

The Japanese Historical Council's Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the activities of historians and historical societies in Japan? The recommendation of remote work to prevent infection has forced people and organizations to digitize their works. Similarly, the Japanese Historical Council (日本歴史学協会), the biggest union of historical societies of Japan, has also been working as per the new normal, promoting the publishing of open access historical journals with the cooperation of the National Diet Library (国立国会図書館). This paper explains how this project started and the difficulties it has faced thus far.

I. Organization and Activities of the Japanese Historical Council

The Japanese Historical Council was formed in 1950 as a union of Japanese historical societies, because the Japanese Science Council (日本学術会議) established as a national academy in 1949, had asked academic societies of all fields to organize their own unions based on each discipline.¹

Currently, 82 historical societies compose the Japanese Historical Council. As its constitution states, the council aims to promote interconnection among historical societies or research institutions and to discuss important topics related to historical science.² As part of this objective, the council has issued various statements on the government, academy, and society; held symposiums on historical education and the conversation of historical documents; and set up meetings with the National Archives of Japan (国立公文書館) and National Institute of Japanese Literature (国文学研究資料館). Furthermore, the council has cooperated with the National Committee of Japan to support efforts regarding joining the International Congress of Historical

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¹ See, Nihon Rekishigaku Kyōkai 50nen shi henshū iinkai (ed.), *Nihon Rekishigaku Kyōkai 50 nen shi* (Nihon Rekishigaku Kyōkai, 2000), p. 1.

² See, the constitution, available at: <http://www.nichirekikyo.com/about/constitution.html> (Accessed: March 16, 2021).

Sciences.³

The Committee of the Japanese Historical Council is composed of the members recommended by the affiliated societies and a select committee organized by committee members. A standing committee is also organized under the committee of the council. The compositions of the committee and standing committee have to be approved during the council's general meeting. The term of these committees is three years. Furthermore, seven special committees are organized by the committee members and the commissioned members are appointed by those special committees. Each committee specializes in its own area: the National Archives of Japan, academic freedom and freedom of thought (concerning the "National Foundation Day"), historical education, conservation and use of historical documents; the protection of cultural properties, international exchange, young researchers.

The promotion of open access historical journals in Japan has been pushed by the special committee of young researchers. This special committee, which was established in 2018, has chiefly been working on the topics of career paths and the improvement of research environment of young historians, as well as the prevention of all forms of harassment, such as sexual harassment or academic harassment.

Open access of research resources had been one of the principal issues discussed by this special committee, as part of the debate regarding how the Japanese Historical Council should respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Expanding of the open access of historical journals has also been considered in the framework of the discussion of special committee of young researchers. Furthermore, this committee has had experience organizing online meetings. Hence, it could respond to the COVID-19-induced changes relatively quickly.

II. Cooperating with the National Diet Library

Open Request concerning the NDL Digital Collections

In April 2020, COVID-19 began to spread rapidly in Japan and it became apparent that it would be difficult to continue normal activities of higher research and educational institutions. Facing

³ See also the council's website, available at: <http://www.nichirekikyo.com/index.html> (Accessed March 16, 2021).

this situation, the special committee of young researchers held the extra online meetings and discussed how the Japanese Historical Council should and could respond to the new challenges as an association of historical societies.

At first, the special committee discussed problems that part-time lecturers at high schools and universities were facing, since these institutions, as employers, seemed to inadequately consider these individuals during decision-making. It was argued, for example, that the necessary information and the financial support for conducting online lectures and seminars were not enough. On the website of the Japanese Historical Council, the council called for proper measures by relevant institutions and issued opinions and requests of part-time lecturers.⁴

At the same time, the committee considered how difficult it would be for young researchers to continue their research activities since university libraries and municipal libraries were temporarily closed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 infection. These individuals needed to continue with their research endeavors, despite the COVID-19 spread. At the same time, the “Toshokan Kyūkan Taisaku Project” (図書館休館対策プロジェクト Project for Coping with the Closing libraries) started by several young scholars received much attention. This project planned a questionnaire to survey young researchers on how the temporary closure of libraries affected the research activities.⁵ A founder of the project contacted the special committee of young researchers and asked for their cooperation to announce this action to the council’s affiliated societies.

