

Public Libraries in Japan: Triggers for the renovation of library service models

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Introduction

When I was offered this opportunity to speak about Japanese public libraries today, I thought I would present the conditions and the issues public libraries are facing today frankly and from as broad a perspective as possible. It will be difficult to avoid misunderstandings, but there's no reason I should not try. It will be great if I could gain your understanding, and could find in us all shared commitment to grapple with issues that are common to us.

To outline what I am going to talk about today: first, I will review the brief history of Japanese public libraries so far (1. Framework of public libraries in Japan). I will then explain the present conditions, showing some statistics (2. Progress of public libraries since the 1960s). I hope this part will help you to visualize what Japanese public libraries have been. Then I will move on to show the library activities that have been central to Japanese public libraries including the introduction of information and communication technology: ICT (3. Service model for public libraries).

Next, in order to determine if the present library services are in line with their local residents' needs, I will present some research results (4. New Attitude of Users in public libraries (views acquired through researches)). The research has demonstrated how average citizens of our country see the library, to what extent they use the library, and how they are acquiring information in today's information society.

Although many libraries are still offering the same kind of services they did in the past, changes in the social environment have made some of them quite antiquated, calling for libraries to update their service model. However, at the same time, local governments are facing financial straits and undergoing various reforms based on the so-called NPM (New Public Management). The situation is not quite benevolent for public libraries currently, and it is quite difficult to achieve a breakthrough.

Despite the dismal conditions, there are some libraries that have succeeded in defining and responding to the new needs of people and have earned large support from their local residents. It seems they indicate a possible route leading to public library transformation. Their attempts and IT innovations may offer clues for the development of new libraries. With this in mind, I will sum up the challenges of the future at the end of this presentation.

1. Framework of public libraries in Japan

In Japan, commercial publication of books started in the early half of 17th century. The traditional readership, composed of aristocrats, monks and upper-class townspeople, had to be expanded in order for the market to grow, and book-lending shops played a large role as a catalyst in this. According to some records, there were 650 lending shops in Edo (or Tokyo) in 1808, which grew to 800 in 1832. (Edo's population exceeded one million in 1817, and the literacy rate of the day is estimated around 70 %) Also, a book lending shop in Nagoya, founded in 1767 and stayed in business for 130 years, boasted a collection of 21,401 books at the closure of their business.

Public libraries, which are open to general population, seem to have their inception in the social developments like these. Private collections started to lend books to the general public after the end of the 18th century, and some of the shrine collections followed suit after the 19th century. However, it was not until the Meiji Era (1868 to 1912) when modern public libraries, operated by the civil government, came into being in Japan. The Meiji government established a western-styled library in 1872, as a part of its efforts of modernization. However the development of a public education system had a higher priority than libraries, and so the *Ordinance for Library* were not instituted until 1899. As Japan became a modern nation, public libraries were established in every region and their systems were developed. Library operations by the Meiji government, however, showed a strong aspect of "reform from up above," a device deployed to civilize people. The local government system in Japan is divided into two levels. The larger categories are prefectural, variously called *to*, *do*, *fu* and *ken*. Smaller units of city, town and village,

called respectively *shi*, *cho* and *son*, are included in them. Public libraries are developed in each of these levels in Japan, and this two-layered library system derives from the Meiji Era.

During this time there were some initiatives among librarians and staff, such as the establishment of professional associations, but on the whole the expansion and development of libraries made little progress. Furthermore, in the age when funding was slanted toward militarist policies, Japanese public libraries had to go through the darkest period.

Today's Japanese public libraries are based on the *Library Law* established after World War II, in 1950. The article 3rd of this law states that "the library, in its service, must heed its local situations and the wishes of its locals, be mindful of public educational needs for support, and strive for the implementation the following matters," and broad definition of the library roles follow. Adding to it, this law regulates the charge-free principle of public libraries in the 17th article, the allotment of staff and librarians in the 4th through 6th articles, along with other matters that relate to the operation of the library. Though there are some public libraries operated by private institutions, most of public libraries are run by local governments. While the nation establishes basic regulations and policies, the responsibility to actually operate the libraries falls on the local governments.

