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Changes in the Significance of Public Libraries in Japan



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ABSTRACT

Various kinds of libraries exist. In Japan, public and university libraries are quite popular with both students and general citizens. However, libraries have been obliged to change with the times, and they have to ensure their survival in the face of reduced budgets and decreased usage. In recent years, it has been recognized that libraries in Japan also serve as places of relaxation for citizens who do not use their reading materials. Attempts have been made to combine libraries with other facilities. In this paper, we describe the changes and problems related to the significance of public and university libraries in Japan and also present our own thoughts on the subject.

1. INTRODUCTION

Libraries are facilities or institutions that collect and store media data as well as such sources as books, magazines, and audiovisual, braille, and recorded materials; they provide those materials to users. Depending on the type of body or individual who creates and maintains them, libraries can be categorized into national, public (e.g., prefectural and municipal libraries), and private institutions. In addition, according to their users, the following kinds of libraries can be identified: public, membership, parliamentary (e.g., National Assembly Library), presidential, university, school (for elementary, junior high, and high school students), kindergarten, hospital patient, prison, seafarer, Self-Defense Force, and church libraries.

Among those facilities, public and university libraries are more familiar to the general public. A public library is an institution funded by public expenditure from local governments and is responsible for providing information to residents. Public libraries deal with various types of materials for residents or those working for local companies or attending local schools; the libraries are open to all. University libraries differ in that they are open to any users upon presentation of an identification card or advance application. Both types of libraries maintain a close connection with the community. Some university libraries are open to the general public on weekends.

The present study examines the use of both types of libraries and related recent developments. Accordingly, we address here the current situation and ongoing issues related to Japanese public and university libraries and also present our own thoughts on various related matters.

2. Traditional significance of libraries

Libraries have the following six roles: (1) collection of library materials; (2) organization of library materials; (3) storage of library materials; (4) provision of library materials; (5) organizing meetings and events; and (6) providing guidance about materials and library use. The services of a library also include lending, copying, requesting, and reserving materials, providing reference works, and offering mutual loans of materials.

In Japan, the Japan Library Association stipulates that public libraries have to provide professional staff (librarians), who acquire knowledge and skills in linking users with desired materials.¹⁾ This underlines the important role of librarians in library work. Librarians' duties

cover general library administration, though the amount of such work depends on the type of library.²⁾ University libraries hold materials related to departmental research, such as for undergraduates. The librarian is an expert in a particular field and assists students as well as university staff and faculty researchers. With a public library, the librarian's work is primarily in response to library users, and it involves some office work at the counters.²⁾ Counter tasks include procedures for lending and returning publications, locating reference works, and helping users search for materials (many tasks are undertaken concurrently in small libraries). In addition, the librarian has to shelve returned materials.

3. Current use of public libraries

According to a survey conducted by the Japan School Library Association and *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper in 2011, the average number of books (excluding such items as textbooks, reference books, manga, and magazines) read in May of that year was 9.9 for elementary school, 3.7 for junior high school, and 1.8 for high school students. The proportion of those who did not read a single book in that month was 6.2% for elementary school, 16.2% for junior high school, and 50.8% for high school students.³⁾ Those figures are extremely low. Further, social disparity among citizens is thought to lead to differences in the number of people who read books. One facility that could play a role in improving this situation is a library. Books are normally lent out at no cost. If people could be induced to go to libraries and borrow books, reading levels would increase.

The books that users wish to read are not always appropriately arranged in a library. For a public library to function properly, 50,000 materials and three full-time staff members, such as librarians, are a minimum requirement. That would demand a minimum library size of 800 m².¹⁾ Such facilities are supported by taxes. According to the Web site of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the budget for material expenses in public libraries has decreased in recent years (Fig. 1). If the number of library users declines, it is to be expected that the budget will be further reduced. Accordingly, there are concerns that libraries may disappear altogether in the future. To avoid this outcome, it is necessary to demonstrate that libraries are a necessity; for that purpose, it is necessary to attract more users.

