Library Users' Views and Librarian Evaluation at the Taipei Public Library

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How the librarian is perceived is an important aspect of any management strategy to attract users. In the past, the public image of librarians has often been stereotyped, described by one writer as: "An old maid sitting behind the counter with a severe and peremptory expression, sometimes dull and expressionless, not willing to say more than necessary to people."[1] Where this image exists, librarians cannot command a high social position or a respectable salary. These factors affect their spirit and incentive to work, and the library itself is less respected.[2] Library administration must foster new, positive images of librarians, who would be better viewed as trustworthy, professional, kind, and active, for example.

The image of public librarians is influenced by the general value judgment of vocations and views on the development of library and information science professionals. In other words, cultural differences are a main factor affecting users' perceptions of the roles and professionalism of librarians. The authors searched the literature and did not find any studies on the image of Chinese or Taiwanese librarians. Perceptions of professionals in library and information field among the public in Taiwan may not be the same as those in Europe and the United States, but issues and concerns about stereotyping of perceptions are similar.

This study chose the Taipei Public Library System (TPL) as its subject. In all, TPL includes forty-one branch libraries and fourteen public reading rooms, and it employs more than four hundred librarians. About twelve million patrons go through the libraries' turnstiles every year. TPL has adopted marketing strategies to promote its educational function and other wideranging activities, and it polls its patrons' views annually in order to assess the success of those efforts. The purpose of this study is to use those polls to examine the image of librarians through the dual perspective of library patrons and the chief executives of TPL branch libraries. The major objectives of this study are to:

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- briefly investigate images of librarians in literary works and in the media;
- explore aspects of the composite image of librarians;
- identify and analyze the image of TPL librarians by different user groups;
- discuss problems TPL librarians encounter in attempting to shape their image; and
- offer suggestions on reshaping the image of TPL librarians and other public librarians based on the results of this study.

Documentary Research

Wilson pointed out that the stereotyped image of librarians among the general public includes five characteristics.[3] According to the image, librarians:

- are usually neat, careful, and eager to obtain information;
- tend to be obedient and conservative;
- are passive and modest;
- are not outgoing or extravagant; and
- tend to worry and lack confidence.

In 1989, Wallace investigated the image of librarians by interviewing more than one hundred people of different age groups and ethnic backgrounds.[4] Most stated that the stereotype of "an old maid" came to their mind when the word "librarian" was mentioned, and the adjectives that were most frequently associated included: old-fashioned, frugal, nearsighted, conservative, unstylish, bookish, introverted, underpaid, unattractive, antisocial, and boring. However, the study also revealed positive aspects of the librarian's image, such as adept, intelligent, capable, kind, graceful, knowledgeable, wise, and hard-working. The adjective "helpful" appeared frequently, as well as a view of the librarian as a "know-it-all" who can find an answer to any question.[5]

One of the main reasons librarians suffer image problems is due to stereotyped presentations of them in various media.[6] This has been studied more thoroughly in the West than in Taiwan. For example, in content analysis of some literature, two recurring character types have been

identified: "The Old Maid," an elderly, celibate woman; and the "Ingénue," a young woman whose library career invariably conflicts with her romantic interests. While at first these stereotypes seem like polar opposites, they can alternatively be interpreted as expressions of a single image across a span of years; that is, the "Old Maid"' is an "Ingénue" who put her career ahead of her love life.[7] The fictional "Old Maid" can be seen as sometimes stern and rather unfriendly to library patrons. By contrast, in the mystery fiction genre, however, librarians often are portrayed as key figures in helping to solve crimes, as they are knowledgeable and adept at finding answers to puzzling questions.[8]

Librarians in children's literature are often depicted in a very positive manner. For example, "Library Lil" transforms the townspeople's lifestyles by getting them to switch their allegiance from television to books.[9] Another positive librarian is Miss Rumphius, who "helps every one to find the books they want," and spreads flower seeds along her walks so that flowers will blossom everywhere.[10] *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* is about Alia, the director of Basra's Central Library in southern Iraq, who saves the library's books through her own efforts and that of friends and neighbors before the library is bombed in a battle in the Iraqi War.[11] Alia is depicted as a confident, intelligent, and brave woman who can face and solve problems even in life-threatening situations.[12]

