Book Review

Disability Publics: Making Accessibility in Modern Japan

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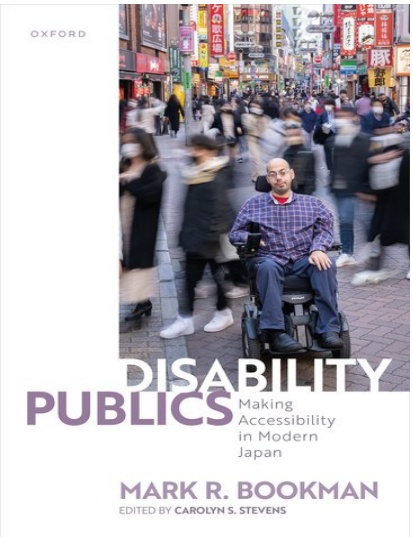

Disability Publics: Making Accessibility in Modern Japan

By Mark R. Bookman

Edited by Carolyn S. Stevens

Oxford University Press, 2025

196 pages.

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Abstract

Disability Publics: Making Accessibility in Modern Japan explores how over the past 150 years, attitudes toward disability in Japan have evolved. Rather than a constant progression, there have been constant impediments and new challenges.

The book uses research methods from history, anthropology, sociology, and political science, as well as media and communication studies.

The title of this Open Access study available for free download refers to diverse groups of disabled people and stakeholders who have fought to define and implement accessibility and inclusion measures in Japanese society. Publics provide sociopolitical spaces where debates and actions occur.

Over a century and a half, activists, lawmakers, and others have shaped the concept of disability in Japan. As a case study, Japan has the third largest economy and most rapidly aging population in the world.

Dr. Bookman asserts that insofar as the Japanese experience reflects international advances in disability rights, the subject should be of interest to students of Japanese history and society, as well as those focusing on human rights, military matters, government, consumerism, geriatric care, and industrial innovation worldwide.

Keywords: disability studies, Japan, history, anthropology, sociology

This account of slow progress over the past 150 years in achieving some degree of disability rights in Japan uses approaches from history, anthropology, sociology, and political science, as well as media and communication studies. The author, Dr. Mark R. Bookman, was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Tokyo Institutes for Advanced Study and also served as an inaugural member of the newly established International Committee of Japan Society for Disability Studies. After Dr. Bookman's untimely death in 2022, the volume was edited by Professor Carolyn S. Stevens, who teaches Japanese Studies at Monash University, Australia.

The title of this Open Access study available for free download[1] refers to diverse groups of disabled people and stakeholders who have labored to define and implement accessibility and inclusion measures in Japanese society. The so-called publics provide sociopolitical spaces where debates and actions occur.

Over a century and a half, activists, lawmakers, and others have shaped the concept of disability in Japan. As a case study, Japan has the third largest economy and most rapidly aging population in the world. Dr. Bookman asserts that insofar as the Japanese experience reflects international advances in disability rights, the subject should be of interest to students of Japanese history and society, as well as those focusing on human rights, military matters, government, consumerism, geriatric care, and industrial innovation worldwide.

As a contributor to a previous book (Grisdale, 2019) promoting travel to Japan for tourists with disabilities, Dr. Bookman offered some evidence of societal progress. However, in this study evaluating the experience of long-term residents of Japan, the results are more nuanced. For instance, a 2017 survey from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism is cited here (Bookman, 2025, p. 139), stating that only 368 of 102,766 hotel rooms in greater Tokyo were wheelchair accessible (0.4 percent).

The author notes that in his own life, a series of gradually extended stays in Japan for study and work coincided with increasing personal health issues. Yet there is no explicit analysis in the new book of the difference between the way tourists with disabilities and less transitory residents are treated by officials.

[1] https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/disability-publics-making-accessibility-in-modern-japan/ as well as the publisher's homepage at https://global.oup.com/academic/product/disability-publics-9780198979739

Nevertheless, the stakeholders studied comprise what Dr. Bookman terms blind elites as well as wounded veterans, architects, engineers, educators, and activists with impairments, sometimes possessing conflicting ideas about what inclusion means.

Therefore, accessibility in Japan cannot be given a static definition, but is continually shaped by sociopolitical and socioeconomic pressures. Inadvertently, some groups may have led to the exclusion or marginalization of others. For example, the focus on physical accessibility might overlook individuals with cognitive impairments.

So, for example, the introduction of braille to Japan and standardization of education for blind people in the 1890s positioned them to demand political changes in the early 1900s. The post-World War II industrial boom left many workers injured or otherwise disabled. They took the opportunity of large-scale events such as the 1964 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games to demand welfare reforms. Periodicals and other media were essential for activist interchanges.

