

## The story of Unipet

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## 1. Unexpected turns

Shikoku, as documented in Japan's oldest history *Kojiki* (古事記), is a place of “one body with four faces, each comes with its own name”. The spirit of Iyo (伊予) is called Ehime, the one in Sanuki is Iiyorohiko, while Ōgetsuhime is the spirit of Awa, and Takeyoriwake is the face of To-sa. Between the mountains and separated from the outside world, there lies a town called Uchiko in the Nanyo-Chiho area of Ehima, Iyo (now prefecture of Ehime). Uchiko thrived for producing wood wax and paper and was once a busy town, popular with visitors.

There was a shop selling petroleum products known as petroleum station inside the city. The shop owner was often seen at the other end of the second floor. “Retail business is an art” is his favorite line.

This is a story about how he actualized this very idea, and made his mark through all the hard work, struggle and challenges. The story concludes with a happy ending with the owner sailed through the ocean of retail business.

Since graduated from university, the owner has joined a large trading company and later worked in Melbourne, where he oversaw the natural gas business in Western Australia. Just when took a long holiday to return to Japan, his father unfortunately suffered a fell and had to stay in a hospital in Matsuyama. He would visit his father there. He later made a duty call to the parent company in Yokohama, where he met his former boss S from the subsidiary.

“Since I have resigned, why don't you also quit your job to return home and succeed your father's business?” S asked abruptly after they met. S then called the unit that the owner belonged to at the time and helped him to resign. This “unexpected turn”, which come without prior warning, took the owner off guard, surprised and stunned.

He later resigned. He would never know if anything other than the call would lead him to the same decision. Nevertheless, that is how his story began, starting from this very phone call.

## 2. Go cash

A typical day for the owner started very early. Before the sun rose, he would drive for about an hour, through the fogs and the hilly villages, from Matsuyama to the main petroleum station. The fresh air in the early hours always rejuvenated his body and soul. After going through the documents on his desk, he would make sure to visit PS storefront every day. His motto incapsulates this routine: “Born in the morning, die at the night. Day in day out, day after day. One day is one life.”

When he first joined the industry, the owner was often troubled by all kinds of problems, constrains and interpersonal relations. Although he now controlled his own business, he was not entirely at ease.

Half a year into running his own business, he felt he was “not suitable” for the job. So he told S, he did not need the fame and achievement, that he only hoped he could be accepted to return to his previous company. S, who knew the industry well because of his previous position as a director, could understand the doubts and the problems the owner faced. “Why don’t we transform the petroleum stations into ‘self-service’, and operate the business on cash?” S suggested. Before this dialogue even happened, the owner already had been thinking about self-service petroleum station for some time, although it was not allowed under the regulations at the time. In fact, he is born to be sharp about the “nature of matter” and takes swift responses.

During that time, four petroleum stations in the vicinity of Uchiko the headquarter belonged to PS, which purchased petroleum from petroleum manufacturer. Other than selling oil products, sales such as paraffin lamp oil, diesel and heavy oil A and insurance also went well. But the shop owner was eyeing on improving management and sales, while also promoting the use of cash.

During that time, sales on credit were popular for goods transaction. It was also common among for petroleum stations to operate in this mode. Although it has the benefit of secure a fixed customer base, clients may also risk falling into bankruptcy.

Many clients, who were used to paying on account, were rather reluctant to change their way of payment. Some even switched to other stations because PS ran on cash. The owner however would not care less about these backlashes at all, and pressed ahead with the changes.

In his mind, he already envisioned the future of self-service oil filling by cash.

He also strived to create a more “work-friendly” environment, by simplifying paperwork, improving condition in workplace, implementing basic education, and improving “capacity to sales”. Thanks to hard work from united colleagues, annual sales improved and new sources of funding were secured. When overseas staff vacations were still rare to corporates of similar scale, PS already arranged holidays to France, Spain, Australia and Canada.

All seemed to go smooth before the shop owner caught pneumonia and stayed in hospital Matsuyama for one month. Not only he was worn down, it showed the pressure borne upon him. Yet this accidentally turned another page for him.

After being discharged from the hospital, the owner happened to notice a book about people-oriented business, which has been sitting on the office's bookshelf. The book, produced by an oil company to its subordinate petroleum stations, was hardly noticeable but uplifted the owner. The owner was deeply touched by each and every line in the book. Every morning, he will read the book until he could memorise it inside out. The thinking of "retail across large areas", "independent and self-sustaining", "people before organization" and "motivation comes from person but not organization" have started to change the way he thinks and speak. He became more forceful. The sickness has turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

At the meantime, the owner has kept himself healthy by visiting a spine massage clinic. The founder of the clinic, once instructed by a leading expert in anatomy, was born in Niigata, yet he accepted suggestion from subordinates to open the clinic in Matsuyama after the war. His treatments of "Furuki baby exercise" and others have saved people from discomfort and won him praise and gratitude. He had 22 poem monuments in the Gokoku in the city.

### 3. Petroleum station in South Matsuyama

Although the owner has a strong intention to open a new chain in rural South Matsuyama region, the process was still a painful one to him.

