Toward Continual Reform: Progress in Academic Libraries in China

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This article traces recent developments in China's academic libraries. Areas covered include managing human resources, restructuring library departments, revising and implementing new policies, evaluating services and operations, establishing library systems, building new structures, and exploring joint-use library models. China's academic libraries are focusing more on the user; consequently, several major changes accompany this endeavor.

The rapid expansion and development of higher education in China has provided unique challenges and opportunities for advancement of its academic libraries. These libraries must actively explore new ways of improving their services in order to adapt to the ever-changing environment of their parent institutions. To achieve this goal, many libraries have focused on enhancing administrative functions through continual reform of librarywide structures and effective use of human resources. Significant progress has been made in these libraries in the past several years. In this article, the author attempts to outline some of the changes and improvements through this reform.

Improving Human Resources Management

Academic libraries in China have continued to strive for high-quality services for library users in the past decade. There is no doubt that library users must remain the main focus of library operations. There is still much room to improve services to users in these libraries. However, shifting focus from user services to library personnel has received much attention in recent years. Academic libraries have started placing greater emphasis on their human resources than before in order to maximize the ability of employees and to help them reach their potential. Realizing that high-quality library services can be provided only by library staffs who are motivated and committed to such goals, many libraries engaged in redesigning library positions and selecting employees based on their qualifications. The following are just a few examples.

First, some libraries no longer keep lifelong employment practices as they did in the past. Instead, they have started contractual employment. Under this concept, the contract clearly states the position (job description and requirements) and the

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salary. The most qualified employees are chosen for the position. The contract is renewed at the specified period. After position restructuring at the Peking University Library, all positions have been categorized into nine different ranks. An employee who is appointed to each position within a certain rank is entitled to a salary and stipend according to the responsibilities and qualifications specified in the position description. In June 1999, there were 210 positions at the Peking

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University Library. In 2000, the library employed only 202 staff members. From these positions, 178 were chosen through an open selection process. That is, the library re-advertised all positions within the university. These positions were open primarily to the existing personnel of the library. The library staff applied for these positions according to their education, experience, and specialties. Through selection, qualified individuals were appointed to advertised positions. Eighty-five percent of the appointed employees received both salary and stipends based on their positions and ranks; fifteen percent of the positions received salaries only. Those who were not appointed to the library positions were employed in other supporting units within the university.[1] The Tsinghua University Library took similar steps in redesigning its library positions. There are nine ranks for the library's 120 positions. Forty percent of them are key positions, and the remaining 60 percent are general positions. All employees (including department heads) were appointed on a competitive basis. When appointed, employees signed a contract with the library that is reviewed annually. At the same time, the library implemented a system of "subject librarians" learned from its counterparts in the

United States. It aims to provide better services for teaching and research. These subject librarians serve as liaisons to academic disciplines, provide library instructions to students, and write library instructional materials for subject areas. The one-year implementation of this program has proved to be very effective.[2]

Second, many libraries learned from their counterparts in the United States that employ more student workers than full-time staff. The recent trend in China's academic libraries is that libraries started employing more student workers and temporary workers and at the same time lowered the number of full-time staff. Therefore, the operational and personnel costs could be reduced. At Dalian National Minority College in Liaoning Province, the library started using student volunteers for certain library functions to alleviate staff shortage in the library. This strategy has been very successful.[3]

Third, libraries started raising standards in selecting directors. In recent years, some academic libraries have required library directors with an advanced degree in library science (master's degree or higher). Others have hired library directors who are subject experts or professors with responsibility for guiding doctoral students. The Tongji University Library in Shanghai even invited a reputable academician from the Chinese Academy of Sciences to be the library director. There is no doubt that the high qualifications and reputations of these library directors, to some degree, have changed the images and increased visibility of these academic libraries.

Restructuring the Library's Departments

In light of the need for operational changes, some libraries have initiated internal restructuring, including streamlining administrative functions and eliminating unnecessary positions and departments. These steps enable libraries to operate effectively and efficiently while responding quickly to the demand for improved services.

