



From Toshokan to Bunko: Rethinking the Public Libraries from the View of Japanese Grassroots Children’s Libraries

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The library connects us with the insight and knowledge, painfully extracted from Nature, of the greatest minds that ever were, with the best teachers, drawn from the entire planet and from all our history, to instruct us without tiring, and to inspire us to make our own contribution to the collective knowledge of the human species. I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture and our concern for the future can all be tested by how well we support our libraries.

– Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*¹

Introduction

LIBRARIES ARE CONSTANTLY perceived as “chambers” for knowledge accumulation; their contents – books – allow us to travel beyond the boundaries of time and space. Indeed, Carl Sagan was right to say that our understanding of humanity and the importance (or lack thereof) we attach to our libraries is reflected in whether and to what extent we support these institutions.

Known for its high level of literacy, Japanese society gave rise to the *bunko*, an indigenous, community-based library for children. Proliferating throughout the country, the *bunko* sought mainly to cultivate the reading habits of Japanese children. But apart from its pedagogical aims, the *bunko* also reveals community dynamics at work, as evidenced by “volunteerism” and the participation of “*bunko* women.”

The following study seeks to:

- Identify the antecedents of the *bunko* in Japanese history
- Describe the various activities and services the *bunko* offers
- Examine the nature of community participation, including volunteerism and the participation of *bunko* women
- Explore how the *bunko* responds to specific trends in Japanese society

Japan, the Community, and the Children’s Library Service: An Overview

The Community and the Library

Libraries do not exist in a vacuum. They are an integral part of a particular institution: universities, businesses, and governments, the last of which can put up public, national, or community libraries.

But what is a community? As William J. Martin (1989, 57) remarks in *Community Librarianship: Changing the Face of Public Libraries*, a community has no precise definition, but it is either a collective social unit or a process of social interrelationship. For this study, a *community* tangibly refers to the geopolitical unit with definite physical boundaries; in Japan, the community is the *machi* (街) or neighborhood, which is roughly equivalent to the Filipino *barangay*. Communities are as diverse as the

libraries found in them, but despite these variations, libraries exist mainly as instruments of education and enlightenment (Carnovsky and Martin 1943, iv).

Antecedents to the Bunko: The Japanese Public Library System

To fully understand the concept of the bunko, the study looks into the development of the Japanese public library system, as well as children's library services in the country.

The Japanese public library system traces its roots to the *Teikoku Toshokan*, otherwise known as The Imperial Library, which was established in 1872 and adapted from the British Museum by the Meiji leaders. Later on, The Imperial Library became one of the branches of the National Diet Library, built in 1948 and patterned after the US Library of Congress.

By the final year of the Meiji era in 1911, local authorities had created 541 public libraries that contained three million volumes (JLA International Exchange Committee 1980). However, only a few individuals used the libraries since they were perceived only as venues for book preservation and formal education. Ninety-eight percent of libraries were concentrated in formal education centers and outnumbered public libraries.

Much of the libraries and other institutions were destroyed during World War II. Under the Americans' postwar educational mission, however, there emerged an emphasis on book borrowing. Attention was given to public libraries, which received a boost from the economic growth of the 1950s.

In April 30, 1950, the Public Library Law was enacted; it stipulated that the public library was to be a tax-supported institution whose purpose is to provide books and materials to the public (JLA International Exchange Committee 1980). The national government also extended its support through local government units such as cities, villages, and towns, all of which shouldered the operating costs of local public libraries (Kawasaki, Yamaguchi, and Takashima 1996). Since then, April 30 has been commemorated in Japan as "Library Day" to encourage support and patronage of libraries.

Japanese public libraries are categorically classified as either prefectural or municipal. The former includes the key libraries in the forty-seven prefectures, while the latter comprises libraries established in the cities, towns, and villages.² Most are situated in larger cities, so rural areas generally lack library access.

In 2003, the Japan Library Association (JLA) published a report stating that there were 2,731 public libraries, 63 prefectural libraries, 1,636 city libraries, and 1,033 town libraries (JLA 2006) in Japan. Despite this, 40 percent of towns did not have libraries. The shortage can be traced to demographic and economic trends. A rapidly aging population and recent economic decline led the government to re-channel resources and address social system concerns, and to resort to private management methods.³ This included compelling some libraries to outsource their services, which then reduced the employment of library professionals. Financial constraints and personnel shortage thus resulted in the decrease of public libraries. This opened up a larger space for alternative institutions that can provide library services, one of which is the *bunko*.