Obstacles and limitations came in all forms whenever the owner took on new challenges. Unspeakable pressure shrouded him from going forward, as if a car was taking a hard break on the road amid the misty fog. Not to mention resistance, some well-intended, some otherwise, and remaining ones simply could not be resolved. These have stirred up his mind to focus his attention on the negative ones.

At this juncture, M, who claimed himself as an *aonisai* (or novice youth), would shout “go, go!” He would encourage the owner:” Struck down all the bad resistance. Forget about the others!” Although these words may sound like covering fire from one person only, it could easily beat support from thousands of people combined.

The reason why M was called *aonisai* because he lived up to the ideal and belief that “man stays naive before three years old”. Many praised that he was Muga, which is created by Japanese art icon Yokoyama Taikan.

The shop owner met M while he was speaking at a wedding of the son of construction company owner held in a hotel in Matsuyama, which he grew up in. Since then, M became his good friend. They would often meet in cafes in Nibancho, Matsuyama in the mornings. M also introduced the great painter Okamoto to the owner, which is very relevant to the construction of an art gallery, which will be explained in the following parts.

#### 4. Serendipity, fortune and virtue

PS South Matsuyama was officially launched on April 29, 1994. This Petroleum station is the foundation of Unipet Japan, and a symbol of the owner taking his retail business and the autonomy in his own hands. Thanks to M, baseball “iron man” Sachio Kinugasa, who maintained the record of appearing in 2215 baseball matches, was invited to the opening of the petroleum station. Some staff workers at the station were Kinugasa’s diehard fans and they pleasantly took photos together.

The Petroleum station was at a large field near the Iyo railway flyovers, which is linked to the Matsuyama Expressway. The scale was really not small at that time, especially when workers only handle oil refilling and accounting balance. The sudden emergence of semi-self service oil refilling has taken people in the neighbourhood by a big surprise. Many have doubted PS’ future, but the owner ignored these speculations. He was going full steam ahead for the retail model he believed in.

Just like a seed growing into a large tree, no one can stop the owner’s drive to move forward.

The Petroleum station was built on a roughly 3,300 square metre plots of land. There were two vending machines for self-service car wash, three dosing machines and 18 fuel nozzles. A large art sculpture of shachihoko (legendary creature in the sea, bearing head of tiger and body of carp that protects people from evil) by Nishikimatsu Mitsuno, made with the famous Kikuma tiles, was placed next to the clock tower near the entrance.

The entire space is all about “enjoyment” and “care”. Inside the waiting room of the station (or called salesroom in Japan), there are massage facilities and high-resolution televisions for drivers, with a mini-golf driving range at the other side. The overall equipment was generally simple, owing to the large area of the station.

Because of the fire safety regulations, petroleum stations enclosed with a closed U-shaped firewall was the mainstream at the time. Yet the owner created an open and visible design by using driveway.

Guided by his motto “simple is the best” and the attitude “customer is the owner”, he insisted the spacious environment is for customers to enjoy freely. While Japanese poet Masaoka Shiki once wrote “paints with layers of paints are my favourite”, leaving room breathes new life for this space. In that way, the owner keeps the core and trajectory of the station.

Despite the path-breaking new equipment, a huge obstacle immediately followed. Petroleum manufacturers would no longer provide petroleum to him, and there was also difficulty to secure credits from banks. While the situation was dire that there was seemingly no solution, the owner, born to be agile person on execution, secured the help and understanding from S and executives from another oil company, eventually resolving the deadlock.

“Life is about serendipity, fortune and virtue,” the shop owner often said. He would put it this way: “Car must move forward with tyre rubbing the road. Mankind too. We are fortunate to meet each other. Serendipity is precisely to move forward despite the friction. So we should avoid acquainting with those who would obstruct us like taking a break on the car.” To manage fortune and luck is part of the talent, although that could only be acquired from one’s own experience.

## 5. That single thread

The shop owner often visited Okamoto Tetsushiro's atelier, which is located in the quiet residential area of Matsuyama. His mind would come at ease whenever he stepped foot in his atelier. He would momentarily forget about time, as he admired paintings after paintings. He felt this is a space for creation.

Master Okamoto's piece *Third-class train in Hokuriku* was once selected by Nika Exhibition. Guided by serendipity, he was received in Akita by Masakichi Hirano, whose brother is a student of Tsuguharu Fujita. Fujita, who served as the lead adjudicator of Nika, highly praised his drafts and encouraged him to join the exhibition. Eventually, the shop owner bought the painting with 3 million yen.

Another painting by Fujita, *Work in Akita*, was 5 meter long and 20 meter wide, making it the largest wall painting in the world. It was commissioned by Hirano and now stored in an art museum in Akita.

Master Okamoto once spoke of a story. There was once an art trader visited his atelier and offered to buy all his work in the gallery for 30 million yen. The master immediately shouted: "Out!"

"Each painting is like my own daughter," he said. "Whenever I entrusted someone of my work, it felt as though seeing my daughter getting married. I will not give her to anyone that cannot be trusted."

It becomes a regular enjoyment for the owner to chat with the master. At one conversation that was supposed be same as any other, the master casually told him that he has originally recommended by Fujita to study in Paris, but could not make it because of the war. "If sir you have been to Paris, you may be living another life," the shop owner said. Master Okamoto however responded: "No, this is my destiny. Life is like a single thread. It looks like a convoluted fork in the road, but when you straighten it, it was just like a single thread." This is where the story comes from.