Despite the enactment of the law, public libraries in our country remained static for a long time, until the latter half of 1960s. The dramatic development of public libraries since then was created by two factors. One is the nationwide field surveys led by the Japan Library Association and their report titled *Public Library Management in Medium-to Small-Sized Cities* (1963). The policy, or the management standard for medium to small sized libraries, shown in this report chose to emphasize circulation in order to connect the library service to the needs of the residents. Until that time, libraries had been mainly equipped with educational materials, and thus had not been a place where people casually visited. However, as more and more materials that matched people's tastes and needs were collected in the libraries, they established themselves firmly in the lives of people. The other factor was Japan's economy in the high-growth period. Numerous municipalities competed to establish their public libraries, actively putting the fruits of the brisk economy into use.

2. Progress of public libraries since the 1960s

Today municipal merger is very much encouraged in Japan, and the number of towns and villages is on the rapid decrease. As of March 2007, there are 47 prefectures, 743 cities and 1,546 towns and villages. These prefectures, cities, towns and villages each (sometimes jointly) operate their own public libraries. Needless to say, the role of the libraries of cities, towns and villages is to offer library services to their residents. Prefectural libraries, added to their own library functions, play supportive and coordinative roles for city, town and village libraries

Table 1: Establishment rates and fundamental indicators of Japanese public libraries

	Prefectural		City- and ward-found		Town- and village-found		Collection size (by 1000) (per 100 persons)	Incoming materials (by 1000) (per 1000 persons)	Circulation (raw #) (per 100 persons)
	number of prefectures with library	establishment rate (%)	number of cities and wards with library	establishment rate (%)	number of towns and villages with library	establishment rate (%)			
1967	47	100	384	65.2	218	7.9	14,300 25	1,000 17	9,220 16
1977			497	74.5	269	10.3	37,740 49	4,330 57	84,230 110
1987			601	88.9	453	17.4	110,160 117	11,430 121	229,252 243
1997			664	96.0	829	32.3	216,620 201	17,830 165	41,9220 388
2005			748	98.2	772*	46.6	305,280 258	19,600 165	59,912 505

*Ostensible decrease due to municipal mergers.

Table 1 shows the number and establishment rate of libraries by local governments (at the time, there were 802 city- and ward-found libraries (including the special districts in Tokyo), and 1,041 town- and village-founded libraries. Other than these, there were 26 privately found public libraries). According to

this table, the library establishment rate in towns and villages fell short of 10% in the 1960s, showing that such municipalities were still exceptional. Both city- and ward-found and town- and village-found libraries increased rapidly, first the former showing 10 point increase in the first decade (the number of libraries reaching that of municipalities), and the latter followed in the 80s (Japan Library Association, *Library Year Book*).

However, the establishment rate of libraries among towns and villages still remains about 45% today, and this is one of the issues Japanese public libraries face. Looking from a different figure, the number of libraries per 100,000 Japanese are about 2.31, far below 22.26 in Finland. (Japanese municipalities unusually have community centers facilities called ‘Citizens’ Public Halls’, which often have library rooms within them. In the towns and villages that do not have their own libraries, these library rooms play a very large role in providing library services to the residents. Prefectural libraries are now supporting their services by incorporating them into their networks, and cities, towns and villages that have libraries are linking these library rooms by ICT technology, thus multiplying their service points. They are not included in the library statistics, so inclusion of them will change the situation a little.)

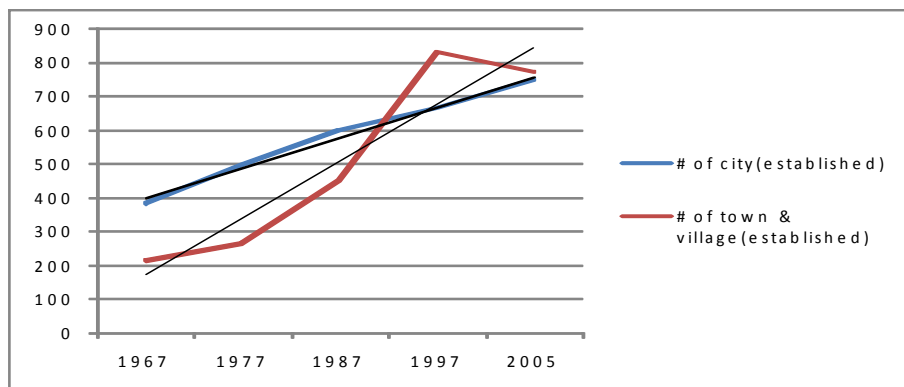


Figure 1: The number of public libraries since 1967

Sandra Parker reports that though the number of public libraries in Japan (100,000) is the smallest among the G7 nations, the circulation transactions per service point in Japan are by far the largest (*Update*, 4 (12) 2005, pp. 33-35).

