

The Library Profession under Pressure in Japan: Change in the Construction State

Andreas Vårheim, University of Tromsø, Norway

Eisaku Ide, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan

Moriano Iju, Yokohama National University, Japan

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Abstract: In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, with increasing unemployment, the small effects of economic stimulus packages and debt-ridden economies with deflationary tendencies, many economists see the downward economic trajectory of Japan as a possible route for the rest of the advanced OECD economies. In this context, the way Japanese public library services are affected by the “hard times” is of interest regarding prospective developments in public libraries in the OECD countries outside Japan as well as the design of policies and strategies for maintaining high quality library services in a prolonged economic downturn.

From 1955 until the late 1990s, statistics show that Japanese public libraries grew in all relevant aspects in terms of the number of service points, users, materials, circulation and librarians. In 1997, this situation changed. The number of permanently employed

personnel declined, and funds for materials shrank, while the number of libraries, librarians, and users still grew at a high pace. From interviews with librarians, library directors, and leading officials at prefectural and ministerial levels, it is evident that these changes were even more dramatic than the statistics reveal.

The paper describes these developments focusing on the decline of the library profession. Secondly, tentative explanations for the changes relating to the Japanese political economy are discussed. Hypotheses regarding both Japan specific policies and institutions, and imported neo-liberal policies and institutions are put forward.

KEYWORDS: Japanese public libraries; Public libraries; Library profession, Japanese library development; Library political economy.

INTRODUCTION

Since the burst of what is known as the “Bubble economy” in the early 1990's, the Japanese economy has mostly experienced very low growth despite numerous stimulus packages, the lowest income taxes among the OECD countries, a 5 percent consumption tax (equivalent to sales tax or value added tax), and interest rates around 1 percent or less.

Numerous roads, along with city halls, gymnasiums, and other infrastructures, including library buildings, have been built to stimulate the sluggish economy. This policy of public works is also an alternative way of providing social welfare compared to welfare state systems and is one pillar of the Japanese political economy (Estevez-Abe, 2008; Park, 2011). Thus, Japan has been labeled a “construction state” as opposed to a “welfare state.” Additionally, the second pillar of the Japanese model is that welfare services, health insurance, pensions, and even schools, are provided by employers. Therefore, in a construction state, the building of infrastructure has meant that employers could continue providing welfare services to and employing permanent employees. With

the declining economy, employers had become increasingly less willing to do this and started hiring temporary workers for whom welfare obligations were not compulsory. While there has been an increase in the construction of new library buildings, spending for permanently employed librarians has sharply declined. Temporary staff earn half the salary of permanent staff with the same qualifications and keep the same low salary throughout the contract period regardless of seniority. One librarian interviewed had been a temporary worker for 20 years (since her local library opened).

This paper describes aspects of the development of the political economy of Japanese public libraries since the 1990s focusing upon the development of the library profession. The study is based upon official statistics and interviews with personnel throughout the Japanese library sector, ranging from top officials in the ministry in Tokyo to librarians temporarily employed in Tottori prefecture. Second, this paper considers whether these developments are mostly the result of a stagnating economy, the introduction of neo-liberalist ideas, or Japan-specific

factors grounded in the institutions of Japanese government, the Japanese library system and Japanese society.

BACKGROUND: PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN JAPAN

Japanese public libraries can be traced back to before the Meiji reforms of Japanese society and of the government that put the country on the path to industrialization in 1868 (Nagata, 2007). The literacy rate was estimated to be 40 percent in 1868 (“Japanese Education and Literacy,” 2011). In the 1890s, a public library system (in the modern sense) was developed, and public libraries were spread nationwide. The “Ordinance of Library Government Personnel” was implemented in 1899. The Japan Library Association was established in 1892, held its first national conference in 1906, published its first journal in 1907, and in 1914, formed a committee to recommend literature for public libraries (Welch, 1976: 162–163). In many ways, the government was instrumental in this process and saw public libraries as way of containing left-wing

ideology from spreading through private reading groups set up by anarchists and socialists (Domier, 2007).

Gradually, before World War II, the Japanese state became more nationalistic and militaristic. This changed the role of public libraries. At first, public libraries were left alone. Compared with schools, public libraries were not considered important to the modernization of Japan. This was reflected in the low levels of funding allocated to libraries. Still, the number of libraries increased greatly. Also, entrance fees and book rental fees were charged (Keeney, 1948: 20). Moreover, censorship was in place from the beginning, and the police regularly examined patrons' borrowing slips and arrested patrons suspected of crime (Domier, 2007). Censorship became more heavy handed during the 1920s, and libraries were expected to provide patrons with ideological guidance and be more "effective" social education institutions in helping the government control youth as well as adults. Amended library legislation specified that "libraries may serve as supplemental facilities for social education" (Domier, 2007: 558). Eventually, during WWII, reading

became part of the war effort, and certain texts were mandated to be read by all citizens. Many not-so-willing librarians, along with teachers, gave reading guidance in small groups to ensure that the government message would be received as intended for future soldiers and supervisors of inhabitants in occupied territories.

