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The 2005 Tokyo International Book Fair

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One of the largest publishing trade fairs in Asia and the largest in Japan, the 12th Tokyo International Book Fair (東京国際ブックフェア, http://www.bookfair.jp), was held at the Tokyo International Exhibition Center, commonly known as “Tokyo Big Sight” (東京ビッグサイト), July 7-10, 2005. I attended the 2005 fair in order to look at the variety, quantity and formats of the latest public and academic publications in Japan, which are often hard to assess from the catalogs, and to learn about the Japanese book market first hand.

Site of the Fair

The Tokyo Big Sight, opened in April 1996, is Japan’s largest exhibition and convention center. The distinctive building, located close to the Odaiba business and entertainment district of Tokyo, has a waterfront architectural design with opaque colors blending in with the light-blue background of Tokyo Bay and its skyline. It has a total floor area of 230,873 square meters, of which 80,660 are devoted to indoor exhibition. The center is made up of three main areas: the West Hall, the East Hall, and the Conference Tower, along with rooftop and outdoor exhibition spaces. The postmodern Conference Tower is built with four interlocking inverted pyramids. The main exhibition halls are located in the West Hall and the East Hall. Various restaurants, coffee shops, and snack facilities are conveniently located along the hallway to the Conference Tower.

Exhibits

The Tokyo International Book Fair (TIBF) is both a trade event and a book sales promotional fair for publishers, importers, wholesalers, bookstores, literary agents, publishing professionals, and the general public. In recent years, the annual fair has focused on copyright trade and service for general readers. According to the official statistics, this year’s TIBF was the biggest ever. In addition to regular visitors, a total of 48,412 publishing-and-trade-related people registered to visit displays of 638 exhibitors from 28 countries and regions. It was reported that the participation of overseas publishers this year doubled from the past exhibit, with strong growth from Europe, Southeast Asia, and China. I was one among 1,030 registered overseas visitors.

TIBF consisted of the following special fairs: Natural Sciences Book Fair, Humanities & Social Sciences Book Fair, Children’s Book Fair, Editorial Production Fair, Digital Publishing Fair, and Educational Book & Software Fair. An additional attraction was that TIBF teamed up with two other trade-related events: the 16th International Stationery & Office Products Fair (国際文具紙製品展) and the 3rd International Office Machines & Equipment Expo (国際オフィス機器展). These two exhibits were held in the East Hall, while TIBF was held in the West Hall.

The first two days of the Fair were open only to the trade industries, such as publishing companies, bookstores, and education-related organizations. The exhibition was moderately crowded and relatively uneventful, and the display of books and materials looked small and neat. There were nicely arranged desks and chairs in each booth, and many participants were engaged in business interviews or private talks. The atmosphere was professional, and the site offered an effective and open venue for new and non-local publishers to be introduced to the Japanese book market. I chatted with Philippe Werck, a publisher from Belgium. He told me that this was the second time that his company participated in the Fair, and he
thought that any company with an interest in the Japan market has to exhibit at TIBF. I made similar
observations. The publishers treated me courteously upon hearing that I came all the way from the U.S. to
visit the fair. Later on I found that there is actually a law supporting cultural exchanges such as book fairs.
It is named the “Law to Promote the Culture of the Written Word (文字・活字文化振興法),” and it was
enacted in July 2005.

Public Fair

TIBF was open to the general public on the weekend. As if touched by a magic wand, the convention halls
were dramatically transformed overnight. The number of books on display at least quadrupled. I was
surprised to find crowds on the train serving the convention area, and crowds waiting in lines to purchase
tickets inside the convention center. The general public paid an admission fee of $12 (Y1200) for the two-
day fair. The special TIBF promotional editions of Bunkatsushin [Book Business] 文化通信 and Shūkan
dokushojin [Weekly Reader] 週刊読書人 were distributed free of charge.

Parents brought their children on a weekend outing to the safe and pleasing convention site, and book and
software lovers looked for new materials and trends in the publishing business. In Japan, where books are
usually sold at a fixed price, the 20-30% discounts offered by publishers at the fair were greatly welcomed.
The publications on display included CDs, DVDs, electronic resources, software, maps, and teaching
materials as well as books. For an annual market of 77,000 titles and 4,500 magazines, the fair is an
effective venue for the promotion of new titles and the introduction of new products.

