

報告 (Report)

韓国の公共図書館の現状と将来展望 – アフターコロナの状況を中心に

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Current Status and Future Prospect of Korean Public Libraries, with a special regard to after-COVID 19 Pandemic Situation

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*** All the sources not specified in the Tables are cited and adapted from the following material: Presidential Committee on Library and Information Policy of Korea, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 1). National Library Statistics System, at <<https://www.libsta.go.kr>>.

1 Preface

Public library is only one type of various libraries of which the modern history opened to the public is not so long than other library types. But in the modern society, it has been regarded as one of the very important essential organizations in any community. In this reason, most of national and local government have tried to support the public libraries using the taxes for them to provide their facilities and services without any charge to the library users.

Despite the importance and value of the public library, this type of library has not been much focused from the academic community than any other type. And in many countries including USA, it has been not so easy to invite or secure highly qualified personnel and specialists in those libraries, and in some cases not to secure qualified librarians. Instead, they prefer to pursue their careers in other fields including academic libraries, information industry, and so on, because those areas can afford to pay more salaries and benefits for the better qualified personnel.

In this presentation, I will try to browse the general status and characteristics of the public library in South Korea, investigate some trigger events to encourage public library development and some of recent innovative services in South Korea during and after the COVID 19, and try to suggest some ideas for the practitioners and researchers based on my personal experiences as a researcher having involved in the area more than thirty years.

2 Current Status of Public Libraries in South Korea

2.1 Number of Public Libraries

There have been public libraries before Korean government first made the Library Law in 1963. Before the 1970, there were less than 60 public libraries (58 in 1970), but after the announcement of “Five-Year Plan for the Establishment of Public Libraries” in 1968 (108 in 1975) and the new start of Ministry of Culture in 1995, the numbers have been increased drastically as 120 in 1980, 221 in 1990, 420 in 2000, 780 in 2010, 1,172 in 2020 (Table 1) , and 1,236 in 2022 (Table 2)

Table 1 Increase of Numbers of Public Libraries in South Korea

Year	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Number	58	120	221	420	780	1,172

(adapted and added from 2)). In 1975 it reached more than 100, in 2005 more than 500 (514),

Table 2 Comparison of Numbers of Public Libraries by Nations

Nations	Korea (2022)	USA (2021)	Australia (2021–2)	Germany (2022)	Japan (2022)
Number	1,236	9,207	1,706	6,748	3,305

and in 2016 more than 1,000 (1010).

2.2 Other General Indicators for the Korean Public Libraries

Other general statistics about the public libraries in South Korea show the services for the public have been continuously improved during last five years, as we can see in Table 3.

Population per library has been decreased year by year, and total numbers of the collected books have also been increased every year. But books per library have been decreased from 2019 – it might because many libraries applied the Korean Enforcement Decree of the Library Act [Attachment 7] which specifies “The scope of the discard and weeding of library materials should not exceed 7 percent of the total library collections per year,” to save the spaces of the libraries. Visitors and Book-lent per libraries have been decreased during the COVID 19

Table 3 Other General Statistics for Public Libraries in South Korea

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Population per library	47,287	45,723	44,223	42,747	41,617
Books per library	100,665.43	101,476.75	101,147.5	100,113.3	99,193.38
No. of books total	110,329,315	115,074,631	118,544,873	120,936,866	122,603,018
No. of librarian per library	4.4	4.5	4.5	4.6	4.7
Visitors per library	253,464	250,804	76,431	115,016	142,160
Books lent per library	115,990	117,962	100,449	110,768	111,824

pandemic periods, but after it both have been recovered gradually, even though not the same with those before the pandemic. One more thing to notify is that the number of librarians per library has been increased year by year, though not a large number.

Based on the statistic of 2022 data, National Library Statistics System suggest that comparing with those of 2021, numbers of book lent have increased by 1.07 percent, total operating expenses by 13.81 percent, and book purchase costs by 0.77 percent, whereas numbers of borrowers have decreased by 1.28 percent, numbers of book collection by 0.76 percent, and increased numbers of collected books by 3.4 percent.

3 Some Trigger Events to Encourage Public Library Development in South Korea

There have been many important and crucial incidents and events which have given valuable momentum for the development of public libraries in South Korea. In this part I will try to suggest some of them based on my own personal perspective on them, including (1) the enactment of the Libraries Act, (2) launching of local government system, (3) various changes under the IMF system, (4) organization of Library and Information Policy Committee and establishment of long-term national library development plans, (5) evaluation of library operations and establishment of national library statistics system, (6) rapid increase of small libraries, and so on.

