

THE *SEIKATSUSHA* AND THE FIGHT FOR CONSUMER RIGHTS: CONSUMER MOVEMENT ACTIVISM IN POSTWAR JAPANESE SOCIETY

Patricia L. MACLACHLAN

Our country should seriously consider the fact that by prioritizing economic development, it has accorded insufficient attention to such essential goals as the improvement of the livelihoods of our individual citizens, the wealth of the human spirit, and social justice ... In response to demands for a more affluent lifestyle environment, I feel it is necessary to thoroughly rethink our programs and policies concerning *seikatsusha*/consumers.

(Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro, speech to the Diet, 23 August 1993)

1993 was a landmark year for the Japanese consumer movement. Prime Minister Hosokawa's ascension to power on a pro-consumer platform promised the beginning of a new era in which consumer welfare might finally gain a fair hearing after decades of prioritizing producer interests. The year also marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the enactment of the Consumer Protection Basic Law (*Shōhisha hogo kihonhō*), the "constitution" of consumer protection in Japan and the catalyst behind a comprehensive system of consumer protection policy-making and administration (MACLACHLAN 1996a: 93–100). Together, these two events sparked a lengthy dialogue within the organized consumer movement concerning the historical record of postwar consumer activism and the future of consumer protection in Japan (SHIMIZU 1994; ZADANKAI 1993).

Movement musings revealed a surprising degree of ambivalence about the significance of the new government for Japanese consumers. For while welcoming Hosokawa's commitment to the consumer as a positive change in late twentieth century politics,¹ activists were not nearly as enthusiastic about jumping onto the new consumer bandwagon as one

¹ Interview with HIWASA Nobuko, 21 February 1994; Interview with MIYAMOTO Kazuko, 1 February 1994.

might expect. Underscoring their hesitation was a deep-seated scepticism about the government's ability to overcome business opposition in its efforts to implement the spirit of such oft-quoted slogans as "precedence of the *seikatsusha* interest" (*seikatsusha no rieki no yūsen*). More importantly, advocates were highly critical of Hosokawa's lack of response to the specific needs of the so-called *seikatsusha* and of his failure to redress the neglect of consumer *rights* both by previous governments and by the Consumer Protection Basic Law (SHIMIZU 1994).

In this essay, I examine aspects of the consumer movement's critique of the Hosokawa Government's consumer stance as a point of departure for an exploration of two recurring and inter-related themes in the postwar record of consumer activism: the evolving conceptualization of the *seikatsusha* and the increasing importance of consumer rights for movement organizers. Much more than just idiosyncratic preoccupations of consumer activists, these themes were a direct response to social, political and economic developments and have the movement's objectives and strategies throughout the postwar period. They serve, in other words, as historical and conceptual tropes through which the movement was shaped by history and history was, to a significant but limited degree, shaped by the movement. Examining these themes from the vantage point of the political changes of 1993, moreover, brings into stark relief the deeply entrenched political factors which have obstructed the complete fulfillment of movement goals vis-à-vis the *seikatsusha* and consumer rights in the past and which will continue to challenge the movement in the future.

Before progressing, a note about the composition of the movement. According to statistics compiled by the Economic Planning Agency, in 1990 there were thirty-one national consumer organizations with a combined membership of over eleven million people; 4,523 organizations at the prefectural and local levels with a total of just over eight million members; 1,267 consumer cooperatives serving roughly thirty-five million Japanese (this figure includes the families of card-carrying members); and 1,806 "lifestyle schools" with approximately 80,000 members (KEIZAI KIKAKUCHŌ 1991: 5-6). Although these figures do not take into account overlapping memberships, they do give an indication of the sheer size and diversity of the movement. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that many of these organizations have conflicted with one another in terms of their political leanings, their objectives, and their relationships with governmental authorities. For the purpose of simplicity, therefore, this essay is based on the activities and policies of the housewives' organizations, the consumer co-operatives, and Shōdanren (The National Liaison Federation of Consumer Organizations), the umbrella organization formed in 1956 which coordinates most major movement campaigns at the national level.

