

# Five Laws and Libraries in Korea: Are We in the Right Direction?\*

Cheong-Ok Yoon\*\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the current situation of public libraries in Korea, from the viewpoint of Ranganathan's 'Five Laws of Library Science'. Public libraries have very rapidly grown in Korea in the past ten years. With an average growth rate of 5.8% per year, the number of public libraries reached to 703 in 2009, and the number of people served per library have gradually reduced every year, even if still far below other advanced countries. However, there are still some attempts to retrain people of their right to read whatever they want. In this paper, it is emphasized that in public libraries more attention and financial and strategic assistance should be given to the disadvantaged people, and the equal right to benefit from library services should be ensured. And the library as a growing organism should be balanced with the responsible library director, devoted librarians, and concerned people in the community.

Keywords: Ranganathan, Five Laws of Library Science, Public Libraries in Korea, Banned books, Library service to the disadvantaged group

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\*\* Professor, Department of Library and Information Science, Cheongju University, Korea(jade@cju.ac.kr)

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## 1. Introduction

Almost all librarian-wannabes in Korea learn “Five Laws of Library Science” when they start studying library and information science. Some people learn by rote these five rules only to pass exams without thinking much of their meanings. Others keep in mind the vision and philosophy of those rules, and then determine to follow them through all their career as librarians.

Dr. Ranganathan, one of the greatest pioneers and philosophers in library science, must be proud of being a librarian himself and helped other librarians feel the same by pronouncing those five rules:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his/her book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism

There have been lots of excellent writings and interpretations about these five rules, not to mention Ranganathan's own works. Today four notable scholars from India, Ranganathan's birthplace, and Japan are here to present the significance of those rules in the 21st century. Therefore, in this writing no attempt is made to describe, explain or interpret the significance of these five rules. Only to be discussed here is whether we Koreans are in the right direction in applying Ranganathan's five rules to the libraries in Korea.

## 2. Five Laws and Libraries in Korea

### 2.1 First law: Books are for Use

The first law, constituting the basis for the library services, is very closely related to the access to all kinds of library resources, including books.

Since no books are “chained” any more in the library, as Ranganathan observed in the earlier days, there is no need to worry about physical restraint laid on books. And almost all libraries ensure free access to their resources in various forms.

However, institutional, political and social restraints still exist in some part of this country

even in this decade. Such restraints are not observed in public libraries, because no government or authorities dare to “chain” publicly certain books. But ...!

In 2008 23 books were officially labelled “improper” by the Ministry of National Defense, and almost a half million young men in the Korean army were told “not to read” those books. Those books were banned from about 1,500 army libraries, because they “praised the North Korea”, “opposed to the government and the U.S.A.” and “objected against the capitalism”.

Among those “improper” books, were 『Bad Samaritans (나쁜 사마리아인)』 written by Professor Chang Ha-jun, selected as the Best Book of the Year by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the Best Seller Book of the major bookstores in the civilian world, 『History of Korea (대한민국사)』 written by Professor Han Hong-gu and nominated for the Best Book of the Year in 2003, 『One Spoon on the Earth (지상에 숟가락 하나)』 by Hyon Gi-young, a writer with “the voice of conscience” and 『Our God (우리들의 하나님)』 by Gwon Jeong-saeng, one of the most beloved writers for children, and so on.

As shown in <Figure 1>, one online bookstore held a special sale for those books, and most of the books in the list instantly became the best sellers for several weeks. People ridiculed the authorities who tried to control people's right to read, and gave them the message: No one has the right to force people to read or not to read anything.



<Figure 1> “23 Improper Books” Selected by the Ministry of National Defense in 2008

Books are for use. And the choice is on the readers, even if they are in the army. It is certain that Ranganathan could have been proud of Korean people who followed his Law without knowing what it was!

## 2.2 Second Law: Every Reader, His or Her book

This second law suggests that every member of the community should be able to obtain materials needed. To follow this rule, society should provide adequate number of libraries for people, and those libraries should be equipped not only with an adequate size of collection, but also with adequate number of librarians who are devoted to and well aware of users' needs.

How “adequate” libraries, collections, and librarians in Korea are to provide every reader with his or her book? It cannot be denied that both their quantities and qualities are not fully “adequate” yet, especially when compared with an international standard as well as people's expectation. However, there is hope in that the situation gets better, as far as their numbers are concerned.

