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**BUNKO: A private children's library in Japan".  
A Short Introduction to Bunko**

**Kichiro Takahashi**  
Assistant Library Director  
Tenri City Public Library  
Nara, Japan

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**Abstract**

*In this paper, I will try to introduce Bunko, a very unique type of private children's library in Japan. Numerous articles have been written on bunko, but many of them are presented in Japanese and only a few papers were written in English (1). Therefore, firstly, I plan to sketch out general characteristics of bunko. Secondly I briefly describe the history of bunko, especially the period from the 1960s and the 1980s when the number of bunko rapidly grew.*

## **1: General Characteristics**

### **1-1: Definition**

Bunko (pronounced “boon-ko”), to put it simply, can be defined as a private library specialized for children, which is typically run by a volunteer or a group of volunteers. The word “bunko” originally meant “library” and it is comprised of two parts “*BUN*” and “*KO*.” *BUN* means literature or sentence, and *KO* storehouse, so “Bunko” is similar in its formation to “Bibliothèque.”

Bunkos can be found throughout the country; the total number of bunko could be around 4,000 today. They are established in a variety of places; private house, community center, temple, church, supermarket, and any places where books can be stored and children may freely gather. A bunko that is opened in a private house is called *katei bunko*, or a home library, and a bunko set in other places is called *chiiki bunko*, or a community library.

### **1-2: Services and Activities**

Bunkos differ greatly in their collection size, some with over 10,000 volumes and others with less than 100. They also differ in opening hours, most of them open once a week, but a few open even every day.

The services and activities provided at bunko are similar to those offered at a children’s room of a public library: book lending, storytelling, booktalk, puppet show, and other activities to promote books to children.

### **1-3: Staff**

These activities are offered by volunteer staff, or librarians of bunko and 90% of the staff are women. One typical image of a bunko is that a woman is happily reading and lending books to children in her house or some other place.

Many of the bunko women are basically housewives, though they occasionally work as a part-time worker. I know some bunko women who are retired librarians and teachers, but, generally speaking, many of them are not specialists in library science and children’s literature. Even though they do not have a professional qualification of librarian, they are quite enthusiastic and often learn themselves to gain skills and knowledge to manage a children’s library. Some bunko women are so skillful and experienced in storytelling that they are sometimes invited as a lecturer at university classes or other seminars to teach the art of storytelling to students or librarians.

What motivate these women to open a bunko? It is a little hard to answer. Each individual running a bunko has her or his own reason to start a bunko. Some women begin a bunko because there is no public library in the city they live, and others start a bunko because the bunko is a part of the activities of child club in the community to which they and their children belong. And, of course, there are many just because they have a deep love of books and find a joy in sharing books with children in the neighborhood.

## **1-4: Costs**

Bunko is a “private” library, therefore, any costs of running a bunko have to be managed by the staff themselves. Some of the bunkos charge a membership fee, but it is very nominal, usually 50 or 100 yen per month, or sometimes per year (100 yen is almost equivalent to 1 U.S. dollar today). The budget size of a bunko varies greatly according to the amount of money the staff can afford.

## **1-5: Diversity**

Bunko is a private and free activity, and anybody who has an interest in offering books to children can design a bunko as she or he likes it. Thus, if you visit one hundred bunkos, you will notice each of them has its own appearance and style of management. In her article “A Grass-Roots Library in Japan” Ann Miyoko Hotta wrote (2), “a bunko can be created in just a few weeks in the corner of a room, but it can just as easily disappear. The people who run each bunko can decide for themselves what books they will provide and how they will operate the bunko; those who run bunko do not have to answer to anyone else.” Her words well describes one of the essences of bunko. Bunko can be opened in any place and it can be managed in any way, and it is very hard to define and generalize bunkos in simple words.

Little things such as sickness of the owner can easily put a bunko to an end, and it is also very difficult to keep track of bunkos that will be established and disappear suddenly.