4. Relationship with the Internet

The use of the Internet is increasing in Japan, and it is possible for libraries to use it for their own cataloging. In such cases, it is possible for users to check the availability of materials without having to visit the library itself. Some publications rely entirely on the Internet: some academic journals exist only in electronic form. With such journals, a limited number of subscribers or all individuals can view the content. Users can download relevant documents and view them immediately or after printing them out.

In the case of conventional library materials, however, such actions would result in copyright problems. With electronic media, the materials have already been purchased. That is achieved by extending copyright protection to a mechanism that allows one-time-only downloading and copying once to an electronic device, such as a mobile phone and personal computer.

Apart from such usage, in some cases, only a small portion of the materials can be browsed on a trial basis. With electronic journals, it is usual for the copyright to be transferred in advance from the author to the publisher or academic society. For that reason, there are no provisions for the materials being read as a violation of the author's rights. Hitherto, publishers of electronic journals have frequently allowed free viewing of part of the materials and charged only for additional browsing. If that approach were adopted with library materials, many copies could be made and the copyright would not be protected. It is theoretically possible to devise a mechanism allowing users to browse only while they are connected to a library site and are able to access from only one location at a time; such an approach has already been attempted.⁴⁾ Currently in Japan, communication speeds and the ubiquitous information environment have not progressed sufficiently for anyone to adopt that approach; further, the types of materials with that method would be limited to those in which the copyright has expired. A further possibility would be the user being required to pay communication costs rather than actually purchasing materials.

5. Problems with university libraries

Universities are educational and research facilities and book materials are indispensable for their functions. Indeed, when establishing a new university or department in Japan, it is prescribed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology that the institution should have more than a certain number of specialized documents. In this regard,

many universities face two problems that prevent them from purchasing many materials. First, their budgets are lower than those of public libraries. When a university is founded, it clearly has to have arrangements in hand to obtain books: otherwise, the university would not obtain approval for its establishment. However, beyond that initial establishment, the university may find challenges in obtaining funding. Within overall university budgets, it appears that there are many cases in which other elements, such as maintaining classrooms, are prioritized.

Second, universities face problems in creating storage space for books and other such materials. Textbooks cannot be obtained in electronic form: all such volumes have to be purchased as paper media. In contrast to other types of libraries, university libraries have to subscribe continuously to various academic journals so that researchers can conduct their work effectively. Thus, the amount of available storage place gradually decreases. If the library archive is maintained in underground, upper-story, or ad hoc facilities, readers will have reduced access to the materials. Limited storage space restricts the number of materials that can be held. For that reason, increasing numbers of universities in Japan are reducing their purchases of print books and shifting to other media, such as electronic journals.

Electronic media have the advantage of not requiring the extensive storage space that print books demand—just a number of computer terminals. Cost is an important consideration if readers need access to particular materials over a certain period: accordingly, many materials are not held permanently by university libraries. An additional factor is that it is often difficult for library staff to determine which books might actually be needed by users; this problem is exacerbated by the existence of different print media and different subject areas. In the case of older materials, some universities are considering disposal. However, with such materials, it is difficult to determine whether or not users may actually want to read them in future. Further, the materials were purchased from tax monies and are part of a university's assets. Thus, careful consideration is required before implementing disposal.

With university libraries, the low frequency of visits and readership of materials is not a serious problem. At one time, such libraries could be used only by university students or members of staff. In Japan today, members of the general public are also able to use many university libraries. A large number of the documents in such institutions are old and regarded as valuable; however, because such specialized materials are not available in public libraries, it is considered necessary that they be accessible to ordinary citizens to satisfy their intellectual requirements.