After WWII, the U.S. administration in Japan – General Headquarters/Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (GHQ/SCAP) – implemented a new library law in 1950 that reorganized and modeled the public library system after California, instituting such changes as forbidding fees of any kind (Keeney, 1948). An interesting continuity, however, is that in the library legislation of 1950, public libraries were viewed as institutions for social education (*The Statute Book on Social Education*, 2009). This viewpoint persists today.

Until the late 1960s, the number of libraries increased at a slow pace despite the progressive library law (figure 1). The number of qualified librarians grew faster and had doubled by 1960 compared to 1955, but this was from the low level of 401 to 911 (figure 2). Shelves

were gradually opened, especially in the late 1960s. In these years, the number of registered users and the number of books borrowed increased dramatically (Kawasaki et al., 1996).

It is widely claimed that a report from the Japan Library Association published in 1963 was instrumental in bringing about the changes (Kawasaki et al., 1996; Koizumi et al., 2008; Nagata, 2007). The "Report on Management of Public Libraries in Medium and Small Cities" gave many recommendations for the management of public libraries. In this context, it suffices to mention the criticism of library management for devoting too much time and energy to the administration and organization of materials and too little time and energy on users and the use of materials. The report's user-oriented focus was expressed in policy proposals for increasing the proportion of popular materials and for increasing circulation. The report and a high growth economy in which municipalities competed in establishing public libraries were the two main factors driving the library revolution. Earlier, libraries had been mostly places for quiet study for high school students

preparing for university entrance examinations.

METHOD AND DATA

The data analyzed are of two sources: government statistics and interviews with employees in the library sector. The interviews provided context for the quantitative data and elucidate possible causal mechanisms.

The source for the statistical data were the Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the data were retrieved from the Historical Statistics of Japan (<http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/chouki/26.htm>). Demographically speaking, the interviews were carried out in one small, one mid-sized, and one large (metropolitan) prefecture, as well as in Tokyo. On the national level, leading officials in the Social Education Division of the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and

Technology), and one leading official in the Japanese Library Association were interviewed. In the prefectures, officials in Social Education departments, and heads of prefectural libraries were interviewed. On the local level, city library directors, branch library heads and librarians were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in October 2009. Most interviews involved only one interviewee, while four interviews were conducted as group interviews where mostly two three informants participated. In total, 19 people participated. One author took part in all interviews, and there was always one Japanese speaking interviewer or one Japanese-English language interpreter present.

CHANGES IN LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT FROM 1997

In the late 1960s, Japanese public libraries were expanding rapidly in every respect. Growth continued at the same pace throughout the

sluggish economy from 1991 until 1997. From 1997, a complex pattern of changes emerged.

The number of libraries increased 161% (from 917 to 2,396) from 1971 until 1996ⁱ (figure 1; table 1).

Figure 1 here

In the same period, the total number of employees in public libraries grew from 6,877 to 22,057, representing a 221% increase (table 1; figure 2). The group of qualified librarians increased by 440% during these years, from 1,954 to 8,602. The number of permanently employed staff increased by 170%. Non-permanent personnel, contractual or temporary labor expanded from 593ⁱⁱ to 5,021 persons, a 798% increase (table1; figure 2).

Figure 2 here

Figure 3 here

Turning to library use, (table 1; figure 3), the period between 1970 and 1997 also was characterized by expansion. Registered users increased by 1,723%, from under 2 million in 1971 to more than 31 million in 1996.

Figure 4 here

Book borrowing increased from below 53 million copies in 1975ⁱⁱⁱ to approximately 278 million copies in 1996, an increase of 617% (table 1; figure 6). 2.6 million books were bought in 1971 compared to 19 million copies in 1996, an increase of 632%.

Statistics are available for every three years plus the previous fiscal year of the statistical report. Therefore, in order to describe changes from 1997 and later, and since data for 1998 is lacking, data from 1999 and onwards must be used to give the best picture. In the period following 1997, a depiction of reduced growth and decline is

found, as shown in Table 1^{iv}. From 1999 to 2005, the number of libraries increased 15%, and the total number of employees grew by 23%. The increase for librarians was 30%; the number of permanently employed personnel decreased by 9.4%, and the number of temporary employees grew by 88% between 1999 and 2005. Registered users increased by 21%, books bought decreased by 9.7%, and the circulation of books grew by 21%.

