

## COLUMN

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# Behind the Books: Global Insights from Law Librarians

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This column was born out of curiosity and community. Inspired by the many conversations and shared experiences of colleagues and friends at gatherings of the International Association of Law Libraries (IALL) and other law library organizations around the world, it seeks to explore the ever-evolving roles we play in the legal community.

Each installment of this column will spotlight individual law librarians from around the globe, providing a unique perspective on their work by exploring their careers, professional responsibilities, challenges, and insights. While our core mission as law librarians—providing access to legal information—remains universal, the roles we play can vary significantly. By sharing these stories, we hope to foster connections that increase the visibility of our community and inspire creative solutions to shared challenges.

This column also serves as an invitation: if you have a story to share, we want to hear from you. Please reach out if you are interested in participating.

Warm regards,  
Julie and Mike

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## INSIGHTS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Featured Librarian: KWAK, JI YOUNG\*

### INSTITUTIONAL ROLE AND SETTING

I serve as a court official and grade 7 assistant librarian in the Supreme Court Library of Korea. The Supreme Court Library, whose history began in the 1950s, was established as an independent organization under the Supreme Court in 1989 in accordance with Article 81 of the Court Organization Act,<sup>1</sup> and serves as a national library established and operated by the State in accordance with Article 4 of the Library Act.<sup>2</sup>

The library's mission is to collect, organize, preserve, compile, and publish books, library materials, and judicial resources to support judicial affairs. The library also provides information on library and judicial materials as well as related services. It is divided into four divisions: General Affairs, Publishing and Editing, Acquisition and Technical Processing, and Knowledge Management and Services. As an assistant librarian, I work under the Knowledge Management and Services division.

### PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND LIBRARIANSHIP JOURNEY

I joined the Supreme Court Library of Korea in 2007, at a time when the concept of subject specialist librarians was just beginning to emerge in Korea. I had a vague desire to work in a specialized library, and among the various fields, law particularly attracted me due to its interdisciplinary nature and focus on public interest. This closely aligned with the principles of library and information science. Libraries, as non-profit institutions, are always at risk of extinction despite their inherent value. For librarians, having a strong sense of mission is essential.

While librarians in other specialized fields typically focus on serving professionals or researchers, law librarians provide services not only for judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and law professors but also for students and the public. This distinction is significant because any member of the public can be directly involved in a lawsuit, and major court decisions can impact everyday life. I believe in the importance of universal intellectual accessibility. However, even legal experts can struggle to find necessary materials, making it even more challenging for ordinary people outside the legal field. A law librarian plays a crucial role in bridging this gap, serving the needs of both experts and the general public.

To work as a librarian in Korea, a certificate in library and information science is required. The Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism issues librarian certificates to individuals with the appropriate educational background and work experience in libraries or library and information science and manages the certification process.<sup>3</sup> I graduated from the Department of Library and Information Science and obtained a Level 2 librarian license. During

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<sup>1</sup> Court Organization Act [Act No. 3992, Enforcement Date 4 December, 1987.] Article 81: (1) The Director shall be appointed for the Court Library; (2) The Director shall be appointed from among judges or court officials of Grade 2; (3) The Director shall be in charge of affairs of the Court Library under the direction of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and direct and supervise personnel under his/her control; and (4) Matters necessary for the organization, operation, etc. of the Court Library shall be prescribed by the Supreme Court Regulations.

<sup>2</sup> Library Act [Act No. 19592, Enforcement Date 8 August 2022.] Article 4: Libraries shall be classified as follows, based on the entities that found and operate such libraries: (1) National libraries: Libraries founded and operated by the State; (2) Governmental libraries: Libraries founded and operated by local governments or the superintendents of education pursuant to Article 32 of the Local Education Autonomy Act; (3) Non-governmental libraries: Libraries founded and operated by corporations or organizations founded pursuant to the Civil Act, the Commercial Act, or other statutes, or by individuals.

<sup>3</sup> Article 43 of the Library Act in Korea classifies librarians into three categories: Level 1 librarians, who hold a doctorate in library and information science; Level 2 librarians, who either have a degree in library science or a master's degree in the field; and assistant librarians, who have completed a junior college program in library and information science. See Library Act [Act No. 19592, Enforcement Date 8 August, 2022.] Article 43: The Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism shall issue a librarian certificate to a person who has educational background and working experience in libraries or library and information science and shall manage such certificate.

my undergraduate studies, I double majored in business administration and art history alongside library and information science. I chose business administration because I believed that effectively running a library involves not only organizing and classifying books but also managing human resources and accounting. My interest in art history stemmed from a desire to study materials related to art galleries and museums, which I thought would enhance the user experience in a library that functions as a complex space—what I like to call a *Larchiveum* (Library + Archives + Museum). While a double major is not necessary, my diverse academic background enables me to understand and perform my job more comprehensively.