Children's Libraries in Japan

The public library system of Japan developed special services to cover the varied needs of the populace. These included the book mobile, libraries for the handicapped, and the children's library, the last of which emerged after the Second World War. As early as 1959, 34.3 percent of public libraries had children's sections. By the end of 1979, it doubled to 67.5 percent (JLA International Exchange Committee 1980). From then on, much of the public libraries would have half of its collection devoted for children.

Through the initiative of the National Diet Library (NDL),⁴ the International Library of Children's Literature (ILCL) was established in January 1, 2000. It provides library services for children by conducting various programs that enhance reading and learning.⁵ It also collaborates with school libraries and related institutions to promote interlibrary loans

and reference services. Moreover, the ILCL reaches a wider number of readers.

Although the demand for these materials increased, the number of libraries that hold them remained inadequate. The bunko was established to address this matter. *Libraries in Japan*, published by Japan Library Association (1980) says that “through the efforts of mothers, several thousand small private collections have been opened to children.”

The Bunko Movement

The word “bunko” combines the two Kanji characters 文 and 庫, literally translated as literature and storehouse, respectively. Thus, the combined ideography would mean “storage of literature.”

Typically, a bunko is a room, a corner, or even just a shelf filled with children's books. Children can take as many books as they like from the shelf, read them in a nearby space, and return them right after.⁶ Some bunko allow children to bring books home and return them on their next visit.⁷

Furthermore, the bunko was initially classified according to its location. A bunko opened in a private house or home is known as the *katei* bunko or home library, while those situated elsewhere are known as *chiiki* bunko or community library (Takahashi 2006). However, recent trends have rendered such classification outdated. Some bunko were set up along staircases (*kaidan* bunko), while others were built inside a bus⁸ (bus bunko) or any place as long as the books could be stored and accessed freely.

The Five Attributes of the Bunko

In various texts, the bunko are described as indigenously Japanese; privately operated and funded; run by volunteers; and dedicated to providing materials and services to children (e.g. Takeuchi 1995, Yoshida 2004, Takahashi 2006, Cheunwattana 2008). With this string of descriptions, the author drew a relational diagram (Figure 1) of the five attributes of the bunko.

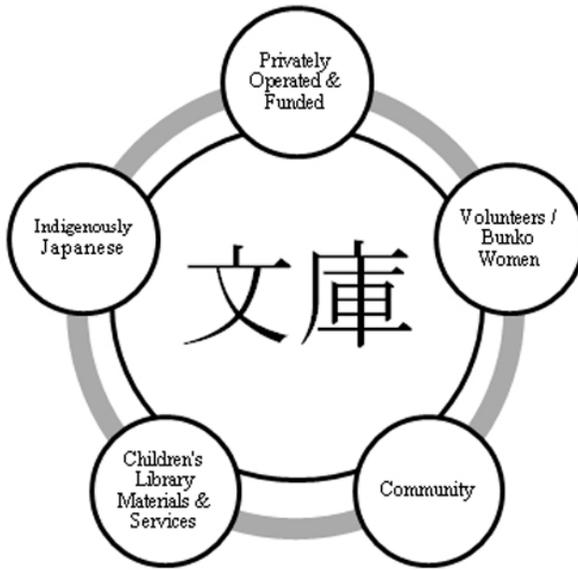


FIGURE 1
The Bunko and Its Key Attributes (Author's Own Diagram)

Indigenously Japanese

The bunko can be traced back to the Meiji era. Back then, men were generally in charge of a bunko's operation, which then applied only to libraries registered under imperial rule. The bunko was also established only by affluent members of Japanese society. Although many were not recorded, the oldest known bunko was built by Kasui Takenuki at his abode in Aoyama, Tokyo in 1906 (Takahashi 2006). A well-known children's writer, editor, and librarian, Takenuki filled his bunko with large collections of children's books.

Early bunko owners were mostly children's book writers and editors, including Hanako Muraoka, Tomiko Inui, Miyoko Matsutani, Teruo Teramura, and Momoko Ishii. The post-World War II period was another phase in the development of privately operated libraries, and it proved to be a huge influence on the bunko as we know it today. In 1951, Hanako

Muraoka opened the Michio Bunko (Yoshida 2004). Found mostly in private homes, these early post-WW2 bunkos were the home library type (*katei bunko*) where owners opened a section of the house for the books. In 1955, Shigeko Tsuchiya opened the Tsuchiya Jido Bunko (Tsuchiya Children's Library) in her home in Setagaya, Tokyo.⁹ Three years later, Momoko Ishii put up the Katsura Bunko in Suginami-ku. The Katsura Bunko, together with Tsuchiya's book *Kodomo no Toshokan (The Children's Library)*, became very instrumental in the proliferation of the bunko throughout Japan.

