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23  
Monday  
Nov 2015

## Mieki and Japanese Corporate Magazines (PR-shi)

POSTED BY MICHAEL P. WILLIAMS IN POSTS

≈ 1 COMMENT

### Tags

Ajinomoto, 社史, 雑誌,  
house organs, PR誌,  
Japanese magazines,  
Mieki, PR-shi, shashi, 味の素, 味液

While many among us have transitioned to reading news and feature articles online, the print magazine persists. As libraries too have exchanged print journal subscriptions for electronic, we nevertheless remain committed to collecting a number of magazines and other periodicals in print. This is especially true when it comes to serial items published in Japan, a country slow to abandon print for digital options. As we both maintain and expand our print acquisitions, we find ourselves looking into the past, searching for and acquiring back issues for numerous titles. It is this sense of completism that had led us to collect and to document near-obsessively such rarities as almost every single issue of the long-running men's lifestyle magazine *Brutus* (1980-present), the entire run of Japanese *hanga* art periodical *21 Prints* (1990-2012), and today's unique title, *Mieki* 味液 (1956-1978), a magazine published by food and chemical corporation Ajinomoto, and dedicated almost entirely to the eponymous Mieki ("flavor liquid") a hydrolyzed vegetable protein and industrial soy sauce additive.

### WELCOME

Welcome to Unique at Penn, part of the family of University of Pennsylvania Libraries blogs. Every week this space will feature descriptions and contextualization of items from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The site focuses on those materials held by Penn which are in some sense "unique" - drawn from both our special and circulating collections, whether a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript or a twentieth-century popular novel with generations of student notes penciled inside. See the About page for more on the blog and to contact the editor.

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- "If a Woman Had Been Mayor"
- A Woodblock on Pilgrimage: From Flanders to Philadelphia
- Etta Winograd: Artist of the Figurative and the Fantastical
- A Collection of Korekushon

### ARCHIVES

- August 2019
- February 2019



— (top) Ajinomoto PR-shi *Mieki* in original string-bound file; (bottom) *Mieki* no. 1, no. 30, and contemporary information booklet included in Penn's acquisition.

- August 2018
- December 2017
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*Mieki* is an exemplar of a two long-lived genres of Japanese periodicals, both of which can be essential elements of the growing discipline of the study of *shashi*, or Japanese company histories: *shanaihō* (internally aimed company periodicals) and *PR-shi* (externally aimed “public relations magazines”). These publication types are ubiquitous, hazily defined, and share a significant overlap, but they not too difficult to identify once you’ve got one in front of you. If you’ve ever thumbed through an issue of American Airlines’ *American Way* during a flight, or through a copy of Red Bull’s *The Red Bulletin* at your gym, you’ve had your hands on a PR-shi. Two salient features of PR-shi can be observed:

1. They are more interested in creating positive awareness of corporate brand than in direct advertising (and as such, feature editorial content not typically present in catalogs or circulars).
2. They are generally issued outside of traditional magazine distribution models, often for free or for a nominal price (the latter option often employed as a loophole to take advantage of discounted mailing rates).

Finding the progenitor of *Mieki* and other PR-shi in Japan is no easy task, and numerous candidates have been identified, such as the pharmacy-sponsored digest of pharmaceutical news *Hōtan Zasshi* 芳譚雜誌 (1878-1884), Maruzen Publishing Company’s *Gakutō* 學鐙 (begun in 1897 under the title *Manabi no Tomoshibi* 學の燈, and still in publication today), and *Hanagoromo* 花衣, begun in 1899 as both a seasonal catalogue of the Mitsui Draper’s Shop (now the international department store chain Mitsukoshi) and a literary magazine featuring Meiji literati like Ozaki Kōyō and Izumi Kyōka penning stories whose content resonated with the goods offered for sale. *Hanagoromo* would give rise to a series of Mitsui/Mitsukoshi PR-shi, including the monthly *Jikō* 時好 (1904-1908), which notably featured author Mori Ōgai and which claimed to have had a circulation of 16,000 copies. Not to be outdone, competing dry-goods seller Shirokiya Gofukuten released their own series of PR-shi like *Katei no Shirube* 家庭のしるべ (1904-1905), which serialized Russo-Japanese War tales, and its followup *Ryūkō* 流行 (1906-1918), which shifted focus from the domestic onto the stylish, and featured prominent authors like Yamada Bimyō and Shimazaki Tōson.

- October 2013
- September 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013
- June 2013
- May 2013
- April 2013
- March 2013
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- Front and back covers of 1982 reproductions of the first issues of two of Japan's oldest PR-shi, *Hōtan Zasshi* (left) *Gakutō* (right). Reproduced in *Fukkoku Nihon no Zasshi*.

Just as Shirokiya was retiring *Ryūkō* to launch its successor title *The Shiroki Times*, so were Americans coming to grips with their own PR-shi crisis. Here in the United States, so called "house organs" had enjoyed their own history, largely as advertising arms of publishers to increase book sales. Robert E. Ramsay notes "that is how such magazines as *Harper's*, *Collier's*, *Scribner's*, and others started." More ecumenical histories of American house organs will note, as George Dallas Newton does, "the patent medicine almanac[s] [...] between 1830 and 1870," and earlier, "the flourishing almanacs of the makers of sarsaparilla and stomach bitters." Looking even further back, neither Newton nor Ramsay hesitate to suggest that Ben Franklin's famous *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1732-1758) was a house organ for Franklin's printing office here in Philadelphia. But in October 1918, with a wartime need to reduce paper consumption, the United States War Industries Board drew a firm line between periodicals approved for paper use, and for house organs and other "periodicals that are not entitled to, or do not enjoy, second class mailing privileges." By the second World War, however, house organs seemed to boom, with the 1944 *Printers' Ink Directory of House Organs* listing more than 5,100 titles, some of which were even house organs about creating *other* house organs.