While working at the Supreme Court Library of Korea, I pursued an LLB (Bachelor of Laws) to enhance my expertise. I also earned both a master's and doctorate in library and information science, which enabled me to achieve a Level 1 librarian license based on my work experience and academic qualifications. This combination of legal and library science education has significantly strengthened my ability to serve users effectively.

I specialized in records management during my master's program, recognizing that, despite handling numerous law books and materials, the most crucial resource in the court is the verdict itself. Understanding that judgments are considered records, I pursued a master's degree in records management to gain the expertise needed to handle them effectively. Additionally, I earned a certificate as a records management specialist. This certificate was issued by the Minister of Public Administration and Security in accordance with Article 78 of the Enforcement Decree of the Public Records Management Act.<sup>4</sup> It can be obtained by earning a master's degree or higher in records management or by holding a bachelor's degree in records management, history, or library and information science, and passing the records management specialist examination after completing the required training.

The Supreme Court of Korea has a Supreme Court Records Preservation Office where records managers oversee various administrative records, including judgments; however, this office does not provide reading services to the public. By contrast, the Supreme Court Library of Korea operates a special reading room for judgment information and publishes materials such as Supreme Court decisions, often supplying case materials to both judges and general users. While library and information science and records management are distinct fields, combining expertise from both can create a synergy that enhances work processes and user services.

## LOCAL LEGAL SYSTEM

In Korea, all librarians are collectively referred to as “librarians,” regardless of their qualifications. This means there is no distinct differentiation between associate librarians who have obtained qualifications through educational institutions and Level 1 librarians who hold doctoral degrees. Furthermore, awareness of subject-specialized librarianship is minimal, leading many to be unaware of the differences between librarians in public libraries and specialized law librarians. The recognition of librarians' professionalism remains quite low. Changes in litigation structures and the law significantly impact the duties and responsibilities of librarians. In modern society, conflicts are becoming increasingly frequent and complex. With developments such as “Self-Represented Litigation” and “e-Trials,” the demand for legal information is rising among both legal experts and the public. *Beopmaru*, the reading room of the Supreme Court Library of Korea, is the only place where the public can access specialized materials to prepare for a lawsuit. Initially, the Supreme Court Library focused primarily on serving internal users, such as judges. However, in 2018, it expanded its offerings to the public in order to reduce the justice gap and improve access to justice. Alongside catering to legal experts, I also strive to provide legal materials that meet the needs of the public.

## CHALLENGES

The Supreme Court Library of Korea began offering public services in earnest when it relocated to the Judicial Research and Training Institute building in 2018. Previously situated in the Supreme Court building in

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<sup>4</sup> Enforcement Decree of the Public Records Management Act [Presidential decree No. 34487, Enforcement Date 17 May, 2024.] Article 78: The Minister of Public Administration and Security issues a records management specialist certificate to individuals who meet the qualification requirements set forth in the Ordinance of the Ministry of Public Administration and Security.

Seocho-gu, Seoul, the library moved to its new location in Ilsan, Goyang-si, Gyeonggi-do. Since *Beopmaru* serves not only as a public service space but also continues to provide internal services for judges and employees at the Judicial Research and Training Institute, it addresses a variety of needs.

The building houses three different organizations (the Judicial Research and Training Institute, the Supreme Court Library, and the Judicial Policy Research Institute), leading to diverse requirements from internal users. This situation makes it challenging to establish a clear service direction between internal support services, professional services for legal experts, and services for the public. Consequently, the library's identity has become ambiguous. I believe that establishing the library's identity and determining the direction of its services for both legal experts and general users is of the utmost importance. To adapt to the changing environment, the Supreme Court Library of Korea adopted the Collection Development Policy in April 2021. This policy, based on an analysis of user needs, emphasizes e-books and digitized original texts. Budgets for domestic and international legal books and e-books are managed separately.

The Supreme Court Library Acquisition Committee, consisting of both internal and external experts, meets annually to review the library's book purchase budget and assess the status of the collection. The committee selects books for purchase by country and advises the President of the Supreme Court Library on the vision and basic policies for collection development. All contracts are executed through legal procedures in accordance with relevant laws, and budget officers actively work to secure funding for quality services.