Momoko Ishii, a prominent writer, translator, and editor of children's books, is identified as a key figure in the existence and development of the bunko.¹⁰ In the mid-1950s, Ishii traveled to the United States and Europe to observe children's reading and book publishing services (Yoshida 2004). Obtaining a thorough understanding of the functions of the library, she opened her own *katei bunko*, known as Katsura Bunko, in 1958. It was initially intended as a venue to determine which materials would capture the children's reading interest (Takahashi 2006). At the Katsura Bunko, she learned firsthand the impact of providing children with easy access to books in a free and home-like atmosphere (Matsuoka 1994, 10). Children had the liberty to select the materials that interested them. As such, Ishii was able to identify the children's preferences.

Ishii continued to observe and note the significant responses of children to the reading materials. She also became aware of the difficulties involved in maintaining the bunko, which required a great deal of sacrifice and a considerable amount of money (Takahashi 2006). In 1965, seven years after opening the Katsura Bunko, Ishii published the *Kodomo no Toshokan (The Children's Library)*, where she shared key findings of her study and called for the establishment of more public libraries. The book was not a bestseller, but it did attract the attention of several women who were likewise concerned with advancing children's reading skills. Although it was not purposely written to encourage the establishment of individual bunko, Ishii's book did serve that purpose; it became special, influential, and symbolic in the history and development of the bunko movement

(Takahashi 2006). Ishii passed away in 2008, and the Katsura Bunko is now managed by the Tokyo Children's Library.¹¹ At present, under the stewardship of Keiko Harikae, it opens once a month and maintains an inviting reading atmosphere for children.

The concept of the bunko is indigenously Japanese, although it is not unique to Japan. Home libraries also exist in Thailand and Korea (Hotta 1995), though it was not referred to as a bunko. The early development of bunko, the participation of the community, and the easy access to children differentiate the Japanese bunko from other typical home libraries.

Privately Operated and Funded

Libraries are generally supported and financed by its founders or owners, either the academe or the government. The bunko is different in that it is funded and operated by private individuals, mostly parents, whose main interest is to nurture their children's reading in an inviting reading environment (Takeuchi 1995). As such, the bunko depends on citizens, usually mothers and other members of the community, for personnel and operating costs. Budgets vary; some charge a "nominal" membership fee, "usually 50 to 100 yen per month," or even every year (Takahashi 2006). The Tokyo Children's Library, a non-profit foundation, and the ItoChū Memorial Foundation (ItoChū Kinen Zaidan), a grant-giving institution, provide support to some bunko across the country.¹²

As a private and independent entity, the bunko is managed according to their owners' preferences. They have the liberty and autonomy to select the books and operational models.¹³ To help improve bunko management and share key practices, bunko managers organize themselves into associations.¹⁴ They conduct letters, publish newsletters, and do resource-sharing activities.¹⁵

Bunko are established in neighborhoods, set apart from the public library, and are thus generally more accessible to children. They provide a reliable, appropriate, user-centered, accessible, and a neutral and unbiased

facility (Blanshard 1998). Furthermore, it tries to cultivate such atmosphere by making the children experience reading as an enjoyable activity. Since the bunko is beyond the confines of the school, children enjoy the comforts of reading in a more relaxing atmosphere.

However, the private nature of bunko does not necessarily preclude a partnership with local government. This will be clarified in the next section.

Children's Library Materials and Services

Bunko by definition offer materials of interest to children,¹⁶ the number of which is difficult to determine; small bunko may boast of a modest collection of 100 books while large ones hold over 3,000 volumes (Takeuchi 1995). The bunko resources, especially in the case of a katei bunko, depend on the financial capacity of the owner.¹⁷ To obtain more resources, some bunko cooperate with public libraries, who loan their resources to the bunko, ranging from 20 for several weeks to 600 for 3 months (Takeuchi 1995) The ILCL also lends crates of children's books to bunko and local libraries. The sharing maximizes the use of children's books and exposes the readers to a wide variety of materials.

The bunko's services parallel those of public libraries. These include free voluntary readings, book loans, singing, reciting nursery rhymes, paper folding, and making toys and handicrafts (Cheunwattana 2008). But one of the regular activities is storytelling, which, according to studies on brain development, reinforces the advancement of knowledge (Blanshard 1998). Also, Takeuchi (1995) identified ways that help encourage children to read and learn: reading aloud, book talking, and book displays. In bunko circles, one major advocate of storytelling is Kyoko Matsuoka of the Tokyo Children's Library.¹⁸

The Bunko and the Community

The bunko has its roots from the community, catering to the children living and studying within the neighborhood. As shown above, the unavailability of public libraries in most places led to the burgeoning of several bunko. Reading became more accessible to children, and the community became more directly involved in the movement. Community support is vital to the effective operation of the bunko. Even katei bunko (home-based bunko) requires community involvement, including financial and logistical support, as in free advertisements in newsletters.

