

Knowledge for life: The evolution of Korea's library ecosystem

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the Korean library ecosystem, from its pre-modern documentary culture to contemporary legal frameworks. Defining libraries as essential social institutions for the constitutional “right to know,” the study analyzes the historical and institutional foundations of Korean librarianship. It explores modern innovations, such as generative AI integration and “K-Library” landmarks, under the Fourth Comprehensive Library Development Plan. Furthermore, the paper discusses strategic responses to the “demographic cliff” and digital polarization, repositioning the library as a “social operating system” for community empowerment. It concludes by presenting the 2026 IFLA World Library and Information Congress in Busan as a global platform for sharing Korea’s innovative models.

Keywords

Korean libraries, library policy, Library Act, digital transformation, library ecosystem

Introduction

Korean libraries have developed in tandem with the nation’s historical trajectory, rooted in a profound reverence for knowledge and a steadfast commitment to its preservation. Tracing their lineage from the Taehak (National Academy) of the Three Kingdoms period to the Jiphyeonjeon (Hall of Worthies) and Gyujeongguk (Royal Library) of the Joseon Dynasty, this rich tradition of record-keeping serves as the intellectual cornerstone of the contemporary Korean library system. Within this historical framework, modern libraries have transcended their traditional role as mere repositories of information; they have established a robust identity as pivotal social institutions that substantively facilitate the constitutional “right to know” and promote information equity for all citizens.

Recently, the Korean library ecosystem has reached a critical inflection point, driven by the digital transformation and evolving global standards. The core values of digital literacy and information accessibility—as articulated in the 2022 IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto—have been systematically integrated into Korea’s Fourth Comprehensive Library Development Plan. This integration has led to strategic policy objectives focused on expanding technology-integrated services and fostering digital citizenship. Furthermore, the implementation of generative AI-driven personalized knowledge services and the “K-Library” landmark projects through spatial innovation underscore the evolution of libraries into proactive knowledge hubs that harmoniously bridge technology and humanity.

Despite this quantitative and qualitative growth, libraries face the pressing challenges of devising survival strategies in an era of “demographic cliff” (precipitous population decline) and narrowing the digital divide. Efforts to redefine the library not merely as a physical space, but as a “social operating system” that empowers citizens and revitalizes

communities, are recognized as pragmatic responses to these contemporary demands. In particular, the 90th World Library and Information Congress, to be held in Busan in 2026, is expected to serve as a significant milestone for sharing Korea’s innovative library models with the international community and exploring avenues for global cooperation.

This study examines the historical origins and legal foundations of Korean libraries and provides a multi-faceted review of current operational statuses and institutional changes aimed at strengthening professional expertise in librarianship. Additionally, by diagnosing contemporary issues through cases of technological innovation and sustainability models, this paper discusses the future-oriented roles of Korean libraries under the vision of “Libraries for a Better Life.”

Historical origins of Korean libraries and the legacy of documentary culture

Pre-modern libraries

Korea’s library history dates back to the Three Kingdoms period, establishing a long-standing tradition of documentary culture. Taehak (the National Academy, established in 372 AD) in the Goguryeo Kingdom, as the first national educational institution, demonstrated early forms of library collection. Gyeongdang, a private educational institution for commoners, also performed functions that encouraged reading and archery

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(Sim, n.d.). However, the substantial framework of a national library system can be traced back to the Jiphyeonjeon (Hall of Worthies), established by King Sejong the Great during the Joseon Dynasty.

Established in 1420, the Jiphyeonjeon functioned as both the king's academic advisory body and a functional national library responsible for the storage and utilization of books. It sought to centralize national knowledge resources by integrating and managing materials previously dispersed across various repositories, such as Bomungak and Sumungak. Notably, it focused on expanding the national collection by actively importing new editions of books through diplomatic channels with the Ming Dynasty (Sim, n.d.). These capabilities in book collection and research led to prolific publication and annotation projects, serving as the intellectual foundation that spearheaded the "Cultural Renaissance" of the early Joseon period, including the creation of Hunminjeongeum (the Korean alphabet).