Although these organizations do not represent the entire spectrum of consumer-related opinion in Japan, they have had a major influence on the postwar historical trajectory of the movement as a whole and comprise the majority of consumer activists at the national level. They are also among the most vocal and widely-respected consumer advocates on the national scene, as well as the most politically and financially independent.

1. THE PRECEDENCE OF THE SEIKATSUSHA INTEREST: HOSOKAWA'S CONSUMER POLICIES AND THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT CRITIQUE

The consumer movement's critique of Hosokawa's "precedence of the *seikatsusha* interest" policy was rooted in opposition to the prime minister's allegedly indiscriminate use of such concepts as *seikatsusha* and *shōhisha*. One of those vague and quintessentially Japanese terms which defy translation, *seikatsusha*² has acquired such a host of definitional nuances that some activists avoid it altogether. To champions of the concept within the consumer movement, however, the meaning of the term is clear: to them, a *seikatsusha* is an individual who seeks to balance several competing identities en route to building a meaningful and sustainable livelihood. As such, the concept is much broader than consumer (*shōhisha*) and connotes a range of complex and interconnected social issues of a quality-of-life as well as material nature (MIYASAKA 1990: 51).

The movement's definition of *seikatsusha* was eloquently articulated in a 1994 article by SHIMIZU Hatoko, a prominent consumer activist and vice-president of Shufuren (The Japan Federation of Housewives' Associations). From a very basic perspective, SHIMIZU argued, a *seikatsusha* is a human being concerned with his or her life and physical and mental health. On a more sophisticated level, the concept embraces the notion of citizenship within both the nation and civil society (*shimin shakai*). Third, a *seikatsusha* may sometimes assume the work-related functions of either a producer or laborer. Last, but certainly not least, a *seikatsusha* is a consumer (*shōhisha*) who purchases and consumes goods and services in the marketplace (SHIMIZU 1994: 15). Put simply, the concept of *seikatsusha* denotes a multi-faceted and proactive human being situated at the confluence of the social, economic, and political spheres; the concept of *shōhisha*, on the other hand, invokes a unidimensional individual confined to the tail end of the production process. Whereas the term *shōhisha* conjures up an image of conflict between producers and consumers, the notion of *seikatsusha* helps bridge the conceptual divide between the two and lays the foundation for

² *Seikatsusha* is based on the term *seikatsu* (livelihood, living, subsistence).

a much more complementary – if not always harmonious – relationship between them. As the following pages attest, consumer organizations have emphasized either the *shōhisha* or the *seikatsusha* in their political campaigns, depending on the specific political and economic conditions of the period in question.

Consumer advocates have never pushed their definition of the *seikatsusha* so far as to incorporate large producer interests, but they have argued on behalf of limited cooperation between consumers, workers, and small businessmen for reasons which will be discussed shortly. As such, the concept seems to embrace the idea of the “average man/woman on the street” who is part of the nation’s “masses.” It is, therefore, not the producer *per se* who is viewed as a threat to the interests of the *seikatsusha*, but rather the producing *elite* – the powerful corporations and their allies in government whose actions and decisions have an immediate and profound impact on the lives of average Japanese.

While appearing to acknowledge the non-elite aspect of the *seikatsusha*, Prime Minister Hosokawa was criticized by Shimizu and others for using this complex concept interchangeably with *shōhisha* or for whittling it down to its most simplistic and apolitical dimension: a living, breathing person. Even more troublesome to SHIMIZU and her colleagues were the kinds of policies advocated by Hosokawa as means to achieve the “precedence of the *seikatsusha* interest.” Deregulation, lower prices, and heightened consumer access to imports were all very well in terms of putting extra money into the pockets of the passive consumer (SHIMIZU 1994: 17), but they did little to redress the long-standing neglect of the “rights” of the *seikatsusha* in their consumer and citizen capacities. Moreover, many feared that, in the absence of deeply entrenched consumer rights, rolling back the protective umbrella of governmental regulation would actually harm the *seikatsusha* by directly exposing them to the self-seeking actions of producers (MACLACHLAN 1996a: 242).

