

## PORTRAIT

# The Common People's Spirit

**M**ichio Watanabe, senior dietman of the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party, was appointed to the key Cabinet post of Minister of International Trade and Industry when Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone reorganized his cabinet on December 28 last year. The *Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry* interviewed him to introduce his personal side to our readers and to ask him what he intends to do in his new post.

Michio Watanabe, born in 1923, entered the public accounting business after graduating from the Tokyo College of Commerce (presently Hitotsubashi University).

He began his political career in 1955 when he was elected to the prefectural assembly in his native Tochigi Prefecture.

In 1963 he was elected to the House of Representatives of the Diet on the Liberal-Democratic Party ticket and won his first Cabinet post in 1976 when he was named Health and Welfare Minister.

After serving as Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister and Finance Minister, he was named in 1983 to the key LDP post of Deputy Secretary General which he held until he assumed his current post.

**Q:** Since the purpose of this interview is to introduce your personal side to our readers, I hope you will allow us to ask some frank questions.

First, about your personal life. We understand that your father passed away when you were still small and that you went through many hardships in your boyhood and the years immediately after World War II. What are some of your strongest recollections of those years?

**WATANABE:** My philosophy is "A misfortune may sometimes turn out to be a blessing in disguise; good luck and ill luck are next door neighbors." It's true that I did not have an easy time in my boyhood. About a week after I was born, I was adopted by a poor family, and my

foster father died when I was a sophomore in middle school. I had to change school many times. But all these experiences have been useful in shaping my character and outlook on life. For instance, I was brought up on the love of other people, so I can readily understand people's feelings. I was brought up on simple food, so I am healthy.

Because I changed school many times, my friends were spread all over the prefecture. This helped me greatly when I campaigned for the prefectural assembly election.

Being poor, the only school I could afford to enter was a normal school, or the military academy. I decided to become an army officer. But I failed the entrance examinations, perhaps because my attitude was considered bad. Anyway, I was saved from dying on the battlefield.

**Q:** It has been said that, after the war, you earned your living as a peddler.

**A:** That's right. I wasn't accustomed to being deferential to people, so bowing my head in order to sell goods was tough. But I did learn that no matter how good your merchandise is, you won't be able to make sales unless you yourself are trusted. This was really a case of misfortune turning out to be a blessing in disguise. Only a thin sheet of paper separates misfortune from blessing.

**Q:** So, that's how the Watanabe philosophy of life began to be formed.

**A:** That's right. My foster father was poor and illiterate. But he was a liberalist and a democrat. He did not interfere in his children's activities, but he took good care of them. In fact, he took better care of me, his foster child, than his own blood daughter. He was a splendid foster father.





**Q:** *He must have been a man of sterling qualities.*

**A:** The middle school I attended was 15-16 kilometers away. I commuted on a bicycle over dirt roads. In winter, I had to leave home while it was still dark, and when I returned home it was already dark. To get me to school on time, my foster parents had to get up at 4:30 to prepare my breakfast and lunch box. In the evening, they always waited for me to come home to have supper together. They never ate by themselves before I came home.

This was so even when I went to distant towns for a judo match and returned home around 9:00. They prepared my meal and waited, saying, "When Michio comes home he will be hungry." They would feed their foster child first and then eat themselves. That's something I couldn't do.

**Q:** *They treated you as if you were a god...*

**A:** It was almost like that. They were poor and uneducated, but they were splendid people. I was really fortunate. They taught me never to complain or grumble. I've become a cabinet minister and I guess my income now falls in the high bracket, but I live very simply. I still cook my own meals in the Dietmen's dormitory, although the people around me say it's not becoming of my status.

**Q:** *You have the common people's spirit.*

**A:** That may be so. But I think it's a case of everything having two sides.

**Q:** *Why do you cook your own meals?*

**A:** About two years after I became a Diet member, my daughter, who is now a doctor, said she wanted to attend junior high school in Tokyo instead of in the country. So, I brought her to live with me in the Akasaka Dietmen's dormitory. The dormitory's dining hall opens at 7:30 in the morning. But she had to leave at 7:00 to reach school in time for her class. She would go to school without eating breakfast. I couldn't bear to see this, so I started to get up at 6:00 to prepare her breakfast and lunch box. I did this even when I didn't get back home until midnight the night before. After about half a year of this, it became a firmly established habit.