The Kyujanggak (Royal Library), founded by King Jeongjo in 1776, inherited the spirit of Jiphyeonjeon and functioned as an even more sophisticated institution for academic research and policy-making. While maintaining its identity as a royal library preserving the writings (eoje) and calligraphy (eopil) of successive kings, it served as a national repository by comprehensively collecting major domestic and foreign works (Kim, n.d.). In 1781, it completed the Kyujang Chongmok, an annotated catalogue for the systematic management of its collection. This catalogue is recognized as a pioneering case that provided a model for systematic bibliographic description in the history of Korean librarianship (Lee, 2013a). This tradition of systematic collection and management forms the historical basis for the extensive archive of over 300,000 classical documents currently held by the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies at Seoul National University (SNU Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies, 2018).

The introduction of modern libraries and national resistance

The Western concept of the library, introduced alongside the opening of ports in the late nineteenth century, transcended its role as a mere physical repository for books and came to be recognized as a "site for social education." This perception began to take shape following the publication of Kim Gi-su's *Ildong Giyu* in 1877 and was further articulated in 1884, when the Hanseong Sunbo provided detailed accounts of the operational status of advanced European libraries. Notably, intellectuals such as Seo Jae-pil and Seo Gwang-beom, who had gained firsthand experience working as librarians in the United States, championed the library as an essential institution for the adoption of modern civilization and advocated strongly for its establishment (Song, 2022).

This voluntary momentum during the Enlightenment period was sustained by intellectuals who sought to preserve national identity even amidst the historical rupture of the Japanese colonial era. The private library movement, epitomized by the Kyongseong Library in 1920, traces its roots back to the Yakhyeon-dong newspaper reading room established by Yun Chi-ho in 1904, as well as the regional reading room initiatives influenced by the Independence Club. During this period, night

schools and reading clubs—driven primarily by the younger generation—served as transformative spaces that enhanced the literacy of the colonized populace, moving beyond the simple dissemination of information (Yeun, 2009). These efforts forged a "grassroots history of libraries" that fundamentally diverged from the state-mandated library policies of the time.

Post-war reconstruction and institutional framework: enactment of the Library Act

In the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–1953), which decimated the nation's overall intellectual infrastructure, the reconstruction of libraries was synonymous with the restoration of the national knowledge system. The Korean Library Association, re-established in 1955, made the enactment of a Library Act its paramount objective and engaged in continuous legislative advocacy. These organized efforts of the library community, coupled with the political climate of institutional reorganization in the early 1960s, culminated in the promulgation of Korea's first "Library Act" on October 28, 1963 (Han, 2002). By codifying the legal basis for the establishment and operation of libraries, this Act provided the institutional framework for libraries to guarantee the public's right to know and contribute to cultural development.

Subsequently, during the 1960s and 1970s, library services were disseminated to rural and fishing communities through the "Village Library (Maeulmungo) Movement" led by Um Dae-sup. The Village Library Movement was a grassroots initiative driven by the private sector to lower the barriers to knowledge and realize information welfare. It played a decisive role in establishing a nationwide network of public library systems and its eventual integration into national policy (Lee, 2013b).

Legal and policy frameworks and core values of contemporary libraries

Legal foundation: libraries as a bastion of democracy

Today, library services in South Korea possess legal legitimacy not merely as a matter of administrative convenience, but as a substantive means of exercising the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Korea. Article 21 of the Constitution protects the freedom of speech and the press, based on which the Constitutional Court recognizes the "Right to Know" as a fundamental constitutional right. In this context, libraries serve as pivotal social institutions and infrastructure that substantively facilitate the constitutionally guaranteed right to know in the daily lives of all citizens. The Library Act (Act No. 18547), which was wholly amended in 2021, explicitly mandates that national and local governments must support library development to ensure citizens' right to access information and to bridge the knowledge-information gap. It further stipulates their clear responsibility to devise necessary policies for free and equal access. Furthermore, Article 13 of the Local Government Act reinforces the legal foundation of library services by defining the establishment and management of

Table 1. Alignment of UNESCO manifesto missions and Korean library initiatives.