Moving library staff from other departments to public services is one popular method of redirecting staff. Some libraries have combined such functions as acquisitions with cataloging and stacks management with reading rooms so that staff members from these departments were relocated to public services areas. The Shanghai Jiaotong University Library combined the existing circulation, reading room, and periodicals reading room into one unit; combined the audiovisual and copy services departments; and kept the library administrative office, automation, information services, acquisitions, and cataloging departments unchanged. The library also eliminated serials acquisitions and serials cataloging and moved these functions into general acquisitions and general cataloging, respectively. In addition, the library established a new department of resource-sharing. Thus, the total number of departments was reduced from fifteen to eleven. During this process, twenty-six positions that made up 11 percent of the total positions were eliminated. The Tsinghua University Library went through several restructurings. It only keeps departments such as circulation and reading, acquisitions, automation, technical services, and the science and technology /rare book research institute. The China Agricultural University Library in Beijing has only five departments: automation, acquisitions and cataloging, information services, technical services, and circulation and reading. The total number of personnel in circulation and reading is twenty-two, and only five employees are in the acquisitions and cataloging department. The Yunnan University Library in Yunnan Province has only four departments: acquisitions, circulation and reading, newspaper and periodicals, and information technology. The library reconfigured its social sciences/humanities information services into the circulation and reading room department. It also places sciences information services into the information technology department. The

library employs only ten people in acquisitions.

While continuing the restructuring of existing departments, libraries have slowly established new departments. At the Peking University Library, after restructuring, a new audiovisual department was added to the existing departments, which include acquisitions, cataloging, circulation and reading, information services, periodicals, rare books, and automation. The Capital Normal University Library in Beijing added a new database department to its existing departments of acquisitions, circulation, reading, periodicals, rare books and reference, and automation. The addition of the database department aims at better management of the library's new and retrospective databases. The Fudan University Library in Shanghai recently established the digital department. Another new department, international exchanges, is responsible for exchanging materials, library staff, scholarship, and cooperative projects between the library and other libraries around the world. The library also organized its circulation and reading functions according to subject areas so that two separate departments, social sciences/humanities information services and sciences information services, have been established.

At the Zhengzhou University Library in Henan Province, an internal restructuring occurred in April 2000. It resulted in reducing the number of departments from seven to five. The periodicals department was merged into the circulation department and the general reading rooms department. A new department of multimedia was added. The existing information services department was expanded to information and consulting services.

In China's academic libraries, due to a large number of library staff in nonpublic services areas, each library had to find a way to add more people in public services areas. After restructuring, many academic libraries were able to relocate personnel from nonpublic services to public services areas. Therefore, the situation of staff

shortage in public service areas has improved.

Revising the Existing Policies

Policies and procedures are key for orderly library operations. A library has to continually revise its policies and add new ones to cope with the ever-changing environment. Keeping the policies and procedures updated has become an important benchmark for library management. In many academic libraries in China, existing policies and procedures were implemented in late 1980s and early 1990s and are no longer adequate to meet the current needs of library operations and demands from users. For instance,

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some academic libraries still maintain close-stack system; in other libraries, students are not allowed to share the same reading rooms that are assigned to faculty members, despite the fact that major reference books are housed in these reading rooms. Policies need to be changed to reflect current learning and teaching needs. At the same time, libraries want to have their policies and procedures reflect continuity and consistency. For those libraries that already have implemented an open-stacks policy, there is a continuing effort to open all of the stacks and circulate all monographic copies. For instance, in the past, the Yunnan University Library did not open the stacks to students for fear of losing books. It is now opening stacks and rare books to senior students. At the same time, it has revised its acquisitions policy, which was based on rigid divisions of subject areas. The new policy streamlined the acquisition process for all types of materials.

