

# Overview to the Research on Codes of Professional Ethics for Librarians of China and United States

Xiaoli Hou

School of Marxism Studies Xi'an University of Science and Technology Xi'an, China

244462379@qq.com

**Abstract.** The political revolution in France and the industrial revolution in Great Britain and the United States shifted the course of history around the North Atlantic. Comparably, the transformation of cultural metamorphosis and social structure are more extensive and substantial. The library is the outcome of human civilization, and the mainstream culture in the process of social development has a profound impact on the library culture. We should create good circumstances for intellectual freedom from the perspectives of law, culture and technology. Ethical principles are of great importance for librarians to guide the work, eliminate the ethical dilemma, recognize the ethical responsibility and so on. Based on the historical dimension, this paper systematically sorts out and analyzes the related theories, codes and research practices of the professional ethics for librarians.

**Keywords:** *library ethics, professional ethics for librarians, information ethics*

## 1. Introduction

Libraries are the products of human civilization. They are produced with the generation of characters, progressed with the times, and developed with science and technology. The social and cultural environment is the general environment during the construction of spiritual civilization, and the library construction is a small environment. They interact with each other and interact in a symbiotic and interactive relationship. Library culture is the sum of manifestations of material and spiritual results created by library staff in long-term management activities through the cultivation and advocacy of library scientists under the influence of certain social, economic, political, and cultural environments[1]. The mainstream culture in the process of social development profoundly affects the library culture. The social and cultural environmental factors that affect the library culture are the national culture, community culture and foreign culture. The main purpose of the library is service, and the service also changes with the changes of library functions. The reduction and extinction, development and persistence, deepening and extension of service projects are not only the requirements of the times, but also the development of society. The process of self-regulation and self-improvement of service projects is also for the continuous adaptation to the changes and development of the times and society. For centuries, libraries and librarians have not paid attention to the philosophical issues. Over time, although the role of the library has not changed, new functions and values have been continuously attached. Ethics is a system of values and rules used to judge "what is right? What is good?" [2]Information ethics has deep roots, which can be traced back to Socrates and Plato in ancient Greece. Later, its concept gradually differentiated, and entered the research field of scholars along with library ethics, librarian professional ethics, and computer ethics norms. In the middle and late 20th century, the frequent emergence of ethics norms of library associations and librarians heralded the beginning of ethical research and practice of librarians.

## 2. Related Concepts and Research Originality

Ethics refers to the sum of codes of conduct and norms that regulate the relationship between people and nature, individuals and others, and individuals and society through social public opinion, personal inner convictions and values, and necessary administrative means. It is also a means and goal of self-improvement. The speed of information dissemination and the huge role of information technology in expanding human brain functions have promoted the phenomenon of "information

explosion". In such an environment, in order to protect the relevant rights and interests of stakeholders in the various processes of knowledge creation, development and utilization, the Ethical norms and new ethical relationships formed along with the procedures of information development, information dissemination, information processing and analysis, information management and utilization, etc. At the same time, the library as a storage and dissemination center of knowledge and information, the formulation and practice of the relevant ethical and moral norms of the library becomes particularly important. Librarians as information managers should set an example in observing and practicing information ethics. In 1931, Indian library scientist S. R. Ranganathan formally proposed the "Five Laws of Library Science", which provided the reason for the existence of libraries and also became the basis of library ethics. As Michael Gorman, former president of the American Library Association (ALA), said, morality and moral values are constantly changing and are being redefined. Why so much attention is paid to a long-neglected professional ethic and values? The most important thing is to clearly express a concept: the actions of librarians are for the benefit of human beings, and they have a strong goal pursuit and dedication [3]. The entry of women into the librarian profession in the early 20th century caused subtle changes in the value structure of the profession librarian[4]. There are many forms of ethical values in professional behavior, including mission statements, ethical codes, professional guidelines or policies. In order to more clearly express the originality of research on librarians' professional ethics and norms, the author draws the basic ideas as shown in Figure 1 below.

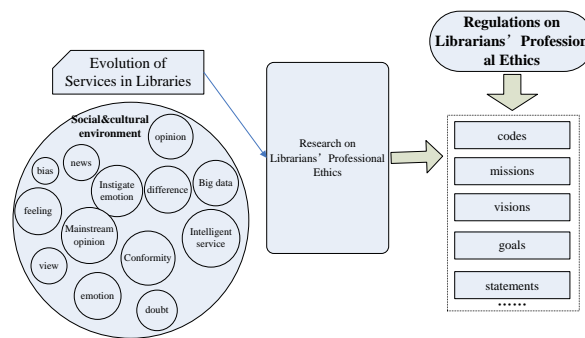


Fig. 1. Originality of research on librarians' professional ethics

### 3. Research Overview

Through comparative review of the literatures published, we can clearly learn about the research status and make a comprehensive understanding of history, current and future of the research on the field librarians' professional ethics. Meanwhile, it is also useful for us to deeply understand the basic concepts, codes' content system and implementation, difference and gap between China and the United States related to this topic.

#### 3.1 Overview of American Studies

Mary W. Plummer, principal of the Pratt Institute Library School in Brooklyn, New York, raised questions about librarians' profession ethics and practically tested a librarians' code of ethics read at the Illinois State Library Association in 1903, and she declared that "librarian should be called a profession." [5] In 1922, Charles Knowles Bolton, a librarian at the Temple of Athena in Boston, mentioned the ethical issues faced by American librarians[6]. In the mid-to-late 20th century, research on library ethics and librarian ethics was increasing. In 1976, John Hanker, a Ph.D. student of Case Western Reserve University, wrote a doctoral dissertation, "Ethics and Its Use in Libraries." [7] Jonathan A. Lindsey and Ann E. Prentice studied the development of ethical norms and the professional ethical codes of American libraries using a chronicle method[8]. Robert Hauptman (1976, 1988, 1991), Thomas Froehlich (1992) and Martha M. Smith (1993, 1997) introduced issues of library ethics and information ethics into the academic field of interest. The philosophers Rafael Capurro (1996, 2006) and Luciano Floridi (1999, 2013) took information ethics

to a new theoretical level. Michael Gorman (2000) suggested that library ethics should be enduring. Sarla Murgai (1999) studies ethics in library science and librarians in the age of electronic information.

