

Sumiyoshi O-Bunko (Book Depository)

Osaka has had a thriving bookselling industry since the seventeenth century. In 1723, a group of publishers based in the three major cities of Osaka, Kyoto, and Edo (now Tokyo) decided to fund the construction of a book depository at Sumiyoshi Taisha. The depository is Osaka's oldest library. Given Sumiyoshi's long association with poetry, literature, and entertainment, donating the first printing of a book was one way the publishers could honor the gods and ensure the book's success. There was also a practical benefit. Edo-period books were printed with woodblocks that would wear down with successive printings. If a book proved to be a bestseller, a copy woodblock could be made from the pristine first print stored at the shrine.

In the 300 years since the practice began, the collection at Sumiyoshi Taisha has grown to over 50,000 volumes, and the original storehouse can no longer hold them all. In some cases, the Sumiyoshi book archives hold the only copy or the best copy of popular historical texts, especially from the late Edo period (1603–1867). Today, most of the books are stored in modern facilities. Kansai-based publishers continue to donate books to the shrine. Every year in May, books are removed from the depository and archival storage to be inspected and aired. Volunteers leaf through the pages, removing any insects that might have burrowed inside and airing the pages in the sun.