Another issue is the rate of library registration by the residents that each public library is meant to serve. Depending on the region, there are some that exceed 60% in registration rate, but the national average is 35.7% (when only the cities, towns and villages that have their libraries are counted, the rate is 37.3%). The figure shows that the libraries are serving only 1/3 of the residents.

3. Service model for public libraries

As can be seen in Table 1, public libraries in Japan made a leap forward through the 60s and 70s, which led to the growth of the 80s, and that tendency was kept up until 1997. It is understandable that it took off in the 60s, considering that the administrative services by local governments started with indispensable utilities such as road constructions after World War II. After this first stage had been completed, many municipalities took up the library construction as something that their residents demanded. Though the 1990s was a time when Japanese economy went through a serious of recessions, resident campaigns for public libraries continued. Sometimes it was used as an election manifesto by candidates, and the influence of the stagnated economy was held in abeyance so far as library construction was concerned.

Though I briefly overviewed the extremely high rate of development of 60s through 70s in the first part, I would like to examine it in more detail here. Many of the Japanese public libraries prior to the 1960s aspired to become large-scale libraries, taking their models from libraries that had a more sophisticated range of services. However mid- and small-scaled libraries, which compose the majority of Japanese libraries, could not attain the funds and remained too poor to serve the needs of their residents. Trying to deal with such conditions, *Public Library Management in Medium- to Small-Sized Cities* defined that the essential function of the public library was to effectively supply materials to every person who sought them, and also it stated that it was important to increase the resident demands for library materials. The “function of material supply” (circulation, to be concrete) was thus placed as the central role of the

library.

This circulation-centered service model strongly appealed to the users who, until then, were only aware of libraries that limited circulation by placing their materials mainly in closed stacks. The new service policy was exciting as it perfectly matched people's demands. It was a counter-reaction to the fact that the Japanese public libraries had not tried to answer people's wishes until then. Open access circulation services were realized at more and more libraries daily, the library activities that matched the residents' demands were heartily welcomed, and new establishment of libraries were demanded in every region of Japan. This shift in the service policy and the local governments' moves based upon it drastically changed the library's roles and people's conceptions about the library and this directly lead to what we have today.

This process resulted in the emphasis being placed on "circulation-ism" i.e. the success of a library being based on the number of volumes being borrowed and the facts pointed out by Parker must be the result of the this. However, various drawbacks later came to be found in this model. For example, it measures the success of the library only according to the number of volumes that it is circulating. In order to "answer" to the users' demands, and as a result, to expand the circulation, the library is liable to stock its shelves with the best sellers that the users are likely to be willing to borrow. This kind of response might unbalance the library's collection, and once a writers' association actually accused the library of hindering their commercial activities by interfering their sales to individuals.

Also, this service model has had some adverse effects. Significantly, the library's important roles such as supporting the residents' research and study, also its reference work were not considered to be important. In a vicious circle, local government considered the major work of the librarian only to be the processing of the circulation, disregarding the importance of professional librarians. As a result more and more cities, towns and villages refused to hire librarians for their libraries.

Meanwhile society developed rapidly, making people's lives quite affluent and changing their needs for information quite drastically. The development of information technology also diversified the options of information acquisition. Along with the advancement of ICT public library's modernization has started from the last stage of 20th century. Circulation control and bibliographic services has now been almost completed in most libraries (*Brief Information on Libraries in Japan*. <http://www.jla.or.jp/libraries-e.html>). Each prefecture has a public library network, which allows people to look up the library holdings and they also provide inter-lending service. Some of them are linked with the academic library network and the national library. It is not rare that libraries are providing reservation services through the internet both by PC and cell-phone (adoption rate of PC: ca 80% of household, that of cell- phone: ca85%. Cell- phone is often used as an internet terminal in Japan like PAD in US).

Though the libraries strived to incorporate new services to cope with people's demand, today's Japanese public libraries cannot be said to have fully caught up. The installation rates of the internet workstations offered for users at public libraries in our nation remain 83.3% among prefectural libraries, 56.7% among city- and ward-found libraries, and 58.5% among town- and village-found libraries as of October 2005. Even among these libraries, not many are offering enough services, such as reference databases and external (commercial) databases. The digitization of holdings has been mostly taking place at libraries with special collections.

As I discussed in the section 1, the user registration rate at public libraries still remains low. There are various reasons for this, but probably the main reason is that libraries still base their services on their assumption that the residents come to their library only to borrow books. It is clear that the traditional "circulation-ism" does not suffice if the library service is to be closer to its users needs and if it is going to contribute to the information needs of the region. However, it is hard to say that libraries today have put their old creed behind them. There has risen a need to heed the actual voice of public library users once again.