The narrowness of these policies, argued SHIMIZU, was further borne out by the character compound for “interest” (*rieki*) in the slogan, “precedence of the *seikatsusha* interest” – the same compound used by businesses to mean “profit,” “benefits” or “return.” Viewed from this perspective, “the precedence of the *seikatsusha* interest” referred not to the rights and powers of *seikatsusha* in their consuming and citizen roles, but rather to the simple monetary benefits which consumers stood to gain through readjustments in the government’s economic policy (SHIMIZU 1994: 16).

In sum, Hosokawa’s “precedence of the *seikatsusha* interest” policy was, to many consumer advocates, only a marginal improvement over the consumer-oriented proclamations of previous administrations. For years, LDP governments had been announcing policies ostensibly designed to

redress the long-standing neglect of consumers in Japanese politics, the most recent example being Prime Minister Miyazawa's "Lifestyle Superpower Five Year Plan." Consumer advocates had long criticized these policies as little more than variations on an empty political theme designed to appease both disgruntled consumers and the country's foreign trading partners.³ Although advocates commended Hosokawa for the sincerity of his commitment to improving the material well-being of consumers, they saw little difference between his policies and those of his LDP predecessors in terms of strengthening the consumer rights of the *seikatsusha* in the polity and the economy.

2. THE SEIKATSUSHA IN POSTWAR HISTORY

The consumer movement's preoccupation with the notion of *seikatsusha* in 1993 was a product of the historical context in which the movement developed. In contrast to the American consumer movement which rose to prominence on the heels of economic affluence during the 1960s (VOGEL 1989: 33–42), the key organizations of the Japanese movement were formed in the midst of the economic scarcity and political uncertainty of the immediate postwar period. These unique historical origins shaped the movement's conceptualization of both *seikatsusha* and *shōhisha* and had a profound impact on the movement's approach to consumer rights.

2.1. *Balancing Consumer and Producer Interests: The Early Postwar Period*

Shufuren, Chifuren (The National Liaison Committee of Regional Women's Groups), and a number of consumer cooperatives (Seikyō) were formed during the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–52), a period of rampant inflation, product shortages caused by a draconian rationing system, and profligate black-marketeering. Surrounded by such widespread economic devastation, consumer activists were concerned not with the quality-of-life issues of their American counterparts during the 1960s, but with the restoration of basic goods and services to the marketplace at reasonably low prices (MACLACHLAN 1996a: 55). This stage of the movement's development was accordingly dubbed the "Movement to Defend Livelihoods" (*Seikatsu bōei no undō*).

Early consumer advocates like OKU Mumeo, the founder of Shufuren and a prewar feminist and labor activist, were keenly aware that Japanese

³ Interview with ŌTA Yoshiyasu, 21 December 1993.

citizens were being affected by economic adversity not only as consumers, but also as farmers, laborers, and small businessmen (KOBAYASHI 1993b). They also recognized that in order to effectively address the problems of consumers, the welfare of workers and producers in society would also have to be improved. With this in mind, many nascent groups threw their support behind the government's economic reconstruction policies, since creating opportunities for producers to generate wealth would eventually have beneficial results for non-producers as well.

In response to these early postwar contingencies, many activists preferred the term *seikatsusha* to *shōhisha* since it captured the importance of both the consumer and producer identities in the individual's struggle for survival. *Seikatsusha* was not only conceptually appealing during those early years, it was also politically correct. For as consumer representatives were well aware, terms like "consumer" and "consumption" had long been imbued with negative overtones in Japanese society. When activists first launched the consumer cooperative movement during the late nineteenth century, for example, they were struck by the adverse reactions of average consumers to phrases like "consumption association," "purchasing society," and "consumer cooperative." Many citizens disliked the term "consumption" because of its passive and allegedly anti-producer overtones, and were equally suspicious of the expression "purchasing society" since it implied not-for-profit economic activities which benefited self-seeking consumers rather than the economy as a whole (KOBAYASHI 1993a: 37). These sentiments could only have been reinforced during the 1930s and early 1940s, when the military government either harnessed the co-ops and other consumer organizations to the national war effort, or banned these groups altogether (NOMURA 1973: 3).

