

Japanese Business Novels

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Japan experienced extremely rapid economic growth from the 1950s to the 1980s. Although the Japanese government provided great support to the growth of key industries, as reflected in such policies as the Yoshida Doctrine and Ikeda's Ten-Year Income Doubling Plan, the dedication, sacrifices, and ingenuity of Japanese businessmen (and their wives) also contributed significantly to rapid economic growth and overseas trade expansion. Japanese business novels not only address some of the economic and business issues of the times, they also provide insights to individuals responsible for Japan's economic success. Although the characters are fictional, they many times give a composite depiction of personalities and characteristics of real individuals in the business world.

This essay analyzes the historical context and reasons for the popularity of four business novels: "Made in Japan" by Saburô Shiroyama, "Silver Sanctuary" by Ikkô Shimizu, "Kinjô the Corporate Bouncer" by Shiroyama, and "The Baby Boom Generation" by Taichi Sakaiya. These novels were published in 1959, 1969, 1959, and 1984, respectively. The novels are set at about the same time as when they were originally published, except for "The Baby Boom Generation," which is a "prediction novel" (Prindle xv) set in the late 1980s. The second section of the essay compares the roles, responsibilities, and treatment of women characters in the novels.

Historical Context and Reasons for Popularity

Each of the four business novels deals with some of the challenging issues faced by companies and businessmen at the time the novels were written. The novels also provide an historical context of the economic, political, and social environment in which the businesses operated. Business novels provide an excellent way for a businessperson to learn about psychology, politics, and strategy, much in the same way as American graduate business schools use case studies to teach students. In addition to the subplots

of romance and intrigue, Japanese business novels have achieved great popularity because of the insights they provide to a company's inner workings and the psychological makeup of people in the business world and because of the high level of importance Japanese society places on industrial development and economic growth.

Japanese exports grew an average of 17 percent annually between 1953 and 1965 (Pyle 1996, 246), and the story "Made in Japan" explores some of the issues facing companies trying to export manufactured goods during this period. Fujishita, head of Galaxy Thermometer Company, worked hard to improve quality, make technical improvements, and cut costs to sell his products in export markets. Fujishita "thoroughly measured and analyzed the work process" (7), which reflects the widespread acceptance by Japanese manufacturers of the quality control methods preached throughout the 1950s by W. Edwards Deming, an American statistician who came to Japan in 1950 (Dower 1999, 543).

Although Fujishita's company experienced a great downturn in business after his refusal to accept voluntary export quotas and after the U.S. doubled the tariff rate to 85 percent on imported thermometers, Fujishita's philosophy of relentless concentration on high quality and efficient production propelled Japan forward in the 1960s and 1970s to capture huge global market shares in such key industries as electronics, automobiles, and cameras. In addition to emphasis on quality and production, Pyle (1996, 246) mentions that a key factor of Japanese economic growth was the labor force's "willingness to work long and hard with a strong sense of loyalty to one's firm," an attitude Fujishita exemplified in the story.

The business novel "Silver Sanctuary" shows the intense competition that companies face in the Japanese domestic market. Six bank branch offices "vied bitterly with one another, each trying to pick up one more client" (34) in a mature market with little growth. Many observers believe the extremely high level of competitiveness in the Japanese retail market has strengthened Japanese manufacturing and financial companies to effectively compete in the international marketplace against companies from other countries.

Sakaiya, author of "The Baby Boom Generation," predicts in this business novel that the Japanese economy would enter a deep recession (133, 143). Japan's continuing economic doldrums during the 1990s and the current high unemployment rate demonstrate that Sakaiya at least partly predicted correctly the future state of the Japanese economy.

This novel reflects accurately the competition in mature domestic markets such as consumer electronics, and it shows how many large companies will try to continue their growth by expanding into unrelated markets where they may not have a competitive advantage.

Tomita, the protagonist in "The Baby Boom Generation," questions many times whether the untold hours devoted to his company were worth the sacrifice of his personal happiness and home life. Even though he "had climbed up the success ladder: first as an outstanding high school student, then as a serious student at a prestigious university, and now as a select member of a large company" (148), he wonders whether quality of life issues should be more balanced with company commitment. Before Tomita and his wife move to Osaka to work in the store, Tomita's wife seems to believe in this formula of success when her first question after being told of the move is about what school their daughter would attend. Japanese society places very high value on the prestige of one's company and university, so parents believe their children must go to good schools and *juku* (cram schools) to succeed on the entrance examinations to get into a prestigious university and subsequently get a position at a prestigious employer.

Women Characters

The roles, responsibilities, and treatment of women characters differ depending on the time when the business novel was written. Shiroyama's stories, published in 1959, give the most traditional portraits of women, but even his stories show the great changes Japanese women experienced after World War II. For example, Tomoko Bumpei in "Made in Japan" has been attending a New York university for three years. Prior to 1945, males had almost exclusive access to this type of higher education, especially overseas, but women had seen their higher education opportunities grow after the end of the war. Kinjô's daughter, Miwako, attended a women's college in Tokyo, and she married a man with a wife and children and left her child Kenzô with her previous husband. Miwako's actions reflect changes in thinking regarding marriage of some people of the younger generation of the time. In contrast, Kinjô's wife, Moto, holds the more traditional Japanese woman's view, firmly committed to the marriage even though her husband had relations with several other women, including the geisha who stopped by their house.

Tomita's wife Sachie in "The Baby Boom Generation" demonstrates that she prefers to have her husband away from the typical big corporation life that exemplifies success. At the end of the novel, she responds very positively to the news that Tomita will be able to obtain the store in exchange for his retirement benefit. Whereas before working together as a couple at the store, Tomita worked extremely long hours at the office, even missing such important family events as Christmas and his daughter's birthday, now they had time to spend together even though they may often be working hard at the store. Sachie preferred a higher quality of life for her family rather than having her husband working long hours in a supposedly prestigious position. Many young Japanese women, and men, in the 1980s and 1990s have been reflecting on the relative importance of quality of life and the sacrifices required for a successful career in a large corporation.

Works Cited

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