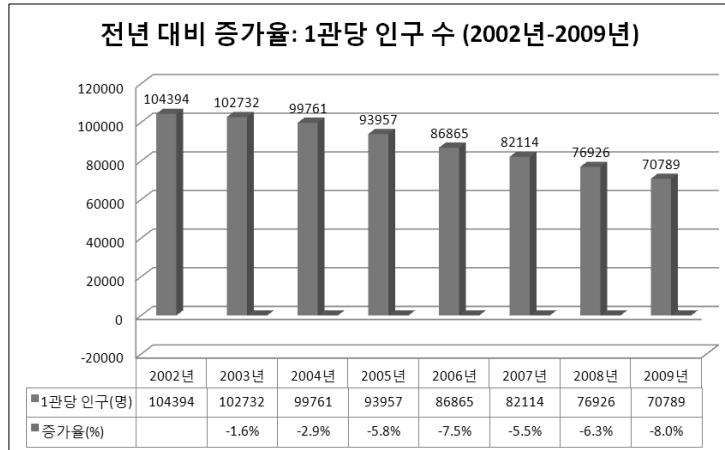
As shown in <Figure 2>, a number of public libraries in Korea has rapidly grown during this decade. In 2002 there were only 462 public libraries, and the number of people to be served per library were 104,394. But in 2009 the number of public libraries has reached to 703, while the number of people per library has decreased to 70,789 (Korean Library Association 2010, pp.15-16). In eight years the numbers of public libraries and people to be served per library have grown with an average growth rate of 5.8% and -5.4%, respectively, as shown in <Figure 3>.

〔표 1-2〕 전국 공공도서관 현황(2002~2009)

구분	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
공공도서관 수	462	471	487	514	564	600	644	703
1관당 인구수(명)	104,394	102,732	99,761	93,957	86,865	82,114	76,926	70,789
1석당 인구수(명)	196	206	196	188	191	173	161	154
1인당 책수(책)	0.64	0.71	0.79	0.94	1.01	1.04	1.1	1.26
자료수(천 책)	32,251	35,850	40,755	45,411	49,343	50,225	55,227	62,561
직원수(명)	5,368	5,539	5,664	5,840	6,223	6,077	6,388	6,785
사서자격증보유자(명)	1,958	2,023	2,179	2,324	2,560	3,260	3,433	3,810
운영예산(천원)	300,714	354,576	345,624	360,109	418,714	417,857	482,241	605,975
이용자수(천명)	97,606	117,611	133,208	154,712	174,833	123,187	136,802	162,851
이용책수(천권)	110,074	179,668	172,698	213,489	265,501	257,885	289,872	355,689

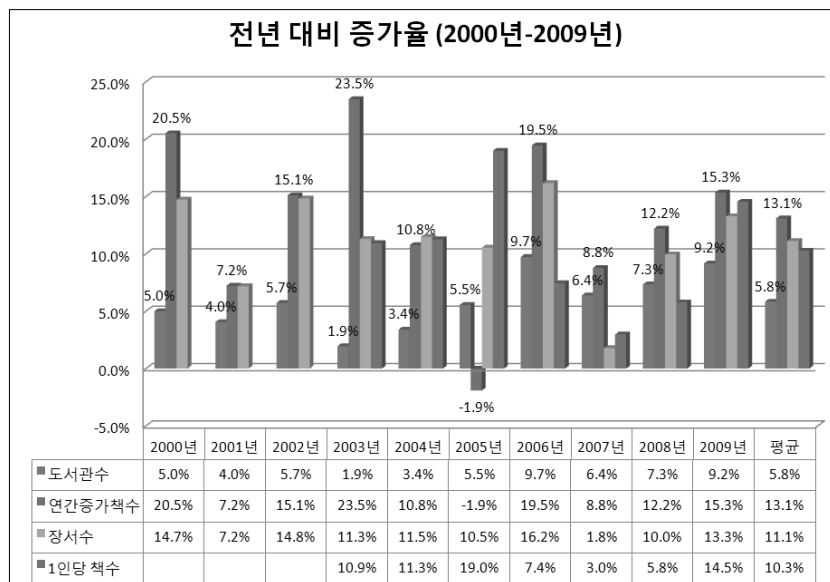
\* 자료: 1997~2006 : 한국도서관연합  
 2007~2009 : 국가도서관통계시스템(www.libsta.go.kr) "전국도서관통계조사" 문화체육관광부

<Figure 2> Public Libraries in Korea: Year 2002-2009



<Figure 3> Population per Public Library: Year 2002-2009

As public libraries have increased, the size of their collections has also grown. <Figure 4> shows that in 2002 a total number of books in all public libraries were 32,251,000 volumes with an average 0.64 volume per people. With an average annual growth rate of 13.1%, books were steadily added to the collections every year to reach 62,651,000 volumes in 2009. It amounts to 1.26 volumes for each and every person in Korea. Even though it is far less than 2.8 volumes per person in the U.S.A. and 2.9 volumes per person in Japan, it is getting better year by year.

