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A History of Hitachi

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Introduction

Hitachi, Ltd. stands today as a colossal multinational conglomerate, a name synonymous with innovation across an astonishing breadth of industries. From its humble origins in a small mining repair shop in Japan in 1910, where its founder Namihei Odaira built the first 5-horsepower induction motor manufactured in Japan, Hitachi has grown into a global powerhouse. This book embarks on a journey through the compelling history of this enterprise, charting its evolution from a nascent vision for Japanese self-reliance to its current stature as a global leader in digital systems, sustainable energy solutions, advanced railway systems, and critical infrastructure.

At its core, Hitachi's enduring legacy is built upon a foundational mission: to contribute to society through the development of superior, original technology and products. This guiding principle, coupled with the cherished values of "Harmony," "Sincerity," and "Pioneering Spirit," has propelled the company through over a century of profound global changes and technological revolutions. It is this unwavering commitment to innovation and societal betterment that has allowed Hitachi to consistently adapt, diversify, and emerge as a resilient force in the global economy, addressing the most pressing challenges of each era.

The scope of Hitachi's impact is truly remarkable. Today, Hitachi is a publicly listed company headquartered in Japan, engaged in a broad range of sectors including digital systems, electronics, energy, rail transportation, automotive manufacturing, infrastructure, and healthcare. As of June 2024, Hitachi holds a market capitalization of 16.9 trillion yen, making it the fourth largest Japanese company by market value. Globally, Hitachi was ranked 38th in the 2012 Fortune Global 500 and 129th in the 2012 Forbes Global 2000. The company's reach extends across numerous countries with a significant presence in regions like the United States, where it generates billions in revenue and employs thousands.

This book will delve into the intricate tapestry of Hitachi's development, exploring the pivotal moments, strategic decisions, and technological breakthroughs that have shaped its trajectory. From its early days of manufacturing electrical machinery and heavy industrial equipment to its later ventures into electronics, computing, and advanced IT solutions, the narrative will highlight Hitachi's consistent drive to push the boundaries of what is possible. We will examine how Hitachi navigated the complexities of world wars, periods of rapid economic growth and decline, and the dawn of the digital age, continually reinventing itself to remain at the forefront of technological progress.

Furthermore, 'A History of Hitachi' offers more than just a chronological account; it

provides a comprehensive overview of the company's global importance and its current situation in the 21st century. The book will explore Hitachi's strategic focus on Social Innovation Business, its advancements in infrastructure systems, and its significant contributions to fields like healthcare and life sciences. We will also investigate Hitachi's dedication to corporate social responsibility and sustainability, examining its ambitious goals for net-zero emissions and circular transformation by 2050. By understanding Hitachi's past, readers will gain invaluable insights into the strategies that have propelled it to become a vital player in addressing global challenges and shaping a more sustainable future.

Through this detailed exploration, readers will come to appreciate not only the scale of Hitachi's operations but also the ingenuity, resilience, and foresight that have characterized its journey. This book promises to be an essential resource for anyone interested in business history, global industry, technological innovation, and the evolution of a company that has, for over a century, consistently striven to "contribute to society through the development of superior, original technology and products."

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Chapter One: The Foundations of Hitachi: A Vision for Japan

At the dawn of the 20th century, Japan was a nation in flux, rapidly modernizing and industrializing after centuries of isolation. The Meiji Restoration, just decades prior, had flung open the doors to Western technology and ideas, sparking an era of intense transformation. While the nation eagerly absorbed these foreign innovations, a subtle but persistent undercurrent of desire for self-reliance began to emerge. It was against this backdrop of national ambition and technological aspiration that Namihei Odaira, a visionary engineer, laid the groundwork for what would become Hitachi.

Odaira's journey began not in grand corporate offices, but in the practical, hands-on environment of the Kuhara Mining Company, located in the small town of Hitachi in Ibaraki Prefecture. Born in 1874, Odaira was a product of this transformative era, possessing an innate curiosity and a profound belief in Japan's capacity for technological independence. He understood that true sovereignty in the industrial age wouldn't just come from importing machinery, but from mastering its creation. His initial role at Kuhara was to oversee the repair and maintenance of the company's electrical machinery, much of which was imported and prone to breakdowns. This hands-on experience, grappling with foreign-made equipment, deepened his conviction that Japan needed to develop its own robust industrial base.

It was within the modest repair shop of the Kuhara Mining Company that Odaira's ambition truly took root. He wasn't content merely to fix what was broken; he envisioned building something entirely new, something fundamentally Japanese. His focus quickly turned to electric motors, the pulsating heart of industrialization. At the time, Japan was heavily reliant on imported motors, a situation that not only drained national resources but also left the burgeoning industries vulnerable to external supply chains. Odaira saw this dependence as both a weakness and an opportunity. He believed that if Japan could produce its own high-quality electric motors, it would be a significant step towards industrial self-sufficiency.