To avoid the controversies inherent in the terms "consumer" and "consumption" and to promote cooperation between consumer and small labor and producer groups, many large postwar consumer cooperatives referred to themselves as "lifestyle cooperative societies" and embraced subgroups – many of which consisted of women – from labor unions and agricultural and fisheries cooperatives (OKU 1988: 167). The coexistence of producer, labor, and consumer interests under a single banner paved the way for a cooperative, if not always harmonious, working relationship between these groups in a number of postwar political campaigns, including the movement to strengthen the Anti-Monopoly Law, opposition to the liberalization of Japanese agricultural markets, and efforts to prevent the loosening of the Large Scale Retail Store Law.

The cooperatives were not the only branch of the consumer movement to prefer the term *seikatsusha* to *shōhisha*; the housewives' organizations were also in favor of the concept. During the early Occupation period,

those who took the brunt of inflation, the black market, and the inefficient rationing system were housewives responsible for the tasks of shopping, raising children, and managing family finances. In the midst of economic scarcity, consumption evolved into much more than just the passive act of purchasing and consuming goods and services; it became a crucial precondition for both the survival of the family and the effective performance of the housewife's duties. Shufuren and Chifuren members consequently took to the political stage not only as *shōhisha*, but also as women, mothers, the wives of producers or laborers, and newly enfranchised citizens. They were, in other words, female *seikatsusha* who felt compelled by economic and social circumstances to take a semi-integrative approach to consumption and production.

This holistic approach to consumption and the semi-cooperative relationship between consumer, worker, and small business groups were reinforced by the structure of the national political system during the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike the American movement which arose in a political context that was relatively open to the consumer interest (VOGEL 1989: 40, 108), the Japanese movement operated in a political system which was, for all intents and purposes, closed to their demands. Consumer organizations were consequently reduced to such extra-institutional modes of interest articulation as street demonstrations, petition drives, moral posturing, and the occasional product boycott (MACLACHLAN 1996a: 69). Relegated to the fringes of the national political system, it was only logical that they would link up with other under-represented political actors in their efforts to bring about policy change.

A shortage of financial resources during the early postwar years was an additional incentive for consumer organizations to seek allies outside of the movement. Sōhyō, the large federation of public sector unions affiliated with the Japan Socialist Party, for example, was a long-standing member of Shōdanren and a major source of funds for the umbrella organization. Labor and consumer groups occasionally cooperated in single-issue consumer campaigns, but they did not always get along; consumer movement efforts during the 1960s and early 1970s to strengthen the Anti-Monopoly Law, for instance, were opposed by a number of unions which preferred to side with their anti-reform employers.⁴

In sum, the economic and social imperatives of the early postwar period shaped a conceptualization of the consumer's place in the economic and political realms which prompted Japan's nascent consumer organizations to coordinate some of the material demands of the consumer with those of workers and small producers. This conceptual compatibility of the pro-

⁴ Interview with ONO Shōji, 9 March 1994.

ducer and consumer interests under the rubric of *seikatsusha* paved the way for a semi-cooperative relationship between consumers, farmers, workers, and small business groups, a relationship that was in turn reinforced by a lack of consumer representation within the national policy-making system and the resulting need for allies elsewhere on the political horizon. The result was a "holistic" approach to consumption which has distinguished Japanese consumer organizations from their more confrontational and politically independent American counterparts.

The widespread adoption of the term *seikatsusha* should not suggest that Japan's nascent organizations eschewed conflict with business representatives; on the contrary, the movement's early postwar history is rife with stand-offs between consumer advocates and businesses – both big and small – that violated the welfare of consumers (NHSK 1980; OKU 1988). What it did signify was a willingness on the part of consumer advocates to strike a balance between the otherwise conflicting demands of consumers and producers. This balance became more and more difficult to achieve, however, as the economy expanded during the rapid growth period.

2.2. The Consumer-Producer Standoff and the Issue of Consumer Rights

During the period of postwar economic reconstruction, consumer activists struggled to solve a serious but relatively straightforward problem: the shortage of basic goods and services in the marketplace caused not so much by unscrupulous business behavior as by the economic implosion which followed in the wake of wartime defeat. With the advent of rapid economic growth, however, the problems affecting consumers increased in both quantity and complexity and were often directly attributable to unfair business practices. The direct offspring of the twin phenomena of mass production and mass consumption and of the partnership between business and government on behalf of "growth at any cost," these issues included the proliferation of defective products in the marketplace; a lack of consumer access to consumer-related information; the increasing use of additives in processed foods; the absence of adequate consumer redress mechanisms; consumer fraud; and high prices and a narrow range of product choice caused by cartels in the marketplace.

