

Bookstores, Libraries, *Kashihonya* & *Dokushokai*: a Historical Tour of Reading Spaces in Modern Japan



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Thinking about How & Where We Read

Reading. We take in an enormous amount of text on a daily basis, and usually do not give much thought to how and where we do it. Certainly, we may be conscious of how we read much more on screens than before: a quick glance around a train filled with commuters on their smartphones makes a strong contrast to a generation or two ago when those same people would have been immersed in paperbacks or newspapers. Yet even if most people are aware of how reading has changed from when they were younger, the ways that they read and where they do so is not something people tend to really think about, let alone study. So just what are “reading spaces” and why are they important?

Reading Spaces

Basically, a reading space is any space associated with readers or reading. This includes locations where people acquire, read, or discuss reading materials. Reading spaces may be private, or they may be public, such as libraries, bookstores, and cafes. They may also be geographical/physical in nature, or virtual, with the latter including both popular portrayals of reading spaces in fiction and online reading communities. Regardless of what form they may take, reading spaces can be important social spaces that connect readers together. Reading spaces are also important for what they can tell us about our changing society, since changes in reading cannot be separated from the spaces where reading takes place – the spread of libraries contributed to quiet reading, while modern railways popularized pocketbooks that could be easily carried and enjoyed by commuters. People attending a book club, seniors reminiscing about the old manga cafes of their youth, the media glumly reporting on bookstore closures, and stories that portray awkward student romance in school libraries all reflect the myriad ways in which reading spaces reflect, and influence, our lives.

Reading Spaces in Japan

As a historian of Japanese books and print culture, I have long been interested in reading spaces in modern Japan. Inspired by various accounts of the places important to modern Japanese readers, especially in the Meiji and Taishō eras, I had been researching for many years how reading had changed down to the present. Over the course of the mid-19th and 20th centuries, Japan’s tremendous

socioeconomic transformation led to changes in the practice and conception of reading. New technology made books cheaper to produce at the same time that the new education system dramatically increased literacy, resulting in explosive growth of the reading population. By the early 20th century, reading was not just a way to gain knowledge or enjoyably pass the time, but a sign of being a proper modern citizen. Public reading was routine, but as increasing urbanization pushed larger groups of people together in the cities there was pressure to abandon the old methods of reading aloud and instead read silently, a change encouraged by the expansion of libraries which enforced silence. Another big change occurred in the early postwar era, when social reading among family and friends declined and reading became a more private activity. I found that as reading kept changing, reading spaces, perhaps unsurprisingly, continued to evolve as well.

In 2019, I presented some of my preliminary findings at the annual conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), and was pleased to see a great amount of interest in the topic. Considering how there was almost no research available in English on the history and culture of Japanese reading despite the popularity of Japanese literature and manga overseas, I was prompted to produce a book on the subject: *Reading Spaces in Modern Japan: The Evolution of Sites and Practices of Reading* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Taking a Tour of Reading in Modern Japan

Reading Spaces in Modern Japan takes people on a tour of reading in modern Japan, from past to present, and from geographical space to virtual space. From the early modern era through modernization, postwar economic growth, and into the digital era, it looks at how and why reading evolved. Essentially, it is a brief history of reading in modern Japan told through looking at spaces, in an effort to explain how reading and social context influence each other. Writing the book allowed me to consider changes over time, as well as compare the particular characteristics of the reading world of each era. For instance, readers from the 18th century to the mid-20th century would all have been aware of *kashihonya*, but in the Edo Period the term referred to peddlers who went door-to-door lending books, in the Meiji Era to reading rooms filled with everything from textbooks to popular novels, and in the mid-Shōwa Period to places that primarily stocked manga for children. *Kashihonya* were always commercial book-lending

operations, but each period had its own unique version, something that is sometimes lost amidst scholarship or historical memoirs that only discuss one era in isolation.

I look at three particular topics, each focused on a different type of reading space and a different era. First, I examine the development of Kanda-Jinbōchō, which is not only Tokyo's book town but also the capital of Japanese print culture, in the 19th and 20th centuries; second, I look at how public reading spaces, especially libraries, transformed from the 18th century to the early 21st century; and finally, I look at how reading spaces have been portrayed in popular culture as well as new developments in reading from the late 20th century until today. Here, I want to just touch on each of these in turn. Come along with me on a short tour.