In 1910, Odaira achieved a monumental feat within the confines of that small workshop: he successfully constructed Japan's first 5-horsepower induction motor. This wasn't merely a technical accomplishment; it was a symbolic declaration of intent. It demonstrated that Japanese engineers, with the right vision and dedication, could compete with the established industrial powers of the West. This initial success, though small in scale, ignited a spark. Odaira's innovative spirit quickly gained recognition within Kuhara Mining, leading to the formal establishment of a separate electrical machinery repair shop in Hitachi. This shop, initially a division of the mining

company, would soon become the independent entity known as Hitachi, Ltd.

The name "Hitachi" itself carries significant meaning. It combines two Japanese characters: "hi" (日), meaning "sun," and "tachi" (立), meaning "rise" or "stand." Together, they evoke the image of the rising sun, a powerful national symbol, and reflect Odaira's aspiration for Japan to rise as an industrial power. This name, simple yet profound, encapsulated the company's foundational mission and its connection to the nation's broader destiny. It was a name that would, in time, become recognized globally as a hallmark of Japanese engineering and innovation.

Odaira's philosophy extended beyond mere technical proficiency. He instilled in his nascent team a culture of meticulous craftsmanship, continuous improvement, and an unwavering commitment to quality. He understood that for Japanese-made products to gain acceptance, they had to be not just comparable, but often superior, to their foreign counterparts. This dedication to excellence became a cornerstone of Hitachi's identity, a principle that would guide its operations for over a century. The early employees, hand-picked by Odaira, shared his passion and his belief in the transformative power of engineering.

The initial years were challenging, as is often the case with pioneering ventures. Resources were limited, and the skepticism towards domestically produced machinery was still prevalent. Yet, Odaira and his team persevered, driven by their conviction and the tangible results of their work. They expanded their output beyond the initial 5-horsepower motor, gradually developing a range of electrical machinery for the mining company and other nascent industries in Japan. Each new motor, each new piece of equipment, represented another small victory in the larger battle for industrial independence.

The success of the electrical machinery repair shop at Kuhara Mining Company eventually led to its spin-off as an independent entity in 1920, though its origins trace back to that pivotal moment in 1910. This formal separation marked a critical juncture, allowing Hitachi to pursue its own course, unconstrained by the direct demands of the mining operation. With independence came greater autonomy to innovate, to expand its product lines, and to seek new markets. The vision that began with a single motor in a repair shop was now poised to blossom into a full-fledged industrial enterprise, ready to play a significant role in Japan's journey towards modernization and global standing.

Odaira's leadership was characterized by a blend of technical expertise and an astute understanding of national economic imperatives. He wasn't just building a company; he was contributing to a national project. His foresight in recognizing the critical need for indigenous technological capabilities laid the bedrock for Hitachi's future diversification and global reach. He understood that a strong industrial base was not merely about economic prosperity but about national pride and strategic autonomy.

This perspective would deeply influence Hitachi's long-term corporate strategy, even as it expanded far beyond electrical motors.

The 1910s saw Japan actively developing its infrastructure and industrial capacity, fueled by a desire to catch up with Western powers. This created a burgeoning domestic market for electrical machinery, and Hitachi was strategically positioned to capitalize on this demand. The company began to manufacture a wider array of products, including electric fans, power generators, and transformers, each meticulously designed and built to meet the rigorous standards Odaira had established. This early diversification, though still within the realm of electrical engineering, hinted at the company's future trajectory as a multifaceted conglomerate.

The commitment to "superior, original technology" was not just a motto; it was a daily practice. Odaira encouraged his engineers to experiment, to push boundaries, and to find innovative solutions to the technical challenges they faced. This culture of relentless innovation would become a defining characteristic of Hitachi. The company's early successes were not merely about replicating foreign designs but about improving upon them and developing technologies uniquely suited to Japan's industrial needs. This emphasis on originality and local adaptation set Hitachi apart and fostered a deep sense of national purpose within the organization.

The very location of the initial workshop, in the town of Hitachi, also played a significant role. It instilled a sense of local pride and community, linking the company's identity to a specific place. While Hitachi would eventually become a global entity, its roots in this small Japanese town provided a strong cultural anchor, reinforcing its commitment to its Japanese heritage and values. The early employees were often drawn from the local community, fostering a strong sense of shared destiny and collective effort in building a pioneering enterprise.

As Hitachi expanded its product range and reputation, it began to attract talented engineers and skilled workers from across Japan. Odaira's vision resonated with many who believed in Japan's industrial potential. The company became a magnet for individuals who wanted to contribute to the nation's technological advancement, creating a vibrant intellectual environment where ideas were exchanged and innovations flourished. This early talent acquisition was crucial for laying the groundwork for Hitachi's future research and development capabilities.

In essence, Chapter One of Hitachi's story is a testament to the power of a single vision, nurtured by dedication and a profound sense of national purpose. Namihei Odaira, starting with a simple 5-horsepower motor, not only founded a company but also helped to ignite Japan's industrial revolution, demonstrating that the nation could indeed stand tall on the global stage through its own ingenuity. The foundations laid in those early years – the commitment to quality, the spirit of innovation, and the

unwavering focus on contributing to society – would become the guiding principles that would carry Hitachi through the tumultuous decades to come, transforming it from a local workshop into a global industrial giant. The stage was set for a remarkable journey of growth and diversification, driven by the enduring spirit of its founder and the aspirations of a nation striving for technological independence.

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