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Postprint: A Twenty-Year Comparative Analysis of Differences in Public Library Development Between China and Japan

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Modern library concepts were introduced to China and Japan at similar times; however, after a century of concurrent development shaped by divergent national conditions and intellectual traditions, substantial disparities have manifested across numerous dimensions.

[Method/Process] The 20-year developmental trajectory (1997–2016) of public libraries in China and Japan is visually rendered across five dimensions: institutional count, aggregate collection size, workforce numbers, registered user base, and acquisition budgets. Corresponding annual variation charts are presented for per capita metrics and per capita growth rates.

[Results/Conclusion] Through a dual analytical framework encompassing economic and policy factors, this study investigates the causes underlying the stagnation of public library development in both countries, particularly Japan, over the past two decades. Lessons are synthesized and five strategic recommendations are proposed for the advancement of China's public library sector.

Full Text

A Comparative Study on the Differences in Public Library Development Between China and Japan Over the Past Twenty Years

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The concept of the modern library was introduced to China and Japan at similar times, yet after a century of parallel development under different national conditions and modes of thinking, substantial differences have emerged in many aspects. **[Method/Process]** This paper visualizes the development of public libraries in China and Japan from 1997 to 2016 across five dimensions: number of institutions, total collections, number of employees, number of registered users, and book purchasing funds. Corresponding annual change charts are presented for per capita metrics and per capita growth rates. **[Result/Conclusion]** Based on this analysis, the paper examines the causes behind the sluggish development of Japan’s public library sector over the past two decades from economic and policy perspectives, summarizes experiences and lessons learned, and proposes five recommendations for the development of China’s public library cause.

Keywords: development of public libraries; comparative study of differences; number of institutions; total collections; practitioners; number of registrants; book purchasing funds

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1. Introduction

China and Japan have maintained close relations throughout history. From Japan’s dispatch of envoys to the Tang Dynasty (630 AD) to the “Black Ships” incident (1853), Japan consistently referenced Chinese models for state governance for over 1,200 years, until the Meiji Restoration when it fully westernized and ideologically “left Asia for Europe.” Nevertheless, prolonged historical and cultural exchanges have left certain similarities in how both peoples approach matters, and it is precisely these cultural and ideological affinities that make the differences all the more intriguing—particularly in the realm of library development.

Following the Meiji Restoration, figures such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Tanaka Fujimaro introduced Western public library concepts to Japan, gradually transforming “book halls” with public library characteristics into modern public libraries. By the 1980s and 1990s, Japan’s public library sector had reached a level comparable to other developed nations worldwide. In contrast, China’s modern public library cause started somewhat later, and due to historical reasons, experienced a more tortuous growth path. Even after rapid development following the Reform and Opening Up, a significant gap remained compared to Japan.

This paper examines recent data on public library development in both countries over the past two decades to analyze the primary causes of these differences, drawing lessons from Japan’s experiences to inform better development of China’s public library sector.

2. Data Sources, Indicator Definitions, Research Tools, and Methods

2.1 Data Sources and Indicator Definitions **Chinese Data:** All historical data on China’s public library sector are derived from the *China Library Yearbook* (hereinafter referred to as “the Yearbook”). The Yearbook is a comprehensive reference tool reflecting the annual development of China’s library cause, currently co-sponsored by the Chinese Library Association and the National Library of China. Its authority is beyond question. Statistics for the public library section originate from the Ministry of Culture, ensuring accuracy, reliability, and consistency. As the Yearbook’s statistical indicators have expanded alongside library development, with previous data verified and revised, the author cross-checked various editions and decided to use the “National Public Library Statistics” from the 2017 Yearbook as the primary source, supplementing missing years with the latest available data from other editions.

Japanese Data: All historical data on Japan’s public library sector are sourced from the Japan Library Association website. Hosted by the Japan Library Association, this website’s professionalism and authority are equally assured. The “About Libraries” section publishes relevant data extracted from *Japanese Library Statistics and Directory*, with pre-1998 data released annually after 2013. After verifying historical data, the author adopted the 2018 released data as the primary Japanese source, supplementing missing years with data published in other years.

