

WHAT IS THE OBI IN JAPANESE BOOKS?

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Abstract

Japanese modern books feature a unique accessory known as the obi. The obi is a band wrapped around the lower portion of a book's cover or case, primarily used for promotional purposes. Although its origins are estimated to date back to the late Meiji to early Taisho periods, its exact beginnings remain uncertain. Nevertheless, nearly all newly published books in contemporary Japan include an obi. The obi serves as a medium to convey new information, such as advertisements or announcements, not included in the book's main content.

In this paper, I argue that the obi's material liminality allows it to have two seemingly contradictory characteristics. First, the obi embodies the characteristic of "transience," allowing it to be replaced or updated with ease. On the other hand, the obi also is flexible enough to add durability to a book's changing existence, and is often crafted as part of the book's binding, exhibiting the characteristic of "sustainability." The obi, blending these two characteristics, has become an indispensable element of Japanese books, enriching the culture of book design with its diverse styles. I will demonstrate the indispensable role of obi within Japan's unique book publishing strategies and explore its dual nature as both a source of information and a creative work.

Keywords: book studies, *obi*, bookbinding, bibliography, publication, Japanese books.

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1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the cultural element of the *obi* [band], which is an essential feature of Japanese books. While the term *obi* is commonly associated with the traditional sash or belt worn with a Japanese kimono, in this context, it refers to the strip of paper that is wrapped around Japanese books.

The *obi* is a significant cultural element of books published in modern Japan, representing a unique aspect of Japanese publishing that is rarely found in other countries. Recently, Western books have begun to feature a similar item, referred to as a "belly band" (Visentin, 2021:1) (Team First Second, 2014), but this is a very recent development.

Despite its prominence in Japanese publishing, the *obi* has received little scholarly attention from the perspective of book studies. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on the *obi*. The primary question explored is: Why has the *obi* been

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overlooked in academic discourse? In doing so, this paper aims to lay the foundation for future research on the *obi*.

Given the lack of systematic studies on the *obi*, the author has independently collected examples and identified their characteristics. These examples are categorized and presented below. Unless otherwise noted, the images provided in this paper were collected by the author.

2. Overview of the *Obi*

The *obi* refers to a strip of paper that is wrapped around the bottom of a book's dust jacket or slipcase, primarily serving promotional purposes. It is also known as *koshi-obi* or *obi-gami*, terms believed to have been inspired by the *obi* worn with traditional Japanese attire. As discussed in the next section, the exact origin of the *obi* remains unclear. Nevertheless, in contemporary Japan, the *obi* is an essential element, invariably wrapped around books regardless of genre. It has become an indispensable feature of modern Japanese publishing.

The exact origin of the *obi* remains unclear. Some theories suggest that it was first attached to the 1914 collection of essays by philosopher Jirō Abe, *Santaro's Diary* (*Santaro no nikki*) (Kida, 1975), or to the 1900 essay collection *Nature and Life* (*Shizen to jinsei*) by writer Roka Tokutomi (Matsumoto, 1992). However, since no physical examples have been confirmed, the precise origin cannot be definitively determined. It is certain, however, that the *obi* is not a recent innovation.

The reason we cannot view the original examples is that the *obi* has traditionally been treated as a "supplementary item." It primarily contains promotional text for the book and functions as an advertisement in bookstores. While its presence is expected when the book is sold, it is often removed and discarded by consumers. As a result, the *obi* has not been regarded as an integral part of the book's design and has not been preserved.

Although the *obi* has not been recognized for its value as a source of information, the promotional text and copy featured on it have nonetheless attracted attention due to its advertising function. This paper focuses on the *obi* itself, using contemporary Japanese *obis* as material for analyzing and categorizing its distinctive characteristics.



Figure 1, 2

Irina, Grigore. 2022. Yasashii Jigoku (Kind Hell), Akishobō Publishing House. Photo used with permission.



Figure 3,4

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. 2024. *Hyakunen no Kodoku (One Hundred Years of Solitude)*, Shinchōsha Publishing House. Photo used with permission.

Here are examples of newly published books. On the left (Fig.1,3) is an image of a book with a dust jacket. On the right (Fig.2,4), there is a strip of paper with text at the bottom—this is the *obi*, which contains promotional text for the book. Although the photo only shows the front cover, the *obi* is wrapped around the entire book, covering both the front and back covers. When there is a dust jacket or slipcase, the *obi* is wrapped around the cover or the slipcase.