Core missions of the UNESCO manifesto (2022)	Specific responses and innovation cases in Korea	Lead and related agencies	Relevant SDG goals
Fostering digital and information literacy skills	Providing AI literacy education for all ages and operating the “Doksaro” platform	National Library of Korea, Ministry of Education	Goal 4: Quality Education
Ensuring equitable access to information	Codifying information access rights for multicultural families and persons with disabilities in the Library Act	National Library for the Disabled, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism	Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities
Supporting scientific progress and the creation of knowledge	Establishing institutional repositories and research data sharing platforms in academic libraries	Korea Education and Research Information Service, University Libraries	Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
Preserving cultural diversity and local heritage	Developing community archives and transforming local hubs into landmarks (e.g. “Deullak Nallak”)	Local Governments (e.g. Busan Metropolitan City)	Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

SDG, Sustainable Development Goal.

public libraries as an inherent task of local governments (Lee and Jung, 2023).

These constitutional values are further articulated in Article 2 (Basic Principles) of the Library Act. The amended law declares the publicness and social interest of libraries as its core philosophy, specifying that libraries are essential infrastructure contributing to the enhancement of citizens' fundamental information rights and the cultural development of society (Yoon and Lee, 2023). This serves as the statutory basis for ensuring that all citizens, regardless of physical, regional, or economic circumstances, can enjoy the benefits of libraries equally, in accordance with the principle of equality under Article 11, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution.

National policy implementation: the comprehensive library development plan

The constitutional values and legal mandates of libraries are translated into concrete policy objectives through the “Comprehensive Library Development Plan,” a national-level implementation strategy. Pursuant to Article 14 of the Library Act, the Chairperson of the National Library Committee establishes this comprehensive plan every five years. It serves as a pivotal policy infrastructure that defines the mid-to-long-term vision and social roles of Korean libraries (Council on Library and Information Policy, 2023).

This policy framework extends beyond mere planning; it incorporates institutional mechanisms for substantive execution and feedback. Each year, relevant central administrative agencies and local governments establish and promote “Annual Implementation Plans” based on the comprehensive plan. The National Library Committee ensures the effectiveness and accountability of these policies by evaluating the “performance results” of the previous year and integrating the findings back into the following year's planning—creating a robust feedback loop. This cyclical structure is a primary mechanism of the library operation system, ensuring that macro-level legal ideologies are systematically disseminated to the micro-level environments of individual library services.

Notably, the Fourth Comprehensive Library Development Plan (2024–2028), announced in 2023, systematically internalizes the global standards articulated in the 2022 IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto into a national execution strategy. The 2022 Manifesto defines the library as a “living

force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare,” while adding “digital literacy” and “access to scientific knowledge and innovation” to its core missions (IFLA–UNESCO, 2022). These priorities directly align with the Fourth Plan's objectives, such as “Realizing Digital Citizenship” and “Expanding Technology-Integrated Library Services.” Furthermore, in line with UNESCO's designation of libraries as essential actors for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the development plan identifies “K-SDGs Linked Services” as one of its 12 core tasks. This policy shift signifies an evolution of the library's role: moving beyond infrastructure expansion (First and Second Plans) and user-oriented value establishment (Third Plan) toward a proactive attempt to address social issues and support community growth (Council on Library and Information Policy, 2023). Table 1 summarizes how Korean library services implement the core values of the 2022 IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto through specific national policy actions.