In fact, though, I was always interested in cooking. When I was drafted, I was assigned to looking after the mess of 100, even 1,000 soldiers, planning the menu, calculating the calories and procuring food items. You could say that by cooking my own meals I am combining my hobby with practical considerations.

**Q:** *What is your specialty?*

**A:** Well, I can't cook special dishes. Just

ordinary, everyday food, like *miso* soup. I'm good at broiling fish.

**Q:** *You are a very busy cabinet minister. How do you maintain your health?*

**A:** Working hard, drinking lots of alcohol, exercising and sleeping soundly. That's the best prescription for staying healthy. The thing to avoid is fretting and brooding over things. What's done cannot be undone. Do your human best and leave the rest to Heaven. No matter how much you cry over your failures or complain about your troubles, nobody will help you. Therefore, I first try not to make mistakes. But if I do make a mistake, then it just can't be helped. I won't fret about it. I just get myself a good night's sleep. Within three to five minutes after I get into bed, I'm sound asleep. And for at least six hours, my eyes won't open again.

**Q:** *Some people work best at night and others in the morning. What about you?*

**A:** It doesn't make any difference to me whether it is early in the morning or late at night. I adjust myself to the circumstances. However, I can't stand lack of sleep. Government officials often say they work so late that they get only three or four hours of sleep a day. That's self-defeating, because daytime efficiency drops drastically.

When I was Minister of Finance, I told ministry officials not to work until the wee hours. I told them there is no need to work until two or three in the morning to assess the requests for appropriations from other government departments. They could do that work in the daytime.

**Q:** *You are a man of many hobbies—visiting famous gardens, watching baseball games and sumo matches, playing golf, jogging, swimming, reading books, and so on.*

**A:** I like them all very much, but I don't go overboard on any of them. I don't give myself entirely to one pastime.

**Q:** *We heard that even after assuming the post of Minister of International Trade and Industry, you still go swimming despite your tight schedule.*

**A:** We tend to eat too much, and we don't move our bodies enough. That makes us weak. We don't do manual work, but we get plenty of nourishment, say around 2,000 calories. This is bad for our health. It might be better not to eat at all. But in my case, I have such a strong stomach that I eat all the food placed in front of me. So, I have to dissipate the extra energy. Running is best for using up energy. It's not possible to play golf every day. What's best for me, then, is swimming and taking a sauna bath. I swim twice a week. I can spare time only in the evening, and the pool is open until 9:00.



After I finish work I swim for about one hour from 7:00 or sometimes 8:00. It all depends on my work schedule. I swim for about 40 minutes and take a sauna bath afterwards. A good stiff drink after that, and I can sleep soundly.

**Q:** *Before concluding this interview, please tell us what you hope to do as Minister of International Trade and Industry.*

**A:** For resource-poor Japan, nothing is more important than promoting trade. Japan was able to achieve prosperity thanks to the free trade system. It is essential, therefore, that we safeguard the free trade system.

It is unreasonable to argue about the trade imbalance only in bilateral terms. The problem should be discussed from a global standpoint. Yet, if trade is too one-sided, Japan will be criticized. We must make attempts toward achieving equilibrium. When changes are necessary, they should be made so we cannot be called unfair.

It is vital to implement step by step the action program which the government announced last summer. The fiscal 1986 national budget includes measures for implementing the action program. Tariffs were lowered in January and standards and certification procedures have been simplified considerably. But it is also necessary to make our trading partners understand that Japan is making efforts like these to redress the trade imbalance.

Together with steps to make the Japanese market more open, domestic demand must be expanded in order to increase imports. MITI intends to work hand in hand with the Finance Ministry, the Construction Ministry and other ministries and agencies to stimulate domestic demand. I shall make a total effort to eliminate trade friction. ●