In March 2005, this article's authors searched and found eighty-one illustrated caricatures of librarians by searching Google. Among these were fifty-three female librarians, nineteen male librarians, and nine miscellaneous others (including animals). Fourteen of the fifty-three female librarians are depicted as wearing their hair in a bun; thirty-six of the total eighty-one librarians wore glasses attached to chains. In regard to described expressions or personality characteristics, forty of the eighty-one are depicted as dull, severe-looking, or reserved, while thirty-one appear kind and smiling. Fifty-three pictures show librarians at work, and of them, twenty-four are at a counter; seven are attempting to maintain quiet in the library; seven are holding books; six are busy shelving books; four operate computers; two are seen pushing a book cart; two are engaged in story-telling; and one is doing some ill-defined task. Whether these depictions can be perceived as professional or clerical is open to interpretation.

The question arises, though, of whether these common Western perceptions of librarians are similar to reality, either in content or prevalence. At TPL, concern about librarians' image was addressed as an area needed for improvement. Whether that is true and how it could be done was a larger question.

Research Methods

This study adopts documentary analysis and questionnaire investigation in order to explore the perceptions of librarians at TPL, including the main library and all branch librar-ies (excluding public reading rooms, the Chi-Ming Branch Library for the Blind, and branches that were undergoing renovation). Two questionnaires were designed to focus on the specific image-related issues. One was given to the directors of each branch, and the other to public library patrons.

An open-ended questionnaire consisting of five essay questions was given to each of the thirty-six branch library directors (twenty-seven were returned) during the period from June 25 to July 15, 2005. The questionnaire posed the following five questions:

1. What are some of the strategies adopted by TPL to promote a positive image of the library and its librarians, and what seems to have been the most effective?
2. In what ways do you think the marketing strategies regularly employed by TPL influence the image of librarians?
3. In what ways do you think TPL's educational and training programs designed for its librarians influence the image of librarians?
4. What suggestions do you have to promote the overall image of TPL and the image of librarians?
5. What are some problems facing TPL in shaping the image of librarians?

Another questionnaire was randomly distributed to TPL patrons, including those using the facilities at the main library and all thirty-six branch libraries, during the period from August 1–14, 2005. Seventy copies of the questionnaire were distributed to random patrons of at least fifteen years of age entering each library, for a total of 2,520 copies. Patron questionnaires were divided into two parts. Part One gathered relevant information about the patrons, including their gender, age, occupation, education, frequency of TPL visits, purposes of their visits, reasons for contacting librarians, and library activities in which the patron participated. Part Two focused on personality and traits; behavior conduct, and attitude; professional image and appearances; and perceptions of librarianship in general. There was a final essay question that asked patrons to share their views of TPL librarians.

The Results—Library Directors Survey

The questionnaire for the directors of the TPL branch libraries on "Shaping the Image of the Librarian" comprised five essay questions, with the results detailed below.

Strategies in Promoting the Image of the Library and the Librarian

Table 1 shows that branch directors believe that appropriate strategies to promote the images of the library and librarian are educational training, sponsoring seminars, promoting the International Organization for Standardization 9000, and holding a variety of recognition and morale-boosting activi-

Table 1: Frequency of Directors' Suggested Strategies for Promoting the Image of the Library and the Librarian

Library and the librarian	Responses
Educational training; seminars	10
Promoting ISO	9
Sponsoring activities; marketing; providing guided tours on how to use the library	8
Voting for the most helpful librarian; rules on rewards and punishment	7
5S training	5
Redecorating the library; keeping the library clean and comfortable; changing the allotment of available space	4
Promoting service and manners	4
Other	14

Table 2: Frequency of the Views of Branch Library Directors on the Effects of Marketing Activities on the Image of the Librarian