Meanwhile, to reinforce the empirical foundation of these multifaceted policy mechanisms and bridge the gap between academic research and field operations, the Ministry of Education designated a specialized think tank in 2019. The Research Institute for Academic Library Development (RIALD) at Yonsei University was selected as a Key Research Institute to enhance the feasibility and validity of national library policies. It focuses on developing evidence-based strategies that empower libraries to function as a “Social Operating System”—a core socio-technical infrastructure essential for community resilience and empowerment in the AI era. Ultimately, this comprehensive approach reflects a concerted effort to establish a highly synergetic policy ecosystem where global standards, macro-level legal ideologies, and micro-level field practices are harmoniously integrated through a robust and sustained connection with academia.

Composition of the contemporary Korean library ecosystem

Libraries in South Korea are categorized and operated as national, public, school, and academic libraries, based on their governing bodies and functional mandates. Each library type forms an organic network to address the knowledge and information needs of citizens throughout their life cycles.

Table 2. Characteristics of Korean foundational libraries.

Institution name	Core functions and specializations	Established
National Library of Korea	Central hub for national legal deposit and preservation; bibliographic standardization; collection and digitization of national intellectual heritage (includes National Library for Children and Young Adults and National Library of Korea, Sejong).	1945
National Assembly Library	Support for legislative activities; provision of advanced academic and parliamentary information services; operation of AI chatbots and vector databases (includes National Assembly Library Busan).	1952
Supreme Court Library	Systematic collection of domestic and foreign legal materials under the Judiciary; support for judicial affairs; management of court history archives (e-Court History Museum).	1989
National Library for the Disabled	Oversight of services for the information-marginalized; production and dissemination of alternative-format materials; specialized national library for disability-related fields.	2012

The backbone of national knowledge infrastructure: the quadripartite national library system

Korea's national library system is structured around four core institutions, categorized by their respective roles and affiliations. Although each library is governed by a different constitutional body or administrative ministry to ensure professional specialization, they are unified in their mission to preserve national knowledge resources. The functional mandates and institutional characteristics of these four foundational libraries are summarized in Table 2. The National Library of Korea provides specialized services tailored to various life stages and policies through its branches, the National Library for Children and Young Adults and the National Library of Korea, Sejong. The National Assembly Library has expanded its regional service footprint through the National Assembly Busan Library. The Court Library of Korea contributes to enhancing the transparency of judicial administration. Lastly, the National Library for the Disabled, following its elevation to an independent affiliated agency in 2020, is striving to further enhance its professional capabilities by advancing the project to establish a dedicated facility.

Hubs of the local community: public libraries

Public libraries in South Korea have experienced exponential growth over the past two decades, driven by close interaction between the public and private sectors. In the early 2000s, the "Miracle Library" project—a television program aired by MBC—alongside the grassroots "Small Library Movement," served as a catalyst for raising public awareness and drawing the attention of both central and local governments (Jeong and Lee, 2015; You and Park, 2010). Building on this private-sector momentum, the government established the first "Comprehensive Library Development Plan" in 2003. Furthermore, the 2006 World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) held in Seoul marked a pivotal turning point, elevating library policy to a national agenda. This led to a robust institutional foundation, including the amendment of the Library Act, the enactment of the Reading Culture Promotion Act, and the establishment of the Presidential Committee on Library and Information Policy. Ultimately, these developments resulted in substantive infrastructure innovation, characterized by both quantitative expansion and qualitative service improvements (Lee, 2011).

The number of public libraries nationwide has more than doubled—from approximately 600 in 2008, when the National Library Statistics Survey was first conducted, to 1296 as of

2024 (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2024a). This expansion has drastically improved public accessibility. Notably, in 2024, the service population per public library was recorded at 39,519, falling below the 40,000 threshold for the first time since statistical tracking began. In addition, qualitative revitalization continues to rise, with the annual number of visitors per library reaching approximately 173,000—an 8.7% increase from the previous year.

Recently, public libraries have evolved beyond traditional learning spaces into "multi-cultural complexes" and "Third Spaces." Specialized libraries function as cultural landmarks that reflect regional identity and expand the social value of libraries. As a pioneering instance of such spatial innovation, the "Seoul Outdoor Library" has reconfigured major urban nodes—such as Seoul Plaza and Gwanghwamun—into "urban living rooms." This initiative has established an innovative platform where citizens can simultaneously engage with literature, nature, and culture within their daily lives (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2025).

