# West meets East – Electronic Materials

When visiting Japanese libraries last November as the Horner Fellow, I had two objectives: to learn how their libraries use technology in providing services to their users and whether technology is used to address any library usage and information literacy issues their users might have. One of the assumptions I based these objectives upon was that the libraries were making extensive use of electronic materials, such as article databases and electronic books. I discovered quite quickly, however, that this assumption wasn't *entirely* correct.

Over the course of my two week visit, I found that the article databases being offered are primarily for foreign materials and that electronic books are practically non-existent. Additionally, due to licensing restrictions, remote access to these electronic materials is generally not available. While I was surprised at the limited availability and access to electronic materials, it made me realize that libraries in other countries are dealing with issues unique and different from our own.

During my visit, I attended the Library Fair and Forum Conference. At a session on the future of eBooks in Japan, a panel of speakers spoke about some of the issues surrounding the availability of electronic materials in Japan. Although cost is a barrier, the main issue discussed repeatedly had to do with the structure of copyright law in Japan. Somewhat different from copyright law in the United States, their law requires a publisher to make a request to each author asking for permission before digitizing can take place for commercial purposes. This requirement has prevented their country from developing an effective business model for digitizing commercial materials.

From my observations, I also believe culture has much to do with this lag in adopting electronic materials. Almost all of the librarians I spoke with placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of print materials. I believe this is partly due to their written culture. For those who are not aware, the written language of Japanese primarily uses the character-based system known as Kanji. What I learned during my visit, however, is that the written language has evolved over time. Many of the older texts found in their archives are written in a form of Kanji that fewer and fewer are educated to read. This makes me wonder, how many librarians are concerned that moving to an electronic system will cause a greater shift in this education and knowledge, eventually allowing this older form of their written language to die out?

As Japan tries to balance the fine line of retaining their written culture in a technological world, they have been able to find ways to use technology to preserve their archives and provide electronic access to portions of their collections. For example, many of the university libraries I visited have digitized their rare book and photo collections and made them available online, such as the Nagasaki University Digital Collection (http://www.lb.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/search/ecolle/index-e.html), the International Library of Children's Literature has a media room with digital access to several picture books from across the world, and the National Institute of Information has created a digital repository providing digital storage and access to university publications.

It will be interesting to see how the Japanese libraries deal with the supply and demand issue of electronic materials as more of their users become technologically-oriented. As we have witnessed in the United States, many of these users will leave the walls of the physical library and find the information they seek from the comfort of their own home. The question becomes, how will they find that information if their library is not able to provide it to them?

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