Marketing activities on the image of the librarian	Responses
A positive effect on the image of the librarian	9
No effect on the image of the librarian, depends on the situation	5
A positive effect on the image of TPL	5
Increases coordination of staff members and recognition of the library	4
Increases understanding of the functions of TPL and enhances library visibility	3
Enhances professional knowledge of the librarian	3
Promotes the image of and respect for the librarian	3
Other	4

Table 3: Frequency of Responses of Directors Concerning the Effects of Educational Training

Library staff on the shaping of the image of the librarian	Responses
Promotes the image of the librarian as professional	16
Increases the professional knowledge of the staff, provides new information, enhances understanding of professional work	15
Raises confidence in and creates a positive attitude toward the librarian	5
Helps identify the librarian with the library and colleagues	4
Improves service, addresses user concerns in proper fashion	3
Other	3

ties.[13] In addition, 5S training, which refers to five Japanese words that describe standards for appearance and behavior, was thought to be important. The standards are seirei (tidiness), seiton (orderliness), seiso (cleanliness), seiketsu (standards clean-up), and shitsuke (sustaining discipline).

Effects of Marketing Activities on Shaping the Librarian's Image

TPL regularly holds a wide array of marketing activities. Fourteen of the branch library directors believe that these activities have a positive effect on the image of the librarian and the library, while five disagree, believing instead that the activities lack proper planning or that having too many activities has a negative impact on the overall quality of librarians' work. Moreover, marketing activities may serve to promote the image of the library, but not the librarian (see table 2).

The Effects of Educational Training on Shaping the Librarian's Image

As shown in table 3, most directors believe that educational training of library staff members positively promotes the image of library personnel in general, and the image of the professional librarian in particular. Such training also brings new information into play, and enhances the staff's understanding of professional work.

Suggestions for Promoting TPL's Overall Image and the Librarian's Image

Directors believe that educating and training staff members, maintaining a clean library environment, regularly updating available hardware and software, establishing a corporate identity system, wearing uniforms, increasing manpower, and raising the level of professional knowledge and self-esteem of the librarian are factors that can help promote the overall image of the library and the image of the librarian (see table 4).

Problems Facing Branch Libraries in Shaping the Librarian's Image

Directors believe that, among all of the possible problems that may occur when trying to create a positive image of the librarian, those most difficult to overcome are the effects of insufficient manpower, frequency of personnel changes, gaps in professional knowledge, and an overall lack of respect

for the professionalism of the librarian. Due to a perennial shortage of manpower, librarians are forced to shoulder a heavy workload; this, combined with frequent changes in the core library staff, make it hard for the library to maintain its current level of services, let alone promote and improve its personnel. Moreover, the librarians' level of professionalism goes largely unnoticed because in order to maintain the workload, the vast majority of people viewing the librarians see them in roles as the keeper of the library's books, rather than as an active service providers. Library directors acknowledge that much effort is required to reshape and promote a positive image of the librarian. See table 5.

Results of the Survey—Library Patrons (Part One)

A total of 2,520 questionnaires for TPL patrons concerning their perceptions of the librarian's image were distributed, of which 2,091 were returned (102 copies were deemed invalid). As indicated in table 6, the age group for those thirty-one- to forty-years old was the largest. Because the questionnaire was distributed during the summer vacation, the age group for fifteen- to twenty-year olds also was well represented. The smallest group in terms of numbers was that for the age group of seventy-one years old and older. The responses thus reflect the opinions of a largely younger demographic.

In terms of frequency of patron visits to the TPL, as indicated in table 7, the group with the largest response rate visited TPL about once a week, combined with the next largest group, which was those who visited TPL nearly every day, comprised 57.5 percent of the total response. Thus the vast majority of those who responded to the questionnaire were frequent library patrons, which, it might be inferred, reflect the opinions of those with an accurate notion of the librarian's image.

Table 8 shows the purposes for visiting the library. This reveals that most users come to the public library to make use of its resources, rather than social or programming purposes.

