A study of methods for providing information related to historical research

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The National Museum of Japanese History (Rekishaku) has begun to make public the results of research undertaken on Japanese history and culture via computer networks. Over the past several years, the museum has been constructing a system for making available the original information in historical documents and artifacts to the public. This paper explains the concept behind this method of providing information and discusses the results of an analysis of the use of this information system.

An effective means of providing written data is to provide it in a form in which image information has been added to the basic written information. High quality presentation is possible in cases where there is a complete text to which image information has been added. In the case of a digital collection comprised mainly of digital images of a large number of materials, establishing a layered system based on the appropriate classification of materials and links within each layer and between the different layers is important for enabling users to find the materials they seek with relative ease. In the case of extremely detailed and small-sized digital historical materials, the materials have been digitized so that even the smallest detail is legible. Thus, we have made it possible for users to peruse these kinds of materials by altering the magnification of the materials while the displayed image information is continuously moving. Rekishaku’s choice of an intuitive operating interface gives users the impression that they are handling the real thing. It is also useful for comparative research on materials, and serves a role similar to that of using replicas.

The number of hits made on Rekishaku’s website has increased 1.9-fold in a year, and pages publicizing materials have also received a reasonable number of hits. The necessity of providing information on Japan’s history and culture and the effectiveness of making information public by this means of information communication is now recognized. We have learnt from records on the use of the system that provides information on exhibition materials that some users enter the system with the intent of searching for specific materials, and
that it is necessary to adopt a configuration that facilitates the speedy location of the desired information.

A format that uses mainly image information is effective for making public information relating to historical research in a short time. For digital materials to be effective, it is essential to have a sufficient quantity of materials and it is also important to use these materials in conjunction with exhibitions. When selecting a method for operating such systems, it is critical that the interface is simple and easy to understand.