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# PAPER

## Gagged the Crier

BACK in the dark ages, about a thousand years ago, the news and the bones of commercial interest were carried to the people by *ling power*. But the crier finally gave way to the printing press and the distribution of public information became a *man production* job as *paper*.

That an small part of this distribution has been assigned to the company magazine attests to the effectiveness of this growing medium; that so much use has been made of it during wartime, indicates the confidence of American business management.

This confidence will grow, because after the War the success these magazines have produced will have been told. Then, and then only, will you see how they sold Bonds, salvaged scrap, increased production, gathered blood for ghastly and, most important, how by explaining the company's problem, they improved relations between the company and the people on whom it depended.

By such methods house organs stifled rumor-mongers and helped to defeat those who would slow our fight for freedom.

*Once again, paper has gagged the crier.*

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– Advertisements from the 1944 *Printers' Ink Directory of House Organs*.

World War II was less kind to Japanese house organs (and to magazines in general), with resource rationing and destructive air raids disrupting the market.

It wasn't until the 1950s that Japan's PR-shi industry would boom again with Japan's "economic miracle"—the period of rapid economic growth between 1955 and 1961. So flourished titles aimed to look like a hybrid of popular magazines and art magazines, like the jazz-martini-age-inspired *Yōshu Tengoku* 洋酒天国 issued by Suntory Whiskey (1956-1964), helmed for the first 30 issues by author Kaikō Takeshi, who imbued it with a palpably *Playboy* aesthetic. It is a stark contrast to *Mieki*, launched in the same year. The disparate content of these magazines reflects not only their audiences but their methods of distribution. *Yōshu Tengoku* was only available at Suntory-affiliated bars, and its contents were shaped around the interests of customers: alcohol, nude women, and gambling. Repeat customers became collectors; collecting encouraged repeat business. *Mieki*, meanwhile, is an admixture of technical documentation, interviews, and product history. Its role in Ajinomoto's business strategy is less clear, but the technical-yet-general nature of contents suggest that the magazine was partially aimed at in-house consumption as a *shanaihō* as well as semi-external PR-shi sent to wholesalers and dealers of Ajinomoto products. Still other titles like Exxon's art-heavy *Energy* (1964-1974) were sent directly by its editors to "the ten thousand opinion leaders," a mix of authors, cultural figures, and tastemakers whose addresses were gleaned from public directories.

Given these nontraditional channels, it isn't difficult to imagine why many PR-shi are difficult to locate today. Part ephemera and part grey literature, these materials resist traditional collection strategies. No other library seems to own *Mieki*, and Penn could only obtain numbers 1-30 of the magazine (except for number 18). Even Ajinomoto itself doesn't seem to own the magazine, or at least a complete run of it, as they were unable to tell me what number the final issue was. On the other hand, some PR-shi practically throw themselves at libraries. Yasuko Isono's 1963 article describes a situation in which publishers' PR-shi and dealers' catalogs arrived at libraries in batches, eventually accumulating into piles destined to be thrown into the trash.



— Publisher PR-shi from Japan: (top) B5-sized PR-shi; (bottom) smaller PR-shi distributed within books.

The situation is largely the same at Penn, even over 50 years later. Monthly advertising bundles from our chief vendor of Japanese books are full of



publishers' PR-shi, which have historically carried the literary flavor established by their late 1800s forebears. Authors like Mishima Yukio and Enchi Fumiko, for instance, had appeared in publisher Shinchōsha's *Nami* 波, founded in 1967 and still in print today. Many of these generally monthly titles are published in B5 size format, bearing a superficial resemblance to typical Japanese academic journals. But unlike those journals, PR-shi generally eschew scholarly articles for breezier features, and embrace serially published articles written by single authors as well as "relay articles," in which a serial column passes the baton (so to speak) to a new author each issue. Some of these serial articles are eventually collected and published as single books.

It is unclear how other readers in Japan might obtain these publisher PR-shi, though some like Yoshikawa Kōbunkan's *Hongō* 本郷 (1995-present) or Minerva Shobō's *Kiwameru* 究 (2011-present) offer cheap annual subscriptions. Still others are dependent on physical books as their mechanism of distribution: Readers wanting to collect Fujiwara Shoten's *Ki* 機 (1990-present) or Nihon Keizai Hyōronsha's *Hyōron* 評論 (1976-present) must commit themselves to buying titles published monthly by those publishers, as the issues can only be found tucked within the pages of new books along with advertising circulars. These latter types of PR-shi overlap significantly in function and purpose with another uniquely Japanese periodical genre, *geppō* 月報, journal - like pamphlets issued within monographic sets. Like *geppō*, they are easily mistaken for advertisements and often discarded by libraries, whether by accident or design.

Just as the global destruction of the 20th century World Wars hit PR-shi on both sides of the Pacific hard, so has the World Wide Web done significant damage to the house organ industry. Fumiko Sakuma narrates the decline in PR-shi since 2008 and into late 2013 concurrent with a growth in web-delivered content, but digital options are not perfect substitutes of published issues, nor do they have the trusted physicality of print magazines. That physicality, on the other hand, may be PR-shi's greatest undoing, since corporate magazines less fortunate than *Mieki* may end up lost to history forever. While Penn cannot hope to collect every print title that comes our way, we can do our part to save unique titles for future scholars.

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Michael is the library specialist for the Japanese and Korean collections at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. He has written Chrono Trigger for Boss Fight Books (where he serves as associate editor), and his shorter work has appeared in The Atlantic, The Appendix, and the Journal of East Asian Libraries.

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## THOUGHT ON “MIEKI AND JAPANESE CORPORATE MAGAZINES (PR-SHI)”

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