It was a wake-up call for the owner, who was regretting quitting his job to return home. After hearing from the master, the owner cannot help but asked: "So am I destined to come across Master Okamoto?" "Exactly," Okamoto answered right away. "Then, let me build Master Okamoto's art gallery," the shop owner said. "You are really weird," Okamoto responded. "Hahaha." They looked each other in the eyes and laughed.

When the owner left the atelier, he raised his head to see a clear blue cloudless sky, putting his mind at ease. That is the defining moment that he devoted himself to his own calling.



## 6. Puerto Rico

Self-service petroleum station was running smooth after the government restriction was relaxed. The owner took the time to meet with the director at the petroleum manufacturer, where he met a sales executive returning from overseas assignments. The executive has worked in Puerto Rico (where he later become the head of the petroleum manufacturer and chair an industry body). So he encouraged the owner to have a look at GPR (Gasoline Puerto Rico). The owner, a highly efficient person, then flew to Puerto Rico, the floating island in the Caribbean Sea.

Before the legal restriction on self-service in petroleum station was lifted, GPR in Puerto Rico was already an inspiration to him. He experimented payments at exits at Matsuyama PS. This payment method later became a big push for self-service, after the restriction is lifted. A sign of GPR (Gasoline Puerto Rico) was on display in PS at that time.

“Full service”, which includes window and astray cleaning, once dominated the market at that time. The new stations opened after PS South Matsuyama raised their efficiency, and reduce the workload on workers by halting this full service. The payment method would further reduce manpower.

The owner believed “self-service raised cost productivity”. While cost was reduced, ranging from procurement to manpower, the owner would maintain a competitive but not throat-cutting price. Instead, he would move on to invest.

## 7. Retail in the greater area

In April 1998, restriction on self-service petroleum station was officially lifted. The owner reacted swiftly, as he has always been waiting for this moment. He would explain the new regulation to the top brass in local fire stations. Meanwhile, he often joined seminar to learn about the practical operations following the relaxation. He would poke fun at himself: “In this county, the top brass and I are most familiar with self-service petroleum stations.”

Even though the restriction was lifted, Japan however would still require someone to monitor the self-services. It was impossible to completely drive the salaries to zero, but cost could reduce by hiring part-time workers or freelancers. Some companies in the market would also sell car accessories such as tyres, gasoline and batteries while running an self-service station. But the owner focused on self-services by driving through i.e. without drivers leaving the car. That includes coin-operated car-wash, selling of petroleum products, and self-service primarily ran by part-timers and freelancers. For tyres, gasoline, batteries and other chemicals, the owner felt they could be left to the supermarkets under a mutual beneficial ecology. He would thoroughly implement his motto “self-service petroleum station is the cost competitiveness”.

When the new rules just started to apply, the owner was in no hurry to increase the number of petroleum stations, because of the huge investments over new and modified stations. This however was only part of the reason, largely because petroleum manufacturers’ subsidiary and other more established stations already introduce self-services, while many smaller stations near those who provided full service were closed. 25 years after the restriction was lifted, the number of petroleum stations in the entire nation dropped by half.

Sales performance of stations with self-service could beat stations providing full service by several times. Before this even happened, the owner already has thought: “Increase self-service petroleum stations, and other types of stations would be halved.” Not only could he looked at matters from the industry’s perspective, he would also think like an ordinary consumer. The surge in sales is a resounding proof of customer demands. He would also consider: “The number of petroleum manufacturer will drop, equilibrium between supply and demand will be achieved, and competition on price will fade out. Therefore, the price will be stabilized.”

He has established the principle of “opening one new station in a year, at least five in five years” to boost self-service station. The retail business in the greater region started to move through the gears.

## 8. Water flows around the rocks

While the pace of opening new stations started to pick up, the owner began to eye on affiliated stations in supermarket, countryside and other towns.

Meanwhile, financial institutes that the company used to do business with him have now imposed stringent conditions on new projects. In the past, the owner often visited various financial institutes to meet with their executives, not only to ensure proper financing, but to explain the company's operation policy and future direction.

Under different leadership, these institutes have different financing policy. That has often led to significant change in policies when executives moved to different branches, causing new applications for loan being refused. The owner was forced to forgo the security interest granted by the bank ten years ago.

The owner is not the type that bites the hand that feeds it. After some communication, the bank who once offered assistance to the company pledged: "Penalty will be incurred if payment was received before the deadline Our bank hope to carrying on do business with you in future, sir." The owner therefore decided to work with the bank on the same terms as usual. Other than that, he also received assurances from other regional banks and joined forces on eight new projects.

The owner however also stopped doing business with some banks that raised harsh conditions. Some local financial institutes once refused to borrow loans to the owner. "You are opening new stations too quickly. If this goes on, the existing stations will have to shut down. In that case, our bank could not collect the loan. Therefore, we could only grant new loans every three years," one of the banks said. When the desperate owner was about to seek other channels for assistance, some in the same trade have reached out to help, for which he was genuinely grateful.