The approval plan has been a popular way of acquiring library materials in U.S. academic libraries since 1970s. For a long time, academic libraries in China used a publisher's catalog called New Titles Announcement as a major source of selecting and ordering library materials, though this catalog did not cover every subject. In recent years, thanks to alternative sources of acquiring books, the libraries have become less dependent on the catalog. An increased workload for librarian selectors and acquisitions staff occurred because they had to go through a variety of catalogs for selection and orders. In 1998, the Zhejiang University Library in Zhejiang Province implemented an approval plan. It has not only reduced workload of library staff, but also has increased coverage of acquisitions. When the library decided to implement the approval plan, it revised its operational policies and procedures accordingly.[4]

The increased level of library automation also has provided opportunities to revise existing policies and procedures. Each time a library introduces a new online library catalog system, it impacts the entire library operation. When the Tsinghua University Library introduced a new online catalog system, the library restructured all departments so that all functions are in line with the library goals.

Continuing a Large-scale Evaluation

In the late 1980s, some major research libraries in China completed the first round of provincial-wide evaluation. Since then, many provinces and cities also have conducted the second-round evaluation, with a focus on library automation.

The Education Commission of Hunan Province conducted an evaluation to all academic libraries of the province in 1998. The commission thoroughly reviewed all aspects of each library in its role of supporting teaching and learning. Based on the findings, the commission set up high expectations for academic libraries in the twenty-first century. It also issued citations to the libraries and library personnel who had done outstanding work.

Other agencies such as the Guizhou Province Education Commission and the Shandong Province Education Bureau

also conducted evaluations of academic libraries in these provinces in 1999 and in 2000, respectively. In Henan Province, with the effort of the Provincial Education Bureau, all eighteen college and university libraries were evaluated on the use of technology in 1999. In addition, the bureau evaluated thirty-nine technical college libraries. The bureau's findings were issued in March 2001. The entire process has resulted in significant improvement of library services. The evaluation process was directly led by the Higher Education Division of the bureau. Each college and university actively engaged in the process. Between 1998 and 2000, forty technical colleges invested 32,290,000 yuan (the Chinese currency) into library automation. Four technical colleges put more than 20,000,000 yuan into technology. The Academic Library Committee of Henan Province was also a player in the evaluation process. The committee established the evaluation guidelines on the use of library technology and library automation. The guidelines set up different criteria for college and university libraries and for technical college libraries. Each library first conducted a self-study. Then it was evaluated by representatives and experts appointed by the bureau. The entire evaluation process followed the same standards and guidelines. The library had opportunities to do a self-study and to get feedback from the experts in a timely fashion. The recommendations were reasonable and approachable. Therefore, the evaluation resulted in an improved level of library automation among academic libraries in the province.

Establishing Comprehensive Library Systems

Traditionally, academic libraries in China are small in terms of their collection and staff sizes. A typical academic library in a major university includes a main library and several reading rooms housed in academic departments. On the one hand, collections are often duplicated between the main library and the reading rooms. On the other hand, the university does not provide enough funding for both the library and the reading rooms. Since the late 1990s, mergers among colleges and universities have become an inevitable phenomenon. In 2000, 387 general colleges/universities and 169 adult education institutions merged into 212 general colleges/universities and 20 adult education institutions, respectively. After the merger, the library on each campus was expanded. In many cases, a typical academic library includes several branch libraries in addition to the main library. The pressing issue for the academic library is to decide whether to maintain one central library for the entire campus or to continue functions of each branch library after the merger of campuses. After the merger, many campuses started issuing a unified library card that could be used in both the main library and the branch libraries. The Zhejiang University was merged with several other universities in the area in September 1999. The university libraries now include one main library and five branch libraries such as science and technology, social sciences and sciences, agriculture, medicine, and one off-campus library. The Sichuan University in Sichuan Province kept three libraries after the merger: social sciences and sciences, engineering, and medicine. Nanchang University in Jiangxi Province has divided its library into two parts: north and south libraries. Some experts believe that coexistence of the main library and the branch libraries is the ideal model for the current academic environment.[5]

