factories in Kobe on behalf of J. G. Ingram & Son (in 1908) and Dunlop Rubber (in 1909). A string of Japanese companies making cheap bicycle and rickshaw tires soon spawned in Kobe in the wake of these two British factories. By the 1920s, rubber manufacturing knowledge had become more accessible, and this brought a boom in rubber footwear production in Kobe which filled the space left by the city's depression-hit match industry.

However, Kobe's rubber footwear manufacturers were small in scale and did not challenge Dunlop Far East in more technology- and capital-intensive automobile tire production, which was emerging as the growth segment of the industry. Instead, a rival to Dunlop emerged from Kurume's rubber footwear industry. In stark contrast to Kobe, the Kurume footwear industry was made up of just two large firms: Tsuchiya Tabi and Nippon Tabi. They had both shifted from producing cotton *tabi* (traditional split-toed Japanese footwear) to rubber-soled *tabi* in the early 1920s by drawing on rubber manufacturing knowledge from Dunlop. In 1929, the by-now giant Nippon Tabi established an automobile tire division which hired Japanese engineers from Dunlop and was soon spun off as 'Bridgestone'. Bridgestone was fast able to challenge Dunlop and Goodrich (Yokohama Rubber) in the domestic car tire market and during the war secured a dominant market share which it consolidated in the post-war period through a technical tie-up with Goodyear. The key puzzles to solve are, firstly, why was Japan so successful in absorbing foreign knowledge in this industry? And second, why did what is now the world's largest tire-maker emerge from the provincial Japanese town of Kurume?

Flowing from the summary above, the firms most crucial to my analysis are Tsuchiya Tabi (now Moonstar), Nippon Tabi (now Asahi Shoes), Bridgestone, and Dunlop Far East (now Sumitomo Rubber). Any surviving or

accessible archival material belonging to these firms has therefore been given top priority. Other firms with potentially highly relevant archival material include the smaller Kobe firms Naigai, Nichirin, and Akimai, and Yokohama Rubber which was formed as a joint venture between U.S. tire-maker B.F. Goodrich and Yokohama Electric Cable.

Attempts to Access Corporate Archives

To gauge the existence and accessibility of key corporate material, during a trip to Japan in April 2023 I visited the head offices of Bridgestone, Moonstar, and Asahi Shoes directly. This was not particularly promising. In the case of Bridgestone, I was unable to make contact with any relevant employees. On visiting Moonstar in Kurume, I was able to speak with a member of the general affairs department (総務課) who informed me that only company employees were able to access any surviving archival material they had. I also spoke with members of the general affairs department at Asahi Shoes who were willing to help but informed me that they had little surviving material from before the end of the Second World War.

On returning to Japan for an extended research stay in September 2023, and based on my host professor Nakamura Naofumi's advice, I decided to take a more indirect approach. I contacted the relevant companies through the contact forms on their website in which I explained my research topic, the kind of material I was interested in, and that my host professor at the University of Tokyo was supportive of my request. Most of the companies I contacted did get back to me and informed me that they would discuss my request internally. In the case of Moonstar, they explained that many materials no longer exist, that they do not currently employ an archivist, and reiterated that the surviving material they did have was private and only available to company employees. In the case of Asahi Shoes, they were yet to locate any material from my research period.

While in email contact with a member of Bridgestone's customer relations division, a contact doing business with IHI (Ishikawajima-Harima Heavy Industries) – currently one of Bridgestone's clients – kindly asked them to support my request. IHI contacted Bridgestone directly about my request. Bridgestone discussed my request internally, however they ultimately decided not to grant me access to their archives. The first reason given was that the company did not have an organized record of the materials requested, so was unsure whether they existed. The second explanation given was that even if the archival material was well organized, they are related to the company's decision making at the time so are confidential. Incidentally, in researching the economic history of Liberia, Leigh Gardner attempted to access the archives of U.S. tire-maker Firestone, owner of a huge, controversial rubber plantation in that West African state.¹ Bridgestone has owned Firestone since 1988 and refused Gardner access to Firestone's archives.

I did not initially receive a response by email from Sumitomo Rubber, so I decided to visit their head office in Kobe directly where I was able to speak with a company employee from their general affairs department. I had read that almost all of Dunlop Far East's pre-war and wartime records were destroyed when the factory burnt down during the firebombing of Kobe in 1945, so my chances were slim.² And on visiting the head office, I was told that Sumitomo Rubber do not hold any archives from before the Sumitomo Electric takeover of Dunlop Far East in 1963. The surviving Dunlop Japan records appear to have been transferred back to the British parent company at that time. Dunlop had a rich, publicly accessible archive at their head office in London which was used by Geoffrey Jones in his 1984 article on Dunlop's overseas manufacturing subsidiaries.³ In 1985, an indebted Dunlop was acquired by BTR

¹ Leigh Gardner, *Sovereignty without Power: Liberia in the Age of Empires, 1822-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

² 100: *The First Hundred Years of Pneumatic Tyres, 1888-1988* [in Japanese] (Kobe: Sumitomo Rubber, 1988), p. 18.