In May, the Historical Science Society of Japan (歴史学研究会), one of the most influential societies of Japan in historical science, asked the Japanese Historical Council to issue a request for the enlargement of the range of open access digitized books and journals available in the National Diet Library (NDL) Digital Collections (国立国会図書館デジタルコレクション). Several works have not been made open access because of copyright problems. Then, the special committee of young researchers responded to the request. Apparently, it was an urgent issue for

⁴ See, the council’s website, available at: http://www.nichirekikyo.com/young_researchers/covid19.html (Accessed March 16, 2021).

⁵ See, the website of this project, available at: <https://closedlibrarycovid.wixsite.com/website> (Accessed March 16, 2021) and the report of this questionnaire, Maeda Mugiho (前田麦穂), “Shingata Corona Virus to ‘Toshokan Kyūkan Taisaku Project’: kinkyū enquête, yōbōsho to sono seika (新型コロナウイルスと「図書館休館対策プロジェクト」——緊急アンケート、要望書とその対策),” *Daigaku Toshokan Kenkyū* (大学図書館研究), No. 116 (November 2020), pp. 1-10.

undergraduate or postgraduate students writing theses that they can access literature and documents on the Internet. The increase of open access publications through the NDL Digital Collections was expected to be helpful amid the COVID-19 pandemic, even if it would not completely solve the accessibility problem of research works.

The special committee of young researchers held several online meetings within a few weeks and created a document regarding a “Request for the enhancement of infrastructure of knowledge and information through the enlargement of the range of open access of NDL Digital Collections”. This request, dated May 23, 2020, was delivered to the minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology (文部科学省); the director-general of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (文化庁), the chief librarian of the NDL; and the other related organizations. It was also published on the website of the Japanese Historical Council. The request was approved by 28 historical societies by July 31, 2020.⁶

The request contained the following three points.

First, it highlighted the problem of “orphan works” that had already been digitized in the NDL Digital Collections but had not yet been published on the Internet. The “orphan works” refer to works whose copyright holders are unknown because the years of death of the original authors of these works are uncertain. Hence, it would be very difficult to manage matters pertaining to the copyright of such works. The works of 47,943 authors in the NDL Digital Collections are affected by this issue. These works are only allowed to be accessed inside NDL buildings or using computer devices inside the buildings of the “joined libraries” (参加館) that are approved to access digitized works by the NDL.

Second, it raised a point regarding the arrangement for the amendment of the Copyright Act of Japan to remove the accessibility restrictions of the 1,518,968 “materials transmitted to the libraries” (図書館送信資料), which include digitized documents, articles, and books that are transmitted only to “joined libraries” approved by the NDL, and 920,565 “materials only disclosed inside the buildings” (館内限定資料) of the NDL. This means open access on the Internet or the personal transmission of these digitized materials of the NDL.

Regarding open access on the Internet or the personal transmission of materials, Article 31 of

⁶ See the request, available at: <http://www.nichirekikyo.com/statement/statement20200523.html> (Accessed March 16, 2021).

the Copyright Act of Japan had to be amended. The special committee of young researchers discussed this point. Even if the temporary removal of the accessibility restrictions would be considered under the exceptional situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, this seemed to be very difficult to implement because of the Copyright Act. However, this point was also to be described in the “request” of May 23, as the special committee was aware of the voices of young researchers, as evidenced by projects such as the “project for coping with the closing libraries.”

Third, it raised the need for cooperation from historians and historical societies—as the copyright holders—to expand open access of journals, because the “enhancement of infrastructure of knowledge and information” needed the cooperation of both the NDL and the copyright holders. The special committee requested a temporary removal of the embargo of publications of historical journals during the period of the closing or limited access of libraries. In the case of Japanese academic journals, the embargo period is typically two years. Temporary removal of the embargo was meant to immediately make the articles of those academic journals available on the Internet as open access. At the same time, providing open access to historical journals in general was also requested.