Let's Go to Kanda-Jinbōchō

Today, Kanda-Jinbōchō is fundamentally bound up with print culture. While it has numerous libraries, schools and publishing houses, it is most famous for its vast quantity of used bookstores. Many of these bookstores have been owned and operated as family businesses for generations. The town is possibly the largest used book market in the world, holds various reading-related events, especially the Kanda Book Fair held annually since 1960, and promotes itself as *Hon no Machi* (Book Town).

Yet it was not always so. Back in the late Edo Period, the town was instead known for the residences of *daimyō*, the domain lords who were required to spend half their time in the capital city. A map from the mid-19th century when this was still the case reveals many large *daimyō* residences, and smaller residences for *hatamoto* retainers (Image). It was the Jinbō *hatamoto* family, in fact, that gave rise to the "Jinbōchō" name.

How did a town known for samurai residences become a book town? After the Meiji Restoration led to modernization and the end of the samurai as a social class, the former residences were replaced by other institutions, first and foremost schools. By the end of the 19th century the area boasted a wide range of educational institutions, including no small number that eventually became universities. As the area attracted students from across the country, demand for textbooks and other reading material skyrocketed, creating a business opportunity for residents, many of whom had been employed by

samurai families and were now seeking new work. Thus, used bookstores began to spring up, and soon became a major part of Kanda-Jinbōchō's cultural landscape. In other words, the town evolved from a residential area to a school town, and then to a book town.

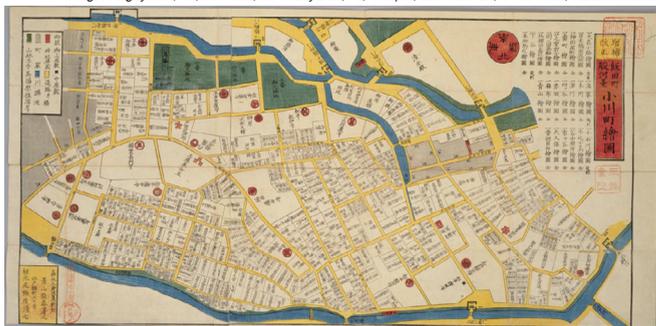
The oldest used bookstore appears to be Takayama Honten, founded in 1875, followed by Yūshikaku (1877), and then many others including Nakanishi-ya (1881), Sanseidō Shoten (1881), and Tōkyōdō Shoten (1891). Bookstores also played an important social role as places where students and intellectuals could network, and regularly visiting bookstores was part of the cultural life of the era. Meanwhile, improved printing technology drove down the price of print, and with improved distribution networks it became easier to enter the publishing industry. Some bookstores evolved into publishers, including Yūshikaku (upon changing its name to Yūhikaku), Sanseidō, and Iwanami Shoten (which was founded by a disciple of literary giant Natsume Sōseki, and made its mark by publishing Sōseki's *Kokoro* in 1914). Given how experience in book retail offers one insight into the book market, it is no surprise that Kanda-Jinbōchō gave rise to various leading publishers.

At the dawn of the 20th century Japan experienced a print culture boom – books, newspapers, magazines, and print advertising all flourished – and both bookstores and publishers thrived, a trend that further expanded after World War I. Popular political and social movements stressed reading as a means to acquire knowledge and transform society, while the Kyōyōshugi self-cultivation movement that gathered steam in the early 1920s (and continued to influence the Japanese education system until the 1970s) stressed engagement with both Western and Eastern classics as a way to improve the self, and then, the nation. Reading became seen as a form of moral imperative for modern citizens, and public reading became celebrated, with books being carried everywhere and reading during a free moment becoming a routine activity. The book trade capitalized on this development, with book design coming into its own, bookstores making attractive displays for their wares, and decorative bookcases for readers to display their collections becoming popular.

Just when it seemed to have entered a golden age of reading, however, Kanda-Jinbōchō was almost completely annihilated in the fires that followed the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. Bookstore owners and librarians struggled in vain to save their precious collections from the inferno, as the town turned to ash. After the disaster, many bookstore owners despaired and left. Other survivors, however, soldiered on, acquiring books wherever they could, and clearing the rubble to erect makeshift stalls. Customers, including universities and government officials hoping to replace lost collections, counted on the book merchants, whose spirit, and the reputation of the town, saved Kanda-Jinbōchō. A sense of normalcy was also brought about by new publications, especially Kōdansha's book about the disaster, *Taishō Daishinsai Daikasai* (The Great Taishō Earthquake and Conflagration), published just one month afterwards, which people credited for helping them come to terms with the tragedy. By the late 1920s and 1930s, with more books available, and at lower prices, than ever before, the town was thriving (Photo 1).