This transformative trend is being further expanded into a regionally specialized model through the "Bibliotheca Busan: Sea of Books" project in Busan, the host city of the 2026 IFLA WLIC. The project has created open, intelligent library spaces that reflect the city's geographical distinctiveness by leveraging iconic coastal landscapes (Busan Metropolitan City, 2025). Notable examples include the "Book Tents" at Millak Waterfront Park and the "Sunset Library" at Dadaepo. Beyond physical infrastructure, the project is characterized by its multifaceted cultural programming. Key initiatives include "Mung-dok Mung-geul," which allows visitors to access the library accompanied by their pets; "B-Book Spots," a collaborative platform where local bookstores and libraries jointly conduct experiential and promotional activities; and author lectures (Jo, 2025). This initiative presents a valuable opportunity for global librarians visiting Busan in 2026 to directly experience a future model of Korean libraries, one that achieves a harmonious balance between technology, nature, and humanity.

School and academic libraries

School libraries serve as pivotal infrastructure for fostering students' self-directed learning competencies and literacy. As of 1 April 2025, the number of school libraries nationwide reached 11,883, with an average collection size of approximately 16,245 volumes per institution, demonstrating sustained quantitative growth (Ministry of Culture Sports

and Tourism, 2024b). Furthermore, the full-scale launch of “Doksaro,” a cloud-based integrated platform for reading education, has established a systemic foundation to provide comprehensive support for individual students’ reading histories (Ministry of Education, 2024). However, despite this quantitative expansion and technological advancement, a significant gap remains in human resources, which are central to library operations. The placement rate of regular teacher-librarians stands at a mere 16%, and approximately 46% of schools nationwide currently operate without any dedicated library personnel (Rebuilding Korea Party, 2025).

Academic libraries are likewise undergoing a functional transformation, emerging as central hubs for research data management and scholarly communication. Major Korean universities are increasingly making research outputs accessible through institutional repositories (Kim and Kim, 2024) and are striving to maximize research efficiency by introducing personalized research support services powered by generative AI (Kim, 2025b). In alignment with these shifts, the government is establishing a strategic roadmap to modernize academic library governance. The 2025 amendment to the Enforcement Decree of the Academic Library Promotion Act emphasizes institutional autonomy, enabling universities to manage human resources and budgets flexibly in accordance with their unique academic environments (Enforcement Decree of the University Library Promotion Act, 2025). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and the Korea Education and Research Information Service has conducted foundational research to reform the academic library evaluation framework. This initiative seeks to move beyond traditional quantitative metrics—such as collection size—and instead reflect the diversification of educational and research support services driven by the digital transformation of the academic environment (Korea Education and Research Information Service, 2025). It is expected that these efforts will establish a systemic foundation for institutions to exercise greater autonomy in cultivating professional expertise and operational management as they prepare for digital transformation.

Professional education and certification system for librarians

Current librarian certification and education system

Presently, the librarian certification system in South Korea is classified into three tiers: Grade 1 Certified Librarians, Grade 2 Certified Librarians, and Associate Librarians. Qualifications are primarily obtained through Library and Information Science (LIS) majors at universities, though alternative pathways exist through designated training institutions such as Librarian Training Centers (Kwack et al., 2009). In the case of teacher-librarians, a separate certification must be acquired by completing a prescribed teacher training curriculum. However, there has been persistent criticism that the existing curriculum fails to adequately reflect the evolving demands of the field. Furthermore, the structural discrepancies between different certification pathways have raised continuous concerns regarding the difficulty of ensuring and standardizing professional expertise (Presidential Committee on Library and Information Policy, 2021).