To those whom he stopped doing business with, the owner also wrote a short paragraph explaining his rationale. He quoted Tsuneo Inui, the founding president of Orix Corporation, Japan's first loan company. "Men always counted on the banks on everything, and men are always mobile. When this dependence shifted, they have nowhere to go."

In writing these words, the owner was also thanking them, because he knew they may still cooperate in the unknown future. "Water could flow around the rocks and forward" was precisely his thinking at the time.

## 9. Rokkakuo and Dome

The owner, whenever hearing about a new plot of land, would rush there immediately. After observing and confirming on the ground - not only the location, also carefully observe the vicinity and traffic flow, he would purchase decisively. His thinking was “once the road opens, the traffic flow would significantly increase altogether”. To open an affiliated station to supermarkets or in the country side, people around him would say “it won’t sell, there’d be no business”. But he would ignore them. “It was good to be without competition. Just like a big tree, there was not many other trees around, and it could absorb more nutrition and grow.” There was little public transport in rural counties, so one could expect a stable demand for refilling. Other than that, most petroleum stations around were smaller stations that ran on credit and provided full service, and there would be no less demands for stations operated in a different form. Eventually, sales gradually increased.

The owner would often visit the construction site. “There are changes every day, so I really look forward to visit. The site is full of energy and vibrancy,” said the owner, while marching on driveway made of fresh concrete.

This new petroleum station becomes the prototype of Unipet self-service petroleum station. This branch changed the existing way of doing things, by adding the most iconic dome tent top and Rokkakuo control booth. Other features include using rewritable card to pay by cash, paying 100 yen for speedy cash wash, Aji-stone sculptures, and operating 24-hour.

The dome of the station was installed because when preparing to open the affiliated station, a supermarket operator requested a branding never seen before. After hearing fire safety regulations were lifted on the Tokyo Dome, the owner reached out to the same manufacturer and introduce it at the PS East Matsuyama station. The dome came with colorful and was easy to maintain, which also reduced the cost of production. Rokkakudo would help surveying the environment around, and it was visible and identifiable to customers coming far away.

Since starting his own business, the shop owner has always kept the price at 100 yen. The 100-yen ionized car wash came with the additional value of 200 yen at a self-service petroleum station. When the number of cars were on the rise, others in the trade would prioritize sales revenue, by increasing the price to 200 or 300 yen. Yet, car-washing at 100 yen was so deeply rooted in customers’ mind and was widely supported. The number of cars washed jumped from 40,000 cars at the beginning, handled by four machines at four stations, to 800,000 now handled by 50 machines from 35 branches.

And for Aji stone sculptures, such as frog, rabbit, Godzilla, and other monsters, they each weigh 10 to 30 kilograms, and were placed in 35 branches to bring a pleasant image.

As for rewritable cards, once the customer paid by cash, the changes would turn into points accumulated and displayed on the screen, saving the trouble to deal with coins

and the great deal of manpower involved. The accrued sales revenue from two days of operation would be deposited in banks deposit bags, and would be handled in bank's night time vault that morning by duty officers. Afterwards, the workers on night-shifts will take over. For any given day, there would be the sales revenue from the day before and the cash for the business day's operation, workers on duty would prepare for the colleagues on duty in the morning to deposit the sales revenue at the bank's night time vault. This repeated exercise speaks of the owner's motivation: "Cash is king."

## 10. Heading for Kyushu

A young man came from Kyushu to Matsuyama. Although he had a strong and bold face, it was as though there are mounting burdens on his shoulder. As it turned out, he was operating four full-serviced petroleum stations, and also running logistics business and land loans for supermarket and buildings.

An executive from car-wash machine manufacturer has recommended this young man to visit the 100-yen self-service petroleum stations. The owner walked through the station's operation with him, unreservedly telling him all about the 100-yen car wash and self-service refiling.

A branch executive of a Kyushu bank, who once worked in Matsuyama, had high praises for Unipet's self-service refilling stations. He suggested the owner to help the young man to reopen the petroleum station he used to operate, meanwhile another station could also be opened on bank loan. At the request of the bank, the owner opened another self-service petroleum station next to a supermarket in Nogata.

Just when sales revenue has increased, the young man was hit by cash crunch after payment to the bank, and could not pay for products acquired from the owner. It involved more than 400 million yen over four months. If this dragged on, it could even bring the owner's company into crisis. To avoid winding down, the owner was forced to acquire both companies. He borrowed 1 billion yen and acquired 20,000 hectares (or 66115 square meters) of unused land (ranked by bank as zero), causing a huge burden on his shoulder.

The owner therefore took the swift action. While it was the first time to start his business in Kyushu, the owner recalled the line from the book that was engraved in his memory. "Retail business across greater area is successful." He was confident in this, and had no single ounce of discomfort when expanding his business. He visited stations across nine different stations, and started to work on every kind of improvements. Eventually, he managed to recover the loss grounds and recorded 50 million revenues in two years. After several years more, he finally repaid all the debt. The unused land has then become the propulsion for Unipet Japan's solar power station in future.