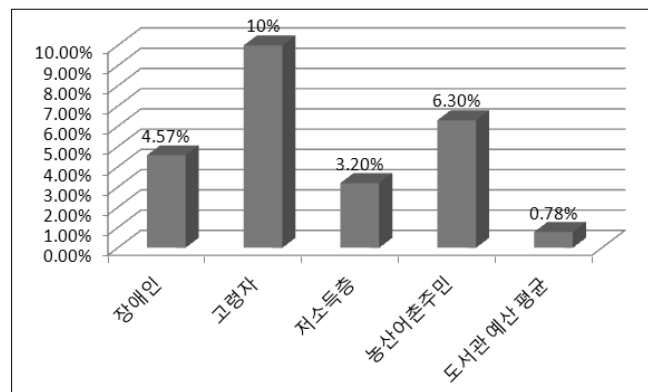


<Figure 4> Average Annual Growth Rate: Year 2000-2009

Since the presence and significance of public libraries in the community have become vivid in recent years, more and more people could benefit from the collections and services offered by their public libraries. However, there are some people left behind.

They belong to the disadvantaged group, including the disabled, the poor, the elderly, and the rural residents in our society. Recently even many people with multicultural background joined them. In 2009 the disabled people registered in their local communities constitute about 4.57% of the total population of Korea. People who are under the poverty line and receive the financial assistance from the government are approximately 3.2%, and the number of senior citizens has rapidly grown to reach more than 10% of the total population in 2010. On the other hand, the number of residents in rural areas has decreased to 6.3% in recent years. Some of them have more than one overlapping disadvantages such as poverty, old age, physical handicap, and residence in rural areas (Kwack et al. 2011).

While every citizen has an equal right to enjoy library services, those disadvantaged people cannot fully benefit from public libraries and enjoy whatever they deserve. It is because such obstacles as their physical and/or intellectual conditions, geographical isolation, lack of time and mobility, and even language and culture often prevent them from accessing libraries and getting the opportunities for education, information, culture, and leisures offered by public libraries.



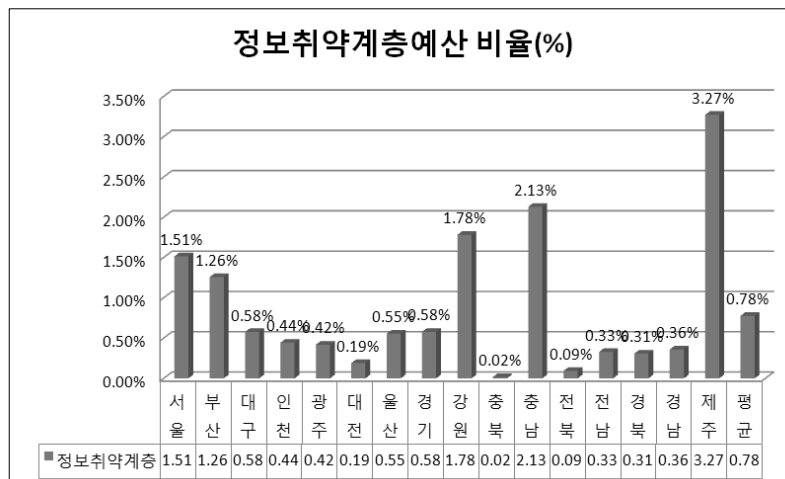
<Figure 5> Proportion of the Disadvantaged Groups and the Budget for Library Services for them in 2010

It does not mean that public libraries in our country have ignored them. Rather they have tried very hard to reach them and provide services they deserve, despite their serious lack of money and human resources. Some libraries have offered at least three to five programs especially

designed for the disadvantaged people in their community.