Reasons for users' contacts with the librarians are presented in table 9. A very high percentage of the users have contact with librarians while borrowing and returning books. While it may be true that through such interactions, patrons are able to gain impressions of librarians' personality traits, behavior, conduct, attitude, and appearance, the circulation transaction is not usually a high-level professional operation and not always conducted by professional librarians, so there may be incorrect impressions. By contrast, when users make requests of librarians for information or reference services, or to assist with computers, they are in a position to evaluate professional knowledge. However, it should be also noted that the second highest

Table 5: Problems in Shaping the Image of the Librarian in Branch Libraries, As Seen by Directors

Reasons	Responses
Insufficient manpower	10
Frequent personnel changes	9
Gaps in professional knowledge, lack of respect for librarians' professionalism	9
Not duly respected or understood, low social status	7
Miscommunication and misunderstanding between librarians and patrons	6
Heavy workload	4
Other	10

Table 4: Frequency of Suggestions by Directors for Promoting TPL's Overall image

Image of Its librarians	Responses
Provide education and training for staff members	10
Maintain a clean reading environment and neat shelves; regularly update hard and soft ware	10
Establish CIS; have the staff wear uniforms	10
Enlarge and train staff; increase professional knowledge and self-esteem	8
Hold marketing activities	4
Improve library services	3
Promote a group identity	3
Other	4

Table 6: Patron Questionnaire Distribution among Age Groups

Age	No. of people	%
15–20	346	17.4
21–30	479	24.1
31–40	522	26.2
41–50	383	19.3
51–60	147	7.4
61–70	77	3.9
71 and older	33	1.7
Unspecified	2	0.1
Total	1,989	100.0

response indicated patrons who had little or no contact with librarians. How their perceptions are formed, if they have any at all, is questionable.

Results of the Survey—Library Patrons (Part Two)

In Part Two, which evaluates patrons' actual perceptions, the questionnaire adopted the Likert Scale, where for

Table 7: Frequency of Patrons' Visits to TPL

Frequency of visits	No. of people	%
About once a week	743	37.4
Almost every day	400	20.1
About twice a week	319	16.0
About once a month	273	13.7
Very seldom	90	4.5
About once every two months	79	4.0
About once every three months	37	1.9
First visit	21	1.1
About once every six months	20	1.0
About once a year	5	0.3
Unspecified	2	0.1
Total	1,989	100.0

Table 8: Purposes of Visits by TPL Patrons

Purpose	No. of people	%
Borrowing and returning books	1,133	24.8
Reading books, newspapers, and magazines	994	21.7
Studying	602	13.2
Looking for information	592	12.9
Gaining access to computers and the Internet	507	11.1
Recreation	342	7.5
Accompanying children	254	5.5
Participating in TPL activities	119	2.6
Others	30	0.7
Total	4,573	100.0

Note: More than one answer could be given.

each question they were asked whether they (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) had no opinion, (4) agree, or (5) strongly agree. There were four sections of questions: "Personality Traits"; "Behavior, Conduct and Attitudes"; "Professional Ability"; and "Appearance." The analysis of the users' answers to the questions, as shown in table 10, reveals that the high and low average scores of the questions were between the ranges of 3.35 to 4.18, which are on the scale between "no opinion" and "agree."

The general averages were very similar: section 1 was 3.92; section 2 was 3.91; section 3 was 3.93; and section four also was 3.93.

The highest average for any question score (4.18) was recorded for section 1, question 1 ("I think the librarian is friendly and kind"). Moreover, in section 2, the question concerning the librarian's behavior, conduct, and attitude ("I think the librarian is demure, polite, and well-mannered") received the highest average score (4.08), while in the section 3, on the librarian's professional ability, question 1 ("I think the librarian is enthusiastic in providing service") received the highest average score (4.14). The lowest average (3.35) for any question was in section 3, question 12 ("I think the librarian is well paid"). This response reveals a discrepancy between the reported impression of the stereotyped image of the librarian as cold and rigid. The overall picture is librarians are courteous and helpful (if not especially well-paid).

