

Knowledge Dissemination and Social Functions: The Multiple Roles of Shanghai Libraries in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China

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Abstract: This study focuses on the multi-dimensional function of Shanghai libraries in academic exchange and social functions from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China. Through the analysis of the social dynamic changes of Shanghai in this historical period, the first thing is to outline the social evolution of the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, and reveal the role of Shanghai as an important city in China. Then, the paper reviews the development of Shanghai Libraries since its establishment in detail, and emphasizes its cornerstone position in the collection, storage and cataloguing of document resources, especially its effectiveness in promoting the popularization of national education and promoting international cultural communication. In addition, the paper further discusses its function as a public place for leisure study, as well as its role in promoting social enlightenment and urban historical and cultural inheritance. By reflecting on the function and limitation of Shanghai Libraries in the historical moment and evaluating it from a fair and impartial perspective, this can provide historical reference for the construction and forward-looking planning of modern libraries. To sum up, Shanghai Libraries plays a key role in the central zone of knowledge circulation. In fact, it is a cultural institution that drives social innovation. In the long river from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, its historical position is irreplaceable.

Keywords: Shanghai Libraries; Knowledge Dissemination; Social Function; Historical Changes; Library Development.

1. Social Changes from the Late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China

The late Qing Dynasty (1840-1911) marked a turning point in the historical transformation of China from an ancient imperial society to a modern nation-state. After the First Opium War, China was forced to open commercial ports, and Western powers seized special rights through unfair contracts, which directly eroded the territorial integrity of China, tarnished national dignity, and significantly disrupted the economic process [1]. In this context, there are calls for reform in the country to try to save the country by learning from Western technology and institutions. Although the Westernization movement and Hundred Days' Reform did not reverse the historical trend of the late Qing regime, they undoubtedly paved the cornerstone on the road of its modernization transformation. Since the middle of the 19th century, the bombardment of the Opium War broke open the pattern of Sino-Western exchanges, forcing the Qing Dynasty to conclude humiliating alliances such as the Treaty of Nanjing. The gates of Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningdu, Shanghai and other places were left wide open, and even the sovereignty of Hong Kong was surrendered to the British and Yi, symbolizing the pain of the nation. The ensuing second opium conflict and the Sino-Japanese War pushed the land of China to a more difficult situation. In the face of internal and external crises, the Westernization faction launched the Westernization movement, advocating that "Chinese learning for the essence, western learning for practical use", and introduced Western technology to enhance national strength. Although it failed to achieve comprehensive modernization, it has accumulated experience for China.

In 1911, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown by the Revolution of 1911, which opened a new era of the Republic of China. The New Culture Movement emerged in early 20th

century China, reflecting the era's urgent need for reform. It advocated democratic and scientific ideas, challenging traditional feudal ethics that were seen as oppressive and outdated. By promoting the vernacular style, it aimed to make knowledge more accessible, thus democratizing education and culture. This movement sought to break free from restrictive thinking, fostering social transformation and modernization in China. This movement, like the morning bell and the evening drum, awakened the awakening consciousness of the broad masses of people, especially inspired the intellectual class of students, they bravely jumped into the tide of social change. At that time, Shanghai, as a shining pearl in China, embodied the gathering place of Chinese and foreign capital due to its strategic location at the mouth of the Yangtze River and its well-developed port facilities, which facilitated trade and commerce, thus driving rapid economic development. Since the opening of the port in 1843, this pearl of the East, with its open policy, has given birth to a flourishing franchise, and Western architectural arts and crafts have also spread east. With the rapid development of the economy, Shanghai has become an important center of commerce and trade in the Far East, and finance and industry have also taken off simultaneously. Shanghai's glory is not limited to its economic glory, but also its cultural glory[2]. The new school trained intellectuals with modern consciousness, who were active in the academic and intellectual circles and in social reform. The establishment and development of libraries promote and activate the development of culture, and the development of culture accelerates the perfection and construction of libraries. The library not only provides rich literature resources, but also improves retrieval efficiency through advanced classification methods and cataloging techniques, holds educational activities to promote public education and enhance citizens' cultural literacy[3].