However, as shown in <Figure 6> in 2010, sixteen municipal and provincial governments assigned merely an average of 0.78% of the total budget of libraries to the library and information services for the disadvantaged people (Committee on Library and Information Policy 2011; Korean Library Association 2010). Too small budget is allocated to libraries to plan for services tailored to meet the special information needs of the disadvantaged. And libraries have serious difficulties in providing them with proper facilities, collection, and professional assistance.

To provide every reader with his or her book, more sufficient budget should be assigned to the library service for the general public, and especially more consideration should be given to the disadvantaged.



<Figure 6> Budget for Library Services for the Disadvantaged Group in 2010

### 2.3 Third Law: Every Book Its Reader

The third law, closely related to the second law, suggests the importance of the item itself, and how to make them available to readers. Almost all public libraries have open shelving that Ranganathan emphasized, and various finding and access tools and means, including Online Public Access Catalogs, digital libraries, information portals and networks, and integrated searching methods, have been developed in Korea, barely off the pace, when compared with other advanced countries.

In addition to those access methods, one of the favorable ways to bring every book to its reader is to promote reading through various means in the community. In the history of public

libraries, one of the most effective and innovative reading promotion movements is ‘One Book, One Community’ reading campaign.

The model of ‘One Book, One Community’ reading campaign started in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. where the Washington Book Center of the Seattle Public Library launched “If All Seattle Read the Same Book” in 1998. And the very successful and well promoted launching of ‘One Book, One Chicago’ in 2001 ignited a lot of cities, counties and town in 50 states of the U.S.A. to adopt this new type of community reading. In January 2011, on the website of the Center for the Book of the Library of Congress, 574 ‘One Book’ projects in the U.S.A. are registered. Not all of them continues, but more than half of those registered communities do every year.<sup>1)</sup>

Libraries in Korea are one of the early adopters of ‘One Book, One Community’ reading campaign outside the U.S.A. In 2003 Seosan, a small city in the West Coast of Korea, first launched this model of community reading campaign in Korea, partnering with the Korean Library Association. Since then, many cities and towns in Korea designed their own community reading campaigns, following this model. They include Sunchoen, Wonju, Cheongju, Busan, Pyeongtaek, Yongin, Gimhae, Seoul, and Seongbuk-Gu in Seoul, to name a few.

The idea of this community reading campaign is very simple. People in the community select a book to read. Then they gather to talk about what they read and share what they think. To help readers understand and get familiar with the selected ‘One Book’, they use various media, events and programs related to the book itself and its theme. In most communities, public libraries are in charge of organizing ‘One Book, One Community’ campaigns, and universities, schools, civic organizations, bookstores, art and music groups, and so on, sponsors or participates in various ways.

The popularity of ‘One Book, One Community’ reading campaign in Korea demonstrates the effort of public libraries to bring books to the hands of readers in the community. And more and more communities have got to enjoy them.

#### 2.4 Fourth Law: Save the Time of the Reader

This fourth law is closely related to the importance of efficient and effective access method to library resources and the capability of qualified librarians to manage them. Ranganathan emphasized librarians' “strong reference skills” and “strong technical skills in cataloging, cross-referencing,

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1) The Center for the Book, Library of Congress. 2011.1.24. “‘One Book’ Reading Promotion Projects.” [cited 2011.1.24]. <<http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/onebook/>>.



ordering, accessioning, and the circulation of materials” (Rubin 2004).

More than 90% of public libraries in Korea use the integrated library automation system, and make OPAC and various digitalized information resources available on the Web. The adoption of high speed Internet and leading-edge ICT have remarkably helped users save their time and enjoy much of library and information service in their convenience.

However, the use of librarians’ “strong skills” to save the time of the reader, as Ranganathan had expected, leaves much to be desired. It is mainly because there are too few librarians in public libraries to serve the readers properly. Overburdened librarians cannot grow up to be dynamic professionals, and plan voluntarily for some creative and innovative services. A shortage of librarians will be discussed in relation to the fifth law of Ranganathan.

## 2.5 Fifth Law: The Library is a Growing Organism

According to Rubin, with this fifth law, Ranganathan argued that library organizations must accommodate growth in staff, the physical collection, and patron use as well as in the physical building, reading areas, shelving, and in space for the catalog (Rubin 2004).

If the library is truly a growing organism, its body parts should grow in balance in order to operate properly.