The selection of foreign law books has been diversified, expanding the target countries from the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, and France to include Spain, Portugal, Russia, and Italy. Furthermore, the Supreme Court Library subscribes to a commercial web database to provide the latest domestic and international legal information essential for trial work.

#### TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

I experienced the transition from landlines to mobile phones and from paper books to e-books and audiobooks. Fortunately, experiences during my youth made computerization and digitalization feel natural rather than daunting. When I joined the Supreme Court Library, it coincided with the library's full-scale shift towards computerization. I was among the first to introduce what are now considered essential services, including the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) system, mobile homepage, and e-books.

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in another significant transformation in libraries through the introduction of remote work systems and video conferences. As social distancing became necessary, traditional library services—such as borrowing, reading, and the use of spaces and facilities—shifted to online formats. Even though the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared an end to the pandemic, library services have not reverted to their pre-COVID state; user demands and usage patterns have evolved. While advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) have gradually strengthened digital and online services, employees initially felt that being physically present in the library was essential. However, both users and staff have come to recognize that remote work is a viable option. Alongside the expansion of digital services for users, the transition to a remote work environment for employees has also progressed rapidly. In our country, the work environment tends to be relatively inflexible.

Although there are systems in place, such as flexible working hours, utilizing them has often been challenging. Nevertheless, the widespread adoption of video conferencing post-COVID-19 has eased restrictions related to physical space. I have realized that I no longer need to travel for face-to-face meetings; video conferencing enables me to connect with more business associates without being limited by geography or time.

I believe that technology will continue to evolve, and we will need to adapt accordingly. It is essential for law librarians to pursue ongoing education in both ICT and the legal field. This is why I am deeply interested in emerging legal tech and, from the user's perspective, strive to identify ways to respond to changes in the social environment. My goal is to establish strategies that will help libraries adapt to this new landscape.

#### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Currently, continuing education programs for law librarians are insufficient. While the National Library of Korea offers on-the-job training for librarians, this training is not specialized for those focusing on legal subjects and tends to cover general content. By contrast, court librarians receive legal training at the Court Officials Training Institute, which is more tailored to their specific needs. To stay up to date with the changes in law and law

librarianship globally, the Supreme Court Library of Korea has been represented at the IALL Annual Course since joining the organization in 2015. We also attend IFLA's World Library and Information Congress. I am personally a member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) and subscribe to the mailing service of the Law

Category	Domestic Publication	Foreign/International Publications	Total
<b>Law</b>	193,436	244,705	438,141
<b>General</b>	83,273	10,283	93,556
<b>Total</b>	276,709	254,988	531,697

Library of Congress (LLOC). I primarily obtain the latest information through AALL and the LLOC's mailing service, and I actively participate in conferences and webinars to stay informed.

## RESEARCH

Although I often provide access to materials while working at the Supreme Court Library of Korea, my main role at the Seoul Western District Court Library involved direct reference services. In district courts, court officials participate in trials, leading to numerous requests for materials related to general trial work or litigation procedures. Unlike judges, these staff members often seek resources that support their ongoing tasks. I made it a priority to identify key materials for each role and proactively provide them during personnel transfers.

I learned that building a relationship of trust with users was crucial. Initially, it was challenging to establish this rapport, but once users recognized that I provided exactly what they needed, they began to request more materials from me. When users visited the library, I made it a point to approach them, greet them warmly, and engage in conversation rather than simply sit at the counter. For inquiries via phone or e-mail, I focused on understanding their specific information needs rather than providing immediate answers, as users often struggle to articulate their intentions clearly.

In early 2024, I worked at *Beopmaru* for about five months. During my time at *Beopmaru*, the focus of my services shifted from legal experts to the public. I recognized that the technical jargon of the legal field can be challenging for ordinary people, making it difficult for them to conduct searches using everyday vocabulary. I aimed to bridge this gap by simplifying terminology in searches to help users find the materials they needed.

Overall, my direct interactions with users at the Seoul Western District Court and *Beopmaru* were invaluable experiences that will inform the future service directions and technologies of the Supreme Court Library of Korea.