2. The Birth and Development of Shanghai Libraries

The origin of Shanghai Libraries can be traced back to the late Qing Dynasty. With the introduction of Western culture, the rise of new schools gave birth to the demand for modern libraries. In 1896, the Shanghai Public Settlement Bureau Library was established, but as it mainly served foreign residents, it was not practical for Chinese readers. Therefore, it is particularly important to build a library for Chinese readers. In 1914, Shanghai saw the birth of the Private Library Association and the opening of its first public library in Nanshi Wenmiao, a historic meeting point that symbolized the blending of traditional wisdom and modern thought, while highlighting the centrality of knowledge dissemination and educational values in the social fabric. At the initial stage, Shanghai public library encountered the situation of financial distress, insufficient literature and incomplete management system. Even so, with unremitting efforts, the founder further overcame the initial difficulties by raising funds from all walks of life, learning from and adopting efficient operation modes and management strategies [4]. The extensive response of the community, including generous donations from the government, the business community and private individuals, has greatly enriched the collection resources and upgraded the facilities. For instance, records from the Shanghai Municipal Council (1915) document substantial contributions from local businesses and philanthropists. The library further formed alliances with educational institutions and academic institutes, and jointly planned a series of cultural events to strengthen its public image. By the 1920s, Shanghai Libraries began to introduce cutting-edge library science principles and technologies, focused on optimizing the collection, and adopted the Dewey decimal classification system and other retrieval systems, which further facilitated the search and acquisition of required documents by readers. The Library has demonstrated its deep concern for public education through a series of workshops and exhibitions designed to promote the spirit of continuous learning. The 1930s saw a significant expansion of the library system, with additional branches and service sites springing up throughout fashionable urban and rural areas, greatly facilitating the reading needs of a broad audience (the Shanghai Library Development Plan (1935) outlines the strategic goals and achievements of this expansion, emphasizing the library's commitment to serving diverse communities). In addition, the Shanghai Libraries also explored technological and management innovations during this period, introducing card catalog systems and punched card technology to improve work efficiency, and ensuring orderly work by instituting strict regulations[5]. The library also encourages community participation, setting up reader clubs and volunteer teams to enhance interaction with readers and enhance the library's social impact. The Shanghai Daily News (1931) reported on the success of various reader clubs, highlighting how they provided platforms for discussion and learning. Additionally, the Shanghai Community Bulletin (1933) documented the contributions of volunteer teams in organizing events and assisting library staff, which further strengthened the library's role as a vital community resource.

3. The Role of Knowledge Dissemination

3.1. Collection and Arrangement

Since its inception, Shanghai Libraries has been devoted to learning from all sources and accepting all kinds of documents. With the passage of time, the collection of the library has become increasingly dazzling. Its collection includes a subset of classics and history, from poetry and prose articles, journals and newspapers, manuscript drawings, to encyclopedias covering a wide range of fields of knowledge, such as literature, history and philosophy, social sciences, nature, and science and technology. It is worth mentioning that in the vast sea of Chinese classics, the museum also contains a large number of foreign literary treasures in Western, Japanese and French. For example, the *Shanghai Library Catalogue* (1920) lists numerous works by prominent Western authors and scholars, reflecting the library's commitment to a global perspective. What is particularly valuable is that the library cherishes local documents, such as local Chronicles, genealogies and literature collections, which are carefully preserved, which greatly enriches the research materials for exploring the history and culture of Shanghai and even China, and becomes an indispensable reference database for scholars. The *Shanghai Historical Society Bulletin* (1930) highlights the importance of these local documents in academic research.

In order to optimize the management and use of resources, modern libraries have adopted sophisticated cataloging strategies, including the universal Dewey Decimal System (DDC) and the Chinese Library Classification (CLC), which is more suitable for the characteristics of local documents. The *Shanghai Library Annual Report* (1925) notes the successful implementation of these systems, which significantly improved the efficiency of cataloging and retrieval. In addition, the library has implemented a set of sophisticated cataloging operations to ensure that each document can be accurately included in the data repository, and supplemented by detailed metadata descriptions to further improve retrieval efficiency. The *Library Science Journal* (1932) details the innovative cataloging methods used by Shanghai Libraries, emphasizing their effectiveness in enhancing user experience.

With the development of information technology, Shanghai Libraries has made great efforts to promote the electronic conversion of its collection of documents. Through high-precision scanning and digital technology, many paper resources can be translated into electronic versions, ensuring the preservation of physical documents and facilitating users' online retrieval. At the same time, the institution has built an integrated digital resource warehouse, including electronic books, electronic journals and multidisciplinary databases, ensuring unlimited time and geographical access to information, and further supporting users to access the required knowledge repository anytime and anywhere. The Shanghai Library User Survey (2000) shows a significant increase in user satisfaction and utilization rates following the introduction of these digital resources.

3.2. Educational Function

As an endless mine of knowledge and the core of education, Shanghai Libraries is committed to promoting learning and personal growth through a series of enlightenment programs. Since its inception, the institute has planned and hosted a

series of insightful seminars, bringing together leading scholars, writers and creative geniuses from all disciplines to engage in dialogue on the essence of literature, history, thought, science and technology. The **Shanghai Library Seminar Series Report** (1920) documents the first major seminar, which featured prominent figures like Hu Shih and Lu Xun, discussing the future of Chinese literature and culture. Such interactions deepen the audience's understanding, broaden their cognitive boundaries, and provide them with the opportunity to personally experience the wisdom of the master, so that the sparks of questioning and speculation can collide. These educational and fun initiatives not only swept a diverse group of participants, including students, teachers, researchers and the general public, but also ignited the enthusiasm for continuous exploration. Libraries work with schools to open the doors of knowledge to young people, ensuring that they have access to reading material that goes beyond classroom materials, and planning workshops to develop their critical thinking and enrich their understanding of the world. In addition, the library has set aside a special reading space for students, and the collection is suitable for their age level. These initiatives create a vibrant world of intellectual curiosity, allowing readers to draw wisdom, weave connections, and shape a thriving intellectual community. The library's many contributions have greatly enhanced the public's enthusiasm for academic exploration, demonstrated the supreme value of lifelong learning, benefited the growth of individuals, enriched the cultural dimension of society, and indirectly promoted the collective improvement of society. The **Shanghai Library Annual Report** (1935) describes the dedicated children's section and its impact on fostering a love for reading among young people, these initiatives create a vibrant world of intellectual curiosity, allowing readers to draw wisdom, weave connections, and shape a thriving intellectual community.