## **2: History**

### **2-1: Before 1945**

I guess that a great number of bunkos have disappeared without leaving any footprints in written records. As nobody could not point out the first library in the world history, so nobody knows the first bunko in Japan.

As far as I have researched, the oldest example of bunko can date back to 1906. It was established by Kasui Takenuki, a children’s writer, editor, and public librarian. This bunko was opened in his house in Aoyama, Tokyo. It may not be surprising that an author for children who naturally has a large collection of children’s books opens a bunko, and many bunkos opened by writers can be found even today. There could have been other children’s writers who had an interest in lending books to children living nearby. On the other hand, there were also many other ordinary citizens who opened a bunko in the beginning of the twentieth century, even though not many of them appear on official records, newspapers and other articles. It is almost impossible to estimate the correct number of bunkos opened before the end of World War II. *The Jido Toshokan Kenkyukai* (Children’s Librarians’ Society) reported sixty bunkos in its 1958 survey, and I see some of them on the list were started before 1945. We have to wait until the 1960s to see the proliferation of bunkos in the country.

## 2-2: Katsura Bunko

As mentioned above, many children's writers have been interested in bunko, Hanako Muraoka, Tomiko Inui, Miyoko Matsutani, Teruo Teramura, to name a few. And Momoko Ishii, a famous children's writer, translator, and editor, is one of those writers.

In 1958 she opened a bunko named *Katsura Bunko* in her house and it was just one example of writer's bunko at first, but after she published a book about this bunko, it was known by many people and the bunko became a special and symbolic existence in the history of bunko.

In this book entitled "*Kodomo No Toshokan* (The Children's Library)" Ishii introduced the first seven years' experience of *Katsura Bunko* while describing daily activities of the bunko with many photographs. This book was never found on the best-seller list after its publication, but it was widely read among many women who were concerned with the reading of the young. After reading this book, many of the women, in turn, began to open a bunko at their home and other places as Ishii described in *Kodomo No Toshokan*.

But it was not completely Ishii's intention to spread the idea of bunko throughout the country. Ishii opened *Katsura Bunko* not just for fun (of course, as a children's writer, she loves children) and not for promotion of bunko. *Katsura Bunko* was a kind of lavatory for Momoko Ishii to observe at first hand what books children would take from the shelf, why some books were chosen many times by children and why other books were not favored by them. Ishii reported the result of her observation in the book with detailed lists of books lent by twelve children while describing in detail the characteristics of each child. And she analyzed the elements that "best-sellers" in *Katsura Bunko* commonly possessed.

In the last half of the book, she turned the topic and began to spent pages to introduce the library services for children in America, Canada, and Europe where she visited from 1954 to 1955 to investigate juvenile publication and public library services. Ishii, as a children's writer and editor, was greatly impressed by the public library in those countries to observe that they functioned as a good channel between children and good books and that they were a good and stable market for children's books of good quality, thus keeping the quality of children's literature. Ishii insisted the necessity of public library, not bunko, as a distributor of good writings to children.

On the other hand, in the last chapter, she emphasized the difficulty of maintaining a bunko because she felt herself that it required a great deal of self-sacrifice and that it could be a burden to keep a bunko for an ordinary people. Ishii stressed that it was urgent necessity to build more public libraries, which is supported eternally by tax, to promote good books to children (according to 1965 statistics, there were only about 750 public libraries in the country).

In spite of these comments, however, the book provoked many women's imagination, driving them to star a bunko. I cannot say for certain why this book aroused their enthusiasm for bunko in spite of Ishii's warning. Maybe her vivid and lively description of daily activities of the bunko was so attractive that it conveyed to readers only interesting aspects of bunko, contrary to Ishii's expectation. Whether Ishii hoped it or not, anyway, this book became one of the crucial factors to bring about the rapid development of bunkos after the 1960s.