The red book on the left (Fig.1,2) is *Kind Hell*, an autobiographical essay by Irina Grigore from Romania. The *obi* features a vertical text introduction, beginning with a quote from the book: "When I read *Snow Country*, I thought, 'This is it. These are the words I want to speak.'"

The black and gold book on the right (Fig.3,4) is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. Released in paperback form in June 2024, it generated significant buzz. The *obi* prominently features an advertising copy in the center, with "Nobel Prize in Literature" written in the top left and "46 languages, 50 million copies" in the top right, highlighting the book's status as a global bestseller. The design of the *obi* is also more striking compared to that of the first book.

As demonstrated, while all of these are referred to as “*obi*,” their content, design, and production methods vary considerably, resulting in a wide range of variations.

In the case of *Kind Hell*, the *obi* presents content that cannot be inferred from the title or author’s name alone. *For One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it strongly emphasizes the book’s global reception. In both cases, expressions are carefully chosen to create points of connection for Japanese readers, as these are translated works.

While the examples discussed here focus on translated books and adopt an advertising-oriented perspective, it must be emphasized that the *obi* is not exclusive to translations. It is utilized across a wide range of publications in contemporary Japan. Moreover, its function extends beyond mere advertising. This broader role will be examined in greater detail in Chapters 3 and beyond.



Figure 5, 6

Murakami, Haruki. 1987. *Norwegian Wood*, Kōdansha Publishing House. Photo used with permission.

One notable example of an *obi* is Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. This two-volume novel features a red cover for the first volume and a green cover for the second. Initially, the *obi* matched the color of the cover, but after a period of time, they were redesigned to either silver or gold for both volumes. Each *obi* features a short phrase symbolizing the novel or an advertising slogan. The first edition, in which the cover and *obi* shared the same color scheme, was published in early September 1987. As sales began to stabilize, a gold *obi* was added in anticipation of the Christmas season. This particular version appears to have been the best-selling edition. (A more detailed discussion of the relationship between Christmas and the use of gold will be provided in Chapter 4.) In other words, the explosive popularity of *Norwegian Wood* in Japan can be attributed not only to its content, but also to the appeal of its overall book design, including the *obis*.

3. Characteristics of the *Obi*

As previously mentioned, the *obi* was not preserved because it was not intended to be kept, unlike covers or cases designed to protect books. This suggests that the *obi* has always been regarded as an "appendage" to the book itself, characterized by its transience and fluidity.

The *obi* is used to add information not found in the main text of the book, such as genre classification, promotions, announcements, and content introductions. This information is dynamic and often updated. For instance, information such as film adaptations or awards won may happen after the book's publication, requiring new details to be added. The *obi* is an ideal medium for this purpose, as it can easily be removed or replaced, making it possible to continuously update the book with new information in the form of advertisements.

On the other hand, some *obis* exhibit the characteristic of "sustainability," intended for long-term use. This type of *obi* is typically seen with literary and academic books and may feature excerpts, explanations, or introductions to the book's content. Additionally, there are formats in which the *obi* is integrated as a part of the overall book design.

To clarify these characteristics, I will now introduce some concrete examples.

4. Case Studies

First, clear examples of the characteristic of "transience" are provided here.



Figure 7. Photos used with permission.

The circled areas contain the term "New Release," which necessitates the removal of the *obi* once the specified period has passed. In particular, the top example (Fig.7) includes details of other new releases from the same publisher within the same month, making the information relevant solely for that particular month. The second (Fig.8) and third (Fig.9) examples of the *obi* also feature the term "New Release" on the spine. As such, even when the book is shelved with the cover facing inward, the *obi* ensures that the book's status as a new release is immediately apparent.

Similarly, *obis* for seasonal promotions are removed once the relevant period has ended. In Japan, seasonal reading promotions are often organized, with particularly large-scale reading promotions taking place in the summer.



Figure 8. Photo used with permission.

