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Japanese Academic Libraries: An Observation

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For years, American scholars have journeyed to Japan to pursue research projects which called for the use of the resources known to be available in Japanese libraries. Many of them, at least initially, have been and are baffled by the apparent lack of a cogent system of access to research resources and often find the existing order in libraries to impede rather than facilitate research. Despite this, however, the problems of Japanese libraries have been of little concern to most American academic librarians because it has been relatively easy to build significant research collections here in the U.S. which satisfy the major research needs of American scholars. Yet some of the more specialized materials, as well as those called scarce or "fugitive" materials, which often are fundamental to original research, are most likely to be found only in Japan. Some American scholars and librarians have forged individual links in Japan to gain access to scarce materials, but obviously the best of their efforts will not obviate the need for individual American scholars to go to Japan and deal with the "system" there.

The intangible results of the three Japan-U.S. Conferences on Libraries and Information Science in Higher Education notwithstanding, international cooperation between the U.S. and Japan with respect to library resources is, and will continue to be, a logical outgrowth of the present momentum within each country for national cooperation. As the case may be, basic to cooperation at any level is reliable information about the status and practices characteristic of Japanese librarianship.

It was my good fortune that the Japan Foundation accepted my proposal to survey research libraries in Japan under the Professional Fellowship Program for the academic year 1976-77. Through the personal efforts of Professor Takahisa Sawamoto, the then Director of the School of Library and Information Science at Keio University, I was accorded the status of a Visiting Researcher at Keio University.

As I began my observations, it became immediately clear that libraries occupy a much less significant place in Japanese society than they do in the U.S. In Japan, the purpose of libraries is often stated in ideal terms, with objectives quite similar to those pursued by libraries in the U.S., yet the outstanding characteristics of Japanese libraries, unfortunately, are a haphazard pattern of service and a lack of standardization in all levels of library management. With few exceptions, librarianship has not transcended the legacy of the founding years when libraries were staffed by clerks with an ability for materials management.
At present, Japanese librarianship has not yet evolved into a profession and has not been successful in awakening a demand for substantial library service. Expectations of most faculty and students for their libraries are not high. Virtually no one who is not a librarian, and not all librarians, seem to be convinced that libraries have a significant role to play in the total life of academic institutions.

There are currently 420 colleges and universities and 590 junior colleges in Japan, and approximately 1,730,000 college students, excluding junior college students. About 70 per cent of the schools are private and have 78 per cent of the total number of students. According to the 1977 Japanese "Library White Paper" (Toshokan Hakusho), the average university library holding is about 110,000 volumes, or 49 volumes per student. However, a further breakdown shows that private schools, which are attended by nearly 80 per cent of the students, have a ratio of not more than 29 volumes per student.

A university library in Japan usually consists of a main or central library, branch and departmental libraries, and research office (Kenkyushitsu) collections. For the most part, the role of the main library is similar to an American undergraduate library, and the research function is served by the respective departmental library and/or research office (Kenkyushitsu) library. In this structure, the central library is virtually never used by the faculty and researchers, but students are restricted from using the departmental research libraries or Kenkyushitsu.

The central library collection consists of a core collection of basic books on the humanities and general education supplemented by the "recommended reading" (Sentei Tosho) collection. The latter resembles the reserve collection in a U. S. college library in format, but its function is ill-defined in the context of Japanese education.

The undergraduate educational process in Japan is not designed to foster independent, self-motivated studies, and the nature of library service in Japan is correspondingly passive. As a result, despite the fact that university officials often proclaim that "the heart of the university is the library," the function of the main library in many universities is, in fact, closer to that of an appendix. The majority of undergraduate students see the library only as a study hall, and students often graduate from college without setting foot in the library.