Overall, the *China Library Yearbook* offers richer and more comprehensive indicators than Japan’s *Library Statistics and Directory*. However, due to differing development strategies, each country tracks distinct items. For instance, Japan statistics include “mobile library vehicles” and “qualified librarians”—items not collected in China—while China tracks metrics like “number of organized lectures” and “number of exhibitions” absent in Japanese statistics. Furthermore, conceptual definitions for certain indicators differ significantly. For example, “circulation” statistics in China are divided into “total circulation visits” and “books/documents loaned volumes,” whereas Japan categorizes them into “individual loans,” “group loans,” “reservation items,” and “interlibrary cooperation”—concepts that overlap but are not fully interchangeable.

Considering these factors, the author selected five indicators that both reflect overall public library development and permit comparison with similar conceptual scopes: number of institutions, total collections, number of qualified practitioners (hereinafter “employees”), number of registered cardholders (hereinafter “registered users”), and annual new collection acquisition funds (hereinafter “book purchasing funds”).

Indicator Definitions: - **Number of Institutions:** In China, this refers to all libraries managed, funded, and supported by central or local governments that provide free services to the public, including national, provincial, prefecture-level, and all other categories. In Japan, it primarily refers to libraries established by local governments under the “Library Law,” managed by education committees, maintained with public funds, and available free to all residents, including prefectural, municipal, and town/village libraries. Historically, a small number of privately established libraries open to the public (private public libraries, totaling 19 in 2016) are also included. - **Total Collections:** In China, this refers to the sum of cataloged ancient books, books, periodicals, and other documents. In Japan, it refers to the sum of registered open- and closed-stack materials. - **Employees:** In China, this refers to the total number of librarians within the establishment system. In Japan, it refers to the total number of full-time personnel within the public library personnel system (excluding part-time, contracted, and dispatched staff). - **Registered Users:** In China, this refers to the total number of library cards issued by public libraries. In Japan, it refers to the total number of registered readers at public libraries. - **Book Purchasing Funds:** In China, this refers to funds allocated by fiscal authorities specifically for purchasing books, newspapers, magazines, and other materials. In Japan, it refers to the materials budget portion of public library funds allocated by fiscal authorities as well as local corporations and private enterprises. For comparative analysis, these figures have been converted to RMB using annual exchange rates published by China’s National Bureau of Statistics.

For all per capita calculations in this paper, total population figures are derived from official sources: Chinese data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China and Japanese data from the Statistics Bureau of Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

2.2 Research Tools and Methods The author utilized Excel, SPSS, and other data processing software for retrieval and statistical analysis, applying statistical methods to compare the five indicators between Chinese and Japanese public libraries from 1997 to 2016. Building upon this, per capita and per capita growth rates were visualized to illustrate overall changes in both countries’ public library sectors over the two-decade period.

3. Basic Statistics on Public Library Development in China and Japan (1997-2016)

3.1 Basic Overview Between 1997 and 2016, China’s public libraries grew from 2,628 to 3,153 institutions—an increase of 525, representing a 19.98% growth rate. During the same period, Japan’s public libraries increased from 2,450 to 3,280 institutions—an increase of 830, representing a 33.88% growth rate. Changes in the remaining four indicators—collections, employees, registered users, and book purchasing funds—varied considerably between the two nations.

As shown in Table 1, China's public libraries experienced varying degrees of growth across all four dimensions: collections increased by 52.614 million volumes (140.12% growth), employees by 9,326 (19.48% growth), registered users by 50.37 million (905.94% growth), and book purchasing funds by 1.90493 billion RMB (746.24% growth). With the exception of establishment-based employees, all indicators saw multi-fold or even ten-fold increases. Rapid economic development drove growing cultural demands, which in turn increased book consumption and stimulated continuous growth in collection sizes and funding for public libraries as a key avenue for mass education.

In contrast, Japan's trajectory differed markedly. As shown in Table 2, over these 20 years, Japan's public libraries saw collections increase by 18.731 million volumes (75.03% growth), employees decrease by 5,031 (-32.51% growth), registered users increase by 28.90 million (94.41% growth), and book purchasing funds decrease by 75.386 million RMB (-30.22% growth).

Following World War II, Japan's national strength developed rapidly with American assistance, and its public library infrastructure expanded significantly under supportive policies. By the late 20th century, Japan's modern public library system had essentially matured, with relatively stable growth rates. While collection sizes and registered users grew modestly, economic and policy factors caused substantial declines in employees and book purchasing funds—issues analyzed in detail in Chapter 4.