The Volunteers

Many of the participants of the bunko movement are volunteers. In Japan, the word for volunteer, and consequently the name of volunteer associations, is known by the English loan word *borantia*; it denotes actions freely chosen, unremunerated, and social-welfare oriented; it takes place without profit or losses for the actor (volunteer) (Le Blanc 1999, 97). Volunteers provide a number of reasons other than pure volunteer work. Nakano (2000) explains that volunteering in Japan is a “lifestyle choice” in which they “negotiate their self-identities.” Volunteer work also develops the self (97) and covers a multitude of forms and organizational structures.¹⁹ Either way, the end result is a productive contribution to society and a sense of accomplishment for the volunteers.

Volunteers are the strongest force in public library and community service; regular staff are employed, but are frequently rotated among various departments and locales. Thus, because they serve for a relatively short time, their involvement in a specific community is limited. In some instances, volunteers last longer than the actual staff and are thus the pillars and mainstays of bunko work.

Bunko Women

Almost all bunko are run by volunteer mothers; hence, the term “bunko women” was coined (Matsuoka 1994, 10). The term, however, does not apply only to women who set up their own bunko but also to volunteer staff. Many are housewives who do not necessarily have the professional qualifications of a librarian. But their enthusiasm and interest have led them to learn and gain the necessary skills to operate and manage the library.

A number of reasons account for why women volunteer. Women, especially mothers, are critical of the academic curriculum of their children. Takeuchi (1995) argues that bunko are widely appreciated as they offer a more relaxed learning environment than regular schools, which are known to provide intense training and preparation for higher education. Mothers are then compelled to find a less stressful and less competitive place where children could simply read and enjoy literature.

Some women are motivated to establish a bunko because of few, accessible public libraries in their communities. In the case study by Yoshimura (1984) as mentioned in Yoshida's (2004) article, bunko women take responsibility in nurturing their social awareness and development as citizens. They also get to cultivate their individuality (Yoshimura 1984). Furthermore, by helping children read, bunko women serve and contribute to their communities. Compared to arts and music, which require rather more technical skills and expertise, volunteering in a bunko merely entails one's enthusiasm to read and share stories with children. Another reason is personal development (Hotta 1995) and companionship. Because of bunko work, mothers get to exchange recipes and discuss issues on child-rearing and elder care. Through various bunko activities, women foster friendships and derive fulfillment from their participation and contribution in the community (Cheunwattana 2008).

Hotta's (1995) case study of the bunko movement in Higashi Murayama consists of profiles of bunko women, particularly housewives married to regular white-collar job employees. Bunko women in the Tsubomi Bunko in Yokohama fit the same profile of housewives, whose ages range from 30 to 60.²⁰ This demographic profile also conforms to what Vogel (1971) calls Japan's "new middle class" (Hotta 1995). The social structure of modern living is observed to be proportional to the greater social participation of women. Situated within the neighborhood, the bunko became an ideal outlet for intellectual expression.

Bunko and Japanese Society

The bunko impinges on specific changes and trends in Japanese society. First, it points to the nature, if not the limitations of the educational system. At present, it focuses on the college entrance examination (*nyūgaku shiken*), so much so that students attend school just to increase their chances of going to college. As a consequence, schools lack the inviting vibe of a free-spirited place of learning. The bunko, in contrast, provides a better venue for reading.

Second, the mobilization by the community members reflects the social transformation within the society, specifically the prominence of confident, well-educated Japanese women, who assert themselves by participating in bunko work. The bunko volunteers also confirms what Vogel (1971) once called the new Japanese middle-class family, whose basic needs are well tended, thus giving women, the wives, more time to participate in the bunko.

Third, the decline in the number of bunko has been partially traced to Japan's aging population. Four thousand of them were around at the end of the 1980s, but that number dwindled to 3,000 in 2004. Takeuchi (1995) attributes the problem to the declining birthrate. Some bunko closed down since no children were no longer visiting the bunko.²¹ Others ceased their operation due to the illness or death of the owner.

Integration: Concluding Thoughts

The bunko is an interesting social artifact of Japanese society. It has emerged in local communities and appealed to the public by fostering strong social interactions and relationships. For children, the bunko exposes them to good literature and helps widen their intellectual horizons.²² For the adults, the bunko gives them a chance to enjoy volunteer work.