³ Geoffrey Jones, 'The Growth and Performance of British Multinational Firms before 1939: The Case of Dunlop', *Economic History Review* 37 (1984), pp. 35-53.

(formerly British Tyre & Rubber). Jones was informed that Dunlop's archives were destroyed soon after that BTR takeover. The materials which survived the purge – largely balance sheets and financial reports – are now housed at the London Metropolitan Archives.

One particularly fruitful avenue has been the corporate archives of the old Mitsui & Co. (Mitsui Bussan). Mitsui was heavily involved in the rubber trade and had a close relationship with the Ishibashi family, who owned Nippon Tabi and Bridgestone. The Mitsui Archives (*Mitsui Bunko*) in Tokyo house a huge amount of archival material belonging to companies that were part of the Mitsui *zaibatsu* (family conglomerate) before its dissolution in 1947. The archive is accessible to researchers but requires a reservation at the time of writing. Connected to this research project, crucial evidence and insights have been obtained from materials such as the minutes of meetings between the Mitsui Bussan branch heads, detailed surveys of aspects of the rubber industry of strategic importance to the trading company at a given point in time, records of all sales contracts, and corporate archives of other companies belonging to the Mitsui group, such as Sanwa Rubber (Samhwa Rubber) and Nippon Rubber Manufacturing.

Professors Hashino Tomoko and Suzuki Shoko kindly introduced me to the head of Posty Corporation, Baba Takahito. Posty publish the newspaper *Japan Rubber Weekly* (*Gomu Hōchi Shinbun*), currently the primary provider of journalism on the industry. I am currently attempting to make contact with Akimai and Naigai through the three contacts mentioned above. Baba has also kindly introduced me to the president of Kurume's Nakashima Rubber who has been extremely helpful in locating in Kurume an expert on the existence of primary material relating to the city's rubber industry. That contact (at the Cultural Heritage Preservation Division of Kurume City Hall) has kindly verified with Moonstar and Asahi Shoes that both companies do have some archival material sitting in cardboard boxes and will attempt to help me gain access. My attempts to access relevant material through these channels are ongoing at the time of writing, as is my attempt to gain access to surviving archival material at Nichirin through the Suzuki Shōten Memorial Museum.

Explaining Access Difficulties

As this hunt for archival material from Japanese rubber manufacturers has hinted at, the turnover rate of Japanese firms is low and a huge number of firms still in business today trace their roots back to the pre-war era or earlier. For researchers, the longevity of Japanese firms is probably a positive in terms of the survival of corporate archival material but a negative in terms of the accessibility of that material. The explanations provided by Bridgestone and Moonstar suggest that even material from a century ago is viewed as confidential in that it might reveal to competitors some of the sources of their firm's competitive advantage, or some activities which could tarnish brand image. The perceived risk is especially high when the request is from a foreign researcher without direct connections to the company or local business community. Most Japanese firms prefer to take the safe option of limiting historical material to in-house company histories – *shashi* – which give them an element of control over their own historical narrative. As explained in a previous research note in this journal, *shashi* are information-rich and an important resource for scholars.⁴ However, they may omit delicate but important information and tend to lack analytical rigor. In my experience, they also often favor an old-style entrepreneurial history which emphasizes the genius of the founder and subsequent presidents, as well as the uniqueness of the company. Any parallels at competitors, the replication of strategies by rival firms, and the structural factors affecting strategy and choice are often overlooked. This makes

⁴ Kumagai Shōko, 'Welcome to the World of Japanese Company Histories', *Shashi: The Journal of Japanese Business and Company History* 5 (2020), pp. 5-6.

sense when we consider that the target market of *shashi* is the firm's own employees, in which the firm presumably wants to instill a sense of pride in the company's history.

