

TOKYO LETTER

Three Weeks at MITI

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In less than 30 years, who has achieved more or grown more quickly than Japan? Passing from a subsistence economy in the aftermath of war to become "third greatest" in 1968, Japan has become a kind of gigantic industrial base, fascinating and frightening at the same time, the point at which all our fantasies and forebodings—and hence all our ignorance—converge.

Fascinated and concerned, Westerners have looked for the secret of the "Japanese economic miracle" and in the wings they have discovered the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, or MITI, whose organizing power and coordinating activities they believe to be at the basis of everything, explaining everything—or almost. This is witnessed, for example, in the recent study by Chalmers Johnson: *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*.

This is why, succumbing myself to the simple desire to learn the truth behind the Japanese economy, I chose to spend three weeks of my study period in Japan at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry.

Above all I wanted to understand the internal organization and functioning of MITI and its relations with the other partners in the economy.

So although I stayed continuously in the one office in the one section, I devoted each day to a different aspect of economic problems, dividing my time into two: in the morning personally studying the subject, using documents and information provided by the ministry, and in the afternoon talking with officials, generally at the assistant director level. To remain open to the world outside, my study period also included visits to business (such as NEC or the Nissan plant at Zama), to Tsukuba scientific city, to JETRO or to major trading companies. I even attended a press conference by the then Minister Shintaro Abe and a meeting of the budget committee.

Such a program, though allowing me a broad sweep of MITI's areas of involvement, nevertheless involved the danger of



flying over things, of superficiality, at times, and therefore of incomplete and frustrating knowledge. It would have been preferable, no doubt, to devote several days, even a week, to a specific subject, in order to dismantle all the mechanisms and better understand the MITI role.

Nevertheless, the lessons of this study period were infinite, and I feel I learnt more about Japan in those three weeks than in all my five months' stay in Japan. Here, for want of space, I will deal with just three points: life in an office, the decision-making process and the MITI officials.

Office Life

The very area of its big collective offices, occupied by dozens of people, cluttered with papers, books and documents of all kinds, and enlivened by the

constant ring of telephones and people coming in and out, symbolizes MITI to perfection. Nothing is kept back as personal or confidential; everything is shared and constantly accessible. In this regard, MITI seems to me to be the ministry of open doors: doors of all offices opening onto one another, but also a door open to the rest of the world, because in the corridors you cross paths not only with officials, but with journalists and even housewives, coming to do their shopping in the ministry's basement shops.

In the office, there is a good-natured, family atmosphere that assures a feeling of equality and general understanding without, at the same time, really effacing hierarchical relations. It creates a curious mixture of conviviality and hidden authority, transforming the *kacho* (head of section) into not just a superior but the motivating force in the group. Day-to-day discussions are never formal and take place on demand, creating, if not a real democracy, at least the feeling of sharing a common destiny and task.

This work bears little relation to the legend of the Japanese "workaholic" and only a minority of officials stay late at the office. (A distinction should also be made between those who stay back because there is urgent work to do and those who stay back simply to be like the rest...) Moreover, the days give the impression of great emptiness, because one spends the better part of the time waiting: waiting for a meeting to end, for a decision by a related section, for the outcome of a consultation process, with the interminable discussions it involves.

Faced with this work of waiting, it is little wonder some officials say they would rather spend less time at MITI.

The Decision-Making Process

MITI in no way belies Japan's image as "the country of collective decision-making" and "the paradise of social consensus."

This obstinate drive for consensus is both a strength and a weakness. A strength, because once the decision is taken, it will be respected, honored and applied without resistance or bad will, since everyone will consider it a reflection of both his own interests, well understood, and the will of the group.

But such a system leads to endless meetings and discussions, and means officials have to turn into public relations agents. All the time spent in explanation and discussions is time which could well

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have been used for deeper background analyses.

Moreover, this bureaucratic system of decision-making sets in motion such heavy and complex machinery that it is obviously inoperable when a crisis occurs. In fact in such a situation, one must either continue striving for consensus, with no decision possible in time, or sacrifice consensus and revert to a more solitary decision, from the top of the hierarchy.

It seems to me that the final possible danger of decision by consensus is irresponsibility. Since the group must decide, no individual is prepared to take the necessary decision, resulting in interminable meetings where to listen is wiser than to speak, and people merely give opinions rather than cut through to a solution. Since in the end it is the group which has decided, nobody wants to take the consequences for a possibly bad decision.