In this age of advanced technology, it is interesting to note that the bunko still attract people to establish them. One possible explanation is the belief in the importance of reading, a traditional form of learning. While the presence of other mediums for learning may be more enticing, reading books continues to be an important habit to develop, especially among children.²³

The bunko remains as one of the globally applicable models for children's library services (Cheunwattana 2008). Children from any part of the world deserve the chance to be exposed to good reading services. Reading will always be a part of a child's holistic development. In this sense, the bunko can be modified depending on the needs of the children in a particular community. It can also be adopted by a similar movement to open opportunities for more effective community cooperation.

"From Toshokan to Bunko" implies an empowerment of the library service at the local level. Although the bunko is a typical form of library service, it provides a more personal connection between the library and its users. Moreover, it is a significant venue for the personal development of its stakeholders. By understanding its operation, the bunko help us value libraries as more than just a four-walled storage area of books, but as a social system that builds and strengthens the community.

Notes

- 1 Carl Sagan (1934-1996) was an American astronomer, astrochemist, and author.
- 2 Prefectural libraries are responsible for lending books to individual patrons and to the municipal libraries.
- 3 These private management methods imply the outsourcing of the administration of some public facilities and services (JLA 2006).

- 4 The National Diet Library (Kokuritsu Kokkai Toshokan) is the sole national library in Japan. It served as the legal depository of Japanese publications in accordance with the Legal Deposit System.
- 5 The ILCL also serves as a national center supporting research and study on children's literature.
- 6 There are instances that children can ask the staff from the bunko to read the book for them.
- 7 Some bunko would be open once or twice a week or even a month depending on the availability of the owner.
- 8 In 1969, a bunko used two old buses linked together and open, named the Kumegawa Kodomo Toshokan (Kumegawa Children's Library), but people would always refer to this as the "Bus Bunko" (Hotta 1995).
- 9 The roomful of books she had collected over the years was offered to the neighborhood children for pleasure reading (Matsuoka 1994, 10).
- 10 Momoko Ishii was an editor for the Juvenile Department of the Iwanami Shoten Publishing House (Matsuoka 1994, 10).
- 11 The Tokyo Children's Library (TCL) is a nonprofit organization initiated in 1967 by bunko owners Momoko Ishii, Shigeko Tsuchiya, and Matsuoka Kyoko (Matsuoka 1994, 10).
- 12 The Ito Chū Memorial Foundation and the Tokyo Children's Library would conduct an interview-survey of all bunko chairpersons in the country. In this manner, active bunko can be identified. And as part of the Ito Chū Memorial Foundation's corporate responsibility, identified bunko are provided with financial subsidy.
- 13 Some bunko would be open once a week or even once a month (frequent schedule falls on a Saturday). The owner can suddenly decide not to open if she becomes busy with other engagements.
- 14 Two large bunko associations are the Nihon Oyako Dokusyo Center (Japan Parent-Child Reading Center) and the Oyako Dokusyo Chiiki Bunko Zenkoku Renrakukai (Parent-Child Reading/ Neighborhood Bunko National Association) (Takahashi 2006).
- 15 An example of this is the Bunko Study Group in Yokohama (BSGY). This was established in 1984 for the research and support of bunko activities in Yokohama City (Yoda 1999).
- 16 Bunko collections would often include Japanese folktales, picture books, and various story books that can cater to the different children's age groups.
- 17 Junko Ito's Tsubomi Bunko (a katei bunko) in Yokohama presently contains 3,200 volumes. Most of them were purchased by the owner herself. Similarly, Ms. Tanegawa of Katei Bunko in Kita-Urawa would acquire her collection from personal purchases and gifts from parents and children who visited her bunko.
- 18 The signature for this style of storytelling is the "story candle," which is lit when the session begins and extinguished when it ends (Hotta 1995).
- 19 Volunteers would include nationwide groups like the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) but also include those that read books for the blind citizens, those that promote leisure and hobby activities, a mother's club, several children's clubs, and professional associations (Hotta 1995).
- 20 The Tsubomi Bunko in Yokohama is owned by Junko Ito, a housewife of a doctor. There are six of them who would usually run the bunko, including a wife of a consultant and another one who does part-time job at the nearby Konan Toshokan (Konan Library).

- 21 The Tokyo Children's Library, operating similarly as a bunko, would cater to the children enrolled in the various elementary schools within the neighborhood. However, in recent years, the children who visit had decreased since less students had enrolled.
- 22 Bunko women would notice that children become more articulate in expressing themselves in conversation.
- 23 Forty to sixty percent of children from the Asian region comprise the greater part of the literate public. These children will be the adult readers of the future if they have caught the reading habit when young (Anuar 1985).

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