3.1 Enactment of the Libraries Act

Libraries Act in South Korea had been first established in 1963, through the name changes of Library Promotion Act (圖書館振興法)(1991) and Library and Reading Promotion Act (圖書館

및 讀書振興法)(1994), and returned into the original name in 2005 again. The purpose of this act is “to contribute to the cultural development of the nation and society by guaranteeing the people’s right to know about library knowledge information, setting the responsibilities of the state and local governments, and defining basic matters concerning the operation, services, and social roles of libraries” (Article 1).

It consists of 8 chapters, 55 sections and supplementary provisions, and has been revised continuously reflecting the changes in the various situations and the requests from the library community and the customers. Chapter 4 (articles 25–38) specifies about the public library related parts in detail, including establishment, operations, registrations, and so on. Based on this mother law, the enforcement ordinance, detailed enforcement regulations, and ordinances of each local government have been prepared accordingly. Especially, the enforcement ordinance has the specific regulations on the qualifications of librarians (article 32 and Table 4), securing librarians, facilities, and materials (article 33 and Tables 5–7) which can be applied to public libraries.

These establishment and proper and timely revisions of these related laws afterward have become an essential element that provides the basic basis for the development of public libraries, even though some parts are still evaluated as unsatisfactory.

3.2 Launching of local government system

Korea’s local government system was enacted in 1949, but it was not implemented properly for a long time but revived in 1991 to elect the local council members and expanded in 1995 to elect the local government heads. With the starting of this grassroots democracy, each local government have competed with others to provide better public services to their own community members, including the establishment of public libraries in their community.

Drastic increases in the numbers of public libraries from 1995 and 2000 in South Korea is not a coincidence. Just in time, the Department of Culture (name at that time) was established as a new department in the central government in 1995 which supported the library related areas, to make the synergy effects for the public library establishments. At that time, the establishment of new libraries was a hot issue and major concern of local governments, with the heads of the local governments were said to not fall in the next election.

3.3 Various changes under the IMF system

South Korea has experienced the financial crisis generally called as IMF crisis during the late of 1990 (1997–2001) because of the severe foreign exchange shortage. It had almost completely changed the lives of most of the Korean people. So many people lost their jobs and suffered from murderous high bank interest rates. It left a lot of aftereffects including easier layoffs,

drastic increase in non-regular workers and job insecurity, privatization of many public goods, even though Korea had recovered from it within very short times than expected.

But there was also something to be learned from such a crisis. Many people have raised their interest and awareness of the economy, and their consumption patterns and lifestyles have changed. Especially after the recovery from the crisis, the major user groups of public libraries have changed. Namely, before the IMF, major groups of the users were school and university students, but after it, elderly users and family users have increased continuously. One of the reasons must be that users of those groups had visited during IMF system because of their unemployment and found and realized that public libraries had developed so much comparing to those they had had used before and come back to the libraries after they returned to their jobs, in many cases with their family members. This marked a remarkable change in the general pictures of the library.

3.4 Organization of Library and Information Policy Committee and establishment of long-term national library development plans

Library and Information Policy Committee (國家圖書館委員會) is a committee established by the Libraries Act (chapter 2). Article 14 of it specifies that the committee chair should prepare the library development plan each 5 years. According to the act, the committee has developed the first (2009–2013), second (2014–2018) and third (2019–2023), and the fourth of it (2024–2028) is now on the stage of a draft. Based on these plans, each metropolitan governments and each public libraries can develop their own plans. It can be a useful tool for them as a general guideline.

The third plan was developed under the vision of “Library to change our lives,” and three core values of “inclusiveness of people,” “innovation in spaces” and “democracy of information.” There are four strategic directions: (1) a library discovering individual possibilities, (2) a library building community competencies. (3) a library practicing social inclusion, (4) library innovation to open the future. Based on these directions, 13 core and 36 specified assignments are suggested in detail.

Related to this and based on the libraries act (article 37), registered public libraries should be evaluated each year by the central and local government agencies related to the operation of facilities, human resources and library materials. To facilitate the collection and management of the library-related statistics and data, National Library Statistics System (<<https://www.libsta.go.kr>>) has been developed. Each registered library should upload its data on the system and the data are also used as a basic data for the library evaluation.

3.5 Rapid Increase of Small Libraries

Generally speaking, a small library will be a not big library having not enough staff, facilities and collections so that not satisfying the general criteria for the public library. In South Korea, it is regarded as a library its “main purpose is to improve the life-friendly library culture of the local community based on the participation of residents and self-government,” according to Promotion of Small Public Libraries Act (<<https://www.law.go.kr/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=253591&efYd=20230808\#0000>>) which were made in 2012 to promote it. Even though it has not included criteria based on the size, we can infer that the category includes the libraries having less than 4 librarians, less than 10,000 items of library collections and less than 330 square meters. But the Act also regulates that a small library should have one or more librarian(s), 1,000 or more collections, 33 or more squares of spaces.