6. Public library issues in Japan

6-1. Protection against child suicides

From primary to high school, bullying of students is frequent in Japan (Fig. 2). The reasons for that and possible countermeasures are not the focus of the present paper. One of the few times when bullied children can relax is during long vacations, such as in summer: at those times, the victims do not have to attend school and confront the bullies. However, once the summer vacation is over and the new term begins, the victims have to face the bullies again. That can lead to incredible stress for the victims: in extreme cases, they take their own lives. Public libraries can play a role in helping to address this situation. One example of a public library taking an active step in this regard is as follows. At the end of August 2015, the official Twitter account of the city of Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture stated, “Children who have difficulties in starting the new term and will be absent from school can come to the library.”⁶⁾ Initially, this statement struck many people as absurd. However, it later came to be recognized that victims of bullying who are unable to seek help from their parents could in fact be assisted in this way, thereby avoiding a tragic outcome. The present authors are not experts in this field, but we believe that the action in Kamakura may actually have prevented suicide. Thus, if children visit a library at a time when they should normally be attending school, librarians should not check on the particular circumstances: they should let the children use the library as a place where they can relax and achieve peace of mind.

6-2. Use as study places

Public libraries are considered places that children can easily use. Thus, it seems natural that children should use them as places for studying and doing their homework in the summer vacation. In recent years, however, some public libraries in Japan have stated that schoolchildren should not use them for study purposes.⁷⁾ The reason given for such decisions is that libraries are originally intended to be places where people can read books. However, if schoolchildren adopt them as study places, that can cause problems for regular library users because the library becomes too crowded. Different libraries do of course have different views about this matter. Some libraries maintain that it is fine for students to study there quietly if they do not use library materials; others believe that if students are not there to read books, they should go elsewhere.

6-3. Library complexes with municipal buildings and cafés

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of “library complexes” in Japan.⁸⁾ In some cases, libraries are established within municipal buildings or in conjunction with child play areas. In recent years, libraries have been set up in the same building as such establishments as coffee shops, museums (galleries), and theaters. There are two reasons for this library complex approach. First, it offers a location that offers easy access for users. Second, it presents a way for a library to diversify and could bring it new benefits.

With respect to the first reason, it is necessary for libraries to acquire many users if they are to survive (Table 1).⁸⁾ In that regard, ease of access is important. A library being located close to public transport links will facilitate visits by users. Establishing a library at such a location faces many obstacles, such as securing a good site. However, setting up a library in a complex with other facilities helps reduce those problems.

Regarding the second reason, the types of available information have undergone diversification in recent years: it is much easier for users today to obtain information from various media. Accordingly, libraries have to deal with this development. For libraries to respond effectively to users’ needs, they have to provide services for specific requirements and present the unique features of their own facility. To respond to diverse user needs, libraries themselves have to diversify: it is necessary for libraries to examine other ways of promoting themselves while maintaining their current service. However, a library has to recognize that there is a limit for the services it is able to provide independently. If a library undertakes development of its services in this way, it will inevitably involve other organizations or facilities. Thus, greater attention is being devoted to establishing libraries in complex facilities. In contrast to the traditional style of a library as an independent structure, library complexes offer considerable advantages, such as undertaking events in conjunction with other facilities and allowing users to spend time in a place that offers greater comfort. Accordingly, the current approach to libraries will undergo diversification.

7. Necessary actions for future libraries

For libraries to survive in the future, they will generally have to consider the following factors.

1) They need to obtain essential information. City life for individuals at home and in the

workplace involves contact with various kinds of information. Among that diversity, it is necessary to select important information and decide whether the information they receive is correct or incorrect. In the face of increasing internationalization, local governments have to provide residents with accurate information and strive to broaden their vision and international spirit.

2) Libraries need to promote leisure fulfillment, especially among older people. Reducing the number of working hours is a necessary step for Japan's economic development. However, if working hours are decreased, it is necessary to consider how people should spend the additional leisure time. If reducing working hours does not result in leisure time that has the same value as time spent earning money, shortening working hours will be meaningless. A prime candidate in profitably spending leisure time is learning and education. That can enhance people's culture and knowledge: it can make their lives more meaningful; it can also allow them to become more creative contributors to society. With the ongoing greying of Japanese society, the number of elderly people with considerable leisure time will naturally increase. Libraries can play a major role in such people being able to achieve a meaningful old age.