Issues surrounding corporate archive access in Japan have been the subject of many studies and research notes in Japanese.⁵ Numerous scholars, both Japanese and foreign, continue to struggle with accessing Japanese corporate archives. For example, Xia & Donzé had to rely on published sources in their recent study of Kobe sake brewer Nihonsakari as the firm refused access to archival material.⁶ But there are also success stories. For example, W. Mark Fruin is reportedly the only researcher to have been granted access to the corporate archives of soy sauce giant Kikkoman.⁷

Proposed Research Strategies

To raise the chances of gaining access to corporate archives, the experiences documented in this note suggest that contacts are key. This is probably particularly important for junior researchers (even more so for those without Dr. or Prof. in front of their name!). In my case, Janet Hunter, Nakamura Naofumi, Hashino Tomoko, and Suzuki Shoko have been crucial in helping me build a network of relevant contacts. Many other Japanese academics in the field have also been extremely helpful. It may ultimately take a chain of contacts before one succeeds in reaching influential figures in the firms or industry being researched. If one is unable to get in contact with the company through contacts, direct requests may work in some cases and are best directed to the firm's general affairs department.

However, regardless of the approach taken, my experience suggests that the chances of being refused access to corporate archives in Japan are high. As such, an indirect approach to collecting evidence may be required and can be fruitful. In Japan, there are a huge number of resources conducive to an indirect approach. In terms of primary evidence, I have located numerous relevant industry surveys by manufacturing and export associations, branches of regional government, and various national government ministries. For example, regional industrial surveys (some of them focusing entirely on rubber) are housed at the Kurume and Kobe city libraries have been particularly useful.

There is also a huge amount of relevant material in Japanese industry periodicals and journals, many of which have recently been digitized by the National Diet Library (<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/>). In my case, I have also found British and American industry periodicals useful in building a transnational source base. Many Japanese and English-language newspapers have also been digitized which allow relevant articles to be found via keyword searches. For larger companies, there may also be surviving published primary corporate material. For example, I have located Nippon Tabi catalogues for both the domestic and export market, and a detailed information booklet on Nippon Tabi and Bridgestone published by Nippon Tabi in 1934. Finally, for research on Japanese business history taking a global perspective, corporate archival material in other countries can also be fruitful. For example, Goodrich and Goodyear's archives belong to the University of Akron and are publicly accessible.

As mentioned above,⁵ the publicly accessible Mitsui Archives are also an excellent resource. The archive also houses a huge and complete set of records of the Mitsui Mi'ike Mine which has been indexed and is discussed in another research note in this journal.⁸ The online-only Suzuki Shōten Memorial Centre also has some useful primary material as part of its project of piecing together the history of what was briefly Japan's largest trading company.

⁵ For example, Kotani Masashi, Asada Atsushi, Yoshida Takeshi, Miyamoto Noriko, Nakamura Munetaka, & Kamaoka Noriyuki, *Shashi, Aakaibu Sōken no Chōsen: Soshiki no Rekishi Shōkei wo Kanga* (Tokyo: Shuppan Bunka-sha, 2019). Ogawa Chiyoko & Koide Izumi eds., *Aakaibu he no Akusesu: Nihon no Keiken, Amerika no Keiken* (Shibukawa: Nichigai, 2008). Matsuzaki Yuko, 'Kigyō Aakaibu wo Jizoku Kanō na mono to suru: Nihon-teki Keiei ni okeru Aakibisuto to wa?', *Aakaibuzu-gaku Kenkyū* 21 (2014), pp. 34-54.

⁶ Qing Xia and Pierre-Yves Donzé, 'Surviving in a Declining Industry: A New Entrepreneurial History of Nihonsakari since the 1970s', *Business History* 66 (2024), pp. 221-40 (p. 225).

⁷ W. Mark Fruin, *Kikkoman: Company, Clan, and Community* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁸ Raja Adal, 'Index of the Mitsui Mi'ike Mine Archive', *Shashi: The Journal of Japanese Business and Company History* 6 (2021), pp. 3-4.

Unfortunately, primary material at the Mitsubishi Archives have recently been closed off to researchers due to concerns the archive would be used by Korean or Chinese researchers with ulterior motives.

There is also a vast amount of secondary literature – both academic and commissioned grey literature – in Japanese which can be used to weave together an original analytical narrative. The commissioned grey literature in Japan is often more comprehensive and detailed than such literature in many Western countries. *Shashi* have already been mentioned and will be familiar to readers of this journal. Manufacturing associations themselves often also compile detailed industry histories, sometimes entirely focusing on a specific region.

As such, the absence of corporate material can undoubtedly be compensated for via an indirect, more detective-work-heavy approach. A lack of access to corporate archives should be no barrier to producing high-quality, original research in Japanese business and industry history. In any case, important research topics and questions should be investigated regardless of the availability of organized archival material. That said, the difficulties associated with accessing corporate material should by no means put researchers off trying. Building a network of contacts and persistence in the face of numerous dead ends will give researchers a good chance of gaining access to rich and novel corporate archival material.



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