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Abstract
Essay on Japanese periodicals and PR ephemera.

Keywords
Japanese, Publishing, Ephemera

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Posted by Michael P. Williams in Posts

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, 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.
(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.
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 芳譚雑誌 (1878-1884), Maruzen Publishing Company’s Gakutō 学鐙 (begun in 1897 under the title Manabi no Tomoshibi 学の授業, 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.
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.
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.
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

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

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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 机 (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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