## **2-3: Rapid Increasing after the 1960s**

From the 1960s and the 1980s, the number of bunko grew rapidly. *The Jido Toshokan Kenkyukai* listed 4,406 bunkos in its yearbook of 1980. I guess that there could have been over 5,000 bunkos in Japan in the beginning of the 1980s. According to 1980 statistics, we had only about 1300 public libraries in the country. It is surprising that the number of bunko almost doubled that of public libraries and that many of the bunkos were managed by volunteer women.

There are several factors causing this rapid widespread of bunkos from the 1960s to the 1980s. Momoko Ishii's book, of course, can be thought one of the factors. But the greatest impetus that encouraged a great number of women to start a private library for children is the paucity of public library during the period above.

Many women who were concerned with children's reading and worried that there was no public library in their town began a bunko to offer books to children themselves, thus trying to substitute public library's role at their cost. And these amateur children's librarians contributed greatly in the distribution of children's books. Bunkos could not become a perfect substitute and they were often easily put to an end, but many of the bunkos in the country played an important role as outposts of promoting good writings to children. If there had been no bunko, many children in Japan had spent days without knowing the richness of children's literature especially in the region without public library.

During this period, many bunkos were swarmed up with a great number of children. The more children came to a bunko, the more books were required. But any bunkos could not spread their services beyond the staff's ability and budget. Subsequently, bunko women had to face the limitation of bunko and also noticed that it should be public office's duty to establish a institution to guarantee children a free access to books. Then some of them started to lobby the local government to build a public library. In some cases they could successfully persuade the government to establish a public library with a children's room or to improve the library services in their community. But, in many cases, they failed to convince the government officers for their requirement, but at least they could make the public office aware the necessity of public library services and the importance of reading for children, because the personnel with whom bunko women had to negotiate were relatively indifferent to library at all in those days.

## **3: Bunko Networks**

### **3-1: Bunko Association**

As bunkos proliferated, associations of bunkos were formed in many places. Bunko association functions as the platform where bunko women gather to exchange information useful to manage a bunko and to discuss problems they face in daily activities. Many associations publish a newsletter and often sponsor lectures to study children's literature and library services for children inviting children's writers, librarians, and scholars.

The membership of Bunko associations are usually limited within a local region, but there are two large associations to which bunko women from many regions belong;

one is *the Nihon Oyako Dokusyo Center* (Japan Parent-Child Reading Center) established in 1967 by Shogo Saito, and the other is *the Oyako Dokusyo Chiiki Bunko Zenkoku Renrakukai* (Parent-Child Reading/ Neighborhood Bunko National Association) established in 1970. These associations have played an important role as a nation-wide network of bunkos. Both of these associations have an annual meeting, sponsor lectures on various topics and issue a magazine and a newsletter. Although not all of the bunkos in the country belong to these associations, without them, there could have been no place for bunkos in different regions to exchange information and to be influenced one another.

### **3-2: Tokyo Children's Library**

The Tokyo Children's Library is not a bunko association, but it originated from *the Katei Bunko Kenkyukai* (the Home Library Studying Circle), which was started by Momoko Ishii, Hanako Murakoka, Shigeko Tsuchiya, other members who were running a *katei bunko* in Tokyo. Hanako Muraoka, who was a children's writer and translator, started a bunko at her home as Momoko Ishii did, and Shigeko Tsuchiya, a housewife, also had a bunko at her house (she opened another bunko later). *The Katei Bunko Kenkyukai* began in 1957. It published a newsletter and had a meeting of its members. It was one of the earliest nationwide associations of bunko. It ended in 1964. But it was soon reborn as the Tokyo Children's Library, which was established in 1974 based on the four bunkos: Momoko Ishii's *Katsura Bunko*, Shigeko Tsuchiya's two bunkos, and *Matsunomi Bunko* of Kyoko Matsuoka, director of the library. The Tokyo Children's Library is a private children's library, offering a variety of activities and lectures; such as storytelling course and special lectures by children's writers and other people working in the field relating to library, children's books, education, and so on. The library has a children's room, a story room and a research room for adults. It publishes a journal and a famous series of *Ohanashi No Rousoku*, a collection of tales suitable for storytelling.