Issues such as these are common to most advanced industrialized societies at specific stages of their development and symbolize a growing power imbalance between producers and consumers. As products become technologically more sophisticated and warranties and contracts more complicated, manufacturers and retailers achieve an immediate advantage vis-à-vis the consuming public in terms of knowledge and exper-

tise. And the wider the knowledge gap between businesses and consumers, the greater the likelihood that consumers will fall victim to defective products and fraudulent business practices. Japanese consumer organizations immediately took steps to correct this imbalance by becoming more like their counterparts in the West – by adopting, in other words, a much more confrontational stance towards producers. This new tactical and rhetorical emphasis was never more apparent than in 1957 during the first annual All Japan Consumer Conference (*Zen Nihon Shōhisha Taikai*), when movement leaders proclaimed:

Capitalism is a double edged sword! We are exploited both as workers and consumers! The battle to abolish the exploitation of workers has progressed; the trickery of exploiting consumers, however, has been taken to the extremes of ingenuity and it threatens the livelihood of the masses! (OKU 1988: 198)

Contrary to the tone of this and many other public statements, movement activists never advocated radical political change as a cure-all for the problems faced by the *seikatsusha* in their consuming capacities during the rapid growth period; nor did they abandon their allies in the labor movement or farming and small business communities. What they did do, however, was pressure businesses and government to apply the democratic standards of the postwar constitution to the consumer realm by respecting the *seikatsusha*'s right to life, health, and happiness. By the mid-1960s, they fine-tuned their demands even further and insisted on the fulfillment of the following five consumer rights, the first four of which had been articulated by President John F. Kennedy in 1962: (1) the right to product safety; (2) the right to a wide range of product choices at competitive prices; (3) the right to be informed of consumer-related information; (4) the right to be heard in the formulation of governmental policies (MAYER 1989: 26–27); and (5) the right to consumer redress. Together, these rights functioned as a compass for the subsequent four decades of consumer movement activism.

2.3. Movement Strategies for Advancing the Rights of Consumers

Movement efforts to correct the consumer-producer imbalance in accordance with these five rights have proceeded on several inter-connected fronts. First, in response to the consumer's right to information, many organizations have set up programs to arm consumers with the basic information needed for making safe and rational purchases. Some of these programs are carried out in cooperation with local consumer centers and the

Japan Consumer Information Center (Nihon Kokumin Seikatsu Sentā), a semi-governmental organization administered by the Economic Planning Agency. Although many have been highly effective, further efforts to expand access to consumer-related information have been frustrated by the absence of information disclosure rules at the national level, the protection of business secrets by the civil code, and by the lack of discovery provisions within the court system.

Second, some organizations, including the more radical Consumers' Union (Shōhisha Renmei), have perfected what is referred to in the movement literature as *kokuhatsu*-style politics: the practice of publicly exposing wrongdoers in the business world, berating them for violating consumer rights, and demanding immediate changes (NHK 1980: 120–21). Closely resembling Ralph Nader's brand of political activism, *kokuhatsu* politicking led to significant improvements in the safety of consumer products and the pricing practices of many businesses, and is still practiced today in opposition to the use of chemical fertilizers and synthetic additives in food.

Third, consumer activists have sought wider representation within both the national and local policy-making systems as a means to ensure the consumer's right to be heard. These demands were partially met in 1968 with the enactment of the Consumer Protection Basic Law and the subsequent institutionalization of a consumer-related bureaucratic infrastructure spanning national and local levels of government. The creation of a bureaucratic consumer "space" did not, however, result in the kind of influence that the movement had originally hoped to acquire. At the national level, consumer policy-making is a complicated affair involving all the major economic ministries and agencies, most of which are relatively closed to routine interaction with consumer representatives. Advocates have access to the Economic Planning Agency, the coordinator of consumer policy within the national government, but the usefulness of these inroads is weakened by the agency's limited influence within the bureaucracy. Advocates also sit on various advisory commissions (*shingikai*) set up to deliberate on consumer-related issues, but their voices are often overpowered by business representatives. For all intents and purposes, the formulation of consumer policy is controlled by economic bureaucrats and business representatives with little more than symbolic input by grassroots consumer representatives (MACLACHLAN 1996a: 105).