## RESOURCES

The current status of the Supreme Court Library of Korea's general collection is as follows:

The Supreme Court Library publishes a range of materials related to rulings. There are two particular publications available in English: the *Supreme Court Law Journal*, an academic periodical that includes research papers with international relevance written by judges as well as the latest Supreme Court decisions; and *Supreme Court Decisions*, which compiles the year's key judgments and rulings from the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court Library also houses valuable and historical books, some of which are available in e-book format. Five major service materials include the *Former Korea Official Gazette* (an e-book covering June 1894–August 1910), the *Official Gazette of the Joseon Government-General* (covering issues no. 1 to no. 5567, 1910–1945), the *Joseon Statute Book* (edited in 1930 and published by the Joseon Association for Public Administration), *Civil Judgment in the Late Joseon Period* (providing access to 151 volumes of 14,538 civil judgments, 1889–1918), and *Joseon High Court Decisions* (offering 36 volumes of 2,794 rulings, 1909–1945).

In addition, the "Comprehensive Legal Information System" (<https://glaw.scourt.go.kr>) and the Bubgoeul System (<https://lx.scourt.go.kr>) are available online. The first is a database that organically integrates information such as precedents, laws, and legal documents operated and managed by the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, the National Assembly, the Ministry of Government Legislation, and the Supreme Court Library, and is distributed inside and outside the Supreme Court through the internet.

The Supreme Court Library is a center that provides comprehensive legal information. Data such as precedent data and legal documents from the Supreme Court, courts at various levels, and the Constitutional Court



are collected, processed, and loaded into the system. Functionality, such as improved search quality and stability, was further improved in July 2013 when a new comprehensive legal information system, co-developed by the Supreme Court Library and Government Computer Center of the National Court Administration, was implemented. Now, people can quickly and accurately search for precedents from the Supreme Court and lower courts, legislation of the Republic of Korea, Supreme Court rules, internal regulations, and legal literature through the Bubgoeul System. The most important legal resource is the judgment itself. The Supreme Court Library of Korea operates a special reading room for judgment information. In this room, people can search for and view judgments using the Case Management System, the same digital platform for case documents used by all judges and court officials of all courts nationwide.

### CULTURAL INSIGHTS

Our country has long been predominantly single-ethnic, with a shared culture. However, there has been a recent increase in multicultural families due to a rise in international marriages. Consequently, we are seeing more lawsuits involving foreigners, particularly in domestic affairs cases. The Supreme Court Library acquires books published not only in Korea but also in Japan, Germany, and the US, primarily for referencing foreign cases. However, there is now a growing need for services that provide translations of essential materials into foreign languages for litigants involved in trials in Korea. To ensure that litigants from diverse cultural backgrounds do not face disadvantages due to cultural differences during their trials, we need to offer a broader range of relevant materials than we have in the past.

In our country, judicial examination was traditionally used to select judges, prosecutors, and lawyers. However, due to various negative issues, the system transitioned to a bar exam conducted through law schools. While the public has a clear understanding of the judicial examination, many are still unaware of the steps to become a judge, prosecutor, or lawyer after entering law school. Furthermore, with the establishment of law schools, awareness of law libraries and law librarians has begun to grow, but the understanding of these concepts remains insufficient. I hope that definitions of key terms, such as the bar examination system, judicial appointment system, law library, and law librarian, are clearly recognized and understood.

### FUTURE OUTLOOK

The development of legal technology has significantly streamlined workflows. The digitalization of data and the availability of web databases enable quick searches and easy access to vast amounts of legal information. However, as AI technology advances, questions are being raised about the necessity of librarians and the potential threat to their jobs.

Users now expect more than just the provision of information: if law librarians cannot offer professional answering services, they risk becoming obsolete. I believe law librarians are at a crossroads where it is essential to identify the unique services that only law librarians can provide. While AI and machine-learning technologies can enhance the efficient use of big data in legal judgments, these systems currently lack the ability to verify the accuracy or bias of the data they process. Therefore, it is crucial for law librarians to validate the information's reliability. The level of legal knowledge possessed by librarians has become increasingly important. Although legal experts may have a deep understanding of their field, they may not excel in locating diverse types of data. As a result, it is time for librarians to pivot towards providing answering services that leverage their legal expertise. Law librarians should be equipped to provide resources that inspire and support legal professionals in their work.

To promote the professionalism of librarianship, it is essential to raise awareness and establish regulations regarding the qualifications for law librarians. There is a strong recognition of the need for subject-specialized librarians, particularly in the medical and legal fields, due to the high levels of required expertise and complexity in these areas. However, systems to support the subject expertise of law and medical librarians are lacking. In Korea, there are currently no professional regulations for subject-specialized librarians.

Librarian qualifications are typically granted through undergraduate programs at universities, which makes it difficult to train librarians with specialized knowledge in specific fields. Consequently, library and information science students often need to pursue additional expertise in related subjects through minors or double majors. Since a law degree (Juris Doctor (JD)) is not required to work in a law library, individuals with a library and information science degree can assume these roles without formal legal education. Many librarians in law libraries don't hold a law degree, leading to uncertainty about the qualifications necessary to be recognized as a law

librarian. This ambiguity complicates the establishment of clear expertise as a subject-specialized librarian in the legal field.