Avoiding critical damage during the terrible firebombing of the

Image: Kageyama, M., Tomatsu, M. and Iyama, N., comps., Edo Kirie-zu, 1849-1862, NDL Collection



Kanda-Jinbōchō vicinity in the mid-19th century

Photo 1: public domain



Kanda-Jinbōchō in February 1934

Photo 2: public domain



Libraries from the late Meiji to early Shōwa eras were important study spaces for students, as in this example from Tahara Town Library, prior to 1945.

capital during World War II, Kanda-Jinbōchō entered a renaissance in the postwar era. People replacing lost collections gave way to new generations of student customers, who in turn gave way to a diverse collection of readers and antiquarian book collectors. A product of some 200 years of cultural and business development, Kanda-Jinbōchō remains one of Japan's greatest reading spaces and a powerful symbol of Japanese books and print culture.

A Trip Back to Early Public Reading Spaces

Public reading spaces can be understood as communal spaces where people engage in reading or reading-related activities. This can include bookstores, where people browse and which may include areas for reading or events, libraries, and reading rooms or cafes. The important communal aspect of reading should not be surprising because reading was historically more often social than private. Back in the Edo Period, personal libraries were usually small, so people exchanged books frequently and read them together. Reading aloud was common practice, and while silent reading alone or in groups also existed, reading aloud enabled a group to bond and enjoy a work together, especially if not everyone was literate. Books, however, usually had to be purchased, and were prohibitively expensive for most people. The great libraries historically managed by the court, temples, and powerful courtier families were accessible only to elites, and lending was usually prohibited. Much the same applied to school libraries. In the late Edo Era, some of the domain libraries were open to the public and allowed borrowing, as was the case with Hada Hachimangū Shrine's library in today's Toyohashi, Aichi Prefecture. Many village heads opened their libraries to fellow villagers: called *zōsho no ie*, these became important local resources. Most readers, though, counted on the *kashihonya* peddlers, who lent both study and entertainment material cheaply.

With modernization, Western-style bound books arrived, which changed how books were displayed and stored. Japanese bookstores adopted bookshelves, and changed layouts to accommodate open-shelf browsing, creating the distinct character of modern Japanese bookstores: bookshelves along the walls, and traditional *hiradai* tables in the center space (the custom of putting *hiradai* outside to attract passersby developed later during the Taishō Period). The *kashihonya*

gave way to “new-type (*shinshiki*) *kashihonya*” which had fixed locations to accommodate the large numbers of books now being produced. Many *kashihonya* specialized in academic materials and had students as customers. Meanwhile, new schools and universities naturally built libraries for their students and scholars.

In 1872, inspired by

Western examples, Japanese officials began building a public library system. Public libraries had a rocky start, with poor funding and management, but slowly began to grow in number. In some ways they imitated their Edo-Era forebears: they were mostly closed-shelf, some charged user fees, and their holdings were random – in some cases simply repurposed collections from a domain library or temple. What was new were the rules, especially silence. Library patrons had to adjust to reading silently, or at least very softly, instead of reading aloud. With their strict rules and messy collections, one might wonder why people bothered. Students, however, embraced public libraries as quiet spaces to study, safe from the busy and noisy cityscape outside. They often visited as groups, but read quietly as individuals, and libraries responded by providing reading areas for them (Photo 2). Even in the Taishō Period, however, public libraries were outnumbered by school libraries, and most people acquired books elsewhere. Small towns and rural villages usually had no public libraries, prompting young people to organize reading groups (*dokushokai*), often focused on education or local development. Both libraries and reading groups came under increasing government control from the late 1920s, as the authorities became increasingly concerned about what, and how, people read. This trend, along with censorship, intensified during the war years.

Looking at Public Reading Spaces from Postwar Times to the Present

In the early postwar era, as Japan struggled to rebuild, reading was a refuge from the troubles of the day, and books a valuable commodity. Libraries, bookstores and reading cafes all increased. The US occupation, seeing libraries as vital to democracy, undertook a comprehensive reform of the public library system. Most people saw libraries as “free *kashihonya*” but the notion that libraries were a symbol of freedom and empowerment took root. The Library Law (1950), which required public libraries to be free, tax-funded, and aimed at community needs, was embraced by the Japan Library Association (JLA). Postwar libraries became important community hubs for education, entertainment, and networking. By the 1960s, an emphasis on serving the community led to better-trained librarians, services for children, and other library innovations. Libraries were

Photo 3: public domain



Children at a kashihonya, circa 1956

important information resources for communities, but their primary role was still as spaces people could visit to read. People still enjoyed reading as a group activity, and would visit libraries with family or friends. Another popular place for group reading was a new form of *kashihonya*, which focused on manga and was immensely popular

with children (Photo 3), but by the late 1960s these *kashihonya* had disappeared, giving way a decade later to manga cafes.