This type of library has long been operated in private areas as so-called “Mungo”(文庫), rooted in “Maeul-Mungo Movement” by Daesup Eom and reported as more than 35,000 villages in 1970s (3). With the promotion of Saemaul (New Community) Movement by the Korean government, most of them had been integrated into Saemaul Mungo in 1981, some of which have been lasted till now. But new styles of small libraries have been increased by the residents of the many communities as part of the civic movement after 1990s, as in Table 4 and 5. In 2014, Manual

Table 4 Increase of Numbers of Public Libraries in South Korea

Year		2005*	2010	2015	2020	2022
No.	Public	778	660	1,364	1,504	1,578
	Private	2,094	2,280	4,231	4,970	5,321
	Total	2,872	3,349	5,595	6,474	6,899

* From Jeong 4). Others are cited from National Library Statistics System

Table 5 Other General Statistics for Small Libraries in South Korea

Year		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
No.	Public	1,433	1,477	1,504	1,512	1,578
	Private	4,897	5,195	4,970	4,936	5,321
	Total	6,330	6,672	6,474	6,448	6,899
Books per library		6,168	6,157	6,249	6,272	6,273
Visitors per library		5,850	5,873	3,396	3,405	4,054
Books lent per library		3,190	2,985	1,635	2,579	2,755

for Operating Small Libraries was published 5).

Korean government and local government has supported this type of libraries continuously by

establishing the related act and ordinances and making and managing the integrated homepage of Small Libraries (Figure 1). The homepage says that 7,500 libraries are now operated in South

Figure 1 Integrated homepage of Small Libraries



Korea (<<https://www.smalllibrary.org>>). They have importance roles in the local community not only to expand the library services which cannot be reached from the major libraries but also to improve the quality of lives of the local residents. They also have continuously replaced the book mobiles in many areas.

3.6 Establishment and active activities of non-profit private organizations related to libraries

In addition to the Korean Library Association, there are many other private organizations which have established to improve the general level of cultural and reading life for the citizens and promote the library related activities, in many cases cooperating with public libraries and others related to them. Those organizations have been established or accelerated their activities especially during the late of 1990s and the early of 2000s. Some of them are: Korean Children's Book Association (어린이도서관연구회) established in 1980. Korean Small Libraries Association (한국작은도서관협회) established as association for private small libraries in 1997. People Who Make Small Libraries (작은도서관만드는사람들) started as Good Book Reading Family Meeting (좋은책읽기가족모임) in 1997. Kids and Small Libraries Association (어린이와작은도서관협회) established in 1998. Citizen Action for Reading (책읽는사회만들기국민운동) (2001) operating Book Start Korea and Book Culture Foundation (책읽는사회문화재단). Friends of Public Library in Korea (한국도서관친구들), etc.

Those organizations have not only promoted book reading and general activities of the public library and other related works, in many cases, they themselves have operated the contracted-out public libraries or some programs.

4 Can COVID–19 Pandemic Situation Help to Make Innovate Public Library Services?

Last many years, almost all the people all over the world have suffered from the COVID–19 pandemic (coronavirus pandemic). It is the same in the libraries in South Korea. Most of the libraries have been closed at least temporarily for some times or opened them partially. As we can see in Table 5 , visitors per library and books lent per library in South Korean public libraries were decreased during those times and not recovered yet to those of before the pandemic. Even though all of us have experienced hard times during those years, it must be “require creativity and adaptability at both an individual and organizational level” 6) for the public library community in South Korea also. As Drucker 7) says, the unexpected was the richest source of opportunity for successful innovation. Can South Korean public library community make it as a chance to innovate their services?

4.1 Increases in Electronic Collections and Their Usages

The usage of electronic materials including e-books and accordingly the collection of them during the pandemic have been increased in South Korea to respond to the users’ needs and demands, as we can easily anticipate it and others reported in other countries (e.g. Goddard 8)). Even though the exact national statistics report about it cannot be obtained, the author calculated the collection of e-books and the usage in Daegu Metropolitan City based on the statistics, as in Table 6. Only after COVID–19 loosened, e-book-reading and lent have been decreased.