The special committee also requested further enhancements regarding the digitization of academic journals. Currently, J-Stage serves as the main internet platform for providing open access to the Japanese academic journals, except the university repository services. The “request” of May 23 also intended to promote further digitalization of academic journals and open access publishing on J-Stage to governmental organs.

Cooperation with the NDL

After the “request” of May 23 had been issued, the staff of the NDL set up a consultation meeting with the special committee of young researchers of the Japanese Historical Council. Subsequent online meetings were held several times between July and September. Then, the staff of the NDL presented three proposals.

1. The NDL has already digitized many historical journals part of the preserved materials that were published by the affiliated societies of the Japanese Historical Council. The digitized journals that have not been published on the Internet could be made open access via the NDL

Digital Collections service.

2. The NDL has digitized not only old books, but also the academic journals. The NDL would give to digitizing the previous issues of academic journals without charge, if the societies could manage the copyright of their journals and request open access for those journals in the NDL Digital Collections. In this case, each whole volume of journals must be published without exception.
3. Some historical journals of the societies of the Japanese Historical Council are accessible only inside the buildings of the NDL, and are inaccessible even digitally inside the buildings of “joined libraries.” Such limitations in accessing academic journals should be suspended temporary or removed entirely.

Furthermore, the Japanese Historical Council was asked to survey the historical societies with regards to how they have dealt with the issue of copyright in connection with articles published in their own journals.

After these meetings, the special committee of young researchers created its “announcement on the publication of academic journals on the internet through the NDL Digital Collections,” delivered it to the affiliated societies, issued it on its website, and tweeted about it.⁷ Through this, it is intended to give the societies the option to provide open access of their journals. Currently, the special committee of young researchers has taken charge of a liaison to receive such open access application of the historical societies and to submit these to the NDL.

However, few affiliated historical societies of the Japanese Historical Societies gave a positive response regarding this project until the end of November 2020—the first deadline for applications. The inquiries were sent to the special committee about the management of copyright by two leading historical societies. Only one society, the History of Science Society of Japan (日本科学史学会), which is not part of the Japanese Historical Council, applied to publish the previous issues of the *Journal of History of Science* (科学史研究) through the NDL Digital Collections, under the condition of a one and a half year embargo. Only two societies agreed to abolish the limitation of reading inside the buildings of the NDL. The application for open access

⁷ See the announcement, available at: http://www.nichirekikyo.com/young_researchers/ndl_digicolle.html (Accessed March 16, 2021).

remains to be an ongoing project.

Recently, the number of members of most historical societies in Japan has been decreasing, and the primary reason for this seems to be the declining birthrate and aging population of Japan. As a result, the financial foundations of many historical societies have become quite unstable. Hence, it is financially difficult for such societies to digitize previous issues of their journals. Therefore, the project of the digitalization without charge and publications with one or two years of embargo must be attractive for these societies. Even so, there were few positive responses to this project by the Japanese historical societies because of copyright problems. As a next step, the special committee of young researchers has organized a consultation for the management of copyright for the providing further open access to academic journals.

III. Obstacles in the Development of Open Access for Japanese Historical Journals

In January 2021, only 29% of journals in 79 journals of the affiliated societies of the Japanese Historical Council implemented open access publishing. Journals or bulletins of societies organized by history departments or courses of universities are being published via the open access repositories managed by the universities themselves. In other cases, historical societies independent of universities mostly use the service of J-Stage for open access publishing. Some societies, such as the Gender History Association of Japan (ジェンダー史学会), the Association for East European Studies (東欧史研究会), and the Society for the Study of Modern History (現代史研究会), which clearly specialize in their own disciplines and have about two or three hundred members each, seem to be willing to provide open access to their journals.

Many historical societies in Japan have hesitated about open access publishing because of financial concerns. These societies usually provide their members the right to one printed version of their journals and the right to contribute articles in exchange for the annual fee. These societies are afraid of a decrease in revenue due to the declining number of members, since one of the main incentives to join societies would be lost if anyone can read the previous issues of journals for free after the embargo period of one or two years.

