

18. ETERNIT ACTIVITY AND EMERGING VICTIMS: JAPANESE CASE

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The Evolution of Japan Eternit

The history of Eternit in Japan goes back to the early 1930s. The Tokyo Gas Company purchased the right to sell asbestos cement (AC) pipe and related products from the Italian Eternit for an initial payment of 6.5 hundred thousand Yen (equivalent to about 5 million Euros today). This led to the establishment in Tokyo (in February, 1931) of the “Japan Eternit Pipe Company” (in this paper: “Japan Eternit”) which began to sell AC pipe in 1932. The payment of the balance (86%) of the purchase price, paid periodically, would cost Japan Eternit up to 3 % of their profit.

Over the course of time, Japan Eternit developed a number of factories (Fig. 1). During mid-1950s and early 1970s, the company had three large-scale factories employing more than seven hundred people. At that time, blue asbestos (crocidolite) was used for manufacturing AC pipe as well as white asbestos (chrysotile).

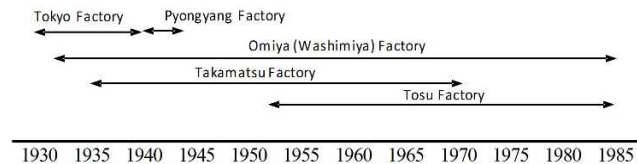


Fig. 1. Periods of operation of the Japan Eternit factories

While there are few documents which described the contents of workers' jobs in detail, some workers have told of their jobs in the Eternit factories. According to them, the manufacturing process was operated 24 hours a day, to avoid cement solidification, and shifts changed every 8 hours. For processing, asbestos was mixed in the proportion (white:blue) 7:3. Fig. 2 shows a worker lathing AC pipes wearing a simple mask.

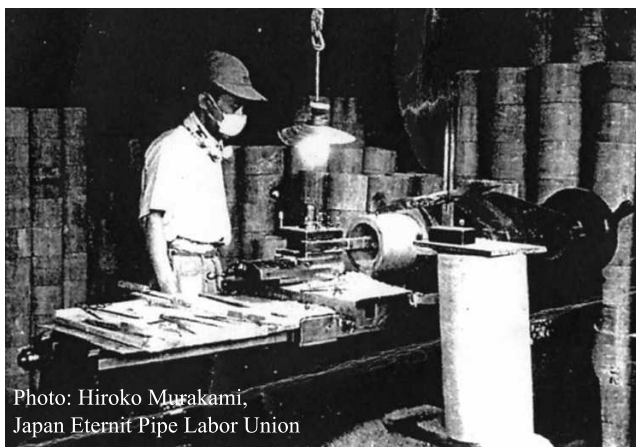


Photo: Hiroko Murakami,
Japan Eternit Pipe Labor Union

Fig.2. Lathing of AC pipes

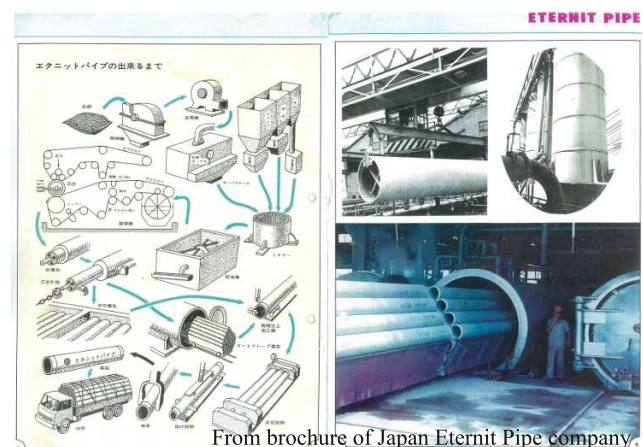
Production of AC Pipes in Japan

Japan had three big companies which produced AC pipes. After the establishment of Japan Eternit, the second company, Chichibu Cement Company, started production in 1939. This was because the Japanese government had requested it to do so to satisfy increasing wartime demand. The third company, Kubota, started production of AC pipes in 1955, and continued production with crocidolite and chrysotile until 1975; then with chrysotile alone until 1997.

During rapid economic growth in the 1960s, these companies produced the same style of pipes, and they were cooperative rather than competitive. When one company lacked AC pipes, the other companies dispatched products with the other company's trademark. In 2005, Kubota announced consolation money for mesothelioma victims around their factory; this caused a huge amount of social and media attention to be focused on the asbestos disaster threatening Japanese society – the so-called “Kubota Shock.” Because the other two AC pipe companies produced the same type of pipes as Kubota, the activities of all three AC pipe companies gave rise to a number of victims of asbestos-related diseases among people living in the vicinity of their factories as well as workers. Fig. 3 shows products of Japan Eternit.