#### ADVICE AND INSIGHTS

Many people envision librarianship as a leisurely and elegant job, where one simply reads books during work hours or checks them in and out. This misconception needs to be addressed and challenged. Being a librarian is a certified profession, and although we view ourselves as professionals, the public often does not share that perspective. It is our responsibility to raise awareness and promote understanding so that the public recognizes librarians as valuable professionals in our field.

Majoring in library and information science is a fundamental requirement, along with strong information technology (IT) skills and proficiency in foreign languages to enhance information retrieval capabilities. While tools like ChatGPT and translation software are well-developed, a certain level of foundational knowledge is essential for effectively managing specialized and complex legal information.

Additionally, it is crucial to have a background in law and a solid understanding of legal principles. This legal knowledge and mindset are vital for facilitating smooth communication with users. Given that the law is constantly evolving, ongoing education about the changing legal landscape and advancements in IT is necessary. Furthermore, librarians must be familiar with their ethical responsibilities and adhere to the established code of conduct.

#### PERSONAL REFLECTION

##### **What has been the most rewarding aspect of your career as a law librarian?**

After providing help with legal information, I feel a deep sense of fulfilment when I receive expressions of gratitude from users or heartfelt cards. However, the most rewarding experience for me was serving as a library operations expert in the “Project for Capacity Building of the Vietnam Court Academy Based on Digital Innovation Technology” in collaboration with the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)<sup>5</sup>. The Court Academy under the Vietnam Court is a higher education institution dedicated to judicial training in Vietnam; however, it lacked a library. In 2022, I conducted a preliminary survey before the project’s initiation and later participated as an expert in the planning survey for its launch in 2024. Based on the 2022 survey findings, the project will unfold over the next five years with a total budget of US\$14.7 million. It aims to create a smart library and establish a judicial information and knowledge-sharing platform utilizing advanced IT, thereby enhancing the education and operational capacity of the Court Academy. Additionally, I obtained an Official Development Assistance (ODA) certificate to promote the understanding of international development cooperation.

Since the lack of space in libraries is a constant issue, I gained considerable experience in relocating and remodelling the library while working at the Supreme Court Library of Korea. However, this was the first time I had planned a comprehensive new library, which included constructing a new building and expanding the necessary equipment, systems, books, and personnel, as there had been no library facility at the Vietnam Court Academy at all. I take considerable pride in having created a foundation that allows judges, Vietnam Court Academy professors, and students from all over Vietnam to access a library equipped with the latest IT facilities.

In Korea, many people work in companies without being able to utilize their majors. I have loved books since I was young and enjoy spending time in libraries and bookstores. I feel fortunate to be able to work in a space I love and to be able to apply my education, which gives me a deep sense of accomplishment.

##### **Are there any memorable or impactful experiences from your career that you would like to share?**

Beyond merely providing information, in-depth knowledge of the law is essential for delivering customized services that meet users’ needs. Since joining the Supreme Court Library of Korea, I have made concerted efforts to enhance my expertise through ongoing education and training. Alongside my studies, I earned a bachelor’s degree in

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<sup>5</sup> Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) is a quasi-governmental organization under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that manages Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects.

law and master's and doctoral degrees in library and information science and records management. In addition to my librarian's license, I also hold a certification in records management.

In Korea's library and information academia, there is a notable lack of research on law libraries and law subject librarians. To address this gap, I have continued my research and published papers to serve as a bridge between academia and the practical world. Last year, I wrote three articles: 'A Study on Exploring Modern Korean Society Through Analyzing the Distribution of Civil Case Rulings'; 'A Study of User Behaviors Based on Data from the Beopmaru, Supreme Court Library of Korea'; and 'A Study on User Satisfaction and Improvement Suggestions for the Beopmaru Public Service in the Supreme Court Library of Korea.'

The Supreme Court has implemented overseas training programs aimed at enhancing the work skills, job expertise, and motivation of judges and court clerks. Sponsored by the Court, participants in these programs receive training or engage in research at international universities, educational institutions, or research centers. Due to the limited number of seats, competition is fierce, and the majority of those selected have been general officers of the Court. I am proud to be the first librarian supported by the Court to participate in such an overseas training course. Although it was challenging to be selected as the first, I believe future librarians will have greater opportunities to participate in this valuable program.