The 2025 roadmap for strengthening professional competencies

In response to these challenges, the Special Committee on Strengthening Librarian Professional Competencies—operating under the Council on Library and Information Policy of Korea—submitted a working paper titled “A Study on Strategies for Strengthening Librarian Professional Competencies” in 2025. This paper outlines strategic directions for improving the overall librarian education and certification system, with the expectation that these proposals will lead to formal amendments to the Enforcement Decree of the Library Act following deliberations by the National Committee.

A detailed examination of the proposal reveals a focus on enhancing the practical rigor of LIS education. Specifically, it suggests increasing the minimum required credits for obtaining a Grade 2 Certified Librarian qualification to 51 credits and mandating over 120 h of field practicum. Simultaneously, the proposal aims to improve the quality of hands-on training by strengthening the qualification standards for practicum supervisors. Furthermore, by designating nine core subjects—including Information Organization and Information Retrieval—as mandatory courses, the committee emphasizes securing overall educational homogeneity across the librarian training curriculum (Council on Library and Information Policy, 2025).

This policy direction transcends the simple expansion of operational hours and is consistent with contemporary empirical findings (Cha and Bae, 2020) indicating that qualitative elements—such as the design of the training program and the active role of supervising librarians—are the primary determinants of practicum effectiveness. The research demonstrates that student satisfaction and the perceived acquisition of professional competencies are more heavily influenced by the alignment with university curricula, systematic program organization, and professional engagement with supervisors than by the mere length of the field experience. Accordingly, the proposed roadmap, which integrates quantitative expansion with enhanced qualification standards for supervisors, serves as an institutional framework that operationalizes these academic insights. Such institutional refinements are expected to significantly bridge the divide between theoretical education and field practice, fostering a standardized level of professional expertise across the country. By ensuring the stable cultivation of job-specific competencies required by libraries at all levels, this initiative is anticipated to serve as a substantive foundation for the upward leveling of library service quality nationwide.

Digital re-skilling and continuing education for in-service librarians

In addition to the education of new professionals, the digital re-skilling of the approximately 35,000 in-service librarians has emerged as a pressing national priority. Commencing in 2026, the National Library of Korea has launched a large-scale professional development initiative designed to bolster AI and data literacy among active librarians. This program consists of 95 practice-oriented courses—covering specialized areas such as chatbot implementation and data visualization—with the overarching goal of empowering librarians to serve as proactive agents in the era of digital transformation (Seo, 2026).

Recent key developments and technological innovation cases

The recent technological innovations and spatial evolution of Korean libraries transcend isolated phenomena; they represent a substantive process of operationalizing the global values of the 2022 IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto within the national policy framework of the Fourth Comprehensive Library Development Plan (2024–2028). Notably, the 2022 Manifesto redefined libraries as “essential agents for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare,” while incorporating “digital literacy” and “access to scientific knowledge and innovation” into their core missions. In alignment with this global shift, Korean national policy has internalized these values by establishing “Realizing Digital Citizenship” and “Expanding Technology-Integrated Services” as primary strategic objectives.

This policy trajectory is elevating the role of libraries beyond traditional infrastructure expansion, redefining them as proactive agents that address social issues and support community growth. The following sections examine key instances where this policy intent has manifested into concrete services, including intelligent information access via generative AI, the creation of cultural landmarks, data-driven personalized services, and eco-friendly practices for sustainable development.

Generative AI services

University libraries are actively integrating generative AI to advance research support systems, while public libraries are adopting these technologies to democratize access to knowledge and information. Situated at the intersection of vast academic databases and the complex information needs of researchers, university libraries serve as frontline testbeds for generative AI technologies. A prime example is the Sungkyunkwan University Library, which established “Biblo,” the first AI platform specialized for academic information among domestic universities. This platform advances recommendation services based on intent and sentiment analysis, strengthens global accessibility through multilingual chatbots and voice recognition, and provides personalized knowledge information services via integration with large language models (Kim, 2025a).