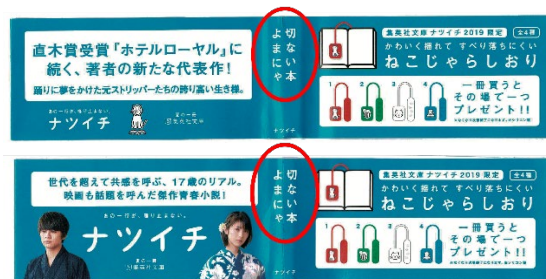


Figure 9, 10. Photo used with permission.

The figure above is an example of a promotion by Shueisha. Different *obis* are created for each individual book. On the front section of the *obi*, there is a description of the book's content. The spine section also includes words that clarify the book's genre or provide a specific classification of its content. This helps attract the attention of potential buyers and makes it easier to select a book.

The cat depicted on this *obi* (Fig.10) is a character from Shueisha named *Yomanya*. The *nya* in the name imitates the sound of a cat's meow. The same phrase *Yomanya* is also written on the spine, which is a play on the Kansai dialect, meaning "must read." The use of both meanings serves as a clever play on words. It reflects a meticulous attention to detail. Additionally, the *obi* describes the content with phrases such as "exciting book" and "heart-wrenching book."

The following is a promotion by the major publisher Kadokawa.



Figure 11. Photo used with permission.



Figure 12. Photo used with permission.

That year, there was also a collaboration project with a movie. The two *obis* at the top (Fig.13) share the same design, but they differ in length, depending on the thickness of the book. It is important to note that not all *obis* have the same design. Some are created with unique selling points, tailored to the specific content of each book.

The following is a promotion by the publisher Shinchosha, one of Japan's leading major publishing houses.



Figure 13. Photo used with permission.

The following they do not create a unique *obi* for each book, they instead use several set designs. The variation in artwork creates a noticeable distinction in appearance. As we have observed, since the *obis* were produced by different publishers—Shueisha, Kadokawa, and Shinchosha—the design approaches vary accordingly.



Figure 14. Photo used with permission.



Figure 15. Photo used with permission.

Promotions are not limited to the summer season, and this is an example of an *obi* for a Christmas promotion. In Japan, as indicated by the term 'Christmas sales battle,' Christmas is considered a critical opportunity for product sales. This example is from Shinchosha. The top *obi* (Fig.16) is attached to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, while the one below (Fig.17) was used for other books selected for the Christmas fair. It reads, 'Merry Christmas from those who have read it.' The use of gold is commonly associated with Christmas in Japan.

It is intriguing to observe the differences in design based on the publisher. This serves as evidence that publishers are not only refining cover designs, but also intentionally crafting *obi* designs to attract the attention of potential buyers. Some publishers create unique *obis* for each book, with different selling points, while others use the same design across all books. By producing a uniform design for all books, publishers likely reduce production effort and manage costs more efficiently.

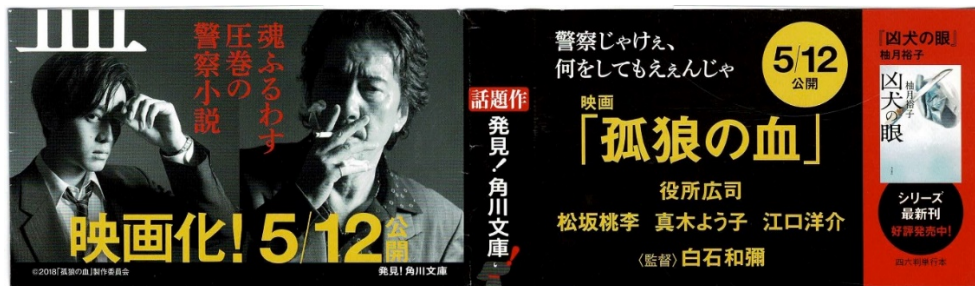


Figure 16. Photo used with permission.



Figure 17. Photo used with permission.



Figure 18. Photo used with permission.

These *obis* are added to books that have been made into movies or stage productions. They serve the purpose of providing new information that is not found in the main body of the book. As with other *obis*, it is preferable to remove these once the event, such as the film's release, is over to maintain the freshness of the information. The book at the top (Fig.18) was published in 2017, and the film adaptation was released in 2018. The book in the middle (Fig.19) was published in 2011, with the film adaptation occurring in 2018. The book at the bottom (Fig.20) was published in 2018, and it was adapted into a stage production in 2019. In each case, the *obi* was newly created for books that had already been published.