In short, the *ringisho* decision-making system is like a snake biting its own tail, drawing its strength from its weakness and turning the long and difficult path to a decision into the best guarantee of its appropriateness and workability.

The Men of MITI

Undeniably, the strong point of MITI, and its secret (if indeed it has one), lies in my opinion in its personnel, and what is sometimes called rather pejoratively its "bureaucracy."

In fact it is precisely the manner of recruitment, the guarantee of promotion according to seniority, and the respect for hierarchy that obviates sterile rivalries and creates a sense of common interests. The requirement that officers complete part of their career overseas is what gives MITI its amazing capacity to make use of international situations to better defend its national positions. And surely one can see in the policy of systematically rotating personnel from one division to another or from one office to another the reasons for the youth and suppleness of MITI, which adapts itself immediately to the requirements of the moment and can generate industrial change with such formidable efficiency.

Paradoxically, for a technical ministry with the lowest number of employees and the weakest budget, MITI is everywhere:

in embassies, delegations, representation at international organizations, in JETRO, in the Economic Planning Agency, and in the private sector, thanks to the tradition of "putting the slippers on" (*pantouflage* as we say in France) or more poetically *amakudari* (the Japanese term for post-retirement re-employment, meaning "descent from heaven"). And finally MITI's links extend to the Keidanren (Federation of Economic Organizations) and the Liberal Democratic Party, through the interplay of personal relations and the basic connivance existing in Japan between the economic, political and financial spheres. It is not by chance that MITI is currently seeking to multiply the number of its former officials holding seats in parliament.

This closely-knit network of relations and representation explains why MITI men seem like lords of the economic world and why at the mere mention of the great name of MITI people plunge into pure mythology: falling into the major trap of relegating MITI to the realm of foreignness, uniqueness and inexplicability.

It is certainly impossible to discern

BOOK REVIEW

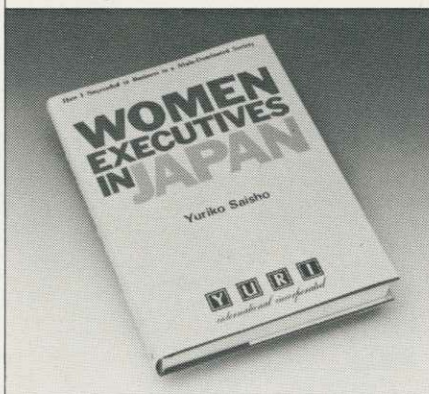
By Yoriko Kawaguchi

Cabinet Councilor
(Comprehensive National Security),
Cabinet Secretariat

"Women Executives in Japan"

By Yuriko Saisho

YURI International Inc.
214 pages; \$11.95 (¥2,500)



This is a biography of a woman endowed with talent and originality who established and managed an advertising agency herself and is now extending her

business activities to the international arena. This book is for professional Japanese women of the younger generation. A professional woman myself, I found the book very interesting and enlightening.

Upon reading it, I was made to ponder how much Japanese society has changed in the past 30 or 40 years since the end of World War II, when Ms. Saisho established her advertising firm, in its attitude towards career women and especially women being promoted to managerial posts.

Japanese women today certainly enjoy far more opportunities than women of earlier days. Ms. Saisho says that her parents did not allow her to go to university because she would lose the opportunity to get married. The annual rate of women who advanced to higher educational institutions (universities and junior colleges) was only 5% in 1955, whereas since 1975 it has been around 32.2%. However, only about 5% of all supervisory posts in the country are filled by women. There has been no change in this percentage for the past seven or eight years.

Behind this discouraging set of figures is the backward thinking of employers, the lack of social facilities (such as nurseries) and systems necessary to enable women to continue working throughout their life.

At the same time, women themselves need to have enthusiasm and make efforts to overcome the many hurdles and accumulate a record of outstanding performance. In this sense, Ms. Saisho's book teaches us many valuable lessons. She relates that she had to reduce her sleep to a little more than three hours during the hectic years that followed the establishment of her business and until its foundation was solidly laid. She had to visit one prospective client every day in order to land a contract. Despite her packed schedule, she found time to take driving lessons to get a license to drive the company car. These and many other episodes showing the extraordinary efforts and energy she put into her work make this book highly convincing.

The promotion of women to managerial posts has frequently attracted public attention in the past two or three years. The publication of Ms. Saisho's book itself may be one sign that the barriers are being overcome by women. Still many more cases of successful career women are needed to break down the barriers against women in Japanese society today.

I hope this book will stimulate many men and women, both young and old, and that more and more young Japanese women will develop executive careers.