### **3.2 Overview of Chinese Studies**

By using the searching expression "Title=librarian ethics" as a keyword to search the China Knowledge Network (CNKI), and obtained a total of 40 documents, among which the earliest article was published in the journal *Library Work and Research*, No. 1 of 1981. The article titled "Ethics Outline of Librarians in Japan" reproduces the outline of Japanese librarians' ethics[9]. Sha Yongzhong conducted a relatively comprehensive study of information ethics and professional ethics in libraries[10]. Zeng Junjun and Sheng Xiaoping selected 38 representative librarians' professional ethics codes, taking their text content as the research object, and applying content analysis to analyze the core content of each code from the dimensions of librarians and resources, colleagues, users, libraries, occupations, and society[11]. Li Jia and Sheng Tian respectively compared the professional ethics of librarians in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and other countries with China.[12,13] Scholars such as Zheng Jiangyan, Jiang Yongfu analyzed and defined the concepts of librarian ethics and library ethics[14].

## **4. Research Review**

Looking at the research status at home and abroad, librarians' ethics has long been one of the focus topics of domestic and foreign library fields. Foreign countries (especially the United States) have been active in the study of librarians' ethics. Since the beginning of the 20th century, many influential research results have been produced, and many ethical regulations for librarian occupations have been promulgated and implemented in the United States. At present, domestic research on this topic is relatively weak, and the number of articles is also limited. The research content mainly focuses on the connotation, attributes, value system, basic principles of ethics codes, library ethics construction, and library professional ethics based on some surveys about the situation, characteristics, or common principles of professional ethics in other countries, few scholars have conducted in-depth comparative research on the content and implementation status of ethics codes for librarians at home and abroad. In addition, past research has not predicted that the rapid development of information technology will affect library services to such an extent, especially the opportunities and challenges that information technology brings to librarians. Although China has promulgated and implemented the Code of Professional Ethics for Chinese Librarians (for Trial Implementation), its concise text, broad and general content, lack of practicality, and cannot well represent the professional characteristics of Chinese librarians. Therefore, on the one hand, Chinese scholars should follow the research progress of foreign librarians' professional ethics in a timely manner. At the same time, they should also refer to and learn from the American librarians' professional ethics codes to form a set of ethical codes in line with the professional practices of Chinese librarians so as to promote the career development of librarians in China.

In this paper, we studied the types of regulations on librarians' professional ethics and comparatively reviewed the researching status in China and the USA. We found there still were a long way to run on the theoretical research and practical experience in China. We should learn from America and make a great emphasis on the content system's construction to the code of librarians' professional ethics.

## **Acknowledgments**

A HUGE thank you to all the kind librarians of the Urbana Free Library and the Champaign Public Library during my studying as a visiting scholar at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I would like to show the deepest gratitude to my cute daughter Sam, my

husband Andrew and all my friends for their understanding, support, and encouragement in getting this paper done.

## References

- [1]. Chen Shuyuan. The Social and Cultural Environment of the Library. Economic and Social Development. (1998) No. 6.
- [2]. Jonathan A. Lindsey, Ann E. Prentice. Professional ethics and librarians. Oryx Press, 1985, pp. 4.
- [3]. Jesse Shera. Sociological foundations of Librarianship. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1970, pp. 29.
- [4]. Sydney Chambers and Carolyn Myall. Women & the Values of American Librarianship. Las Colinas: Ide House, 1994.
- [5]. Mary W. Plummer. The Pros and Cons of Training for Librarianship. Public Libraries. Vol. 8(1903) No. 5, pp. 208.
- [6]. Charles Knowles Bolton. The Ethics of Librarianship: A Proposal for a Revised Code. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. Vol. 101(1922) No 5, pp. 138-144.
- [7]. Johan Beeker: Professional Ethics and Its Application to Librarianship. Case Western Reserve University, USA, 1976.
- [8]. Jonathan A. Lindsey, Ann E. Prentice. Professional ethics and librarians. Oryx Press, 1985.
- [9]. Wang Zhiwen, Liu Xun. The Ethical Outline of Librarians in Japan. Library Work and Research, (1981) No. 1, pp. 43-44.
- [10]. Sha Yongzhong. Research on Library Professional Ethics. Journal of Library Science in China, (2004) NO. 4.
- [11]. Zeng Junjun, Sheng Xiaoping. Content analysis of professional ethical codes for librarians at home and abroad. Journal of Academic Libraries, Vol. 32(2014) No. 1, pp. 34-40.
- [12]. Li Jia. Comparison of Professional Ethics of Librarians in the United States, Britain, Japan and China. Henan Library Journal, Vol. 37(2017) No. 2, pp. 71-73.
- [13]. Sheng Tian. Comparison of Professional Ethical Principles of Librarians in Four Countries: Britain, France, Germany and Italy. Library Work in Colleges Universities, Vol. 39(2019) No. 4, pp. 56-61.
- [14]. Jiang Yongfu. On the Librarian Ethics: Thinking Based on Responsibility Ethics and Responsibility for Him. Journal of Academic Libraries, (2009) No. 3.