## 11. Finally free

The Unipet head office was moved from 2nd floor of PS Matsuyama office to Tsukiji, Tokyo when it launched its self-service petroleum station. When the owner's father passed away, his sick mother also stayed in hospital in Gotanda for three months. She would have to visit Tokyo every month after being released to follow up on her situation. The lead surgeon at the time was owner's high school classmate. "It was tough to follow up [and travel] each month. Why not come and live in Tokyo?" The doctor suggested. So the owner decided to move to Tokyo. This opens the opportunity to relocate the head office to Tokyo, which was also a step in developing the wider region.

It was a fresh experience for the owner to share his daily life with his mother. Miraculously he never felt tired, even though he would have to wake up every four hours in the middle of the night. It was love- pure, whole-hearted and dedicated. Time has slipped and flown down the stream pleasantly, like the clear and tranquil water in a rippling river. He was increasingly motivated to work.

Although his mother had a bad leg and had to live on a wheelchair, on every Sunday, the owner would bring her to different places for lunches, such as Ginza, where they would enjoy sushi and tempura and other Japanese cuisines. The owner is the second son and had three younger sisters among the family with five children. When they were small, his mother was busy taking care of them, and he hardly had a chance to talk to her. It was like reclaiming the lost time in both lives altogether.

After moving to Gotanda, the owner and his mother would stay in Melbourne, Australia twice a year, for a total of four months. While working in Melbourne, the owner bought a new house in the countryside. His mother, already 80 at the time, only left the country on passport for the first time. They would fly from Tokyo to Melbourne directly. Throughout the four years, they travelled there for nine times. They spent many times to visit local cafes, leaving memories of smiling at each other behind. "Although for a long time I have difficulty moving around, but thanks to Koji (owner's childhood name), I was finally set free," she said. Then she returned to her heavenly home. She was 91.

## 12. We can, only if we let go

After his morning jog, the owner would often visit the Tsukiji Honganji temple, which is near the head office in Tsukiji.

The main hall of Tsukiji Honganji was burnt in the Great Kantō earthquake. After it was rebuilt, there was a hemispherical dome at the top of the temple, looking no difference to ancient Indian and Asian Buddhist temples. The main hall has adopted the usual Momoyama style to maintain the sense of gravitas. The other feature is there is no gate. According to the keeper of the temple, he hoped the temple can “easily get in touch with the people outside”. The main hall was solemnly situated at the other end of the spacious cobblestone-paved road. A spire on the rounded dome pointed through the sky. A Buddha, said to be created by Prince Shōtoku, was placed in the main hall and next to Venerable Master Shinran.

Worshippers would quietly flock to the main hall, which was more spacious than the space where monks practise. This way of focusing on the consumer to create space, to an extent, resonated with Unipet’s self-service petroleum stations. After visiting the temple, he would have fresh seafood at Tsukiji shijō, also reflecting the deep connection among Honen, Shinran, and Ippen.

Stickers with “we can, only if we let go”, extracted from *Blue Cliff Record* and *Matthew*, were posted all around the head office.

The glory of life is lost when possessions and money are taken away. The owner, out of his instinct, rejected to be defined by what he lost in past failure, and instead chose to move forward in faith. Because he knows deep down that if he mounted himself in the mold of the past, he would be fixated like a concrete and become a “living fossil”.

Guided by the idea of “we can, only if we let go”, the owner continued to step on the gas.

The business partners from Matsue, which formed a holding company after the merge, have also often come to the head office in Tsukiji.



### 13. Truthful out of the ordinary

Retail business is a golden bridge that connects the consumers and manufacturers. There will never be a day that stops manufacturers from directing their products to consumers. Retailers have a mission to sell the products by manufacturers on appropriate and stable price, not reaping excessive profits out of it. Profiting from illegal sales, monopolistic purchase, or selling substandard products in disguise of normal products are no-go zones for every retailer.

The way that retail business works is always diverse. The prototype of retail, as the owner believed, was market stall (similar to hawkers or roadside market). At the stall, there would be all kinds of people coming and leaving. The process repeats and naturally will extend the scope of conversion. Here, you will meet all walks of life and various culture.

Stall is all about procurement, sales, stocktaking, changing money, exchange with customers. You could see the prototype of retail. The freedom of sales is the source of energy in the business. Store owners have the liberty to choose their customers. When products stop selling, they could pack their belongings and start afresh somewhere else. All these are out of free will.

Freedom brings out the distinct flavor and the glamour of a store, attracting customers because of its reputation. The flavor of market stall is beyond the food, but the wonderful spice of life. “The taste in mouth is of course satisfying, but the best part is always the people,” a frequent customer put it succinctly.

Retail has its own life. It breathes its life each day when the shop opens and closes in a day. From the morning when the sun rises, bringing colors and lights to all walks of life, to the quiet departure at night. It repeats every day and generates energy for tomorrow. Retail is to sell necessity in daily life. The process repeats and retail grows. It is about being truthful out of ordinary.

Unipet’s self-service petroleum stations do not sell tyres or by-products related to cars, neither do they sell on credit, nor sell paraffin lamp oil or diesel. It chooses its customer. It picks its fight to win: “those who need those services, please just visit other stations.” The stations survived, proving the local demands to Unipet’s self-service petroleum stations. Rather than saying it is a survivor of the competition, Unipet finds its way to win without competing.

