Investigating Digitization in Japan: A Horner Special Pilot Project

*Editor’s Note: In October of 2010, Anna Quan Leon spent a week in Japan on a Special Pilot Project on Digitization, funded by the Horner Fellowship Committee and AzLA’s Executive Board. She shares her experience here.*

The primary object of my visit to Japan was to find out how digitization projects are faring, and to see if Japan is encountering the same type of problems we face in the United States. Arrangements were made by Horner committee contacts for me to meet with digital department staff at the National Diet Library (NDL) and the University of Tokyo. Prior to my meetings I developed an outline and questions dealing with problems common to all institutions with digitization projects, including (1) issues they have encountered; (2) digitization standards and how they were developed; and (3) challenges for preservation and future sustainability.

On Oct. 6 I met with Mr. Shuji Kamitsuna, Assistant Director of the Digital Information Planning Office at the NDL. The National Diet is comparable to the legislature and governmental entities in the U.S. I was given a tour of the Main Library and the Annex, which consists of four floors above ground and eight floors below. In 2009, the government supplemented the NDL’s budget with 12.7 billion yen (approximately $137 million U.S.) for digitization, as a way of stimulating the economy.

![Manga shelf](image)

This is Ms. Asuka Nozawa of the NDL’s Administrative Department, who showed me bound volumes of Manga, dating back to 1950, which are being digitized. Prior to 2009, preservation of materials was
normally done by microfilming. A 2010 amendment to the copyright law made it possible for the NDL to digitize its collections without permission of the copyright holder, in the interest of preventing damage to the originals held by the organization.

This is the University of Tokyo.

In the photo on the left, I am in discussions with Mr. Masaharu Ebara, Director of the Historiographical Institute; my translator, Ms. Tawara; and Mr. Kiyora Komiya, Professor, Early Modern Materials Department. At right, I am in the Special Collections Department. As you can see, materials are typically stacked one on top of another. We are being shown a scroll of a shogunate family, one of the many scrolls contained in the department.
This is the Special Materials Department at the HI, which dates back to the late Edo Period (the early 1800s). The Institute became an independent affiliate of the University of Tokyo in 1950. As these photos show, the ceilings are very low. In the early days, these facilities were built without taking into account the space requirements of later generations. Special collection materials invariably end up in storage areas like the ones pictured here.

At left is the International Library of Children’s Literature. Founded in 2000, it is a branch of the National Diet Library. A special exhibit on the Golden Age of the Picture Book is represented here by the book, *Millions of Cats* by Wanda Gag. I was not allowed to take pictures (even without flash) of any books.

What were my findings? Preservation of materials representing our cultural past has always been of primary importance no matter where in the world one lives, and over time preservationists have used the procedures that existed at a particular moment in time. Microfilm—durable and long-lasting—continues to be digitized. Original and rare manuscripts are housed in temperature-controlled environments. Microsoft products are used: this prompted a discussion on the use of Open Source software. I mentioned the advantage of its use as opposed to proprietary software such as Microsoft’s. However, a disadvantage of Open Source is the learning curve involved in its use, a major reason it is not universally favored, even in the U.S.

We went on to discuss digital preservation management; how digital projects all over the world are handled by various organizations; the high cost of digitization; that inter-institutional and international collaboration may be a way to maintain and sustain repositories.

Japan is unique in its production of digitized materials. The NDL is the country’s sole depository library, so a large portion of the NDL budget must be designated for all of the materials requiring digitization.
The International Library of Children’s Literature, which opened to the public in 2000, serves as a digital archive and digital museum. (Visit the Picture Book Gallery http://www.kodomo.go.jp/gallery/index_e.html) In F.Y. 2010, the NDL began collaborating with the Library of Congress (LC) to digitize the LC’s prewar Japanese resources, a program that will take several years to complete. Digitized images will be provided by libraries whose copyright has been cleared, or has expired.

Many exciting things are happening at the Historiographical Institute at the University of Tokyo (HI). The primary mission of the HI is to research, compile, and publish primary source materials on Japanese history, from Japan and other countries. They have accumulated a vast amount of original materials as well as collections of duplicate documents, the result of more than 100 years of investigation and examination of historical records, both in Japan and abroad.

Although computer projects have been in the works for many years, it was not until 2006 that the International Center for the Digitization of Premodern Japanese Sources was established. We discussed the problem of institutions developing digitization systems for their own convenience rather than working towards international standardization. A 2009 evaluation report of the HI mentioned adopting the Dublin Core Metadata Element Set (or developing some framework based on Dublin Core) for various fields. The HI is closely following trends regarding international metadata standards to keep up with the global information resource network. All digitization work is outsourced. All in all, a great deal of joint research and international exchanges have recently taken place and will likely continue.


"So much of our future lies in preserving our past." --- Peter Westbrook

By Anna Quan Leon