An author's preface outlines social and physical barriers that he confronted in Japan as someone using a wheelchair of foreign manufacture, larger and heavier than Japanese products. Written in clear academic prose with relatively little specialized jargon, this book comprises seven core chapters:

Chapter 1 explores how blind activists, especially educated elites, used industrial innovations in transport and communications to create a disability public; they obtained political privileges in prewar Japan that other impaired individuals could not. After campaigning for access to railways and mass media in the 1930s, blind elites, led by Takeo Iwahashi, a social worker and founding director of Osaka's Japan Lighthouse for the Blind (Nippon Lighthouse) persuaded the internationally celebrated disability rights advocate Helen Keller to visit Japan in 1937, 1948, and 1955. Keller's stays in Japan were impactful, as Dr. Bookman notes, although more analysis might have explored how her progressive socialism was disregarded by her hosts, who also chose to focus on Keller's blindness, rather than her deafness or other disabilities.

Societally, a cultural acceptance of, and lore surrounding, blindness for certain professions might have been more extensively elucidated; the present study mentions neither *The Masseurs and a Woman* (1938), a Japanese comedy-drama film about blind masseurs written and directed by Hiroshi Shimizu, nor Zatoichi, a fictional itinerant blind

masseur and swordsman of Japan's late Edo period, created by the novelist Kan Shimozawa in 1948.

Chapter 2 examines how blind activists helped to create Japan’s first disability law in 1949. Addressing current challenges rather than trying to prevent future disabilities, the law prioritized visual, hearing, and mobility impairments over internal injuries and infectious diseases. Some of these limitations would be improved in later legislation. Elected officials cooperated, mainly to prevent mass protests.

Chapter 3 explains why expanded care inadvertently led to abuse in residential institutions. As Japanese cities were rebuilt in the late 1950s, new environmental barriers grew, and the 1964 Paralympic Games in Tokyo highlighted the inadequacy of national disability welfare systems for all participants. Understaffed residential institutions became a further source of physical abuse.

Chapter 4 discusses how some disability programs aimed at community integration. The Green Grass Society, a group of people with cerebral palsy, generated policy reforms by working with other marginalized minority social movements.

In Chapter 5, to serve the emerging accessibility market, architects and engineers planned barrier-free projects. The United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 was an occasion for Japanese activists to collaborate with the American disability rights movement. Following the example of independent living centers (ILC) overseas, Japan’s disability advocates further protested barriers in buildings and transportation. Japan’s rapidly aging society made universal design policies timely.

Chapter 6 explores how antidiscrimination laws helped resolve delays in policy implementation, while Chapter 7 weighs why the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games spurred new antidiscrimination policies. Despite optimistic media reports, the reality was that to integrate into local communities, some disabled persons had to rely on support from family, friends, domestic and migrant professional caregivers as well as robots and other technologies. Sometimes such networks were unavailable due to labor shortages and budget limitations. Institutional abuse remained an issue, underscoring the uneven progress of Japan’s domestic disability efforts.

And care robots have failed so far (Bookman, 2025, p.142) to be as responsive as humans, due to unclear, redundant labor divisions and potential accidents caused by their introduction.

A Conclusion—Epilogue provides an historical overview, including such dramatic episodes as the Sagamihara stabbings committed in 2016 in Midori Ward, Sagamihara, Kanagawa, Japan. Nineteen people were killed and twenty-six others injured by a former employee of a care home for disabled people. The assailant claimed that persons with multiple disabilities should be euthanized, and killing disabled people would help Japan and world peace.

In the wake of such tragedies, the author urges that further research on the history and politics of disability in Japan is needed to improve inclusivity in an increasingly international society.

Disability Publics is a vigorously researched study, with only a few apparent errors. For example, the American biographical drama film *Minamata* (2021) starring Johnny Depp about the effects of mercury poisoning on the citizens of Minamata, Kumamoto, Japan, is wrongly classified here among "documentaries." (Bookman, 2025, p 60).

Similarly, there is a somewhat reductive description (Bookman, 2025, p. 107) of the author Kenzaburō Ōe, claiming that his "semi-autobiographical writings about parenting a disabled child later earned him a Nobel prize." Ōe's literary achievement certainly addressed disability, especially through the experience of his son, which is pertinent to the present publication. Yet the Nobel Committee citation also alluded to Ōe's overall depiction of postwar Japan's existential crises, eros, and political life through themes such as nuclear war and the search for meaning. So fathering a disabled child was in fact one of several subjects that may be said to have earned Ōe the Nobel Prize.

Finally, an abundant but unwieldy, uncategorized bibliography of almost 30 pages might have been more user-friendly if presented by grouping books, scholarly articles, and journalism separately or divided into Japanese and English language sections.

Apart from these minor observations, *Disability Publics* is an incisive work of interest for all readers interested in Japanese history and society. As the author suggests, the topic of how people with disabilities are treated in a society impacts far more than just disability studies, and the wide-ranging intellectual energy of the present Open Access volume makes it potentially useful in many fields of study.

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