In section 4, question 5 ("I think uniforms can make the librarian look more professional") received the lowest average score (3.83). This result contrasts somewhat with responses in the questionnaire submitted to the directors of the branch libraries about strategies on promoting a positive impression of the image of the librarian, where ten directors mentioned that wearing library vests or uniforms as effective tools to promote TPL's overall image of and the image of its librarians.

In a final question, this study also asked patrons to "describe your view of the TPL librarians in one sentence." Answers from the total 1,033 users were divided into four aspects: 1) a positive view; 2) a negative view; 3) a view

Table 9: Reasons for Patron Contact with Librarians

Reasons for contact	No. of people	%
Borrowing or returning books	1,308	65.8
Infrequent or no contact	262	13.2
Making inquiries	259	13.0
Inquiring about Computer Operations	127	6.4
Others	32	1.6
Unspecified	1	0.1
Total	1,989	100

that is encouraging, but offers suggestions; and 4) other miscellaneous views. Among the 1,443 submissions, 1,220 were characterized by a positive view of the librarian, 65 responses were negative views, 88 revealed views that were classified under "other." Results suggest that most patrons have a very positive view of the librarian, most frequently listing such adjectives as enthusiastic, professional, well-educated, knowledgeable, diligent, hardworking, responsible, and patient.

Although the large majority had positive views, there were 135 (15.5 percent) that were either negative or neutral. Critical comments included such words as unfriendly, passive, conservative, unenthusiastic, dull, and trying too hard to please. In all, though, explicitly negative comments directed against librarians comprised only 4.5 percent of the total entries. Among the other views, many users recognized that TPL librarians carry a heavy workload, "work too hard," and are "exhausted." This may be mostly related to circula-

Table 10: Average Scores for the Answers in the Questionnaire on Patrons' Perceptions and Evaluation of TPL Librarians

	No.	Question	Average	Standard error
1. Personality Traits	1.	I think the librarian is kind and friendly.	4.18	0.64
	2.	I think the librarian is calm and stable.	3.90	0.71
	3.	I think the librarian is outgoing.	3.55	0.80
	4.	I think the librarian is independent and strong.	3.77	0.71
	5.	I think the librarian is tender and considerate.	4.05	0.68
	6.	I think the librarian is kind and loving.	4.02	0.70
	7.	I think the librarian is sharp-minded.	3.75	0.75
	8.	I think the librarian is patient.	4.01	0.70
	9.	I think the librarian is virtuous and principled.	4.00	0.67
		*general average 3.92		
2. Behavior, Conduct, and Attitudes	1.	I think the librarian is enthusiastic about public affairs.	3.98	0.70
	2.	I think the librarian is righteous and honest.	4.00	0.66
	3.	I think the librarian is trustworthy.	3.97	0.68
	4.	I think the librarian is law-abiding.	4.02	0.67
	5.	I think the librarian is demure, polite, and well-mannered.	4.08	0.65
	6.	I think the librarian is confident.	3.88	0.70
	7.	I think the librarian is active and adventurous.	3.65	0.78
	8.	I think the librarian is efficient.	3.98	0.72
	9.	I think the librarian has leadership.	3.67	0.76
	10.	I think the librarian is attentive and focused.	3.98	0.67
	11.	I think the librarian is good at socializing and communicating.	3.81	0.75
		*general average 3.91		
3. Professional Ability	1.	I think the librarian is enthusiastic in doing his/her work.	4.14	0.67
	2.	I think the librarian has a sense of self-esteem and a sense of responsibility.	4.12	0.64
	3.	I think the librarian is knowledgeable.	3.68	0.75
	4.	I think the librarian is knowledgeable on general subjects.	3.71	0.73
	5.	I think the librarian has professional knowledge.	3.87	0.71
	6.	I think the librarian can answer my inquiry thoroughly.	4.03	0.70
	7.	I think the librarian is good at computers, retrieving information and using indexes.	3.98	0.69
	8.	I think the librarian is familiar with the library collection and system.	4.07	0.66
	9.	I think the librarian is knowledgeable about books and all sorts of resources.	4.05	0.67
	10.	I think the librarian is familiar with a wide range of internet resources.	3.86	0.74
	11.	I think the librarian communicates well with library patrons.	3.90	0.73
	12.	I think the librarian gets good salary	3.35	0.85
		*general average 3.93		
4. Appearance	1.	I think the librarian always has a pleasant appearance.	3.93	0.74
	2.	I think the librarian always wears a smile.	3.93	0.76
	3.	I think the librarian behaves properly.	3.98	0.70
	4.	I think the librarian is always properly dressed.	3.99	0.65
	5.	I think uniforms can make the librarian look more professional.	3.83	0.95
		*general average 3.93		

