

THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN JAPAN



When you see a photo of Yoshinori Watanabe, you just know that he could never have become anything but a Yakuza chieftan. He has a body like a gorilla, a face that reveals a sharp, calculating intelligence that most of us could only dream of possessing, and laser beam eyes that cut right through you. The most powerful criminal in Japan, Watanabe is a Neitzchean uberman who has unfortunately gone over to the dark side.

Watanabe was born in a farming family in Tochigi prefecture, and at one point worked in a noodle shop in Tokyo, but he's come a long way since then. And he did not get to be the head of Japan's largest and most powerful crime syndicate, the Yamaguchi-gumi, by kissing up to his superiors or volunteering to perform a skit at the annual *bonenkai*. At 22, he started as a junior member of a sub-gang called the Yamaken-gumi and helped his gang win the violent, no quarter asked and no quarter given turf wars of the 1960's. By 1982 he had become the leader of the Yamaken-gumi and was an important underboss of the Yamaguchi-gumi.

When Watanabe took over the leadership of the Yamaguchi-gumi in 1988, many experts were predicting the gang's demise. In their book on Japan's gangsters, *Yakuza*, David Kaplan and Alex Dubro write that, "By the mid-1980s it appeared likely that Japan's largest syndicate would never again dominate the *yakuza* world." The gang had been nearly destroyed after a leadership dispute had caused almost half of the gang's 13,000 members to split off into the rival Ichiwakai and start a vicious gang war. The Yamaguchi Gumi had won the war and gotten a lot of their members back, but had been greatly weakened in the process. They were under attack from the police and their situation could hardly have been worse. The way Watanabe revitalized the gang is almost miraculous. The gang's membership has grown by a third, to over 16,000 members. When you add in part-time members and gangs indirectly affiliated with the Yamaguchi Gumi, that number rises to as high as 38,000. To wit: just one man controls almost half of the *yakuza* in Japan.

His most brilliant innovation was the way he re-organized the gang. In the early 1990's, he split it up into seven semi-autonomous regional gangs, which had the result of making it much more difficult for the police to prosecute the gang as a whole and making it easier to handle both inter-gang rivalries and disputes with other gangs. There are now just three prefectures in Japan that are free of the Yamaguchi-gumi.

The 1990's were a tough time for criminals and the future of Japan's *yakuza* is unclear at this point, but the Watanabe and the Yamaguchi-gumi have never been stronger. Articles on the gang seldom fail to mention how well connected the gang is to Japan's politicians, making it unlikely that there will be a crackdown in the near future. The gang is still expanding, and its de-centralized structure makes it extremely difficult for prosecutors to go after Watanabe. When a Kyoto district court ruled last month that several *yakuza* had to pay 80 million yen to family of a police officer that they had mistakenly killed, prosecutors were unable to convict Watanabe of the crime because of the gang's amorphous structure.

Watanabe also initiated a policy called "Kyozon Kyoei" or "Co-existence and co-prosperity", where gangs started working together and doing their best to eliminate gang wars and territorial disputes. In reality however, it was a way for the Yamaguchi-gumi to insinuate itself into territories that had previously been controlled by other gangs. Yamaguchi gangsters tell other gangs they just want a piece of the pie but end up eating all of it.

Watanabe worked on expanding traditional *yakuza* businesses like sex and drugs and his gang is reported to make as much as 250 billion yen from narcotics and 150 billion from the sex trade. Watanabe is not just an expert at making money through sex and drugs though. He is also said to invest shrewdly in the stock market, and has expanded the Yamaguchi-gumi's empire to such legitimate businesses as hospitals and chemical companies. An article in the *Far East Economic Review* called "The Yakuza Recession" states that nearly half of Japan's most heavily indebted companies have at least some involvement with the *yakuza*.

One might expect that a man as powerful and reportedly ruthless as Watanabe would live an extravagant, luxurious lifestyle, but he is said to be a very ordinary man who watches his diet, jogs and skis, and enjoys karaoke. Yamaguchi-gumi crime bosses have a tendency to die violently, but Watanabe has so far escaped assassination and the Yamaguchi-gumi is more powerful than ever before.