Table 6 E-Book Collections and Their Usages during the Pandemic in Daegu City

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
e-book collection no.	237,372	246,199	286,145	306,130	319,072
e-book users total	613,356	920,429	951,167	1,099,757	1,551,318
e-book reading total	434,695	513,641	675,972	632,816	530,784
e-book lent total	163,606	169,701	215,164	272,734	245,301

* Source: Library Bulletin, vol.40–44. by Daegu Metropolitan Jungang Library.

This experience during the times must be change the attitude toward the electronic materials from the librarians and can be helpful for the libraries to respond to the new generations of customers much more accustomed to born-digital electronic resources.

4.2 Developing and Providing Virtual/Online Cultural and Educational Programs

During the pandemic, most of the public libraries had to discontinue or decrease the off-line cultural and educational programs for their users to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As alternatives of the off-line programs, many of them switched the programs into online programs, using their own programs developed and made by them for the purpose, or purchasing any other commercial programs. They uploaded those programs in their own homepages, Youtube channels, and so on, not only for their own users but also any others to access and use them without any charge or limitations in most cases.

This situation makes the libraries compete each other in good faith across the country and possibly around the world. In this process, good programs will be naturally well-received and widely known to more users in the community as well as to those of all the nations, and programs that do not will be reduced or discontinued. It will give much more motivations to the developers of the programs to make them better and wider, securing and using more budgets than before. In this regard, cultural and educational programs in the future “should be both physical and virtual,” as Goddard 9) indicates.

4.3 Providing Various Ways to Access to the Physical Collections

During the pandemic, it was very hard for the users to visit off-line to the libraries by themselves to borrow a book because of shut-down, temporal closure or shortening of the open time of them. So many libraries tried to make alternative ways to lend the books to the users.

For example, some libraries introduced “drive-thru” library system during the pandemic 10). Recently a public library developed an automatic system recognizing the car number and identifying the borrower to proceed with unmanned loans and returns, and a library applied for a patent jointly with a company.

Many libraries in bigger cities in South Korea established so-called “Smart Library” with the support from the government. Korean government has originally proceeded the project in 2017 to help the users difficult to visit the library because of their own physical or distance problems to borrow the books conveniently, it has been expanded during the pandemic widely. For this purpose, automated unmanned book loan and return systems have been installed in more than 150 public places including subway stations (it is the typical type in metropolitan city), welfare centers, and community centers 11). This can be a good example of extended service of traditional library operations.

4.4 Strengthening the Human Resource Expertise in Public Libraries and Cooperation with Academic Community to Research Library Development

A public librarian complained to me during the pandemic that other people outside the library thought and said to them that librarians and staff of the libraries were just resting without doing anything during the times, in spite that they had done all the things as usual, except those related to receiving and serving off-line the users directly and even more additional works because of the pandemic. Anyway, works of directly serving and responding users, especially with trouble making offline users, must have been reduced.

During this pandemic situation, many public libraries have tried to strengthen the expertise of their library staff using various channels. For example, Jecheon City Library has supported for all the staff to get the reading certificates and managed the book reading clubs for them, according to the best practice report 2023 by them. In fact, many library staff have acquired personally some certificates to operate library programs by themselves, such as lifelong educator, reading instructor, reading therapist, reading therapist, and so on. Based on these personnel developments, many of those libraries have applied and won for the related open competition support programs.

And many public libraries and their parent local government have tried to develop their own long term strategic plans basically based on and following the national plan described above, in many cases with a cooperation with academic communities, especially during those periods. This type of research have been proceeded by the metropolitan and basic municipalities. For example, Dalseong County Library has established their strategic plan with a cooperation with faculty member in Keimyung University nearby 12), and Nowon-gu Public Libraries in Seoul with those from Dongduk University 13). This kind of projects can not only improve the quality of the plan, but also provide practical helps for future library evaluation. Of course, those libraries above have excellent evaluation records in the later evaluation session.

5 Concluding Remarks

This presentation tries to suggest the general picture about the public libraries in South Korea before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Confronted with the un-predicted situation, our library community and the staff have experienced a drastic change in various areas and struggled to overcome many difficulties in the public library sector. All of us have learned more lessons. even though the types and the strengths of the influences and stresses received and felt might be different.

In this regard, it must be very helpful for all librarians all over the world to share their own experiences, efforts and lessons acquired during the pandemic, whether they have been successful

or not. Based on these shared information and knowledge, we can make our future of the public library community more beautiful. But what we should remember in our mind is that even after the pandemic, we should compete with others to secure our own customers, the library users offline as well as online. For this purpose, we should try to upgrade our services and their quality to those levels our customers can satisfy and revisit our libraries again and again. That is the reason why we should focus again on the service quality and customer satisfaction in public libraries, because “there will be no libraries and librarians, without customers” 14).

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