



Comments on Current Events 2013 Blue Sky Library and Books that Cannot Rest in Peace

TAKEDA Toru, Journalist

My wish was to allow them to sleep peacefully in their graves.” So said the late Tomita Michio when I interviewed him about electronic books at his house in Yokohama in 1999.

I think even people who have never heard of Tomita might be familiar with the website *Aozora Bunko*, or the Blue Sky Library. Tomita is the Library’s founder.

After Tomita left a publisher that specialized in science and technology books and became a freelancer, one of his close editor friends asked him to write a series of original paperbacks. It was a time when personal computing was beginning to emerge. Finding a need to document events in this period of transition to an information-oriented society as contemporary history, Tomita began gathering materials in 1984 and published *Pasokon Soseiki* (Personal Computer Genesis), his first solely authored book and the first in his series, in the following year.

Unless it is a bestseller, books are unlikely to remain in bookstores for too long. Still, Tomita was hopeful that his book would survive as a publication. This hope was soon dashed, however. The publisher of *Pasokon Soseiki* decided to withdraw from general interest books, and discontinued all of its paperback series. On hearing the news, Tomita tried to buy the copies that should have remained in stock. However, the work Tomita had produced with tremendous labor had already been shredded.



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One misfortune followed another for the disheartened Tomita. He became seriously ill and unable to travel to do the research he needed for writing. At this time of great distress, Tomita encountered some engineers who were trying to create books that could be read on computers. Intrigued, Tomita began working on reviving *Pasokon Soseiki* as a CD-ROM, processing its data on a personal computer himself.

In the course of this work, Tomita was present at the birth of a new era. He discovered that many of the computer authorities he cited in his book on the Internet already had their own websites.

This experience prompted Tomita to take a step beyond books to be read on computers. He conceived the idea of creating an electronic library on the Net. Based on this idea, Tomita launched the Blue Sky Library, a project for publishing titles out of copyright, whose authors had passed away fifty or more years earlier, and books whose authors had agreed to Internet distribution, free of charge on the



web. Gradually the number of books published through the project increased, with the support of donors. The Library has grown to contain more than 10,000 titles today.

Tomita added *Pasokon Soseiki* to the list of books published through the project. In the interview cited at the beginning of this column, he spoke happily about allowing the book to sleep peacefully in its grave. I recalled those words when I heard that Tomita passed away on August 16 of this year.

Tomita had reportedly expressed his misgivings about the discussion to extend the copyright protection period underway in connection with Japan's planned participation in the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP) Agreement until just before his death. Tomita expressed this view not because he regarded copyright with hostility. Quite the opposite in fact. The Blue Sky Library was diligent in protecting authors' rights. For example, Tomita would work very carefully with the volunteer typists and proofreaders to reproduce written expressions on the personal computer display in exactly the way the authors wanted.

However, commercial publishing is too small a field to connect the thoughts authors try to put into their books with the wishes of readers to receive them. Books that cannot be expected to achieve the level of commercial success needed to cover the expenses incurred by the individuals involved in their publication should be published in a way that finds readers. There should be a place where people who cannot visit bookstores and libraries can access books. The Blue Sky Library had been operated based on this thought.

The number of books that are not published because they are unlikely to be profitable and never reach the public on the Internet free of charge because their rights are held by publishers may increase if and when the copyright protection period is extended without careful consideration. This consequence will not only slash the number of titles that can be published at the Blue Sky Library, but may also thin Japanese culture generally.

Another of Tomita's books, *Hon-no Mirai* (The Future of Books) was published at the Blue Sky Library the day after his death. In this book, the invalid Tomita describes an image of a future book that came to mind while looking up into a blue sky at a park near his house.

"What I picture to myself is a book about a blue sky. A soul that soared into the high, clear sky on a rainbow-colored hot-air balloon writes in big letters with chalk made of clouds. 'I'm here.' All you need to do is just look skyward on the spot when you hear that modest whisper. The book will be in the sky, always waiting for someone to start reading."

Books should be a public medium that anyone can write and read. We must rethink publishing from this most fundamental position and build up a copyright protection system that protects authors without querying the commercial value of their works. Tomita has handed us the baton for realizing his dream of enriching the future world of books, right at a time when new companies are entering commercial e-book services and opportunities to discuss copyright issues are growing.

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Born in 1958, he completed a degree in Comparative Culture at the Graduate School of International Christian University. As a non-fiction writer and critic, he has reported on and written about topics including journalism, Hansen’s disease, Manchukuo and nuclear energy. He has been in his current position since 2007 and has written a number of books, including *Genpatsu hodo to media* (*Coverage of nuclear power plants and the media*) and *Watashitachi wa koshite ‘genpatsu taikoku’ wo eranda* (*Thus We Have Chosen to Build Our Nation on Nuclear Power Plants*).