3.2 Visual Comparison of Five Indicators and Per Capita Metrics Beyond the aggregate changes shown above, annual variations, per capita changes, and growth rates also differed between the two nations. In 2016, China had 0.0228 public libraries per 10,000 people, up only 0.0015 from 0.0213 in 1997—a 6.58% increase. Annual per capita growth rates remained largely between -1% and 1%, except for notable increases in 2011 (1.87%) and 2012 (3.69%). Japan, conversely, reached 0.2584 libraries per 10,000 people in 2016, up 0.0641 from 0.1943 in 1997—a 32.99% increase—with annual growth rates consistently between 0% and 5%, slowing slightly in recent years. Annual changes in total institutions, per capita ownership, and per capita growth rates are illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper], Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper], and Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

In per capita collection ownership, China grew from 0.3037 volumes per person in 1997 to 0.6521 in 2016—more than doubling—while Japan increased from 1.9796 to 3.4425 volumes per person, a growth of over 70%. Notably, Japan's annual growth rate remained relatively stable with an overall declining trend, whereas China's fluctuated dramatically year to year. Annual changes in total collections, per capita ownership, and per capita growth rates are shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper], Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper], and Figure 6 [Figure 6: see original paper].

Regarding qualified practitioners, China's trend was steady overall growth while

Japan's declined annually. In per capita terms, China had 0.4137 librarians per 10,000 people in 2016, up 0.0264 from 0.3873 in 1997 (6.82% growth). Japan decreased from 1.2270 in 1997 to 0.8227 in 2016—a reduction of 0.4043 (-32.95% growth). Annual changes in practitioner numbers, per capita ownership, and per capita growth rates are shown in Figure 7 [Figure 7: see original paper], Figure 8 [Figure 8: see original paper], and Figure 9 [Figure 9: see original paper].

In per capita library card ownership, China grew from 0.0045 cards per person in 1997 to 0.0404 in 2016—an increase of 0.0359 representing astonishing 797.77% growth. Japan increased from 0.2427 to 0.4531 cards per person, a growth of 0.2104. While Japan's growth rate appears to be only about one-tenth of China's numerically, the data reveals that Japan has essentially achieved a level of nearly one library card for every two people. Annual changes in registered cardholders, per capita ownership, and per capita growth rates are shown in Figure 10 [Figure 10: see original paper], Figure 11 [Figure 11: see original paper], and Figure 12 [Figure 12: see original paper].

In per capita new collection acquisition funds, China increased from 0.2065 RMB per person in 1997 to 1.5623 RMB in 2016—an addition of 1.3558 RMB representing more than six-fold growth, with positive growth in all years except 2001. Japan decreased from 19.7807 RMB to 13.7138 RMB per person—a reduction of 6.0669 RMB (-30.67% growth), with negative growth in most years. Annual changes in total acquisition funds, per capita funds, and per capita growth rates are shown in Figure 13 [Figure 13: see original paper], Figure 14 [Figure 14: see original paper], and Figure 15 [Figure 15: see original paper].

4. Main Factors Behind Development Differences

Following economic system reforms after the Reform and Opening Up, China's public library sector comprehensively embraced Western modern library techniques and methods, developing its own growth strategies in alignment with national medium- and long-term development plans. During this process, relevant ministries, local governments, and professional associations formulated numerous regulations and guiding documents, while library science education entered a stage of enhancement—marking comprehensive expansion of China's public library cause. As the data show, all five indicators except employees saw substantial overall growth, with steady per capita improvements.

In contrast, during the latter half of the 20th century, Japan suffered multiple blows including the first oil crisis, the collapse of the bubble economy, and trade disputes with the United States, causing its economy to shift from high-speed to low-speed growth and eventually prolonged stagnation—a condition lasting approximately 30 years. During this period, numerous infrastructure and public facility developments stalled, with public libraries as cultural facilities similarly affected. Despite scholars' advocacy that libraries, like schools and museums, possess educational functions distinct from ordinary public facilities, this did not

prevent government cuts to library support funds. Similarly, national treasury subsidies, another crucial funding source, were gradually reduced and eventually abolished after the 1980s, forcing public libraries to seek new survival models and funding support.

Meanwhile, post-Reform China established economic construction as the central national development strategy. After 40 years of development, national economic strength and living standards have been transformed. According to IMF statistics, China's GDP grew from 0.33 trillion USD in 1987 to 11.21 trillion USD in 2016—a staggering 3,296.97% increase, while Japan's GDP grew only 96.41% during the same period. Although China's public library development speed has yet to match its economic growth, economic expansion has undoubtedly provided strong financial support for library development. Additionally, partial market-oriented operations have diversified funding sources, contributing to sustainable and stable growth.