3) Libraries need to provide support in developing children's ability to think. Promoting children's thinking ability, imagination, and perseverance and fostering adults who have the ability to think is a vital issue for society as a whole. Reading is believed to be very effective in cultivating those abilities. Parents need to make their children aware of the pleasure that reading affords and to provide a suitable reading environment.

4) To compensate for Japan's schooling-oriented society, libraries need to become additional places for education. It is widely believed that the country's present schooling-oriented society needs adjustment: young people have to be given hope toward creating a society where efforts are rewarded and true personality ability is appreciated. Libraries are facilities that can motivate people to learn at any time and enrich themselves. Thus, libraries can help young people deal with their frustrations and increase the number of people who are constantly striving to improve themselves. In this way, libraries can provide immeasurable benefits to society as a whole, such as through building personal academic ability and knowledge. These contents are not completely new.

8. CONCLUSION

Libraries are no longer places that simply lend out books. Technology now offers a full range of diverse media, which are in considerable demand. For people to survive in an age of international competition and economic instability, it is necessary to obtain reliable information instantaneously. Public and university libraries have to collaborate with one another and with information-providing agencies to provide effective support to people in dealing with their various tasks and problems. It is necessary for libraries to deliver reliable information, raise the knowledge of citizens, support them with their problems, and allow people to enjoy a happy life with one another. For that reason, it may be inevitable to consider ways of generating income. It may be easier for libraries to survive if they can make improvements in their management through the development of library complexes and the use of the Internet. Aside from the reading materials they provide, libraries can be places of recreation for older people and children, and they can function in the same manner as meeting halls. However, the use of libraries in this way depends on the views of the owner.

A lifelong learning society is one in which a person selects what they want to learn; thus, they do so by free will. For everyone to learn when they want to do so, the library is the most appropriate facility: it has almost the same importance as a place of compulsory education. As core facilities in a lifelong learning society, libraries will become places that increasingly fulfill the desires of citizens and become facilities that are indispensable to the community.

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Table 1. Number of public libraries and lending in Japan

Year	Number of libraries	Individual lending (thousands)		Lending per person (B/A)
		Registered individuals (A)	Lent materials (B)	
1987	1743	13,898	237,259	17.1
1988	1805	14,822	250,708	16.9
1997	2450	30,608	432,874	14.1
1998	2524	33,091	453,373	13.7
1999	2585	-a)	495,460	-a)
2000	2639	-a)	523,571	-a)
2002	2711	41,445	546,287	13.2
2003	2759	42,705	571,064	13.4
2007	3111	48,089	640,860	13.3
2008	3126	50,428	656,563	13.0
2009	3164	51,377	691,684	13.5
2010	3188	52,706	711,715	13.5
2011	3210	53,444	716,181	13.4
2012	3234	54,126	714,971	13.2
2013	3248	54,792	711,494	13.0
2014	3246	55,290	695,277	12.6
2015	3261	55,726	690,480	12.4
2016	3280	57,509	703,517	12.2
2017	3292	57,323	691,471	12.1

Based on data¹⁾ published by the Japan Library Association.

^{a)} Input and calculation were not possible owing to lack of disclosed data.