We mention the following five journals that have a long history of being the leading and influential journals in Japanese historical science: the *Journal of Historical Science* (史学雑誌) of the Historical Society of Japan (史学会), the *Journal of History* (史林) of the Society of

Historical Research (史学研究会), the *Journal of Historical Studies* (歴史学研究) of the Historical Science Society of Japan (歴史学研究会), the *Historical Journal* (歴史評論) of the Association of Historical Science, and the *Journal of Japanese History* (日本史研究) of the Japanese Society for Historical Studies (日本史研究会). The Historical Society of Japan is located at the University of Tokyo, and the Society of Historical Research is located at the University of Kyoto; both these societies have already established open access publishing for their journals. In contrast, the societies of three other journals are not placed at any university and have not established open access publishing of their journals. The societies that publish the *Journal of Historical Studies* and the *Historical Journal* have developed especially in close connection with the grass-roots movement in the Japanese postwar society. These societies have strong concerns about the decline in the number of their members and a decrease in annual revenue because of open access publishing; however, they have endeavored to develop “opened” historiography for postwar Japanese society. There is a conflict between the Japanese postwar historiography oriented toward an open civil society and the establishment of an open and public history through the open access publishing.

These historical societies do not have sufficient staff to respond any legal proceeding concerning copyright. Currently, most societies in Japan have asked the authors of previous issues to transfer the copyright of their articles to the societies themselves for open access publishing via notice letter or announcement on their website. It would be impossible for these societies to contact all authors of previous issues and receive consent for the transfer of copyright for all articles. Hence, most societies that promote open access publishing have defined a set period for an author to reply after the announcement—usually one or half a year—and considered that the author had licensed the work to them if any objection was not raised until the deadline. Even so, under the current copyright law of Japan, authors could still sue societies that publish their articles in the form of open access without the direct and definite permission of the authors. Especially, regarding the previous issues of the *Journal of Historical Sciences* and the *Historical Journal*, many comments on current topics that were written by authors who were not supposed to read these on the Internet. Hence, societies hesitate to publish it in the form of open access. Societies such as the Historical Science Society of Japan are concerned about legal cases stemming from a violation of the copyright law.

IV. Challenges and Prospects

The discussion of the open access publishing of academic journals may remind us of the international problem of the “serials crisis,” wherein university libraries face the rapid price increase of academic journals. There is a difference between the task of the open access publishing of Japanese academic journals and the “serials crisis” faced by the university libraries worldwide.

Societies based on the history department or courses at the universities in Japan proceed with open access publishing of journals or bulletins via the repository services of their own institutions. In contrast, it is difficult for major societies that engage in Japanese postwar historiography to sufficiently respond to the advent of open access publishing. Under the COVID-19 pandemic, the special committee of young researchers of the Japanese Historical Council proposed the alternative option of open access publishing using the services of the NDL Digital Collections to those societies. Nonetheless, these societies are still concerned about the open access publishing. The Japanese Historical Council shall endeavor to support diminishing such concerns. For this purpose, it would be useful for these societies to share their suggestions on how to solve the problem of the current Japanese copyright law. Concrete examples of historical societies that have proceeded with open access publishing shall be shared among societies that have not yet adopted such an endeavor. As a further step, the special committee of young researchers may propose a format of the copyright provisions for the historical journals in Japan.

The promotion of open access publishing by historians and historical societies concerns both academic journals and academic publications in general. Currently, the business conditions for the academic publishers are very severe in Japan. Therefore, academic books and collections are rarely reprinted. Discussions should be held on how academic contributions can be shared as open access publications on the Internet.

Currently, Japan is lagging in terms of providing digital versions of the academic books and collections, especially for the humanities subjects. A business model for the publication of digital versions of academic books must be established. Perhaps, the digitalization of academic books would also greatly help university libraries in saving space. Establishing how academic publishers could continue to profit from the digitalization and provision of open access of academic books is a matter of great significance.