

Challenges Facing Public Libraries in Japan

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe public libraries in Japan, for which purpose I discuss their historical background, status quo and issues. Firstly, the historical background is examined to determine a prototype of the public library. Books and materials have been stored and organized for circulation for hundreds of years; many of these processes have been recorded and published to promote library service establishment. Secondly, the status quo of public libraries and its background are investigated. When household income increased twofold in the 1970s, Japan's national economy promoted the development of libraries. Until the mid-1990s, grants were offered to cities and towns that could afford libraries, although they remained unaffordable for many rural towns. However, it eventually became difficult to promote building libraries or even to maintain them afterwards. In conclusion, I note several issues affecting public libraries in Japan.

1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Japan Library Association (JLA) was founded in 1892, and it is the third oldest library association in the world. Its Library Journal, which has succeeded for more than a century, was first issued in 1907. In 1963, the JLA issued Public Library Management in Small and Middle Scale Cities and Towns, which emphasized that giving access to books or information is the most important role of public libraries and that more accessible libraries are more important than those of large scale (such as prefectural ones). Libraries of Citizens described experiences of creating library services and insisted on the importance of three points: lending service, children's service and whole area service²). The book also acted as a guideline for those who wanted libraries in their own cities. Due to national economic growth, libraries were built rapidly from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, when the working population began to decrease.

2 STATUS QUO

Library law was enforced in 1950 under the current constitution and was strongly influenced by that of the United States. Many types of services were detailed within; however, most libraries did not implement all of them immediately. The law notes that libraries are not obligatory

(almost 5 percent of the population lives in cities or towns without libraries) and services are free of charge. The preparation systems for librarians and assistant librarians are also established; the law indicates that qualification is not necessary for them to work in libraries. The standard of library establishment and management (Roles and Objectives of Public Libraries, JLA, 2004) is also prescribed to guide those in charge. The cooperation of libraries with related institutions facilitates partnerships. Collecting publications of national and local governments

Roles and Objectives of Public Libraries was published by the JLA in 1989 and revised in 2004 and 2009. It says that public libraries provide information and ideas that are needed in daily life and work and facilitate research according to the interests of each patron. Public libraries are meant to provide access to various perspectives to help each patron form their own ideas, as well as offering information about local government, education, culture and industry. In addition to facilitating patrons' pursuits of individual interests for pleasure, public libraries also help children to form a reading habit, enjoy reading and strengthen their imagination. Moreover, public libraries contribute to their communities' enjoyment of cultural life by organizing lectures, book clubs, music/movie events and exhibitions for patrons.

There were 3,280 public libraries in Japan in 2017, which possessed about 443 million books (3.46 books per person) and there were about 691 million books (5.40 books per person) in circulation. They spent 15.6 billion yen per year (1,219 yen per person) for libraries, which included 2.9 billion yen for collections (227 yen per person) 5).

3 ISSUES

The amount of working individuals in Japan began to decrease in the mid-1990s. Since then, more money has been spent for social security and less subsidy has been granted to infrastructures like libraries. The aging population faces various issues, such as poverty concerns, and it has been increasingly difficult to sustain public library systems. Some policymakers adopted New Public Management, such as privatization or outsourcing, while others decreased full-time jobs. From 1998 to 2017, the number of libraries increased from 2,499 to 3,280 and the number of full-time jobs decreased from 15,429 to 10,443. The Non-Profitable Activities Promotion Law and the Private Finance Initiative Promotion Law were introduced in 1998 and 1999 respectively, although most local governments had not adopted private sectors. In 2003, the Local Autonomy Act was amended for local governments to adopt appointed management organization, and more governments adopted private sectors (although the adoption rate has not exceeded 20 percent).

The JLA compiled four points to consider regarding appointed management organization:

- consider the effectiveness of realizing the purpose of the facilities,
- consider libraries as educational institutions,

- consider libraries as institutions that require cooperation and partnership with related institutions and
- consider that it is difficult for libraries to increase profit (as the service is free)⁴).

The report insisted that the appointed management organization system did not suit library service and that local legislatures should avoid applying the system to libraries. National policy shifted slowly, as some cities or towns adopted the system and evaluated whether they wanted to alter the system every three or five years. One library director noted that it was difficult for appointed management organization to reflect new policies. When the Social Education Act was amended in 2008, the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology indicated that a long-term perspective was necessary for library service and that the system did not suit library service. The Minister of Internal Affairs and Communication (MIC) stated that improving service was more important than cost reduction and that stable employment had to be considered⁸). Since 2016, the MIC has promoted administrative reform through the leading runner approach, which meant that the more an administration apply appointed management organization system, the more grant it got next year, and initially tried to apply the approach to all reforms. But after ordinarily administrative process such as public opinion, the ministry exempted library service from its application.

Thus, the situation of public libraries in Japan is revealed. The number of working people has been decreasing since 1996, and that of elder people will be increasing until 2040-increasingly fewer working people will have to support increasingly more elder people. Local legislatures must reduce expenditure according to the speed of each demographic change. The appointed management organization system has been most readily adopted in the facility management and maintenance fields, such as in schools, hospitals, accommodations, gymnasiums, etc. Most librarians protested adopting the appointed management organization system, saying that it would become difficult for librarians to form their specialties because contracts only last three or five years. But fiscal difficulties have become more and more serious. We have to keep on trying to make the situation better.

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