“Economic base determines superstructure.” Facing economic stagnation, Japan sought new systems to share government responsibilities and pressures in the public library domain. After 2000, Japan gradually introduced public-private partnership concepts from Europe and America, referencing Britain's 1980 PFI policy implemented amid massive fiscal deficits. Adjusting its original “management entrustment system,” Japan formulated a “designated manager” system for domestic public services and amended relevant provisions in the *Local Autonomy Act* to shift public libraries toward management by private enterprises. This policy aimed to leverage private sector and local corporate strength to rescue libraries from their predicament and maintain services while seeking development opportunities, but results have been unsatisfactory.

First, policy implementation faced low enthusiasm from public libraries and local autonomous bodies. According to Japan Library Association survey data, by 2017 only 551 public libraries nationwide (16.80% of the total) had actually adopted the designated manager system, demonstrating extremely limited implementation effectiveness. Second, rather than achieving intended results, the policy triggered numerous controversies. As Chapter 3's statistics reveal, the most severely impacted areas were continuous declines in employee numbers and new collection acquisition funds.

Due to public libraries' shift toward socialized operation, the profit-seeking nature of businesses became increasingly apparent. Since library characteristics preclude short-term profitability, reducing expenditures became designated managers' primary choice. Direct impacts included cuts to book purchasing funds—between 1997 and 2016, acquisition funds decreased by 30.22% due to abolished treasury subsidies and the designated manager system. Under such funding constraints, guaranteeing both quantity and quality of new acquisitions becomes difficult, representing the first indirect effect of budget cuts.

However, Figure 5 shows that per capita collection ownership actually increased. One reason is that acquisition funds were reduced but not eliminated; another

important factor relates to Japan's extremely slow population growth. According to Japan's Statistics Bureau, the population grew from 126.17 million in 1997 to only 126.93 million in 2016—just 0.60% growth. Therefore, with collection growth rates far exceeding population growth, per capita ownership remained largely unaffected even with reduced purchasing funds.

Another direct effect of budget cuts, and a primary means of reducing expenditures, was personnel cost reduction. The main approach involved decreasing recruitment of establishment-based full-time staff while massively hiring part-time and dispatched workers, with low wages becoming the employment standard. According to Japan Library Association statistics, by 2015 the number of part-time staff reached 16,622—nearly 10,000 more than in 1997, with the increase alone approaching the number of full-time staff that year. Additionally, over 10,000 dispatched workers had entered libraries. This influx of non-professionals inevitably lowered overall professional standards, affecting staff morale and triggering resignations while simultaneously raising public doubts about service professionalism and reducing librarians' social status—another major reason for declining full-time staff beyond natural attrition (retirement, death, etc.).

In summary, the fundamental cause of divergent development trajectories lies in economic factors. Under basically stable political conditions, stronger national economies generate higher cultural demands, prompting policy tilts that sustain stable public library development. Conversely, weak economic conditions, even with high cultural demand, cannot guarantee policy implementation, causing stagnation or negative growth. This “pattern” explains why, despite Japan's introduction of revitalization policies after 2008 such as the “National Reading Year,” the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, and professional training assistance for librarians, effects remain limited due to overall economic malaise and deteriorating industry conditions—leaving Japan's public library recovery still distant.

5. Implications from Japan's Public Library Development for China

The five-dimensional comparison reveals that China is gradually closing the gap with Japan, which has long ranked among the world's top public library systems, and has even surpassed Japan in some aspects. At current growth rates and economic conditions, China will likely achieve comprehensive superiority soon. Nevertheless, as a veteran public library powerhouse, Japan's experiences and lessons remain highly instructive.

(1) Establish comprehensive laws, regulations, and industry standards to ensure healthy and stable development. Post-WWII Japan achieved remarkable public library development partly by rapidly forming a domestically suitable legal framework based on foreign experiences, keeping pace with global trends and timely adjustments. Most notably, the postwar “Three Library Laws” (the *National Diet Library Law*, *Library Law*, and *School Library Law*) established the fundamental legal framework, setting operational management

systems, establishing universal service concepts, and clarifying libraries' educational status—laying a solid foundation for development and mass education. China's *Public Library Law* took effect on January 1, 2018, representing a major milestone for the cultural and library sectors following the 19th Party Congress. The law addresses establishment, operation, services, and legal responsibilities, clarifying fundamental issues while providing methods and pathways for future development. However, judicial interpretations and corresponding industry standards must be promptly refined to create a truly “law-governed” environment and comprehensive professional norms covering personnel quality, ethics, and evaluation metrics.