Table 1 here

Comparing years immediately before and after 1997 gives a clear impression of how dramatic the changes were. On every variable between 1999 and 2006, there was a lower growth rate, and in some instances, such as the case of book buying and permanent employment, growth was negative.

ELABORATING CHANGE

Comparing the changes of the variables describing the development of Japanese public libraries in the period before and after 1997, we see clear differences between the developments before and after this watershed year of Japanese library development. What can explain these developments?

To answer this question, in addition to the material presented so far, officials in the Japanese library sector have been interviewed. In the interviews, the picture of changing employment patterns, involving the sharp increase in temporary workers after 1997, is confirmed and exemplified. Before 1997, few library employees were temporary workers.

A typical example is a public library branch in the mid-sized city of Shizuoka with 724,000 inhabitants. This library has 25 employees. Four are permanently employed, while 21 are temporary workers employed on five-year contracts. Of the four regular workers, two are qualified librarians, while all of the 21 temporary workers are qualified librarians.

In smaller cities, the proportion of unqualified temporal workers is higher, but still small. Temporarily employed librarians have to leave the library at the end of the five-year contract period and can only be re-employed if their application is successful. The salary is less than half of the salary of permanently employed workers and stays the same for the duration of contract period. Since 2005, no permanent workers have been employed in this library. Every year, 10,000 students qualify as librarians, while only about 30 permanent positions for librarians are vacant each year in all of Japan (Interview in the Japan Library Association (JLA)). The downturn for permanent employees for libraries started in 1997 and accelerated after 2000. In addition to an increasing number of temporary employees, privatization of library services in the form of outsourcing was introduced. However, outsourcing has not been used very much. Fewer than 100 libraries have been fully outsourced, and only about 1000 libraries have introduced partial outsourcing. Some directors maintain that the budget for materials is still stable, while the budget for hiring people is not (Interviews in Chiba prefecture).

The interviewees explained the changing employment patterns with budgetary restrictions implemented mainly after the 1997 Asian Crisis. As we have seen, temporary labor is significantly cheaper. Decentralization reforms of local governments from 2001 also made it possible for different prefectures and cities to implement their own policies. Since 2003, privatization was added as a policy option through the so-called Koizumi reforms - named after the prime minister at the time (Interview in the MEXT). Decentralization has led to privatization in relatively few prefectures, while the hiring of temporary workers occurred in all the prefectures and cities where interviews have been conducted. Compared to other sectors, privatization in public libraries has been limited (Interview Shizouka, Interview JLA). While employment patterns have changed completely in the library sector and the rest of Japanese society, public works spending on new library buildings has continued through the 1990s and the 2000s (Interview JLA).

DISCUSSION

On the basis of the statistics presented and the interviews, three hypotheses concerning the driving forces behind the development of Japanese public libraries will be discussed.

First, it is maintained that the stagnating economy that began in 1991 and was worsened by the Asian economic crisis of 1997 necessitated public sector cuts. The government stimulated the economy by cutting taxes from an already low level of taxation and did not increase the consumption tax rate above 5 percent. In addition, large public works programs were implemented, including the continuation of library building programs through the 1990s. The length of the crisis, exacerbated in 1997, meant that the government could no longer afford increasing the national debt at the same rate, thus implementing cuts in the public sector in general, including public libraries.

Second, the Japanese crisis, according to this hypothesis, is the

result of Japanese corporate capitalism, of banks, industry, and bureaucratsexchanging favors for too long (Vogel, 2006). That the crisis of the 1990s coincided with a boom in the U.S. economy “proved” that the Japanese economic model of coordinated capitalism was inferior to the liberal market model. The proposed solution for the ailing economy was market-based reform for both the private and public sectors. This was the basis for the Koizumi-era liberal market reforms. The change towards a workforce consisting of more and more non-permanent workers was both a cost-cutting device and a typical liberal market economy reform that sought to de-specialize workers and make the economy more flexible. As stated earlier, there have also been attempts at outsourcing library services. However, outsourcing has only been implemented in a few libraries.

A third explanation for the abrupt and large changes in the employment patterns in the public library sector could be the weak nature of the library profession in Japan. Librarians are not really regarded as belonging to a profession or as specialists by most people

(Interviews with library directors and the Japan Library Association). In the libraries visited, librarians are not hired in permanent positions anymore. This equates to a very low salary regardless of education and seniority. Most employees are hired on short-term contracts.