Advantages of AC Pipe Compared to Competing Materials

As in other countries, the use of AC pipes was widespread in Japan, due to the low cost and ease of installation. Until the 1940s, iron pipes were mainly used for water supplies, with asbestos cement pipes gradually replacing them during the 1950s and 1970s. Fig. 4

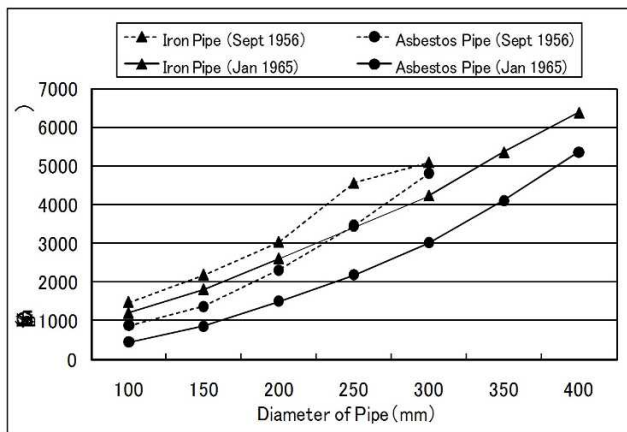


From brochure of Japan Eternit Pipe company.

Fig.3. Production process and products of Japan Eternit Pipe

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shows the costs of iron pipes and asbestos cement pipes by diameter at that time. In the mid-1950s, narrow asbestos cement pipes were about 40% cheaper than iron pipes, while the price of wide pipes was about 10% lower. Such differences increased in the mid-1960s, when asbestos cement pipes were 20-60% cheaper. At that time, the price of narrow asbestos cement pipes was less than half that of iron pipes. Another point was that asbestos cement pipes were lighter than iron pipes, which also encouraged their use.



Source: "Sekisan Shiryo (Data for Estimate)" by Keizai Cyosa Kai (Economic Research Association).

Fig. 4. Costs of pipes for water supply in mid-1950s and mid-1960s (broken line: 1956, solid line: 1965).

Emerging Asbestos Epidemic

As of December 2007, large asbestos companies had acknowledged more than 550 victims. Nichias, the oldest asbestos company in Japan had compensated 307 workers. It produced various kinds of materials including asbestos cloth and insulation, and had links with the British owned Cape Asbestos Company. One hundred and forty-seven workers were compensated by Kubota, which had close ties to the Johns-Manville Corporation.

According to some media articles, victims of Japan Eternit reached 108 as of December 2007 – which the company has never officially admitted. In 1981, a mesothelioma victim was certified for workers' insurance benefit. This was the first case of compensation for mesothelioma in Japan. The total number compensated by workers' insurance or the new asbestos relief law reached 80; mesothelioma: 23, lung cancer: 25, pneumoconiosis: 32. In addition, 57 people – ex-workers or their family members from one factory (Takamatsu) – sued for compensation. Later, seven workers from another factory (Omiya) sued, while a worker had already died of mesothelioma.

In addition to workers suffering from asbestos-related diseases, their families were also damaged. Many fam-

ily members suffered from pleural plaques. The first lawsuit concerned a worker who had a job that involved the handling of raw asbestos from 1952 to 1980; retiring due to asbestosis in 1981. He subsequently died of pneumoconiosis in 1983, when he was 55 years old. As a child, his son had handled masks and clothes his father had brought from the factory. Although he worked in jobs not using asbestos, he died of pleural mesothelioma in 1997, when he was 42 years old. Although his family sued in 2000, the Supreme Court rejected their claim due to the difficulty of identifying his disease. Afterwards, one national authority which operates the new asbestos relief law certified he had had mesothelioma.

Violation of Laws Relating to Health and Safety

Japan Eternit began to provide masks for workers in the early 1960s. Because the masks were very simple, they were easily blocked with relatively large accumulations of asbestos dust. This made it difficult for workers to breathe, so, a number of people worked without masks. According to the workers, no explanation of the hazardous aspects of asbestos or education for avoiding diseases was provided. In addition, the company made workers take their work clothes back to their houses. Some people wore their work clothes even when commuting to work. It was not until around 1977 that precipitators for ventilation were installed at workplaces. This fact was revealed in a court case. When government authorities were due to check factory conditions, the company ordered workers to turn off machines and scatter water on to the floor to suppress dust; anything to give a good impression.

While the first health checks for Eternit workers started in about 1975, it was not until 1980 that the results were reported back to workers. One worker, who directly handled raw asbestos materials, was sent to hospital with pneumoconiosis; on his return the company did not see fit to move him to a "safer" job in a less contaminated area. Some people were not certified for workers' insurance in spite of their asbestos-related diseases. Even in cases of people receiving benefits from workers' insurance, Japan Eternit did not inform the victims' family that the cause of death was asbestos contamination, and required them not to disclose relevant information, including workplace conditions, their diseases and the company's response. That made the position of other victims much more difficult. To address this problem, unions continue to support ex-workers; helping them in a variety of ways, such as explaining the details of health checks and the workings of the new asbestos relief law.

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