(2) Strengthen library science education and improve practitioners' compensation and professional identity. Japan's most severe consequence from implementing the designated manager system and socialized operation over the past 20 years has been the loss of professional staff, indirectly reducing service quality and public recognition. New hires, mostly non-professionals lacking systematic education and knowledge, struggle to provide quality services, triggering public misconceptions about libraries and doubts about the necessity of library science education—further exacerbating educational challenges. Currently, China's public library sector is in an ascending phase with uneven regional development. Despite industry regulations such as the *Provincial (Autonomous Region, Municipal) Library Work Regulations* and *Public Library Service Standards*, libraries at all levels still face substantial staffing shortages, reflecting insufficient professional talent, low compensation, and poor professional identity. Solutions include expanding and improving library science education quality, strengthening professional identity training, enhancing government and public understanding of libraries, and improving staff salaries and benefits to attract professional talent.

(3) Establish mass service concepts. Japan is a mountainous country where building libraries in remote areas is challenging and utilization rates are difficult to guarantee—similar to some Chinese regions. However, postwar Japan proposed the concept of “services adapted to ordinary citizens” from the outset of its public library development. During rapid economic growth, numerous municipal and town/village libraries were established, with substantial investment in mobile library vehicles while implementing main-branch systems to maximize guidance of reading habits and public recognition of library value. However, the long-standing elite-service concept in China cannot be completely transformed in a short time, leaving many grassroots units and remote areas unable to access deserved knowledge services. Government departments and the library community must urgently shift perspectives, prioritize people's interests, and commit to improving citizens' cultural quality to contribute to China's comprehensive moderately prosperous society.

(4) Increase support for public services. The 20-year comparison demonstrates that without sustained and stable funding, public library development inevitably stagnates or resorts to desperate measures. The 17th Party Congress

proposed “building a public cultural service system covering all society,” providing an excellent opportunity for extensive public library infrastructure construction. However, in the decade since, only about 300 new libraries were added, making the total of just over 3,000 libraries mismatched with China’s large national scale. As previously noted, China’s public library development scale has yet to match its economic strength. The government should consider increasing support for public services, especially cultural infrastructure in remote areas, enabling all citizens to benefit from public service development as soon as possible.

(5) Learn from Japan’s lessons and cautiously approach market-oriented projects. Japan’s socialized operation over the past two decades was fundamentally a forced response to economic depression, and its implementation effects have been unsatisfactory. The initial cause was the first oil crisis, with the final blow being U.S. trade sanctions. China is now the world’s second-largest economy. While consistently signaling goodwill internationally, China cannot prevent established powers’ scrutiny. Since 2018, China-U.S. trade friction has occurred frequently, with U.S. sanctions mirroring those previously applied to Japan. China possesses the world’s most complete industrial system and will not be a “soft target” like Japan, but must prepare for all contingencies, including potential economic slowdowns. China’s public library community must maintain clear awareness: once economic development is affected, fiscal support for public facilities will inevitably be impacted. Libraries must firmly grasp their fundamental mission, fully absorb developed countries’ experiences and lessons in socialized operation, carefully consider risks from market-oriented projects, strengthen their own capabilities while fulfilling their value as national knowledge repositories and think tanks, and become effective assistants in addressing international situations.

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A Comparative Study on the Differences of Public Libraries Between China and Japan in the Past Twenty Years

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] The concept of modern library was introduced to China and Japan at similar times, but after a century of common development under different national conditions and ways of thinking, great differences have emerged in many aspects. [Method/Process] This paper visualized the development of public libraries of China and Japan from 1997 to 2016 in five aspects, including the number of institutions, total number of books, number of employees, number of registered persons, and cost of purchasing books. The corresponding annual change chart was displayed on the per capita growth rate. [Result/Conclusion] On this basis, through the influence of economy and policy on the development of Public Libraries in China and Japan, especially for Japan in the past 20 years, the paper summarized the experience and lessons, and put forward five suggestions for the development of Public Libraries in China.

Keywords: development of public libraries; difference comparison; number of institutions; total amount of books; practitioners; number of registrants; purchase of books

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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