tion contact, where business tends to be centered. A similar comment was that the libraries were understaffed.

Conclusion and Summary

The common stereotype of librarians among the Taiwanese public does not exactly resemble the image of an old maid, as depicted in certain research literature in English. Still, there exists some similar aspects of a stereotypical image of the librarian as traditional, conservative, and demure. More generally, this study indicates that TPL users have a very positive opinion of librarians in contrast to the librarian image depicted in many Western literary works and some of the professional literature. Three possibilities to explain these favorable results are immediately obvious:

1. The subjects of this study are mostly regular TPL users, who have experience in using public libraries and know librarian's work content and services conditions quite well. The rest of the general population may not have that perspective.
2. Most of the TPL librarians are civil servants. Taipei city government has established services rules and codes for employees, and those may be reflected in their professionalism.
3. In the past years, TPL has won several important awards for quality management, such as the Service Quality Award of the Executive Yuan; the Service Quality Award of Taipei City Government; Taipei City Government Quality Award for Most Efficiency; and the Taipei City Government Quality Award for Innovation, which suggests that the core value of TPL's service is to provide a distinctly high service for the Taipei citizens.[13]

There were discrepancies between the responses of the branch library directors and library users on the image of the librarian, however. For example:

1. Branch library directors believe that wearing library vests or uniforms can make librarians look more professional; the responses of library patrons indicate that the general public does not share this opinion.
2. Branch library directors believe that the major difficulty in constructing a more positive image of the librarian is that librarians do not posses a sufficient degree of professional knowledge and are not respected for their professionalism. Users, however, view librarians as having sufficient professional training and knowledge to meet their needs.
3. A majority of users consider that librarians "have a heavy workload and are too busy and overtired." But only a relative few branch library directors agreed.

There is perhaps some reason to conclude that users' opinions of TPL librarians' image is higher than many of the directors realize, and that the marketing efforts to improve that image are paying off. As the most advanced public library in Taiwan, TPL has, in recent years, worked to transform the stereotypical image of librarians among the public with the goal of setting up a full-scale quality management program. It has also initiated numerous innovative service and management procedures. The goals set by management could be higher than user expectations.

Based on the feedback in this study, the authors have the following suggestions on reconstructing the librarian's image in the pubic library. Suggestions from users emphasize their perspective as service recipients. They are concerned that professional librarians pay attention to their wants and needs; try to gain a specialized knowledge in specific subjects to meet user needs in gaining access to information; be more engaging and outgoing so that the users can sense their enthusiasm and thoughtfulness; and promote a sense of honor and solidarity among librarians.

Likewise, users have input that is worthy of public library administrators' consideration. These include the need to enhance the professional skills and training of librarians; establish a users' evaluation system to help shape a positive image of the librarian as one of its priorities; and provide long-term training programs for new staff members; and offer programs on emotional management so that librarians may learn proper ways to interact with patrons and release pressure. Moreover, courses on communication skills and etiquette could promote interaction between librarians and patrons. It may be useful to adjust workload by having a flexible schedule for librarians in terms of work assignments. Lastly, sponsor a variety of community activities to attract potential users, where they can show their appreciation of librarian's work.

All in all, the images of Taiwanese and American librarians are complex, both similar and different in several ways. What they have in common, though, is recognition that how they are perceived matters in how well they do their jobs.

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