Meanwhile, the National Assembly Library has constructed the “Intelligent Parliamentary Information Convergence Analysis System” to scientifically support legislative and parliamentary activities. Recently, the library has enhanced its services by introducing “Issue Search (AI Lab),” an AI-based function that comprehends user queries and synthesizes news, legal, and parliamentary materials to summarize core content. Although primarily developed to support the legislative activities of National Assembly staff—providing them with full functionality, including social media analysis (e.g. X, blogs, and online communities)—the library also opens news data analysis and key visualization functions to the general public, thereby continuously expanding the utility of public data (National Assembly Library, 2025).

Spatial innovation and the development of K-library landmarks

Under the “Fourth Comprehensive Library Development Plan (2024–2028),” the government is pursuing the “K-Library Cultural Landmark” initiative, which aims to transform library spaces into regional cultural hubs (Council on Library and Information Policy, 2023). This initiative transcends mere physical construction; it involves integrating themed spaces that reflect regional distinctiveness with amenities such as cafes, makerspaces, and immersive content experience zones. For instance, Jeonju City identified libraries as core assets for urban competitiveness and implemented a radical specialization strategy by assigning a unique theme to each library. Consequently, as of 2024, the number of library users reached 2.3 million, marking a 16% increase year-on-year. This success has prompted a surge in visits from other local governments seeking to benchmark the city’s approach (Jeonju City, 2026).

Sustainability and libraries: eco-friendly architecture and operation

Libraries are increasingly demonstrating tangible efforts to address climate change. The Seoul Metropolitan Library, having been recognized as a “Green Library” by IFLA, presents a practical model for carbon neutrality through initiatives such as the installation of rooftop gardens and the enforcement of policies prohibiting single-use items (Oh, 2023). Furthermore, the forthcoming Seoul Municipal Library in Jeonnon-dong, Dongdaemun-gu, is designed to be the city’s largest eco-friendly timber structure. This facility is expected to exemplify the future library model by prioritizing sustainability across all dimensions, ranging from construction materials to energy consumption (Park, 2023).

Current challenges and strategies for the future

Library survival strategies and role redefinition in the era of the demographic cliff

South Korea has officially entered a super-aged society, as the population aged 65 and over now exceeds the 20% threshold, while the working-age population (15–64) continues to decline, currently standing at 69.2% (Yonhap News TV, 2025). Concurrently, the nation is grappling with a precipitous drop in the school-age demographic—which has decreased by approximately 900,000 over the past 5 years to 7.89 million in 2025 (Pan and Jang, 2025). These dual demographic shifts present libraries with an existential crisis, necessitating a strategic response to both the shrinking youth population and the structural transition toward an aged society. Yet this challenging landscape also offers a transformative opportunity to redefine the social utility of libraries; for instance, in response to shrinking student demographics, school libraries could be reimagined as core anchors for community educational clusters. Such a transition may encourage the development of Maker Spaces within

underutilized library areas, fostering a culture of creative production and collaboration among local residents.

Specifically, to prepare for the shrinking working-age population, libraries must strengthen their functions as “Senior Literacy” centers that support lifelong learning and re-employment for the elderly. A representative case illustrating the library’s role as a community focal point in this era of demographic decline is the Incheon Subong Library, which was awarded the Grand Prize at the 19th Library Innovation Ideas and Best Practices competition announced by the National Library of Korea in September 2025. By expanding traditional storytelling activities led by local seniors (“Storytelling Grandmas”) into digital archives, music video productions, and song releases, the library demonstrated how it can serve as a catalyst for community cohesion (National Library of Korea, 2025).

A human-centered technical support framework to mitigate digital polarization

While the exponential advancement of AI technology has enhanced convenience in daily life, it has simultaneously precipitated serious socioeconomic challenges, including digital inequality, information bias, and job insecurity. In particular, disparities in technology accessibility and proficiency serve as primary mechanisms exacerbating polarization across generations and social classes. In this context, libraries are called upon to expand their roles beyond mere information provision, acting as a “beacon of information” that safeguards fundamental information rights and prevents technological exclusion.