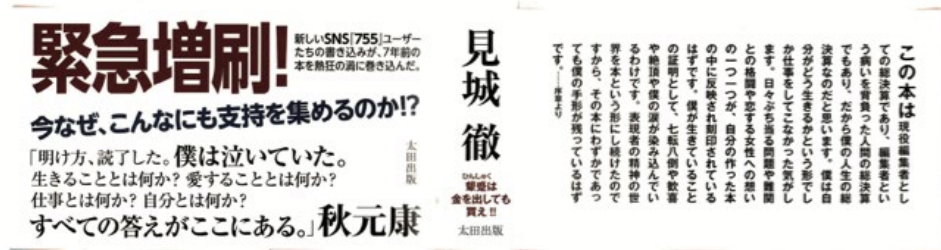


Figure 19. Photo used with permission.



Figure 20. Photo used with permission.

These (Figure 21,22) are example of effectively utilizing *obi*'s characteristic of "fluidity." These are *obis* added to the same book at different times. They serve the purpose of updating information related to the book and creatively keep the book looking new. That is to say, *obis* are not only created for new releases but can also be renewed and produced as needed.

By remaining on bookstore shelves for as long as possible, they are expected to boost sales. Business books, which often reflect current trends and have similar cover designs, benefit from *obi* updates that highlight differences and make them stand out.

Obis often possess both the characteristics of "transience" and "sustainability" at the same time. The following *obis*, attached to a new release, are designed to remain intact even after a long length of time.

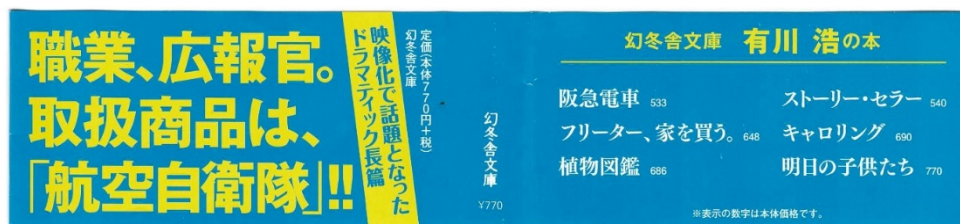


Figure 21. Photo used with permission.



Figure 22. Photo used with permission.

They supplement information not found in the main body of the book, such as summaries, series details, and other works, to appeal to potential buyers. Since the freshness of the information does not change significantly, it is not a problem if the *obi* stays on the book for a long time.



Figure 23, 24, 25, 26. Photo used with permission.

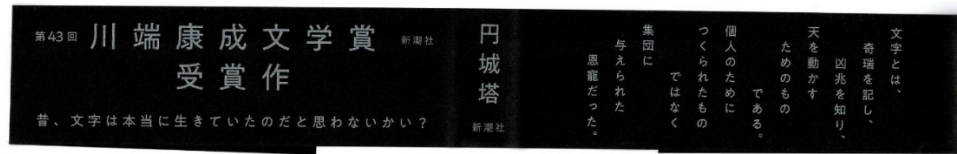


Figure 27. Photo used with permission.

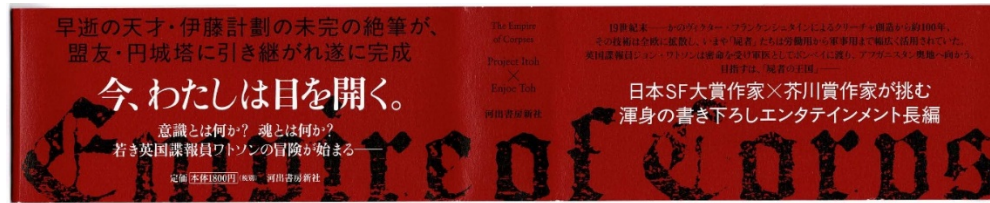


Figure 28. Photo used with permission.

While similarly maintaining both characteristics, the examples above place a greater emphasis on the "sustainability" aspect. The cover design is crafted with the expectation that an *obi* will be included, yet it remains aesthetically coherent even without one. The fact that the width of the *obis* are not standardized indicates that they are conceived as integral elements of the book's overall design. *Obis* are not predetermined in terms of size, length, or color. As seen in this example, they are designed to either avoid obscuring or to enhance the text and illustrations on the cover, thereby complementing the book's appearance as a whole.

