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The Future for Foreign Publishers in Japan

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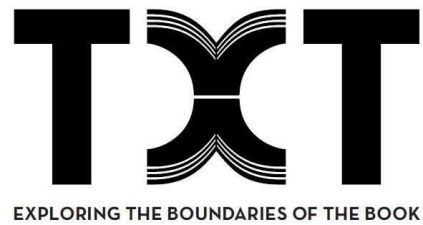
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The Future for Foreign Publishers in Japan

Robin Birtle

Founder and CEO of Sakkam Press, UK

Each publishing market has an effective limit on the number of foreign language books translated and sold in print domestically. In Japan the figure is around eight percent of annual book sales and although a *Harry Potter* level event may nudge the needle a little, this figure is unlikely to vary by more than a percent. Given the Japanese print market is in steady decline, foreign rights teams are having to run harder each year just to stand still and publishers of all sizes are left scratching their heads when a strong seller in its home market flops in Japan.

Foreign rights deals in Japan are brokered by a handful of international agents whose expertise lies in handling contractual matters and arranging for a domestic publisher to take on a book. The international agent has little influence over the release schedule and marketing of the book and is in no position to demand from a publishing major an explanation for poor sales of a promising release. Foreign rights teams, several layers removed from the actual booksellers on the streets of Tokyo, have to accept that these deals are ‘fire and forget’—take the advance and move on without looking back. I suspect that not even Lee Child was told why his first *Jack Reacher* novel is out of print in Japan. However, you can now join me on a virtual tour of a Japanese bookstore and see for yourself what is going on.

Virtual Tour of a Japanese Bookstore

Even gifted with the virtual ability to read Japanese you will find the layout of this store confusing. The Japanese equivalents of mass market paperbacks, *bunko*, are not

arranged by author name but instead are grouped by publisher. This peculiar arrangement is in place to ease the process of book returns to the distributor and certainly does not benefit Japanese consumers who, just like book civilians worldwide, think author name and not publisher when looking for a specific book.

Let’s take a look at two big publishers which are active in bringing foreign content to Japan, Hayakawa Shobo and Kodansha. Your first thought might be that foreign authors are getting less than their 8% share of shelf space. Do not cry foul just yet, though, since that is simply not the case. Kodansha is much the larger of the two publishers and hence provides a better sample size. In our virtual store, as with the real ones, Kodansha sets aside a single section for foreign books and this is, indeed, around 8% of Kodansha’s total *bunko* real estate. (See Figure 1. Virtual Kodansha). So far, so fair. Now take a look at which authors are being exposed to the consumer who is undertaking an ambulatory discovery exercise (or ‘browsing’ in print speak). Patricia Cornwall and Michael Connelly are up there but something odd is going on. Assign a score of 10 to an exposed cover and a score of 1 to an exposed spine to get a list of the ten foreign authors most likely to be discovered by a consumer browsing the Kodansha section.

Author	Discoverability Index
Tove Jansson*	90
Patricia Cornwell	76
Daniel Suarez	44
Michael Connelly	43
L.M. Montgomery*	20
William K. Krueger	15
Martin E.P. Seligman**	12
Aldous Huxley*	11
James D. Watson**	10
Armstrong / Jenkins**	10

This list is a snapshot but reflects a persistent problem for market entrants. Not only does a new author have to contend with contemporary giants such as Patricia Cornwall and Michael Connelly but also a panoply of ghosts of authors past. In the above list, the authors marked with an asterisk are dead and those marked with two asterisks are very much alive but make the list on the back of works published over a decade ago. Some new authors will benefit from posters, advertisements and book reviews in the national press but for many, the spine or cover of their book is the only publicity their literary effort will receive on initial entry to Japan. In the case of *Killing Floor*, the debut work of Lee Child, the cover art was entirely inappropriate for a fast paced thriller. A new book has a window of twelve weeks to perform on the shelves before being returned to the publisher and the publishers presumably do not care which authors succeed, provided some do.