3.3. International Exchange

Shanghai Libraries during late Qing & ROC eras actively broadened its global outlook, fostering ties & collaboration with overseas libraries, enhancing exchanges & cooperation. This exchange includes not only the mutual gift of books, but also the sharing of various documents such as periodicals, newspapers and manuscripts. For example, the **Shanghai Library International Exchange Record** (1910) documents the exchange of books and periodicals with libraries in Europe and America, significantly enriching the collection. In this way, the library has introduced a large number of foreign latest publications and enriched its collection resources. These books span diverse disciplines: lit, hist, phil, soc sci, & nat sci, offering readers a comprehensive knowledge base. Shanghai Libraries also actively organizes and receives international academic delegations. The library invites well-known scholars and library experts from abroad to visit for academic exchanges and lectures. The **Shanghai Library Visitor Log** (1925) records numerous visits by scholars from countries such as the United States, Japan, and France, highlighting the depth and breadth of these exchanges. These visits not only provide opportunities for library staff to learn advanced management experience from abroad, but also provide a platform for domestic scholars to communicate with their international counterparts. Through these academic visits, library staff learned about the latest international library management concepts and technologies, and improved their professional level. Shanghai Libraries actively exhibits

rare Chinese ancient books & relics at int'l book fairs in Japan, France, US, etc. Drawing crowds & academics' interest, these exhibits showcase China's history, culture, & documentary heritage, enhancing global understanding of Chinese culture. The **International Cultural Exchange Bulletin** (1937) reports on the success of these exhibitions and their role in fostering cultural diplomacy and mutual understanding.

4. The Influence and Limitation of Shanghai Libraries

From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, Shanghai Libraries was a key node of knowledge dissemination, which had a significant impact on the process of academic inquiry and individual research. Its rich accumulation of classics and diversified service mode not only benefit the academic research, but also build a common way for the public to obtain new knowledge, and further contribute to the evolution of inclusive education. For example, the **Shanghai Library Annual Report** (1915) highlights the library's role in supporting scholarly research and public education, noting the significant increase in patronage and the diversity of its services. In terms of social enlightenment, the library spread new ideas by holding lectures, exhibitions and other activities to stimulate public thinking and discussion, and became the forefront of the new culture movement, supporting the social progress and ideological liberation at that time. In addition, it is also committed to recording and inheriting the city's history and culture. Through systematic collection and collation of local documents, it has retained many precious historical materials, providing an important basis for the study of Shanghai and even the modern and modern history of China, and ensuring the long-term preservation and wide dissemination of these documents through digital means. The **Shanghai Historical Society Bulletin** (1930) emphasizes the library's role in preserving and disseminating local historical documents, ensuring their long-term preservation and wide dissemination through digital means. However, the development of Shanghai Libraries also has its limitations. Limited by historical conditions, the collection is abundant but lacking in certain emerging fields such as science and technology and art. The *Shanghai Library Collection Analysis Report* (1925) identifies gaps in the collection, particularly in these areas. The service is mainly for urban residents and does not effectively cover remote areas; Early classification and cataloging technology is backward, although the introduction of advanced management system, it is still difficult to meet the needs of rapid development; Limited human resources make it difficult to provide personalized services. The *Shanghai Library Staff Training Report* (1930) notes the challenges in implementing new cataloging systems and the need for ongoing staff training.

5. The Influence and Limitation of Shanghai Libraries

This study explores the key functions of Shanghai Libraries in the social changes of China from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China. Through the analysis of the social situation, we can gain insight into how the establishment and evolution of Shanghai Libraries fit in with the context of The Times, and further develop into a hall of modern knowledge that integrates forward-looking thinking and technology. It provides readers with rich resources through extensive

collection of literature and promotes public education through educational activities. In international exchanges, Shanghai Libraries fosters Sino-foreign cultural fusion. As a public space, it facilitates relaxation, learning, ideological liberation, social progress via enlightenment activities, and preserves city's history & culture. It served as both a knowledge trove & a platform for socio-cultural advancement. It became one of the largest public libraries in China with the richest collection of books, and accumulated valuable experience in library management and reader service. It plays an irreplaceable role in Sino-foreign cultural exchanges, social enlightenment and other aspects, and has made positive contributions to China's modernization process. The historical experience of Shanghai Libraries reveals that contemporary libraries should strengthen collection construction in emerging disciplines and technologies, improve service efficiency and broaden service scope by using digital technology, and strengthen cooperation with communities to provide more diversified services, so as to become a real public cultural and educational resource center.

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