#### 14. Solar power station

The big earthquake in East Japan on March 11, 2011 has triggered massive tsunami in North Eastern coast of the Pacific Ocean, and the deadly incident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, resulting in countless casualties. It shocked the entire Japan and the whole world.

Because of the earthquake, Japan has reassessed its energy policy. This has paved way to possible development of solar, hydroelectric and wind power.

The shop owner, on the advice of S, has visited a large Japanese-funded, Spanish-made solar power station in East Portugal. Take every 100 solar panel as a unit. That large area of the station hosted over 3,000 units of solar panels. Although it looked like a deserted farmland, it inspired the owner to realize that it was also possible to maintain the natural status quo.

When the owner acquired the companies in Kyushu, S already suggested build solar power station on the 20,000 hectares of land, which was once considered a burden to the company. The owner therefore built a 9.5 kilowatts solar power near PS South Matsuyama and carried on with the study. The surplus power under grid interconnection was purchased a high price of 48 yen per kilowatts-hour. The shop owner would head for office very early in the morning, and observed and studied the right angle for solar power from morning to dawn, day after day, night after night. Eventually, he managed to produce a standalone solar panel system that could be transported by one man and could freely change the angle of sunlight reception.

Power companies often dominate the electricity market. The prominent mechanism of supply, instead of sales, left virtually no room for retail operators to join the market. However, the nuclear crisis after the earthquake has opened a new window.

In July 2012, Japan has introduced a new system for stimulating renewable energy known as FIT. The policy stipulated all national electricity companies must purchase solar power at a fixed rate, and in 20 years of operation, the per unit charge must be at 42 yen per kilowatt-hour. Because of demonstration of solar power sales across grids and on surplus power in stations in South Matsuyama, Tagawa, Tobe Animal Land, Central Takamatsu and Tokushima Airport, the owner took swift action in response to the situation.

The trucks used to carry the own petroleum brand were also rebranded as Don Solar. It aimed to raise awareness by driving to and forth the streets. “What is this truck used to carry?” Some may question. But the shop owner does not bother and continued to expand his power retail business.

Other than the unused land in Kyushu, other newly-opened PS provides sufficient space to build smaller power stations. The owner has kept building total of 66 stations, with the capacity of 2,500 kilowatts each. The initial return on revenue was only 5 per cent initially, but after fixed purchase system and the low and long-term interest policy from banks, it then turned into a high-return investment at 15 per cent

return rate per year. In 2015, the solar power stations generated an annual income of 100 million yen. All these seemed like seizing the right opportunity, but the truth is “[the owner] swallowing his own suffering”.

## 15. Win-win-win solution

“Solar power is agriculture,” said the shop owner as he looked at the sun in the morning with gratitude. It may sound far-fetched between agriculture and cutting-edge technology in solar energy. Yet both practices shared the common features of being easily affected by weather, benefited by the sun, and supporting people’s lives.

The lifespan of the sun was believed to be 10 billion years, and it is currently at the mature age of 4.6 billion years. In a way, the use of solar energy was close to infinite. After 4.6 billion years after the sun was born, mankind knew how to turn light into energy and put that to use.

Energy from the sun was an enormous blessing. And it is also clean, emitting no greenhouse gases- that could make a significant contribution to the environment. Given the movement of “zero carbon emission”, the public not only judged corporations based on their profit-making ability, but also their contribution to the environment and the society. One could therefore expect the development and growth for solar energy.

While developing self-service gasoline products and solar energy, Unipet Japan has also eyed on environmental-friendly businesses, such as ionized water car wash and fuel evaporative gas recycling device.

Ionized water car-wash does not use any detergents. It has been increasingly popular because it could even clean up the water stain on the windshield. If detergent was used, the foams from car wash would spill over outside the station, which would soon receive complained from Water Resources Department. Using ionised water could save these peripheral complaints. This is precisely a “win-win-win” solution, echoing the same philosophy of the Omi merchants “good for the seller, good for the buyer, good for the world”.

Recycling the fuel evaporative gas means to recycle the vaporized gas during oil refilling. It allows user to refill with ease without any of the smelly gasoline, which also benefits the environment.

## 16. Splitting up

A holding company was established after the merger between the owner and Matsue merchant from Shimane, in order to expand the scope of retail business, successfully increasing the number of point of sales. The merchant would often visit the head office in Tsukiji. The owner trusted him and almost handed the entire operation to him.

Later, however, the owner found out the Matsue merchant's behaviour has changed. He believed it was because the continuous growth of the company and expansion in scale, casting more doubts on the Matsue merchant.

What surprised the shop owner was a surprising line in a trivial incident (the "bento incident"). The line was hung in the air like a frozen breath, and almost became a calamity. It was only the tip of the iceberg. Yet it could potentially cause managerial problems. In the end, the owner was stabbed in the back from the Matsue partner. It may have been easier to avoid if it came from someone else. The betrayal from someone worked with deserved a much more serious response.

Mistrust against a person would create mutual distrust, and it would be common to lead to poor management. No mistake is allowed when one's hand is on the steering wheel in the ocean of retail business. This entire row has really troubled the shop owner and upset him for quite some time.