Probably a library director might be a head, one of the important body parts. Without much understanding of what libraries could really do, many people think that non-professionals can manage libraries well, and some even argue that they don't need librarians at all. Many public libraries in Korea, including the National Library of Korea, have library directors who themselves are not librarians and often do not know much what libraries and librarians should and could do. In Seoul Metropolitan city, out of 60 library directors of 64 public libraries, 30 (50.0%) are librarians. Maybe several more librarians might be in the general administrative positions. However, that is all. It means that half of public libraries in Seoul are governed by non-professionals (Korean Library Association 2010, pp.396-397).

Some public officials or civilians appointed as library directors often leave libraries in less than a year, even before figuring out what libraries and library directors are supposed to do. For them, libraries are nothing but temporary stops, and often resting places, before they move to “better” positions or even retire, as most directors of Chungbuk Provincial Public Library have done. With such library directors, libraries can hardly establish long-term development strategies and plan for addressing challenging tasks with far-reaching visions. Unfortunately, libraries with

such heads are not rare in Korea.

What about arms and legs? Librarians might constitute those parts. Accompanied with the steady growth in the number of public libraries and the size of collection, the number of librarians has also increased in recent years, but not in quite desirable ways. In 2009, a total number of staff in public libraries were 6,785 persons, and among them librarians were 3,052 persons (44.9%). It equals to only 4.5 librarians per library, and therefore one librarian serves 16,306 people. It is far behind the IFLA Guidelines which recommends 2,500 people to be served per full-time librarian (Korean Library Association 2010, p.50). And the situation in Korea seems to worsen.

Since the public's interests in and demands for libraries become more and more obvious, many local politicians, including mayors, members of municipal and district assemblies, and so on, promise to build more libraries in their communities. Tape-cutting in front of glittering new library buildings has become one of their favorite photo shots. However, few are really aware of the need for well-trained librarians as an important component of libraries, and therefore often commit the management of libraries to non-professional hands without much thought. It is not rare that libraries with impressive new buildings are often full of temporary librarians and non-librarians. Without a proper number of full-time librarians, people in the communities cannot expect quality library and information services for them.

In addition, some communities are eager to build "small libraries" with a couple of thousand books and without any librarian at all. Those "small libraries" are quick and inexpensive to make and still counted as libraries. Therefore, building "small libraries" becomes the easiest way to increase a total number of libraries in a short period of time. Even though those "small libraries" could be a service point in the close neighborhood, they, with only volunteers or temporary or part-time workers, cannot do as much as what real libraries and librarians could do in normal library settings.

And, who or what could be the body? Maybe people in the community, especially satisfied users could constitute the healthiest part of the library as a growing organism. Once people experience or even observe the real benefit of public libraries, they can never imagine their community without libraries. With their support and demand, libraries can grow, and grow fast.

For example, in Cheongju with 630,000 people there used to be only one provincial public library in an old building on the hill before 2003. And very few people visited it. However with the establishment of a new municipal public library in 2003, people began to realize the importance of a public library, and demand more and more libraries in their neighborhood. Now in 2011 four municipal public libraries and one children's library have been built by the city,

and two more are under construction.

It is fair to say that libraries as a growing organism in Korea have not fully grown or mature yet. Since the library is a growing organism, it might be natural to have a growing pain. Especially a very acute pain with such a rapid growth in Korea! A professional director with a long-range vision and plan, knowledgeable and devoted permanent full-time librarians, and people well aware of their right to have public libraries in the community. Libraries which overcome such a growing pain due to lack of understanding of libraries and have all parts as above mentioned in balance could be a really healthy growing organism.

### 3. Conclusion

In this writing, the current situation of public libraries in Korea is rather casually reviewed from the viewpoint of Ranganathan's Five Laws. We, working in the library, do not always think about the application of these Five Laws. However, once in a while we've got to reflect upon these Five Laws, and feel amazed to see how Ranganathan contained the whole world of libraries and librarians in only twenty four words.

Reviewing the present in view of Ranganathan's Five Laws promulgated eighty years ago, we can clearly see where and how to proceed in the future. Through these Five Rules, libraries and librarians once again confirm their responsibility to change and advance only to provide the best service for the users. It is certain that Ranganathan's Five Laws, having led the librarians of the past and present generations in such concise statements, but without any dazzling ornaments and brilliant aphorism, would keep serving as a guidepost to the librarians of the future generation who will celebrate another eighty years of this historical Five Laws.

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