These *obis*, typically produced only for new releases, are designed with a view towards long-term use.



Figure 29, 30, 31

This is another example of an *obi* embodying both characteristics. It is clear that the design functions well whether or not the *obi* is present. Photo used with permission.

It is worth noting that this book does not have a cover. Since most standard Japanese books do include a cover, this book is somewhat unique in that regard. The absence of a cover, yet the presence of an *obi*, highlights just how familiar and accepted the practice of supplementing information through *obis* has become in Japanese book design.

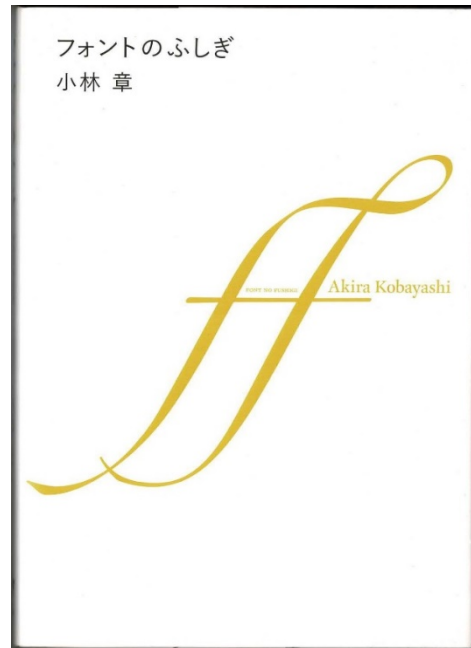




Figure 35, 36. Photo used with permission.

This is an example of an *obi* with an emphasis on sustainability. (Fig.28) The cover design and almost all of the information are featured on the *obi*, and without it, the book would likely be treated as inadequate in a bookstore. For newly published books, the state in which the *obi* is attached is regarded as the “complete” product. Given the *obi*’s high value as a source of information, any damage to it constitutes a loss of information and renders the book itself a “defective product,” as if the main body were physically damaged or flawed. It is clear that having the *obi* is considered standard.

The blue book (Fig.29) is a travel guide. While the colors of the photograph differ, it is the same book. The *obi* of this travel book incorporates vivid photographic illustrations, enabling it to stand out in stores and effectively convey the richness of its content. However, once the *obi* is removed, the book's design becomes simple, making it easy to carry while traveling.

This demonstrates the dual nature of the *obi*, where it is expected to be present when sold, but can be absent once the book is in the consumer's possession.



Figure 40

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2014-2016, Ikezawa Natsuki=Kojin Henshū Nihon Bungaku Zenshū [Zen 30 kan] (Japanese literature complete works by Ikezawa Natsuki), Kawade Shobō Shinsha Publishers inc. Photo used with permission.

This (Fig.30) is another example where the *obi* carries most of the information, but, unlike the previous case, this is part of a series. The design emphasizes the simple elegance of the books when displayed without the *obi*, and the *obi* design is unified to ensure consistency across the series.

The image below (Fig.31) shows the entire series arranged together. While the *obis* are still attached in these photos, it is evident that the books would appear even simpler and more uniform without them.



Figure 41,42,43,44. Photo used with permission.

In recent years, there has been a trend where the *obi* is "present yet absent." For example, the Iwanami Science Library series, published since 1993, eliminated the *obi* starting with volume 101 (Fig.32), released in May 2005, as part of a cost-saving measure. Instead of the *obi*, the cover itself incorporates a design equivalent to the *obi*. By utilizing the traditional *obi* placement, this design retains its promotional function while also integrating it into the overall cover design, maintaining consistency across the series. This format, which is both an *obi* and not an *obi*, represents a significant shift in the evolution of the *obi*.

Thus, it is evident that the inclusion of an *obi* at the time of publication was then considered the norm. The *obi* has, in fact, become an indispensable feature of Japanese books.

