

For the love of a good bookstore

Japanese writer's work in Chinese is an excellent guide to iconic Tokyo booksellers and could also help China entrepreneurs

By YANG YANG

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Liu Suli, founder of the famous All Sages Bookstore near Peking University, once said that Japanese writer Shinobu Yoshii's book *Tokyo's Constant Booksellers*, published in 2016, is one of the two key books about the bookstore business in China. Liu said "it showcases bookstores in an advanced society which may be how we look in 15 years, and lets us understand the content and essence of bookstores".

The other book he referred to is Zhong Fangling's *My Love Affair with Bookstores*, first published in 1999, from which Liu learned how to set up a bookstore.

Polite and gentle, Yoshii speaks in a soft voice that brings to mind one of those Japanese actresses seen in TV series and films, but her favorite Chinese food is spicy and hot Zhong dumplings from Chengdu, in South-west China's Sichuan province.

Yoshii, 42, started learning Chinese in 1996, when as a college student she received a scholarship to study in Chengdu for a year.

Married to a man from Shanghai, Yoshii speaks fluent Chinese and writes about Japanese food and bookstores in Chinese.

In the past five years, as the Chinese government has been encouraging people to read more, and supporting the development of bookstores, an increasing number of bookstores with unique designs have popped up in cities big and small, bucking the closing trend of traditional bookstores.

When Chinese people travel, many visit bookstores, such as Eslite in Taipei and Tsutaya Books in Tokyo.

Tokyo has the highest number of independent bookstores in the world, more than 1,300, according to a Quality of Life Survey 2017 by *Monocle* magazine, higher than the total number of the subsequent nine cities on the list.

"Chinese visitors always say that Tokyo has many great bookstores, but I want to show Chinese readers that before bookstores like these came into existence, there were many small, independent bookstores and publishers that helped nurture readers over the generations. And it's because of them that the culture of reading in Tokyo took off," Yoshii said.

"Without understanding that phase of development for bookstores in Tokyo, you cannot really learn how to run such a bookstore in China. You can imitate those bookstores, but how they run and how they nurture readers can only be learned by talking to the booksell-



Ten independent booksellers that boast interesting backgrounds and an intimate spirit feature in Shinobu Yoshii's book. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ers. As you learn to create a beautiful look like those Tokyo bookstores, you should also learn their history and background," she said.

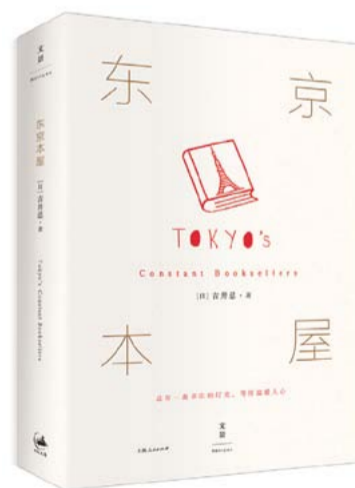
That is why she used the word *honya* — the Japanese word for small bookstore — in the Chinese title of her book to represent the independent and intimate spirit of the stores in her work.

It is also the reason why, when she wrote the book, she first introduces the look, location, history and owner of a bookstore; and rather than summarizing her observations and feelings in the interviews, she uses a Q&A style to let readers learn from the thoughts of the owners in their own words.

In *Tokyo's Constant Booksellers*, Yoshii presents 10 interesting independent booksellers to Chinese readers.

For instance, at B&B, readers can spend 500 yen (\$4.50) to buy a beer and rifle through the books or listen to lectures while enjoying their drink.

At the end of the book, Yoshii



Tokyo's Constant Booksellers tells how a culture of reading has developed over time in Tokyo.

introduces an independent publisher and bookstore Natsuhasha, which has one employee, its founder Junichiro Shimada.

Shimada started the publishing house at the lowest point in his life — after his applications for jobs

were rejected by 50 companies. In the same winter when he was 31, his closest cousin died, and he decided to publish a book to comfort the parents of his cousin.

Yoshii began researching independent bookstores in Tokyo in the winter of 2009, after she got a freelance job writing a column about bookstores in Tokyo for Shanghai magazine *The Bund*.

Yoshii, who moved to Shanghai in 2008 after marrying her husband, has always been a bookworm.

Raised in Tokyo, Yoshii loves bookstores, especially independent outlets, which are very unique in looks and represent the specific tastes of their owners. So, when she picked stores to write about, she deliberately avoided new stores because she did not know how long they could survive.

"I chose bookstores that had a comparatively long history, such as Mosakusha. It has been open for 40 years," she said.

"And even if I wanted to feature interesting bookstores that had



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SHINOBU YOSHII,
Author of *Tokyo's Constant Booksellers*

opened recently, I would still need time to assess them, to see if the books they choose are of the same standard, or even better.

"Staff members at new bookstores are usually very hospitable, and the books are often displayed in a very beautiful way. But after six months to a year, things often change. It takes time to form an impression."

Between 2009 and 2014, 179 independent bookstores in Tokyo shut their doors. But despite this, many independent bookstores survive because "the core values of the bookstore" have not changed.

"The styles (of bookstores) vary but they know very clearly what they want to do, and always stick to their ideal."