Another feature of the Japanese system of public employment, strongly weakening the position of professionals, is that non-specialist public employees are rotated between government services at certain intervals (Interview Japan Library Association). This means that non-professionals are hired in libraries as permanent non-professional workers, but after for example three years they will leave for another local government service. In other words, incentives for specializing are low. Not all local governments use this rotation system. However, it is a widely adapted system, and an institution existing since WW2. and as such a system that it is not a phenomenon of the 1990s. The Japanese library profession has always been weak, but has even from this low standing been severely weakened from the late 1990s.

Library education is rudimentary and consists of short courses for

both university graduates and people with more than three years work experience in a library (Interview Japan Library Association).

In sum, the most fruitful hypothesis for explaining change in Japanese public libraries concerning employment patterns is the “economic necessity” hypothesis. Change is the product of severe budget restrictions for the prefectures and cities resulting from the prolonged economic downturn. The employment reforms can be seen as liberal market reforms combined with the Japanese standard policies of public works, which are typical Japanese coordinated capitalism reforms. Concerning the increase in library employment, the policy is by no means a clear cut liberal market library policy; rather, it is more like a hybrid variety lying somewhere between the liberal market model and the old Japanese coordinated capitalism model. The fact that the outsourcing of library services has been limited supports this. The building of new libraries and the hiring of more librarians are typical products of the Japanese “construction state” way of responding to

economic crisis. Still, the decrease in the number permanent workers in the library workforce can be said to be a liberal market trait.

However, notwithstanding numerous new library buildings, Japanese library patrons still have the fewest library service points per capita of any OECD country but lend the most books per service point (Parker, 2006). While the Japanese, according to our interviewees, do not value the skills of librarians, the building of new libraries and the hiring of temporary labor is one way of answering the needs of Japanese users. Thus, the decrease in the number of permanent workers in the library workforce and the simultaneous increase in library use and the number of libraries is not the worst case scenario for Japanese library users and the Japanese library sector. Yet, in the long run, a decline in recruitment to the library profession can be expected, and a subsequent erosion of the quality of services will likely follow.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Because of the way MEXT chooses to present library statistics, figures for 1996 have been used instead of 1997.
2. The statistic for 1971 statistic could not be found; the one for 1975 is used instead.
3. Figures for 1971 were not available.
4. Figures for the years after 2005 are only available for a few variables and will not be presented here, but for the available figures, the trend described continues.

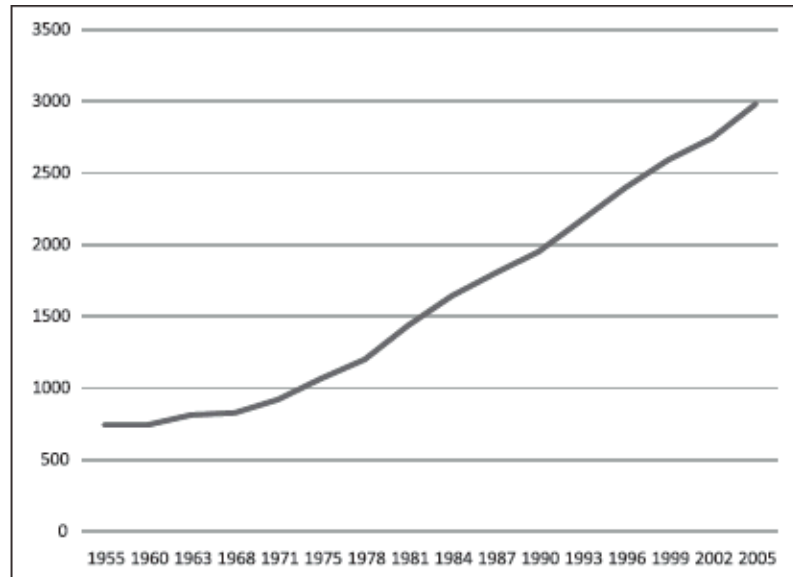


Figure 1. Public libraries 1955–2005.