4. New Attitude of Users in public libraries (views acquired through researches)

Traditionally the user profile of the library has been determined through demographic analyses of the residents and surveys on the users' expectations and demands. However, since social changes have drastically diversified people's lives, more detailed surveys are in demand today. In recent years, we conducted surveys on how the residents used and thought about the library in mid- and small-scale cities in Japan. They were a part of our larger scheme of the "Lifestyles and Libraries" research. I would like to talk about the results acquired through them.

4.1 People's attitudes toward the library and frequency of visit

One of our surveys was conducted in Toride City, Ibaraki Prefecture in 2004. Randomly sampling 1,000 residents residing within the 2 km radius of the library, we asked them how they viewed their library. The 20 questions were put through the factor analysis, and 5 constructive concepts, shown in the explanatory note of Figure 2, were acquired. These were, so to speak, the benefits of the library. Their factor scores were then put through the cluster analysis and revealed that there were 5 groups in the residents' view of the library.

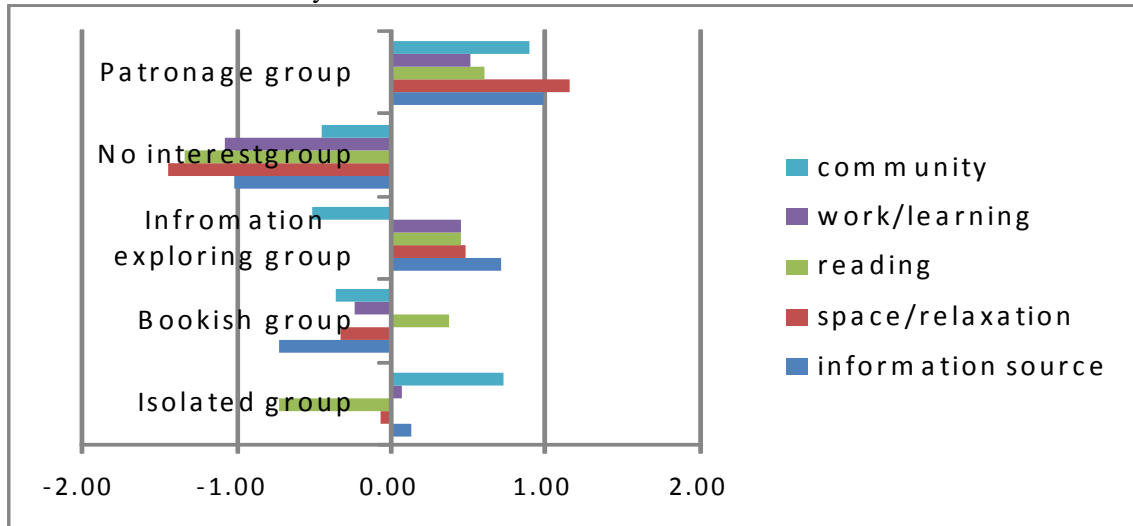


Figure 2 Clusters by views & attitudes toward the library and their factor scores

The Patronage group positively evaluated all the “benefits” which were conceivably brought by the library. The Information exploring group also valued all except the element of space. As could be expected, the Bookish group valued the reading factor, and the Isolated group, interestingly, seemed highly interested in the community function of the library.

Referring to the cross tabulation of the frequency of library visits by each cluster revealed that the Patronage group and the Information exploring group actually frequented the library the most. The latter, especially, visited the library the most times per week. The Bookish group, on the other hand, visited the library more times than the Isolated group and the No interest group, but their level of frequency was not actually very high, suggesting the possibility that they were not very interested in the act of reading in the library.

4.2 Information acquisition paths of residents

Next, in 2006 we conducted a survey with the actual visitors to the two libraries, Toride City Library and Yuki City Library, concerning their attributes and methods of information acquisition.

The library samples were taken from those based on different service models; Toride being traditional and Yuki being new with PCs and various research materials. Probably due to these differences, their user groups showed a little variance. As for the age distribution, the largest brackets at Toride were thirties and sixties, each occupying 21% of the total. At Yuki, on the other hand, thirties took up 20%, but teens (15 and older) and twenties were also quite prominent at, respectively, 13% and 17%. The sum of these two generations amounted to 30% at Yuki, while at Toride it was 19%. To sum it up, Toride had a high portion of male visitors, while the younger age group was a little smaller than what the demographic statistics showed, and the 60 and older group scored more than 26%. At Yuki there were visitors of all generations, with a small slant toward the younger age group. The results showed that aging of the visitors evident at Toride City Library was a general tendency. It was particularly interesting that Yuki seemed to have succeeded in attracting younger generations.