Japan's emphasis on established authors is reflected in the term *rongu seraa*. This word, common in publishing parlance is derived from the English words long and seller and is a handy phrase to describe reliable, old book franchises which are guaranteed a certain amount of turnover. Just slap them up on the shelf, no publicity required whatsoever. Really old material will be out of copyright and, for foreign material, the translations are already in place. Anne of Green Gables, the gift that keeps on giving.

Hayakawa specialise in mystery and science fiction. Perhaps they have a different approach. Have a look at the Hayakawa display (Figure 2. Virtual Hayakawa), though, and you will see their shelves are also heavy with *rongu seraa*. The entire top shelf and a good deal of the second from top is handed over to dear Agatha Christie. Bless.

It is extremely difficult for an overseas publisher to get a publishing deal in Japan in the first place. But as we have seen from our virtual tour, even that is no guarantee of success since the odds are heavily stacked against new entrants to Japan. Does digital change anything?



Figure 1. Virtual Kodansha

What difference does Kindle make?

Amazon launched a Kindle bookstore for Japanese consumers at the end of 2012 after what appeared to have been difficult negotiations with the major Japanese publishers. Given that these major publishers remain half-hearted about digital, overseas publishers and authors could be forgiven for asking 'What has changed?'

For splashy releases from mainstream publishers, nothing has changed. Working through one of the international agents is still the most sensible option. These publishers have the best access to the top translators, a royalty advance will be paid and the book will benefit from the marketing activities and reach of an established organisation.

Outside of the mainstream, though, *everything* has changed. Before the arrival of Kindle in Japan, an overwhelming majority of overseas authors had absolutely no access to the Japanese market since they were unable to secure a deal through one of the international agents. Now, these same authors and their publishers can ask themselves a question which should terrify the army of digital foot draggers in the big Japanese publishers. The question is 'What business model will I use?'

Barbarians are at the Gate and these are their Business Models

The English-Japanese language pair is one of the most expensive when it comes to translation. Finding a way to underwrite translation costs is now the only barrier to reaching the Japanese market and business models are emerging that address this issue. My own company, Sakkam Press, has published under such a model and we are considering each of the following.

Author/ publisher funded. This is the simplest of the four. The author or publisher of the original English book commits to funding the translation.

Sponsorship. Under this model, a commercial sponsor unconnected with the book is found to underwrite the translation costs. For example, an airline may be interested in sponsoring the translation of a book that raises the profile of a particular country and may lead to more travel to that country. In another example, a Hollywood studio releasing a film that is based on a book may wish to ensure that the book is available in translation prior to the film's release in Japan.

Crowdfunding. Use a crowdfunding platform to spread the cost commitment across many readers.

Product-market fit. Most publishers acquire a book and only then do they start to market the book. To borrow a term from the technology world, the acquired book may not have 'product-market fit' with its intended audience. The standard approach can be turned on its head by engaging a potential audience in advance of committing to translate a particular title. Work with, say, a popular blogger to present a small number of sample translations from different titles to a potential audience. Ask that audience to tell you which of the samples they would consider buying if a full translation was available. The response of the audience will be a clear indication of which book is closest to having product-market fit.



Figure 2. Virtual Hayakawa

Access Agents

These new business models will lead to the emergence of *access agents* that will specialise in giving access to readers through marketing activities that build communities and facilitate reader-author interaction. There will be a shift towards commercial relationships that are not deal based but instead are based on a long term, ongoing relationship between author and access agent. The corollary of this approach is that the financial focus moves from the advance to both author and access agent being rewarded for nurturing a franchise over a period of years. Finally, the access agents will also undertake the role of trusted third party who ensures translations are not only accurate but are in keeping with the author's style and are consistent across a series.

Japanese publishing, in decline for twenty years, is badly in need of fresh ideas as to how to get Japan reading again. Overseas authors with little to lose may be the best placed to pioneer new ideas and business models. ■

Notes

This article is based on 'Why Foreign Bestsellers Often Fail in Japan', which was published in *Publishing Perspectives* in 2012