To put the problems of Japanese libraries in proper perspective, it must be remembered that the university library reflects the organization of the parent institution. The university in Japan, particularly the prestigious large institution, is a condominium of various modular units of subject disciplines. Each modular unit is firmly grounded in a single-purpose framework, and disclaims any responsibility beyond its charge. Consequently, the university administration deals primarily with those matters which fall in the nether world of departmental jurisdictions while still maintaining a modicum of coordination of competing interest to function as a single institution.

Accordingly, the budget for resources and equipment is allocated on the basis
of first the faculty, then the department and finally individual professors. The library book budget has been, and still is in many universities, similarly divided up without regard for sharing resources within the walls of a given university. As a result a great many small, specialized and uncoordinated collections have developed, often overlapping one another, and are maintained and organized haphazardly. Until recently, the central library was allocated a mere fraction of the total book budget of an academic institution. As a result, some library directors were forced to canvass other departments for money to buy books for the main libraries of their institutions. As far as library service was concerned, the undergraduate students were severely neglected. In this way, the size of the library collection readily accessible to undergraduate students has been much smaller than the figure cited in statistics which include the majority of the books in restricted collections designated exclusively for faculty and research uses.

During the past ten years, gradual progress has been made. The undergraduate collection and the main library are now given specific budget allocations. Anywhere from ten to twenty-five per cent of the total book budget is now being spent for the main library collection. In a few schools, departmental libraries are being brought into the main library building in an effort to centralize the physical location of scattered collections though without integrating them into the main library collection. In an effort to coordinate the library resources on campus, many universities have established in the main library union catalogs, and centralized ordering, processing, and accounting procedures.

While it is claimed that the service to the students has been upgraded in recent years, and that students have gotten to know the library better, undergraduate use of the library, in my estimation, seems still very slight, and there are still many impediments to discourage even those undergraduates who have specific research interests.

Several times I heard conversations between a library staff member and a patron which seem to illustrate the basic problem. For example, a student brings a specific title from the card catalog and asks to see the book. However, the book cannot be found. After checking the catalog, the clerk informs the student that the desired book is on "semipermanent" loan to a faculty research office and that he, the student, should go to that office in person and ask the professor to let him see it. The student says, "Oh, never mind," and leaves the library frustrated. The library attendant neither offers to try to obtain the book or to intercede for the student nor even asks whether another book on the same topic may serve the purpose, as a trained public service librarian might have done.

Obviously many positive changes have been made, but those changes have not been incisive enough to make a great deal of difference. Nevertheless, there seems to be an irreversible trend in Japan to rationalize management and service of academic libraries. The future has promise of much greater exploitation of total library resources held in Japan than there has been in the past.
Research

The most articulate and strident criticisms of Japanese libraries have come from the faculty in those science-technical fields whose need for systematic access to timely information is the greatest. Researchers in these fields feel that they can no longer wait for the radical overhaul of library organization which is necessary to meet their pressing, insatiable needs. The overwhelming sentiment among scientists today seems to be that they must totally bypass the existing library organization because it is too involved with its own difficult problems.

On the other hand, faculty in the humanistic and social sciences disciplines do not seem to sense an urgency to share resources on a broad, impersonal basis, such as through library networks. This is not because their scholarship lacks sophistication, but because there are several factors which, taken as a whole, create chaotic work situations.

First, despite the ultra-modernization of Japanese urban culture, the Japanese have not given up their traditional emphasis and reliance on personal contacts. It must be appreciated that at all levels of Japanese society, there exists a strong network of personal associations which might be called the "face machine," a kind of "benign cronyism"; in other words, one does personal favors for those he knows. Although pervasive, the "machine" does not have any negative connotations. Unquestionably, the "face machine" is the predominant and preferred entrée or approach to virtually everyone everywhere in Japan.