Reading, and in turn reading spaces, changed in the 1960s and 1970s due to socioeconomic factors. Smaller families with higher incomes meant more people could build book collections or subscribe to magazines, while urbanization and smaller, more private, living spaces encouraged people to make space more personalized and individualized. The upshot of all this was that reading became a more private activity, people read more at home, and library reading areas became more compartmentalized, aimed less at groups and more at individuals. This trend continued into the 1990s, with formerly open and inviting manga cafes becoming Internet cafes that eventually adopted cubicles – a far cry from the social environment of postwar *kashihonya*.

More recently, the digital revolution has led to media panics claiming that the population, and especially youth, no longer read, with library closures often cited as proof. These closures, however, are in smaller towns suffering population decline, and active towns have active libraries. Public reading spaces continue to transform, however. Chain bookstores have been turning into reading cafes, and controversially, so have some libraries, spurring controversy over so-called “Tsutaya libraries” and corporate involvement. This is all part of a broader shift, however: reversing the 1970s trend, people have been reading less at home, and since acquiring books is now much easier than in the past (due to Book Off, Amazon, *Nihon no Furohonya* [kosho.or.jp], and other options), they seek in public reading spaces not just books, but an inviting, pleasant environment in which to read. Public reading spaces have been recognized for their therapeutic value as well as their role in bringing people together. Book-related events, tours, restaurants, resorts, hotels and other innovations reflect this. One development has been a push among schools, libraries and even local governments to encourage social reading, among families, friends, or in reading groups. It is interesting that this is often seen as innovative, when in fact it represents a return to much older Japanese reading customs.

Launching into the Virtual World

Finally, we come to virtual reading spaces, which come in two flavors: first, how reading spaces are depicted in literature or pop

culture, and second, the digital realm, where people engage in activities such as discussing reading online or reading in new ways. In the first case, reading spaces feature in all manner of Japanese literary works and popular media. Libraries feature heavily, almost always in romanticized fashion. Even modern school and public libraries are depicted in outdated and idealistic fashion, not because media creators do not know what libraries look like, but because they seek to evoke a nostalgic, traditional ideal of the library and the associated tropes like high school romance. Librarians, too, are often depicted in a romanticized manner, as masters of knowledge, taken to the extreme with fantasy sorceress librarians and the like. The postwar association of libraries with freedom reaches its zenith in *Toshokan Sensō* (Library Wars), a franchise about people fighting to protect their libraries from an oppressive government. Meanwhile, bookstores in fiction are often associated with local romance and old folk wisdom.

In the digital realm, online reading was slow to catch on in Japan, until smartphones enabled simple, widespread access. As the 2000s progressed, early efforts like Aozora Bunko gave way to a wide range of e-books and other digital reading material offered by libraries, publishers and online retailers. Simultaneously, the digital world gave rise to new reading experiences, in the same way that light novels had reinvigorated young adult print fiction in the 2000s. Online novels have become a popular phenomenon, sometimes spawning manga, anime and game franchises. One of the most popular Japanese game genres is visual novels – games combining text with graphics and sound – which now number in the thousands and thousands and have enormous numbers of dedicated fans both domestically and overseas. Young people are still reading, in other words, but not what their parents read, and not in the same spaces.

Japanese social media is filled with people discussing books, and has fueled purchases for not only new books but older ones and neglected classics as well. There are also online *dokushokai*, whether in old-school forums or in real-time. The coronavirus pandemic did not create these trends, but it did encourage them, and virtual reading communities are only likely to increase in influence in future.

Concluding Our Journey

Reading spaces in modern Japan have evolved over time, experiencing a variety of changes caused by socio-economic factors, technological developments, and even disasters. There was no simple change from a “traditional” to a “modern” model, but a series of many changes, the most recent occurring as readers and reading spaces adjust to society after the pandemic. As reading continues to evolve, it is all but certain that reading spaces will take on fascinating new forms in the future.

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