Consumer advocates have fared better at the local level, where prefectural and city officials in both the bureaucracies and semi-governmental consumer centers have been much more receptive to the demands of citizen groups. The localities perform virtually no direct functions in the formulation of national consumer policies, but they often invite the partici-

pation of consumer organizations when implementing national policies and drawing up ordinances in response to consumer-related problems specific to their respective jurisdictions. The relative openness of the localities to the voices of average citizens has, not surprisingly, prompted the movement as a whole to focus the bulk of its activism on politics at the local level and to work through the localities in its attempts to influence politics at the center (MACLACHLAN 1996a: 107).

Access to the political system not only fulfills the consumer's right to be heard, it also facilitates the implementation of a fourth tactic designed to correct the consumer-producer imbalance: the introduction of laws and regulations to increase the government's legal obligations towards the consumer. Numerous campaigns conducted by a network of consumer organizations led by Shōdanren during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, were important catalysts behind the Anti-Monopoly Law reforms of 1977 which expanded the range of consumer product choice by tightening the restrictions on cartels in the marketplace (MACLACHLAN 1996a: Ch. 3). Consumer movement campaigns have also been instrumental in the introduction of stringent food safety regulations during the 1960s and 1970s, regulations which protect the consumer's right to product safety (VOGEL 1992; MACLACHLAN 1996a: Ch. 4). More recently, the 1994 enactment of a strict liability law in the wake of a nation-wide public opinion campaign conducted by consumer advocates, lawyers, and legal academics marked a significant improvement in the guarantee of the consumer's rights to product safety and redress, although governmental control over many of the institutional mechanisms of consumer redress has since been roundly criticized for perpetuating the consumer's dependence on paternalistic governmental authorities (MACLACHLAN 1996b: 36). In each of these cases, consumer campaigns focused primarily on the manipulation of public opinion through the institutions of local government rather than on lobbying politicians and bureaucrats at the center.

Legislative and regulatory movements are closely related to the fifth and, some would argue, most important (SHŌDA 1989: 117–18) tactic carried out by the movement: educating individuals about their rights as both consumers and members of civil society. One of the most conspicuous examples of this has been "issue definition" (*mondai teigi*) – the careful and frequent articulation in movement literature and public addresses of consumer-related problems and the relationship between those problems and the fulfillment of citizen and consumer rights.

This emphasis on "civics" was born of comparatively low levels of public consciousness about individual rights (*kenri ishiki*) following the introduction of democratic institutions after World War II (SHŌDA and KANAMORI 1991: 260–261). It is also much more prominent in Japan than it is in

the West. In the United States, Germany, and Great Britain, where consumer movements arose well after democratic institutions and a sense of civic consciousness had become entrenched in society, consumer advocates focus on guaranteeing the fulfillment of basic individual rights in the consumer sphere which have long been accepted in other areas of civil society. In Japan, by contrast, consumer organizations were shaped in the midst of the country's transition to democracy and have consequently focused on developing a basic awareness of individual and civil rights in society as well as linking those rights to the consumer realm (SHODA 1989: 108–89).

The task of enhancing the public's awareness of their individual and consumer rights has not been an easy one for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the consumer-related ramifications of a long tradition of individual dependence on authority. Throughout the rapid growth period, many consumers accepted without question the consumer-related information provided by manufacturers and retailers and simply "cried themselves to sleep" (*nakineitta*) in response to consumer-related abuses. Consumers were also reluctant to pressure the central government into addressing consumer-related problems, preferring instead to wait for the government to take the initiative (*okami ni makaseru*). Although consumer awareness has improved markedly since the early postwar years, passivity remains a significant problem – particularly among older consumers.

