The Basic Theoretical Study of Library Science in China

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ABSTRACT

Since M. W. Schrettinger of Germany used the term "library science" for the first time in 1807, quite a few library scientists have been trying to explore its nature, objects, content, and methods of study. In China, the basic theoretical study of library science was initiated in the 1920s, grew in the 1950s, and became well-developed in the 1980s. This paper describes the state of Chinese research and various views on this field. The paper is divided into six parts: the focusing of the developing history, the nature of library science, the system structure, the subject attribute, the methods of study and research directions for the future.

Historical Development of Library Science in China

Although the term "library science" was not employed in ancient China, knowledge about library science has existed since the Zhou Dynasty (1000 BC - 771 BC). At that time there were many historical books describing the theory and method of library works, such as records about the official historian's duties, catalog and classification of books, official and private bibliographies, book collectors, and bookstock mansion. The experience and materials for developing library science in China accumulated through the ancient and traditional activities of sorting out books which became the resources of the subject.

With the development of modern libraries, the concept of library science was formed in China. The term "library science" was applied in some literature in the early 20th century. Library science was not recognized as an independent subject by the society until the 1920s, when the first
library school in China was founded in Wuhan, Hubei Province and library courses began to be offered at some universities. From the 1920s to the 1940s, some works on library science were published in China, including Yang Zhaozhe's *The Librarianship* (1923), Dai Zhiqian's *The Draft of a Speech about Library Study* (1923), Du Dingyou's *An Introduction to Library Science* (1927), Shen Xuezhi's *ABCs of Library Science* (1928), Liu Guojun's *The Main Ideas about Library Science* (1934), Chen Bojun's *The Comparative Librarianship* (1935), Yu Shuangmi's *The General Librarianship* (1936), Yu Youxin's *The Applied Library Science* (1938), and Qian Yaxin's *The Textbook of Library Science* (1943). These works had an active influence upon the Chinese basic theoretical study of library science.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the development of library science entered a new stage. In 1956 the first national forum about the basic theoretical study of library science was held in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. Chinese library science began to gradually form its own unique characteristics. The generally accepted explanation of library science was Liu Guojun's Theory of Essential Factors or "the study objects of library science are library undertaking and its component factors which include collection, readers, librarians, facilities and methods of work." After Liu Guojun advanced his theory, a national discussion was drawn out concerning the objects and content of library science that lasted until the 1960s. Through the discussion different viewpoints arose. Among them, the theory of contradiction and the theory of law had a greater influence on the study of library science. The theory of contradiction held that library science should mainly research the special contradiction in library activities, such as conservation and use of books, but the idea holders had divergent opinions on what the special contradiction was. The theory of law implied that library science was a subject that should research the occurrence, development and organizational patterns of the library undertaking, and its law of work. This view is still favored by many librarians today. Evidently, this discussion pushed forward the old Chinese concept of "let a hundred schools of thought contend." However, the Cultural Revolution halted the discussion and a ten year gap lapsed the study of library science in China.

Basic theoretical study of library science resumed in 1978 with the systematic study of the theory of interchange. In his thesis *A General Survey of Library Science*, Zhou Wenjun states that documents are tools of information exchange; libraries did their work by using documents; the history of the development of library work was the history of information exchange. The purpose of the exchange was to help people understand the world and change it. The role of library work was to enable the society to use knowledge and information more rationally through the interchange.
Zhou thought that the theoretical foundation of library science was information exchange.

The 1980s was a prosperous era in the history of library science study in China. One of the important signs was increasing quantity of academic theses. From 1949 to 1979, there were 4,638 articles published, with an average of 154.6 per year; the following decade there were over 15,000 articles published, averaging 1,500 per year. Besides that, there was also a series of books published. The researchers not only stated their own opinions, but also analyzed others' views, trying to form and perfect the theoretical system of library science. The study of this period cast off the limitation of describing and explaining the concrete library work. The research put libraries into the whole social interchange system and examined their internal and external circumstances from different angles. Now the basic theoretical study of library science in China is forging rapidly ahead.

**New Thoughts about the Study Objects of Library Science**

Researchers have paid great attention to the issue of study objects in library science. After the theory of essential factors, the theory of contradiction, and the theory of law, a few of new thoughts were put forward recently. Typical positions include:

1. The study object of library science is library system.
   This view holds that according to the study contents of contemporary library science, it comprises the main aspects of library work as a system. Regarding the library system as the study object can reflect the objective relation between library work and other work, and between library science and other subjects, enriching the study content of library science. In addition, with the method of system analysis adopted, the study of library science enters the realm of quantitative analysis and leaves that of qualitative analysis. This will help improve the accuracy of the study results.

2. Library science should study the social knowledge.
   This school believes that because the library system is a branch of the system of social knowledge exchange, library science should study the social knowledge exchange and its specific law in library activities. It should study the collection, arrangement, storage, and dissemination of knowledge in order to promote the exchange. It should also study the law of change and
development of library undertaking in the process of social knowledge exchange.\textsuperscript{7}

3. Library science studies the theories and methods of documentary information exchange. This maxim states that the documentary information exchange is an important manner of interpersonal knowledge exchange. Because the direct exchange of knowledge is a face-to-face interchange limited by time and space, patrons use media, such as documents, in order to conduct an indirect exchange. With the demand for documents constantly increasing, documentary information exchange will become a universal social phenomenon.\textsuperscript{8}

4. Library science should study the position and role of libraries in scientific exchange and information dissemination. This precept maintains that the library is an important channel and a key link in the system of scientific exchange and information dissemination. The library is both a resource for absorbing information through book collection, and a resource for transmitting information by providing books to readers. Library work includes the processes of both information exchange and information retrieval. The library has evolved into an information center, the study of library science must suit this change.\textsuperscript{9}