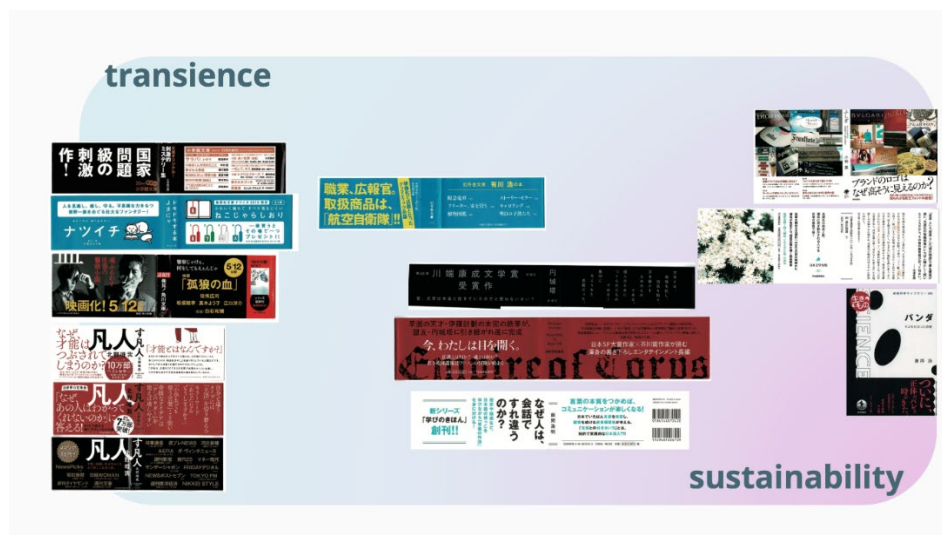


Figure 45. Photo used with permission.

The characteristics of “transience” and “sustainability” we have examined so far in *obi* can be seen as falling upon a spectrum. Some tend towards one characteristic or the other, while others embody both characteristics. The variation in these two characteristics of the *obi* is considered a unique aspect of Japanese publishing culture.

5. The handling of the *obi*

Finally, how the *obi* is handled in bookstores and libraries and its future will be addressed.

Although the *obi* is now an almost universal feature, from the perspective of bookstore staff, it is often viewed as a cumbersome element. Having worked in a bookstore myself, I can attest that managing *obis* can be troublesome. Since they are simply wrapped around the outside of the book, they are prone to tearing easily,

which diminishes the product's appearance. Additionally, the process of attaching and removing *obis* becomes particularly challenging when dealing with large quantities. Nevertheless, whether or not an *obi* is present significantly influences the likelihood of customers picking up a book, and consequently, its sales performance. In the context of current Japanese publishing and sales strategies, the *obi* as a promotional tool remains indispensable.

In libraries, however, the *obi* is seldom preserved due to its role as an advertising tool. It is often regarded as a temporary accessory, and from the perspective of the library's four core principles—acquisition, organization, preservation, and provision—retaining all *obis* is impractical, leading to their frequent disposal.

Nevertheless, the author believes that the *obi* is also a valuable source of information and a form of creative work in its own right.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the reason the *obi* has received limited scholarly attention thus far lies in its longstanding perception as merely an advertisement or supplementary accessory. This prevailing view has obscured its significance within the broader context of book culture.

However, the *obi* merits reconsideration. Despite the ambiguity surrounding its origins, the *obi* has come to function as a distinctive cultural element and a vital source of information in Japanese books. Over time, it has undergone a remarkable transformation—from a utilitarian promotional device to a designed component of the book itself, and even a form of creative expression.

This study has argued that the *obi*'s evolution has been driven by the tension between two seemingly opposing characteristics: its transience and its sustainability. It is precisely this duality that has enabled the *obi* to adapt and endure within Japan's publishing landscape.

If bookbinding history serves as a mirror to publishing history, then the history of the *obi* must be recognized as an essential part of Japan's typographic and design heritage. By drawing attention to this often-overlooked element, this paper has sought to reposition the *obi* as a subject worthy of critical and cultural inquiry. Its continued study may not only enrich our understanding of Japanese publishing but also illuminate the dynamic intersections between design, marketing, and reader experience.

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For Note 3 (Akishobō) and Note 6 (Kawade Shobō Shinsha), individual permissions for image use were obtained, and bibliographic information has been provided accordingly.

For Note 4 (Shinchōsha) and Note 7 (Iwanami Shoten), the information has been provided based on the usage guidelines for book cover images stated on their respective websites.

Illustrations

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