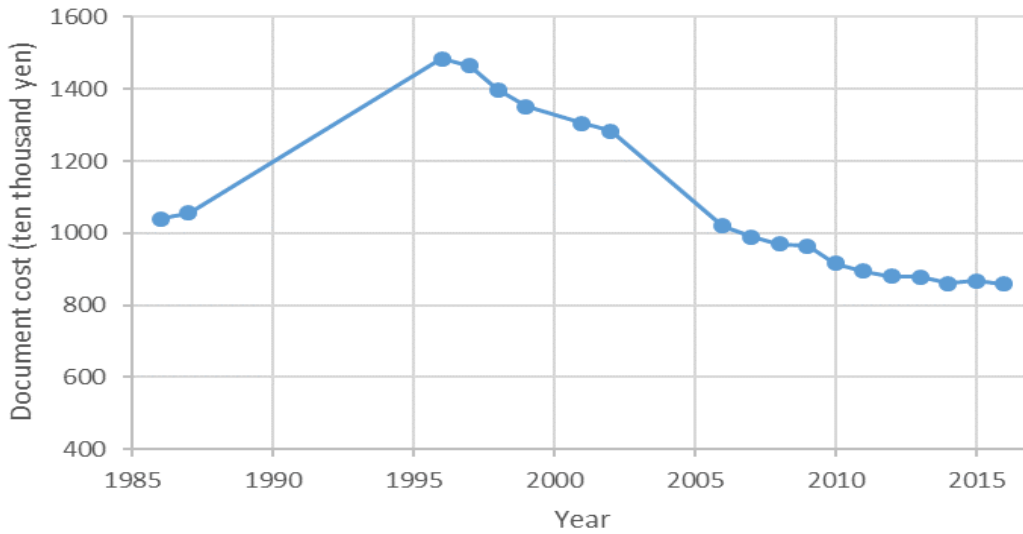


Fig. 1. Purchase costs of materials per library

Based on data¹⁾ from the Japan Library Association.

The numbers in the vertical axis are the total amount invested divided by the number of libraries.

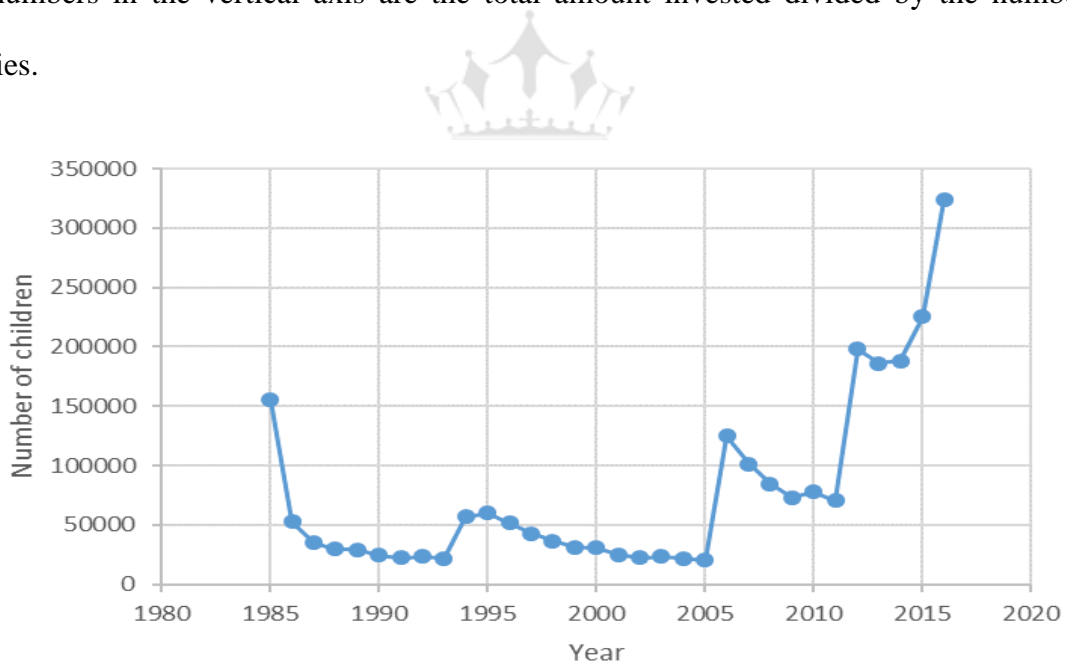


Fig. 2. Official number of school students bullied in Japan

Based on data in reference ⁵⁾.

In 1993, 1994, 2005, 2006, and 2013, the manner of counting cases and the scope of survey changed (hence the steps).