**The Subject Attribute of Library Science**

Defining the attribute of a subject means fixing its place within the scientific system. Chinese researchers have paid great attention to subject attribute, developing three widely held schools of thought:

1. Library science is one of the social sciences because the study object of library science is library undertaking, which is a social phenomenon, so library science should be a category of the social science. Also, the study methods of the social science are mostly adopted by library science. Although some methods of the natural sciences are also applied, they are scattered and therefore do not hold sway on the study of library science. Since the study methods of a science usually reflect its subject
attribute to great extent, library science belongs with the social sciences.\textsuperscript{10}

2. Library science belongs to the comprehensive sciences. The reasons for thinking so are: a) The contents of the study affect the subject attribute. The study of library science has added to the contents of natural science. The proportion of natural science and applied science in the education of library science is increasing; b) The study object of library science determines the subject attribute. Library science is a comprehensive subject composed of many different branches.\textsuperscript{11}

3. Library science is an applied subject. There are three various versions:
   a. A comprehensive, applied subject which means library science can be applied to many other subjects.\textsuperscript{12}
   b. It is one of the applied liberal arts because it is determined by comparing it with the applied science of engineering technology.\textsuperscript{13}
   c. Another view is that library science is an applied technical subject, which holds that the study objects of library science do not include the natural world and human society. Thus, library science does not belong to the natural science, the humanities, nor the social sciences. However, library science is the knowledge that serves the natural science, social science, and engineering technology by its special means. Therefore, it is an intermediate technical subject between them.\textsuperscript{14}

4. Library science is the learning of managing documents. Some basic principles of management science can be applied to it, because library science studies the organization and management of library and its activities. Thus, it belongs to management science.\textsuperscript{15}
The Structure of Library Science

The process of studying the internal structure and the external relations of library science is often a process of understanding the objects of library science. Among the researchers, Zhou Wenjun worked the hardest and had the greatest impact. In his thesis *The General Survey of Library Science*, Zhou put forth the concept that library science is a unitary system consisting of a group of subjects whose structure could be divided into three parts: theoretical, special, and applied library science. Among them, theoretical library science studied the basic library science theories which contained the attribute, role, and position of libraries. Special library science studied special work methods, principles, and law of various types of libraries such as public, university and college, school, medical, agricultural, and scientific and technical. Applied library science studied the fundamental works and processing of library materials, including collection development, cataloging and classification, storage and retrieval of information, reference services, and automation. From then on, people cited this concept in textbooks, monographs, and articles of library science, although some researchers separated comparative library science from theoretical library science and held that library science was composed of four parts as discussed in the last section.

Another opinion advocated by Guo Xingshou holds that it is necessary to differentiate between macro structure and micro structure of library science. The macro structure of library science includes general and special library sciences. The micro library science comprises the basic concepts in library science, library collection, classification and catalog, reference and information service, and library automation, for example.

Research Methods in Library Science

Each subject or domain of knowledge has its own method of research. Developing a research method in library science can promote it into the genuine realm of science. However, Chinese researchers paid little attention to it until the 1980s when articles on methodology in library science research gradually appeared. There are currently two leading ideas about the research methods in China:

1. One group of researchers believe that library science has three major research methods. The first method usually synthesizes the practical experiences of library work and analyzes the records of readers, collection, and other-related areas. The second method utilizes the
research methods used in social science disciplines, such as sociology, economics, and psychology. However, they can play a positive role only when the study objects have the same characters and fit in a controlled environment as in many social science experiments. The third method is to use techniques such as observation, investigation, induction, deduction, analysis, and synthesis.

2. Another group of researchers maintain that the research methods in library science can be summarized into four aspects. These four aspects can be stated as: a) the selective method of study topic, b) the collective method of study information which includes investigation, observation, experience, and statistics, c) the scientific method of research which comprises logical thinking, comparison, classification, analysis, synthesis, induction, detection hypothesis, and history, and d) the comprehensive method which consists of compromising philosophy, system theory, control theory, information theory, and transplantation of the subjects.

Conclusion

In China today, library science is still at a pre-scientific stage. Researchers have not yet reached a consensus regarding many basic theories. As far as the theoretical system is concerned, three patterns of library science exist in China now. The first is the descriptive library science. Its main contents are the theoretical description and summation of the essential factors of the process of library activity. Most studies in China belong to this. The second pattern is called the reasonable library science. Its basic features are the discrimination and deduction of every concept in library activities and theories. Librarians often criticize it because of its highly abstracting and theoretical ideas. The third pattern is the practical library science. Its aim is to solve various problems in library management and the development of library undertaking. In other words, it is to combine theory with practice, and it belongs to the category of applied study in which a typical study content is research about the developing strategy of library undertaking in China.

In China, one feature of library science is introducing theories and methods from other subjects. Certainly, it is efficacious to do so for enriching the contents of library science and promoting the development of the theory within the limited range, yet it has brought in some non-scientific elements to the field. For example, some researchers have borrowed the
terms of other subjects to draw a forced analogy between others' theories and methods and those of library science. Thus, the characters of library science itself are obscured and its scientific level is lowered.

In the 1990s, the emphasis of economic reconstruction ideology has a great influence on the study of library science in China. Quite a few researchers think that the study cannot proceed from the abstract concepts, definitions, and patterns to start to refine the theoretical aspects of library science. Therefore, library science should change its study and research means, and make solving practical problems the ends. In the future, the study emphasis of library science in China will be on actual macro problems—the general existing problems of the library field.

NOTES


3. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.


17. Wu and Shao, op cit. pp. 61-64.