Thus, scholars who are formally compartmentalized in departments and institutions, do, in fact, have fairly comprehensive informal channels to allow them to function effectively. For example, an acquaintance of mine was searching for a report of a small political group published during the war. Searches over several months in institutions and in major libraries, including the National Diet library, failed to turn up a copy. He then asked several associates in the field who, in turn, pinpointed the person most likely to have this information. Using personal contacts, my acquaintance found the book he needed in a fraction of the time it took for him to search for it at various libraries. As it turned out, the book belonged to a library attached to a major university, but its union catalog did not even record the title. Even if the title had been in the library catalog, the librarian would probably not have known exactly where the book was; and even if he had found the book's location, he, as an "outsider," could not have borrowed it. But by recourse to the "face machine," within a few days he could borrow for a month a book belonging to another institution through a person he had never met before.

Another feature of this network is that it opens locked doors. One characteristic aspect of Japanese society is that common access to materials and services is often restricted, but one can be sure that most rules and restrictions can be circumvented if one has an appropriate introduction or connection commensurate with the level of restrictions to be broken or service desired.

Access to the Japanese National Archives may serve as an example. I know
of three people who went to the Archives to examine a certain set of wartime
documents which earlier had been returned from the U. S. The first researcher
merely had a perfunctory letter from a university stating something to the
effect that "the bearer of this letter is affiliated with university "X" and
any service rendered to him will be appreciated." He was told that the
documents in question were restricted and could not be seen. The second,
a young scholar, was able to use the name of another well-known scholar who
was known to the Archives staff. After considerable resistance, he was
told that if he could identify specific pages of the documents he needed,
they would copy them for him. However, the copied pages he received had all
personal names deleted because the persons involved were still alive,
despite the fact that copies of those documents were freely accessible in
the United States. Later I discovered that several Japanese scholars
have microfilm collections of the very same documents because they feared
that if these important and still sensitive documents were held only by the
Japanese Archives, they would not be made available to scholars. The third
scholar was well connected with a government office, and with a telephone
call from the proper official, he was permitted to see whatever documents
he wished.

These examples illustrate how Japanese scholars have been able to cope with
problems arising from the lack of rational, systematized access to research
information and resources. Another factor to be considered in regard to the
academic library is the way in which scholars approach research.

Comparison of the research methods of Japanese scholars and their American
counterparts shows why the academic middleman, the librarian, seems superflu­ous in Japan, but necessary in the United States. The American scholar
begins research with a general survey of a given field and determines which
aspect has yet to be researched. Within a given topic, he raises specific
issues, problems, and questions. He then attempts to answer the questions,
or advocates a position on the issue, or analyzes the problem by finding
supporting documents or evidence. This research product is ultimately
judged on the significance of the questions posed or the problems raised,
how well the analyses are documented and supported. The emphasis here is
on well-documented analysis and on the originality and importance of the
statement.

On the other hand, it can be said that the Japanese scholar attempts to
grasp the whole or the macrocosm of a given subject by gathering and ab­
sorbing all the existing literature which bears on matters within the
subject boundaries and tries to establish the interrelationship of one
factor, the then next factor, and so on, to the larger whole, as if the
task was to piece together a picture puzzle. Consequently, scholarly
output in Japan tends to be more descriptive than analytical. A scholarly
contribution in Japan is often judged by the work's total comprehension
of matters within the subject boundaries rather than on the originality
of his statement.

American scholars frequently criticize the works of their Japanese
counterparts, claiming that most Japanese scholarship does not raise
significant questions, analyze problems, or make any new statements.
On the other hand, a characteristic reaction of Japanese scholars to
American research about Japan seems to be that they too often collect information without establishing the proper ideological framework or context, and manipulate the facts to support their theses. Some Japanese scholars maintain that the relative significance of materials must be established on the basis of a scholarly consensus before materials are considered worthwhile to support an individual scholar's point of view.

The difference in research attitudes in itself is not germane to my paper except to point out that in the Japanese structure, the Japanese scholar prefers to assemble and control research materials personally through the institution of Kenkyushitsu (research office) and consequently, the middle-man, i.e., the librarian, is essentially superfluous. In contrast, the American researcher welcomes the convenience of having his "leg work" research done by librarians so that he can concentrate on the "creative" aspect of scholarly research.