Digital publishing in Japan has been expanding in recent years. There was strong promotion for CD-ROM
products, and it seemed to me that people are now more interested in the e-books read on cellular phones
(携帯電話) than in the displays of the various electronic book services, of which large companies and
organizations are the target customers. Cellular phones now offer a greater variety of features, such as
games, comic magazines, dictionaries, music, etc. Moreover, they have become easier to operate and
feature ultra-high-density screens. Pre-school story books and comics are especially popular.

The fair also provided extensive programs of cultural forums and promotional activities for new
publications and authors’ appearances. For example, talk shows were held at the booth of the Yomiuri
Shibun 読売新聞 and Nippon Television Network (NTV), featuring Mariko Koike 小池真理子 and Asato Izumi
泉麻人 on Saturday, and Yuzuki Murō 室井佑月 and Sawako Agawa 阿川佐和子 on Sunday. Bungei Shunjū 文
芸春秋 set up large photo displays and TV interviews for winners of the Naoki-shō 直木賞 and Akutagawa-
shō 芥川賞. The glittering neon signs of each booth created an atmosphere similar to that of a carnival.
There were Disney characters such as Mickey Mouse roaming about to attract the attention of young
readers, pretty women in short space suits advertised either for new manga titles or for digital products,
and clerks dressed in hanten 半天, a kimono-style jacket, called on visitors to stop by their booths.

Germany, the guest of honor this year, was stationed close to the center of the fair, and featured an
exhibit called “Year of Germany in Japan.” This was an occasion for the country to advertise the 2006
World Cup. The staff of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association distributed Federation of
International Football Association (FIFA) booklets and posters related to soccer games, competition sites,
and hotel accommodations.

2 Kiyota, Yoshiaki. “The Law to Promote the Culture of the Written Word.” A section in Asia-Pacific Cooperative Programme in
enacted on July 22, 2005. One of its goals is the promotion of publishing activities related to written word.

3 According to Shuppan nyusu [2039 (May 2005): 8], in 2004, 77,031 new books were published, which reflects a slight increase of 1.9%
over 2003; in 2004, there were 4,549 magazines on the market.
Led by China Universal Press & Publications Co., seventeen Chinese publishers, including Beijing Municipal Bureau of Press and Publication, participated in TIBF. Most of the display books were dictionaries of various kinds, children’s books, music and art books, and maps. To my surprise, about half of their exhibits disappeared from the shelves on the first public-open day. This was probably due to Japan’s increasing interest in China, and perhaps also to the fact that they didn’t bring enough publication samples to the fair. South Korean publishers were led by the Korean Printers Association and the Korean Publishers Association. Proud of its tradition, the Korean Printers Association set up a movable metal printer on site and distributed free prints of classical texts on oriental paper. This ingenious marketing strategy attracted many visitors.

In the bargain corner, Thomson Gale and the Japan Association of International Publications jointly hosted a very large sale of discount and second-hand Western (mainly English) books. It attracted an enthusiastic crowd throughout the fair.

Outlook for publishing industry in Japan

When I talked to the publishing staff, most of them anticipated a transitional phase, and thought that the market of the publishing trade in Japan is on the decline. In fact, there was a continuous decline of book sales from 1997 to 2004. A 5.9% increase of book sales presumably occurred in 2004, but newly released statistics for 2005 show a 10.4% decrease of book sales and a 3.1% decrease of magazine sales. There are worries about the diminishing interest in books among the younger generation of readers in the age of computer games, electronics, and cellular phones. Because of the digital revolution, the number of existing publishing companies in 2004 was at a ten-year low. Since the formats of books are no longer limited to print and microform, and the storage and presentation of digital books are improving rapidly, the publishing trade will continue to face new challenges. To safeguard its future, the publishing industry may need to lobby for the support of the government under the provisions offered by the “Law to Promote the Culture of the Written Word.”

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5 According to Shuppan Nippon [2039 (May 2005): 10], there were 4,260 publishing companies in Japan in 2004 compared with 4,309 in 1990.