It is particularly noteworthy that the National Library of Korea is focusing on strengthening the substantive digital competencies of librarians through its 2026 training curriculum, which includes operational efficiency using AI and practical exercises in implementing chatbots and web services (Seo, 2026). This represents an essential transition for librarians to evolve from mere conduits of finished technologies into a “Professional Intermediate Workforce” possessing a profound understanding of AI mechanisms and applications. This transformation is predicated on the understanding that only technologically proficient librarians can effectively guide citizens in appropriate AI usage and mediate the potential confusion arising from technological shifts. Furthering this vision, RIALD is developing the “Digital Navigator” program—an open educational curriculum designed to foster a specialized workforce that serves as a crucial human interface between complex AI systems and diverse community members. By institutionalizing this role, libraries can transition from mere information providers to proactive agents of digital equity.

The demand for such a “Professional Intermediate Workforce” is especially evident in school libraries, which have long faced chronic staffing shortages. In this context, recent research has investigated the potential of AI-driven chatbots as a strategic intervention to alleviate these staffing gaps (Lim, 2024). While practitioners demonstrate significant interest in these tools as a means to resolve longstanding professional challenges, their immediate deployment without professional oversight may present certain

risks. Empirical evidence indicates that such implementations are currently constrained by a lack of technical readiness (17.6%) and significant concerns regarding the accuracy of generated responses (16.2%). These multifaceted challenges underscore the vital role of technologically proficient librarians, as the effective integration of chatbots—ensuring accurate information retrieval and the inclusion of essential ethics education—is often contingent upon expert human oversight. By positioning chatbots as instructional aids within a librarian-led support framework, libraries can effectively foster self-directed learning and ensure that the benefits of intelligent innovation are equitably shared among all students. This approach substantively reinforces the library’s mission to safeguard fundamental information rights and prevent technological exclusion in an increasingly polarized digital environment.

While the context of school libraries is illustrative, the challenges of digital polarization are by no means limited to a single institution; rather, they represent a pervasive national issue that transcends generational and socioeconomic boundaries. Addressing such systemic gaps necessitates a more comprehensive and integrated approach that encompasses the entire library ecosystem, including national, public, and academic institutions. It is through the successful institutionalization of this multifaceted framework that libraries can effectively leverage a specialized workforce to lay the foundation for inclusive growth. When these professional mediators are strategically positioned across all library sectors, they ensure that the dividends of technological innovation are equitably distributed among all community members, rather than being concentrated within specific groups. This transition toward a tech-mediated yet human-centered service model constitutes the new social value that libraries are envisioned to pursue in the AI era.

Collaboration with the global library community: IFLA WLIC 2026 Busan

Innovative practices within Korean libraries are evolving beyond the achievements of individual institutions, advancing toward models that possess global applicability. Notably, the 90th WLIC, scheduled to be convened in Busan in 2026, is anticipated to serve as a pivotal platform for sharing the “K-Library” innovation model with the international community.

Conclusion

Inheriting the legacy of Kyujanggak—the Royal Library of the Joseon Dynasty—libraries in Korea have evolved into a world-class digital knowledge infrastructure. The challenges currently facing the field serve as an opportunity to reaffirm the social mandate of libraries. The future vision for Korean libraries is grounded in the “harmonious coexistence of technology and humanity.” While leveraging cutting-edge AI technologies to dismantle physical and intellectual barriers to knowledge, libraries are envisioned as spaces that retain an “analog warmth” capable of alleviating emotional isolation. The vision of “Libraries for Everyone’s Happiness,” articulated in the Fourth Comprehensive Library

Development Plan, serves as a concrete implementation roadmap for this trajectory.

Moving forward, Korean libraries are poised to fulfill their mission as pivotal institutions that enrich citizens' lives and underpin national competitiveness. This objective will be pursued through the systematic preservation of national knowledge resources, the expansion of inclusive social services, and leadership in global knowledge-sharing systems.

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