**College Librarians**

Japanese faculty members identify the core problem of the university library to be the general lack of competent library staff. The staff, on the other hand, believes the root of the problem to be the lack of recognized professional status. There are a number of library organizations in Japan, but apparently no distinct leadership exists to indicate positive direction for the profession as a whole. Everyone seems to be waiting for someone, mainly the government, to do something. For the amount of verbiage produced in the past twenty years by librarians calling for changes has, unfortunately, produced precious little result for Japanese librarians.

There are impressive individuals among librarians. Many, who with energy, dedication, and a personal flair, have managed in the face of tremendous handicaps to take control of difficult conditions and have produced workable solutions to immediate problems. Yet it is disappointing that, despite so many dynamic individuals among them, Japanese librarians have never transcended their specific individual jobs to foster a broader professional awareness.

There are 4,082 people employed in college or university libraries who are qualified either as librarians or as assistant librarians. To qualify oneself as a librarian, a person attends a two-month summer course in library science which awards the required 19 credit units, or one can complete an equivalent correspondence course. Other options are to take the prescribed courses leading to a certificate (from junior college) of a BA, MA, or Ph. D. from five universities: Keio University, Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Toyo University, and Hiroshima University. Keio University has the only full-fledged library science degree program for BA, MA, and Ph. D. Most other institutions offer an option of writing a thesis or dissertation on library science in their education department. The vast majority of Japanese librarians become qualified by way of either a summer course or through in-house programs intended to provide training for newly hired staff and certification for those who want to get a competitive edge in the job market, but not necessarily to get a job in the library profession. These library education programs are not monitored by anyone as to the quality of instruction or course content. Consequently, the entire librarian certification process leaves much to be desired.
On the other hand, there is a basic assumption in Japan that library work is clerical in nature, and most libraries do not have position classifications to distinguish library staff from clerks in administrative offices. Theoretically, both are considered interchangeable. Furthermore, most libraries do not have job descriptions for librarians or manuals of library procedures. The incumbent in a given position knows the perimeters of his responsibilities and passes the knowledge on to his successor. Seeing the milieu of academic librarians in general, it is difficult to accept the librarian's often heard argument that, since librarians in most advanced countries are recognized and given professional or academic status, the librarians in Japan should be given similar status. I have observed no evidence that the jobs of librarians have been objectively analyzed.

Of the 621 college libraries in Japan, all directors are faculty members and nonlibrarians. Of the 621 libraries, only 23 private colleges have full-time library directors. These directors are usually appointed for two to three years from among the senior faculty; by rule, they must serve a full-time directorship, but in reality they rarely do, as can be seen from the figures provided above. They are often complete novices to library management beyond their association with their own departmental collection. They are part-time and are supposed to devise solutions to the immense problems of library management.

Some of these directors take no interest in the library and rarely appear in the library, while some take too much interest in the working of the library, and being inexperienced, they become disruptive. Fortunately, there are also many who seem to take a genuine interest in the overall problem of the library and eventually become effective leaders within their respective libraries and in representing the library profession to the national government to affect policy changes for the library.

**Conclusion**

Japanese libraries exist, of course, in a context quite different from ours, and Japanese librarianship is haphazardly practiced. While there are strong winds of change, the "face machine" is still the *sine qua non* for the best treatment in the Japanese library system. Research methods also differ, noticeably that of the Japanese institution of Kenkyushitsu, which is fundamentally a private affair involving a select few to gather and control materials solely for their own use.

While there are many highly competent individual librarians, Japanese librarianship as a systematized career is still in its embryonic stage and can expect to endure further growing pains. But, as much else in Japan, the mixture of the traditional (i.e., the "face machine") and the modern (i.e., the expanding and upgrading of library management and the necessary technology) seem destined to co-exist, forming a unique system of access to academic information and resources.