After the merger, many colleges/universities expanded from a single campus to multiple campuses. The university libraries have to face challenges brought forth from the merger. For instance, the library has to use the unified software and online catalog system to share databases and to enable user access to the merged collections. Six libraries within the Yangzhou University in Jiangsu Province have recently purchased a new online catalog system after careful planning and discussions. When implemented, users of the merged campus expect to access the library collections through the shared catalog system.[6]

Focus on the Library Building

With the expansion of the colleges and universities, the limited library space impeded effective services to users. Traditionally, in some libraries, reading rooms or reading areas were separated from the library stacks. The Jinan University Library in Guangdong Province renovated the library building in 1996. The renovation has enabled users to use open stacks, to read library materials, and to check out books all in one place. The Tsinghua University Library removed walls between closed stacks and the reading areas. It also streamlined the circulation desk so that users are able to check out different formats of materials at one service point. In the past, users had to take different formats of materials to several locations to check out. These examples demonstrate the potential for improving the existing library building through renovation.

In recent years, expanding the existing library building has alleviated the tension between the limited library space and the growing need for stacks. The Tsinghua University Library renovated twice in recent years. Its useful square footage enlarged from less than 32,291 square feet to more than 290,619 square feet. The second renovation also connected the old facility with the new one at the same floor so that user traffic and library operation are well accommodated.[7] At the Peking University Library, the new building was opened to the university community in December 1998. The main building of the new library is connected to both north and south wings. The new facility uses open stacks connected with reading areas, is equipped with wire lines, and is linked to the old library facility. Therefore, the entire useful library space becomes 548,946 square feet that is able to house 6,500,000 volumes, with more than 4,000 seats. It is considered the largest academic library in Asia.[8]

In designing and renovating library building for academic libraries since late 1990s, many libraries have not only considered user space, stack size, and fitting into the campus landscape, but also have installed networking, an automation system, a security and monitor system, air-conditioning, and other modern facilities.

Exploring Joint-use Library Models

For a long time, academic libraries in China operated in an isolated environment. Use of these libraries was restricted to the students, faculty, and staff within the universities. The library rarely shared resources, personnel, and equipment with institutions and individuals outside the campus. In that environment, it was difficult for the library to attract additional funding from external sources. Although some libraries in recent years have attempted to change the situation by providing fee-based services to local businesses and by issuing library cards to noncampus users, it did not improve the isolated model of library management.

Joint-use of academic libraries is one of the alternatives to change the isolated situation. The East China Normal University Library worked with the Shanghai Dongfang Real Estate Company to build an advanced computer education center. The company provided 500,000 yuan for the facilities, and the library is in charge of the operation of the center. The center is open to the company for its technical needs and at the same time is being used as an electronic reading room for the entire campus. Thus, both the company and the library benefit from the venture.

In 1996, the Harbin Medical University Library merged with the Medical Information Institute of Heilongjiang Province, becoming the Provincial Medical Documentation and Information Center. This is the first example of a joint program between an academic library and an information institute in China.[9] Most recently, in Shandong Province, the Liaocheng Teachers' College and the Liaocheng City built a joint-use library that serves as both the academic library and the city public library. The joint-use library is open partially to the citizens of the city. This model departed from the conventional model of the isolated academic library. It will en-

courage more libraries to open to the public and attract external funding to support the academic library.

Conclusion

China's academic libraries have undergone a major transformation in recent years. Creative approaches have resulted in an improvement in human resources, enhanced public services, and refined library operations. Both academic administrators and librarians have aggressively identified areas needing improvement and have worked collectively to make the necessary changes happen. It is the general perception in China that the changes made in its academic libraries have significantly improved services for the library user.

Notes

1. Zhuo-Xian Gao, "Position Restructuring at Peking University Library," Journal of Academic Libraries 18, no.5 (2000): 63–66.

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9. Yuan Jingwei, "Reform on Information Services Management in Academic Libraries," Library Building, no. 2 (1999): 37–38.