After the head office was moved to Tsukiji, the owner would still visit other petroleum stations in Shikoku. One day he met with M at a cafe. "After divorce, don't stay under the same roof," M suggested over the problematic affairs. M has always been a pragmatic and incisive person. Sometimes to close a matter, it would indeed require a sword like masamune to slice the crumpled threads.

The-owner therefore made the paramount decision of "going separate ways", leaving the experts to take legal actions. Then he moves forward.

## 17. Pink

Pink is the key color of Unipet's self-service petroleum stations, inspired by change in color tone to Toyota Crown. The owner would sometime make changes to the design, color, interiors of the station, and the cleansing works will be handled by the expert. Although he wanted to give a brand-new look to the station, he also cared about the feeling of his staffers. For a long time, the petroleum station was stagnant, which if it continued to be unchanged and unattended, not only the customers, even the employees working there would be caught by mannerism.

Although a change in outlook of the station may create the impression of a change in ownership, but the owner hardly cared about this, as long as he could please the customers. Few could imagine revenue increased by 5 per cent after color was changed to pink. The owner was very surprised about this. Yet he would handpick the design and color of the station, in the same way to "to put the blankets the babies keep kicking off back". The motherly tender and care are inevitable for the development of the company.

In late Autumn, layers of red and yellow grow on the trees, creating a delightful scene, coupled with the fresh air and bright lights. Emotions of moved and gratitude flared up like fountains. Growth and death of trees was a testament of cycle of life in the ever-changing scenery.

All lives in the world quietly grow and wither, until the end. The design and the change to the colour of the station was the life cycle and source of strength for retail business.

The order for Unipet self-service stations to go back are in the order: 1. South Matsuyama, 2. East Matsuyama, 3. Uchiko the second, 4. Rainbow, 5. North Yonago, 6. North Matsuyama, 7. Tobe Animal Land, 8. Ozu City, 9. East Matsue, 10. West Tokushima, 11. Uchiko the first, 12. South Yonago, 13. Ikazaki Kaito, 14. Mikamo, 15. Central Takamatsu, 16. Masaki Bypass, 17. Asakurakami, Imabari, 18. Tokushima Airport, 19. Uwajima Inter, 20. South Yasugi, 21. South Yawata, 22. Nogata, 23. Front area of Izumo Station, 24. Moji Coast, 25. Ensun Tokusa, 26. Front area of the Gallery, 27. East Onoda Station, 28. Matsue, 29. Hirahara, 30. East Kamiita, 31. Kaho Fukuoka, 32. Satsumasendai, 33. Shichifuku, 34. Okayama, 35. Satsuma.

## 18. Unipet Hong Kong

On April 22, 2016, Unipet opened a holding company Unipet Japan in Hong Kong. The owner has moved to Hong Kong and decided to stay here. A door sign writing “Hojo-an” was placed at his residence, while the back of the sign read “Chomei-an”.

The owner could work freely with connection to the internet, as his residence was close to the office. He could also take advantage of the nearby golf course and enjoyed golf every morning, also taking care of his health. His another goal was to pay Tai Chi, having seen the elderly in Hong Kong played in parks every morning, while to walk on the nearby beach.

Hong Kong is a densely populated special administration region at the South Eastern part of China. IT is also a global financial metropolis with energetic skyscrapers. The illuminating golden glamour from the night views are captivating. English is widely used, as you could find people from every corner of the world living here, coupled with Christians, Buddhists and Taoists. It was a graceful harmony of the East and the West. Food in Hong Kong is very diverse. People would have congees in the morning, also with soup. Hot food is better for intestines than cold food. Perhaps of people’s habit, Hong Kong surprisingly was the most long-lived places in the world.

The owner is supporting some university students studying Japanese study and hoping to further their study in Japan. Hostels were provided by Unipet’s Sugita Dormitory (in Tsukimino, Kanagawa Japan). As his next step, the owner planned to open a company in Taiwan to support the college students there.

Hong Kong’s high degree of economic freedom has deeply attracted him, whose soul would hibernate because of cliché regulations and lack of freedom. Donations are free of taxation, unlike Japan. Work visa could be granted after the company is formed, and could stay during the application. Here, one could enjoy economic freedom to such an extent.

The owner would not keep his wealth from his business to himself. During the massive earthquake in East Japan, he donated ten-kilowatt solar generators to the city Minamisōma. He is also dedicated to support education and arts moving forward.

## 19. Tetsushiro Gallery

Okamoto Tetsushiro Gallery was completed on August 16, 2019, located at one end of PS Matsuyama. Although Master Okamoto has already passed away, but the owner has said “Then, let me build Master Okamoto’s art gallery.” The time when both smiling at each other was still a vivid memory.

Chapelle Fujita in Reims, France was painted on the exterior wall of the gallery. The chapel was built by owner of champagne company who funded Tsuguharu Fujita in his old age, where he drew the life of Jesus on the walls there. Fujita himself was laid to rest there. It was said that Master Okamoto, tearful, also mourned his teacher there.

Guests visiting the gallery would be greeted by Genki-kun and Smile-kun at the entrance, which are made from dosing machines at the time. When they set foot inside the gallery, they would then see the *Third-class train in Hokuriku*, a Nika entry once praised by Fujita.