The questionnaire also asked what kind of information source they chose first when seeking for information about: 1) news & social issues, 2) hobbies & everyday topics, and 3) work & study. Table 2 shows the result. Many people were already utilizing network services like search engines in their daily information exploring activities, adding to the conventional media such as books and magazines. The result showed that the visitors were getting familiar with the information services including search engines.

Considering such use was not possible at Toride City Library at the time, these information acquisition behaviors had to be independent of the library usage. At Yuki Library, however, the use of the Internet and computers was actually offered and stated as one of the purposes of visiting the library.

Table 2 Preference of information source
(1) news & social issues, 2) hobbies & everyday topics, 3) work & study

Information source	Toride			Yuki		
	News/social issues	Everyday topics	Work/Study	News/social issues	Everyday topics	Work/Study
<i>newspaper</i>	65.7%	16.6%	9.2%	59.9%	14.9%	8.5%
<i>TV</i>	55.2%	37.8%	6.7%	59.9%	41.8%	7.6%
<i>Periodicals</i>	6.7%	27.6%	14.7%	9.2%	38.1%	18.6%
<i>Books</i>	12.15	33.2%	61.3%	7.7%	29.9%	62.7%
<i>Search Engine</i>	25.5%	38.7%	39.3%	15.5%	26.1%	27.1%
<i>Blog</i>	10.9%	19.8%	19.6%	5.6%	11.2%	17.9%
<i>Bulletin Board</i>	7.1%	16.6%	9.2%	3.5%	14.9%	5.9%
<i>Ask librarian</i>	0%	0.5%	0.6%	0%	0.7%	0%
<i>Ask friends</i>	0.8%	6.0%	6.1%	3.5%	10.4%	10.2%
n=	239	217	163	142	134	118

These results help examine what kind of people use the library today and also how people's information acquisition behavior and the library are intertwined.

Conclusion---Triggers for the renovation of library service models

Library from Now: To be the Regional Information Center, a report by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in March 2006 has been a theme of active discussions among Japanese public libraries. In order to promote public library services, the general tendency tries to place the library firmly within the corresponding local government and to gain the necessary support from concerned officials and parties. In this report, there are some examples of cutting-edge libraries as models of renovating the traditional library services.

Referring to this report, too, I would sum up the issues Japanese public libraries are facing today as follows.

1. Support for everyday problem solving (childrearing, learning-support for children, supplying health-related information, support for continuing education, and business support).
Support as a governmental institution (administrative support, support for school education).
2. Building and supporting community (repletion of local information, formation of local identity, gathering point of the community, function of social inclusion).
3. Responding to the digitization and infomatization of society

Though support for problem solving is inclusive of both conventional and novel learning support, the present situation of the library highlights some aspects of it. Supporting childrearing and supplying health-related information are indeed an urgent task in today's Japan with low birthrate and longevity. Business and administration support means that the library must and can respond to every problem people face in their daily lives.

Community building is a very important issue for the library. In fact, many of the libraries that have won the local support have also been contributing to the formation of the community. Collecting and processing the materials from this viewpoint and involving people while doing this, they also came to strengthen their basic services by answering people's actual voices picked up in the process. Mutual trust between the library and its community in this way seems to form an excellent foundation of library management and activities. In Japan, as elsewhere, the traditional communities are already broken-down and re-construction has become necessary.

As for the response to the digital and information society, it has to be said that public libraries in Japan are lagging behind. Even the MEXT report, though it points to the direction, the actual examples in it unfortunately are already out-of-date. This is very regrettable considering the fact that in Japan, broadband networks are already widely used in households and people have a great command of highly developed cell-phones with multiple functions already. The responsibility of this unbalance may fall not

only on public libraries, but also publishers and content providers who have been so far the bearers of information services. Wherever the blame it falls, as we have seen in the section 4, some people have already stopped relying on the library for this path of information acquisition. That plainly means that libraries are in need for a better and more realistic progress.

In closing, to sum up this presentation, Japanese public libraries rapidly developed since the 1960s, but today they are facing the following issues: 1) formulating a new library service model 2) formulating the basis for symbiotic community, 2) catching up with digitized society, and these issues might be trigger for the renovation of library service model, which is common in all area in the world. (2007.11.14)