Source: Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

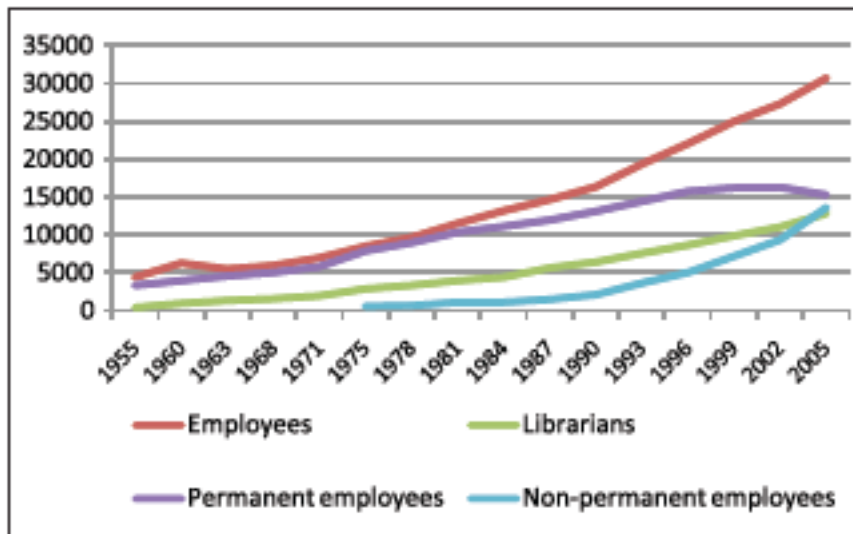


Figure 2. Employment in Japanese public libraries 1955–2005.
Source: Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

Table 1. Change in public libraries by time period: Percentages.

	1971–1996	1984–1990	1990–1996	1999–2006
Libraries	161	19	23	15
Employees	221	24	35	23
Librarians	340	46	34	30
Permanent employees	170	18	20	-9.4
Non-permanent employees	798	95	138	88
Users	1723	55	95	21
Circulation	717	36	63	21
Book acquisition	632	35	26	-9.7

Source: Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

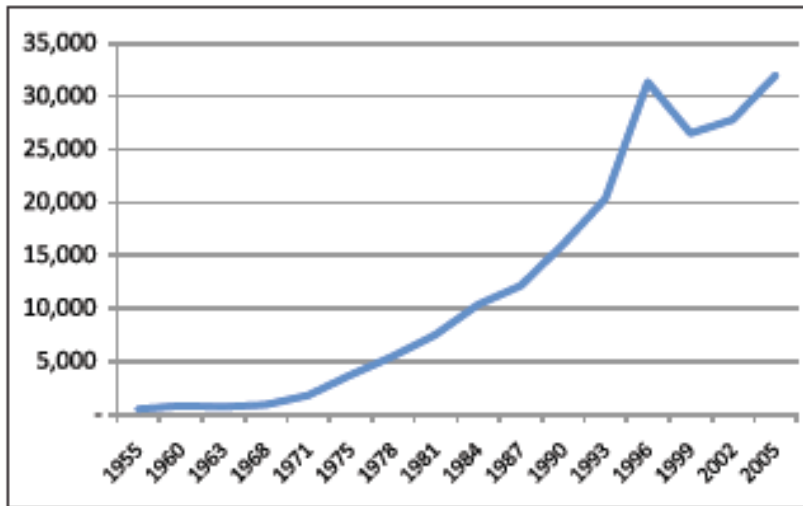


Figure 3. Users registered (000's) 1955–2005.

Source: Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

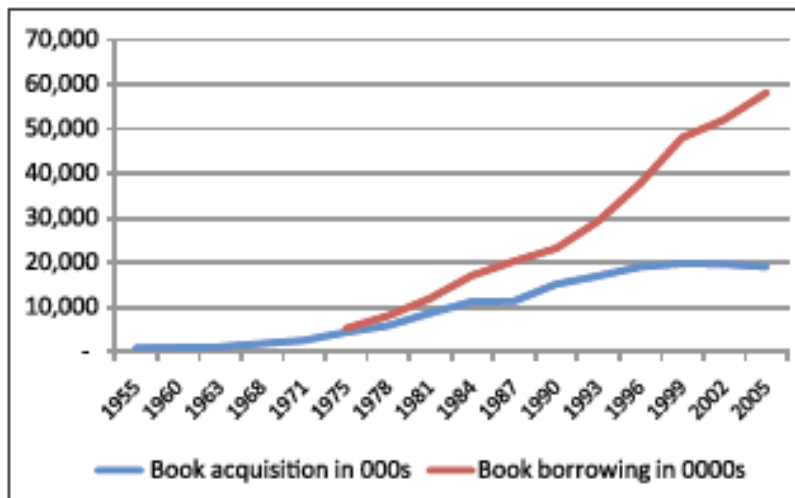


Figure 4. Book borrowing and book acquisition 1955–2005.

Source: Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

ⁱ Because of the way MEXT chooses to present library statistics figures for 1996 have been used instead of 1997.

ⁱⁱ The statistic for 1971 statistic could not be found; the one for 1975 is used instead.

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