Another eye-catching piece was Master Okamoto’s self-portrait. Because of the hardships during war, it was evident that the master has been through years of sufferings in his whole life. Yet he never complained about it. He would often look into the future, often with a smile and his glaring eye. His personality reflected upon his body language, as well as full of love and tender, was all inscribed in this outstanding piece.

Master Okamoto was born in Minami uwagun nishiumi-cho (currently Ainan-cho). His father (surnamed Ozawa) was a doctor born in Oita, and started his practice in Setouchi. He later became bought a fishing boat after becoming interested in fishery, and he moved to Saikai. Young Okamoto then become the adopted son in Okamoto family which has no children, and grew up in Matsuyama.

During the war, Fujita has visited Matsuyama to produce movie, and at one afternoon dropped by the Okamoto family for a rest. While receiving Fujita, Mrs. Okamoto brought up Tetsushiro, who was learning painting in Tokyo at the time This is how Master Okamoto became Tsuguharu Fujita’s protégé.

The gallery hosted a range of exhibits, including those about the mountains, rivers and seas in Ehime, of which the shop owner has deep ties with; and also, the households, potteries, street photos, temples, shrines, and other still objects such as fish and fruits. Other fascinating craft works include views of places across Japan, overseas, historical sites and persons. There are total of over 300 paintings by Master Okamoto.

“Retail business was close to arts and folk arts and crafts,” the owner once said. This thinking is revealing from the birth of the gallery. The pursuit of beauty is shared value in his career and arts. According to Yanagi Sōetsu, folk arts are beauty of practical use, of ordinary, and of health. This has really resonated with retail business.



## 20. Pandemic and Unipet

2020 will be a year that goes down in history. Novel coronavirus disease has swept the world, as World Health Organization has declared it a global pandemic on March 11. There is no sign of being under control as of end of the year, with the emergence of highly transmissible variants that creates even more uncertainty in future.

This pandemic is targeting anything “close”, limiting person-to-person contact. “Closely” related are trips and events, where concerts, vacations, dining and hospitality are greatly impacted. Travelling between countries are either banned or restricted. The epidemic has dealt a huge blow to the weakest link in the society. Not only was it the next revolution after the Industrial Revolution, this pandemic has exposed all sorts of problems for modern civilisation.

The public are taught to avoid three “close” (closed environment, closely-packed environments, and close contacts), maintain social distancing, wear masks, wash hands, and rinse their mouth, etc. Attention to telework and online business has increased. Living habits and style also see various changes. Because the virus cannot be detected by naked eye like natural disasters, it instils unnecessary fear on people. The overreaction has triggered negative impacts such as “self-restraint police” (i.e., complaint enthusiast) and “reputational damage” (individual or groups who suffer economic or reputational loss due to unfounded rumors).

Although Unipet could not have anticipated this unusual situation, its operation has little to do with being “close” when there was only one person stationed at Rokkakudo. Because of the thinkings of co-existence, non-competition, and “find it at another shop”, car care products such as gasoline, tyres, batteries are never handled, and customers would never come “close”.

Rokkakudo mirrored the one in Izura, Northern Ibaraki created by Tension Okakura (Japanese philosopher, originally named Kakuzo). It not only provides excellent and all-rounded visibility, but also created a natural and free environment. Plenty of employees obtained qualifications and developed personal interest during work. Only in that way, a “personal” space that everyone enjoyed could be created.

## 21. Donation as the final task

The ocean of retail business connects with the world. The waves rise and fall, come and go, braving the wind and storm towards the great odyssey ahead. Water from the sea is punching the rocks on the coasts, foams spilling over the sky, gently embracing the pulse of the sea as if it was smiling. This is a soothing and gorgeous symphony. The quivering sea shelters great energy, which can swallow both clear and muddy current. The “life” in retail business is to take “root” in mother ocean.

Reefs and undercurrents across the sea constantly challenge the boatman, just like one is expect the unexpected every day in business. The way a corporate handles problem determines its rise or fall. When Unipet faced obstacles, it would respect everyone and strive to establish a system could avoid the mistake, instead of shifting the blame to employees and hold them accountable.

Corporates need profits. Banks would drop out if deficits prolong, causing cash crunch. Once the blood in business stopped, operations will see loopholes, heightening risk of crisis. Meanwhile, if company only blindly follows profit and distract itself, it could become a boat flipped by huge wave and lost its direction. Even the smallest piece in the business may not properly function.

“Profits are temporary that we take from the consumers,” the owner often said. The number “zero”, discovered in India, is regarded as the foundation of modern civilization and science. “Profit is only temporary” is a management concept akin to the “discovery of zero” in retail business. It requires entrepreneurship and energy to start from zero to one, but turning from one to zero opens a pathway to regeneration and eternity, expanding the retail world to infinitely wide.

“Having nothing is having infinitely many.” It is the same energy that turned from chaos to birth of lives. “Entrepreneur’s last job is donation,” a famous businessman once said. The same goes with profound De (玄德) as Laozi said. Unipet will dedicate itself on contributing to the society and donations.

Unipet-maru will always fly its pink flag in the wind of “time”, sailing through the boundless sea quietly with its head held high.