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Expatriate Japanese Families as Unexpected Users of Public Libraries
A Case Study in a College Town Community in the United States

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Washington University in St. Louis†, Shirayuri College‡, Doshisha University‡‡

Highlights
• This study looks at “trailing” spouses and children of international students and workers from Japan.
• The authors interviewed families staying in a micro-urban, university-centered community in the United States.
• What and how do they read? They “travel light” and do little e-reading. They use local public libraries actively.
• Public libraries can be a great resource for them, but predicting their needs may be challenging.

Background

• Dali (2012): “Immigrant readership” is an area that needs more empirical research and attentions.
• Reading and information seeking behavior of short-term transnational residents of the United States (i.e. the Japanese families in this study) are similarly less well studied.

Number of Japanese citizens living abroad:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worldwide</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,182,557</td>
<td>241,910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

United States (non-permanent resident) 241,910

Breakdown by purpose of stay (U.S.):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th># of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student, scholar, educator</td>
<td>65,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse, children of student, scholar, educator</td>
<td>16,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate employee</td>
<td>52,093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse, children of corporate employee</td>
<td>70,243</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2012)

Research Question

University libraries
- Students, Visiting scholars
- Spouses, Children
Public libraries?
e-books?

Employers
- Workers

• “Trailing” family members of international students and workers receive little active support from university libraries or employers. What sources do they turn to instead to fulfill their information and reading needs?

Method

• Respondents were recruited from a pool of Japanese families that temporarily live in the area with plans to return to Japan after a predetermined period of time (degree completion, termination of a corporate transfer arrangement, etc.).
• The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with adult members of the families. Total of 7 (4 female, 3 male) from 4 families were interviewed.
• Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes.

Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Interviewee age, # of Children</th>
<th>Anticipate</th>
<th>Time in US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Study</td>
<td>20s/30s, 1 (toddler)</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>19 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Study</td>
<td>30s, 2 (grade school)</td>
<td>20 months</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Research</td>
<td>40s, 1 (middle school)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Corporate transfer</td>
<td>30s, 1 (pre-school)</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>11 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Result

• Most families are “traveling light.” This also affects the size of their personal print book collections.
• But the use of e-book is low, in spite of an apparent fit with the “pack light” approach, and the high rate of PC, tablet and smartphone adoption.
• All of the families use local public libraries, despite originally having limited linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
• Frequency of library visit ranges from once a month to multiple times a week.
• Highly used and desired items include children’s books (both by adults and children), films and visual-centric craft and hobby books.

Conclusion

• The transient nature of the stay and the “travel light” mentality shapes the “trailing” members’ reading needs, goals and practices.
• Public libraries in the 21st century face a challenge of engaging patrons with differential social, physical and transnational mobilities, (Sheller and Urry 2006) but can be a powerful resource for them.
• Possible ways to reach this group include children’s services, audio-visual collections and a maker space.

Works Cited