Consumer advocates have also pointed to alleged weaknesses in the Consumer Protection Basic Law as major barriers to the effective implementation of civic and consumer educational programs. As the product of a compromise between the LDP and opposition parties, the law does little more than articulate the various responsibilities of both business and government towards the protection of consumers. Nowhere in this document is there any mention of consumer rights as vested in the individual; consumer protection is instead approached as a *privilege* bestowed on the people by businesses and a benevolent government "in accordance with the development of the economy" (JCIC 1989: 3). Many consumer organizations have criticized this focus on consumer protection via the fulfillment of legally designated *obligations* by both businesses and the state on the grounds that it perpetuates consumer dependence on authority (ZADANKAI 1993: 9) and creates the potential for consumer abuses in areas not identified by law. The movement and its allies in the scholarly community have therefore called for a Western-style system in which individuals are vested with consumer rights which are subject to guarantee by the courts, a system which would empower consumers with the ability to contest the behavior of business and government vis-à-vis a much wider range of consumer-related issues (KIMOTO 1986: 86–88). Amending the Basic Law in ac-

cordance with that goal has consequently become a top priority for the movement.

Generally speaking, each of the above-mentioned tactics has been much more successful in correcting the consumer-producer imbalance at the local level than at the center. The right to be heard, for instance, is much more effectively fulfilled by the localities than the national government, and many movement activists have stated to this author that the localities do more to guarantee the consumer right to safety than their national counterpart. Consumer redress mechanisms are also much more advanced at the local level than they are at the center, and most of the governmental information disseminated to advance the right to know is generated by local bureaucrats and consumer centers. Measures designed to fulfill each of these rights have been introduced in accordance with local consumer ordinances, most of which – in marked contrast to the Consumer Protection Basic Law – include clear statements of the rights of consumers as vested in the individual (SUZUKI 1978: 261–263). Not surprisingly, consumer representatives have upheld many of these ordinances as models for an amendment to the Basic Law.

3. CONSUMER PROTECTION IN THE 1990S AND BEYOND

In terms of their material well-being and overall quality of life, the *seikatsusha* are much better off today than they were a generation ago. Although many of these changes are the inevitable result of post-industrial economic progress, the consumer movement also deserves much of the credit. Thanks to the movement's conspicuous presence in the marketplace and the political scene, the quality of consumer products and sales practices has improved dramatically in recent decades (ZADANKAI 1993: 10–11). Five decades of consumer education programs and *mondai teigi*, moreover, have increased the *seikatsusha's* awareness of their citizen and consumer rights and their willingness to act on those rights when dealing with manufacturers and retailers. Finally, movement activism has been at least partly responsible for the introduction of a number of laws and regulations which have expanded governmental obligations to protect the *seikatsusha's* rights to consumer safety, information, choice and redress.

The movement has, in short, made significant strides in improving the overall quality of life of the *seikatsusha*. Nevertheless, movement advocates continue to look to the future of consumer protection in Japan with a degree of pessimism. As Prime Minister Hosokawa's "precedence of the *seikatsusha* interest" policy revealed, consumer protection is still very

much a function of a paternalistic and, some might argue, arbitrary government. A style of consumer protection which promotes consumer dependence on governmental authority may work reasonably well in a political economy where government is heavily involved in the affairs of business, but in the event of a reduction in the government's watchdog function over business behavior through the process of regulatory reform, consumers risk direct exposure to unfair business practices. Consumer advocates believe that the adverse side-effects of deregulation are best prevented by entrenching consumer rights in the Consumer Protection Basic Law and subjecting them to the protection of the courts, but such an amendment is unlikely to pass in a national consumer protection policy-making system that is largely controlled by bureaucrats and producer interests.

Half a century after the birth of Japan's contemporary consumer organizations, consumer advocates are still struggling to close the gap between consumers and producers in both the marketplace and the political system. A significant number of these advocates are the same women and men who took to the streets during the 1940s and early 1950s to protest the gross inefficiencies of the immediate postwar economy. Now, as before, these advocates are committed to achieving a balance between the consumer, citizen, worker, and producer functions of the *seikatsusha* and continue to ally from time to time with small producer groups on single-issue campaigns. But for as long as government and producer interests impede the fulfillment of consumer rights, the movement will continue to wave the consumer banner and to zealously oppose the power of producer interests in both the marketplace and the political system.

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