### **4: Conclusion: The Bunko Today**

Today, the total number of bunkos has decreased a little, but still it is estimated that we have

over 3,000 or 4,000 bunkos. The number of public libraries is about 2,800 and it gradually increases year by year. But still many bunkos are active throughout the country.

How many bunkos have existed in this country until today? How many books have been lent by bunko women? How many children have visited a bunko? What effects did bunkos bring about for the spread of children's books? And can those effects be expressed concretely in number?

For example, the nationwide survey of bunko in 1981 by the Zenkoku Kodomo Bunko Chosa Jikko Inkai, the largest survey in this field, sent a questionnaire to 4,557 bunkos and received answers from 1,878 of them. And it tells us that majority of the bunkos surveyed had over fifty children members and that 311 bunkos had over 50

children one day on average. This research also shows that the total number of volunteers in these 1,878 bunkos is over 15,000. And this research reveals many other aspects of bunko activities.

I think, however, that it is still quite hard for any researchers to answer precisely the questions above. After visiting over one hundred bunkos, I notice that not all bunkos keep the record of daily activities, such as the total number of library visits, number of participants for story hour, and number of books borrowed. Adding to this, many bunkos have disappeared without being known by researchers, therefore it is impossible to research all of the bunkos in this country.

But we must not forget that in the early 1980s the total number of bunkos almost doubled that of public libraries. At this time bunkos have functioned well to introduce good books to children especially at the place where few public libraries with children's services existed. For many children and their parents, the bunko had been the only one place where they could encounter good children's writings until the early 1980s because public libraries and school libraries were still underdeveloped in number and quality at those times. I believe that bunko volunteers throughout the country handed great numbers of books to children, even though I cannot say the correct number of books borrowed. In many communities there were no persons who were familiar with children's books and storytelling except bunko women. They have contributed greatly as a very unique distributor of books for children and their parents, and they have played an important role as outposts of promoting good writings for children, thus developing a better reading environment in the community.

At the same time, the bunko has an existence beyond a mere substitute for a public library. If you visit a bunko, you will notice its homelike atmosphere and a close relationship between bunko women and children, and that is what the public library lacks. For children, a bunko woman is not only a librarian but also a very special person whom children meet and talk regularly with beyond their relations with their parents and teachers.

Bunkos have contributed to the improvement of reading environment in the communities in many ways. They offer a good place for children to visit freely and to meet good books. And also bunkos have been the place for many mothers to be familiar with children's literature and storytelling. Bunko women also have changed the reading environment, appealing the necessity of public library to the local government.

The total number of bunkos decreases slightly today, but it is miracle that the total number of bunkos in this country has kept being over 3,000 in these thirty years and it is also miracle that we have had more bunkos than public libraries in these years. I believe

that we will have many bunkos in this country as long as we have many adults who have an interest in children's reading and feel love in sharing books with children.

I believe it is worth introducing the bunko, a very unique grass-root children's libraries in Japan as the Best Practice in Family Reading around the world program, where many librarians and researchers who have an interest in various ways of promoting children's books, will gather.

## References

(1) I recommend these three papers for further research.

Hotta, Ann Miyoko. 1998. "A Grass-Roots Library in Japan." *Youth Services in Libraries* (Winter): 143-152.

Matsuoka, Kyoko. 1970. "A Home Library in Japan." *Top of the News* 26 (January): 158-168.

Suyehiro, Ikuko. 1986. "Opening a Big Window for Each Child: A Report on the Bunko: Children's Library Movement by Local Volunteers." presented at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, General Conference, in 1986, Tokyo, Japan.

Adding to these papers, I recommend the series of three nationwide surveys entitled "*Kodomo No Yutakasa O Motomete*" (Tokyo: Japan Library Association) conducted by the *Zenkoku Kodomo Bunko Chosa Jikkō Inkaï* even though these are written in Japanese.

(2) Hotta, Ann Miyoko. 1998. "A Grass-Roots Library in Japan." *Youth Services in Libraries* (Winter): 143-152.