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A Study of Subject Service in Chinese Academic Libraries

By

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This article explores the current status and challenges of subject service in academic libraries in mainland China. The authors selected top thirty universities nominated by Chinese University Alumni Association (CUAA) in 2009 and examined their library webpages in order to identify the current state of subject service. The study concludes that subject service has not been popularized and its development is uneven. Subject service is an emerging trend of reference service in academic libraries. Subject librarianship is facing great challenges and opportunities in the future.

Keywords: subject service, liaison network, academic library, China

Introduction

After thirty years of economic reforms since 1979, mainland China has been rapidly developing. In order to provide support for teaching and learning in the universities, academic libraries have implemented subject service. Humphreys (1967) defines a subject librarian as a member of the library staff appointed to develop one or more aspects of a library's technical or reference service in a particular subject field.

Since Tsinghua University first adopted the subject service in 1998, other universities such as Peking University and Shanghai Jiaotong University followed suit quickly. It has been ten years since the service model appeared in Chinese academic libraries. What is the status of progress? How common is the service offered? The two questions are to be answered in this article. The authors selected top thirty universities nominated by Chinese University Alumni Association (CUAA) in 2009 and examined their library webpages in order to identify the current state of subject service in China.

Literature Review

The existence of subject librarians and their service can be traced back for decades. White (1999) conducted a study of academic subject librarian positions in the United States from 1990 through 1998. He found that subject librarians were expected to have an American Library Association (ALA) accredited MLS degree as the minimum qualification; and some universities required a second master's degree. He also found that subject librarians' primary duties included reference service, bibliographic instruction, and collection development. Cassner and Adams (2008) noted that subject librarians reached off-campus students by being virtually embedded on

the course management software, where librarians were available on the discussion board, available for live chat, and were able to provide information literacy instruction to distance learners. Hardy (2007) observed that subject librarians undertook a wide range of activities with academic liaison and information literacy teaching as central tasks in the U.K. Pan and Lan (2009) discussed how the Shanghai Jiao Tong University developed a virtual community platform where subject librarians shared the library services and resources with their patrons in China. The platform gave users a more convenient and more attractive environment to preserve their research results and share their experiences. Not so much literature has been reported worldwide on the current status of subject service or subject librarianship in China. Further research in this direction in China will enrich the literature on Chinese academic librarianship.

Methodology

The university ranking used in this study is published by CUAA. This domestic university ranking was conducted independently of the Chinese government, with the criteria including government recognition, research, faculty, program, students, and reputation (CEC, 2009). This study collected and analyzed the content on the subject service webpages from the libraries of the top thirty universities in 2009 as identified by CUAA. After a review of their webpages, the scope of this study was drawn upon the following content:

- Number of subject librarians in the library;
- General duties of subject librarians such as reference services, user education, collection development, and library promotion; and

- Special duties of subject librarians:
 - Gain proficient knowledge of library print and electronic resources;
 - Develop library resources navigation and research guide;
 - Create and maintain subject service webpages;
 - Evaluate the resources; and
 - Track status of research projects.

The authors reviewed the webpages in January 2010. An Excel spreadsheet was used to record data for each academic library from which the percentages were calculated. General and special subject service duties by individual libraries are displayed separately.

Findings

A total 13 libraries (43%) offered subject service. Table 1 illustrates the CUAAs ranking of the universities and number of subject librarians. All universities listed subject librarians' contact information on the subject service webpages, while only 50% included faculty liaison information. It is also worth noting that Tsinghua University established a library-student committee that involved graduate and undergraduate students in the network. The number of subject librarians was the least (3) at Xian Jiaotong University, and the most (31) at Remin University of China. Nankai University was offering limited subject service to selected teaching departments and colleges due to a shortage of library personnel. Eleven universities referred to the librarian who offered the service as Subject Librarian, but one university used the term Subject Liaison. Shandong University was the only university that posted minimum qualifications for their subject specialists as shown below:

- Bachelor's degree or equivalent educational background;
- Wide range of knowledge in subject disciplines;
- Familiarity with library collections and academic library settings;
- Knowledge of computer, database, and Internet searching;

- Communication skills, interpersonal skills;
- Ability to speak and write in English;
- Ability to work independently; and
- High spirit of dedication and service oriented.

Twelve out of 13 websites (92%) listed the subject librarians' duties. However, the contents were brief and almost identical. The primary duties were to promote awareness of library programs, collections, and services through librarian-faculty liaison network (100%). Other duties included user education (92%), collection development (83%), library promotion (83%), and reference service (75%). Six universities mentioned creation and maintenance of subject service websites; five stated the need to create and develop instruction and guidelines for new resources; and four referred to the necessity of being familiar with the library collections, resources evaluation, and research project tracking. Subject service was taking shape in libraries such as Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Nankai University, Remin University of China, Tongji University, and China Agricultural University. General, and special subject service duties are identified in Table 2.

Discussion

The findings of less than 50% (13 of 30) top ranking universities offering subject service indicate that it is not widely provided among the academic libraries in China. The development is uneven even among the libraries that offer subject service. Some libraries have shown more significant progress than others.

The findings show that the minimum qualification as a subject librarian is a bachelor's degree. However, Dong (2008) reports that subject librarians at Peking University (Ranking No.1) and Tsinghua University (Ranking No. 2) require a master's or equivalent degree. It is difficult to determine what the minimum qualification for subject librarian should be. Wu and Huang (2003) point out that the percentage of academic librarians with master or doctoral degrees is low. In some small libraries, no one has an MLS or equivalent degree. A majority of academic librarians carry a

college or bachelor's degree in library and information science. Most libraries require subject librarians to carry at least a bachelor's degree either in library science or a subject discipline. The rapid rate of economic growth over the past 30 years in China has contributed to the development of education in library and information science. Chu (2001) reports there were only two library schools in 1978 but about 50 in 2001. Nevertheless, the number of graduates lags far behind the demand for trained professionals. It will take time and great effort to meet the desired number of qualified librarians.

The common responsibility of subject or liaison librarian is to build a connection with faculty and exchange information regarding library services and resources. Some libraries integrate reference service, bibliographic instruction and collection development into various subject disciplines and create specific positions such as Health/Science Librarian, Literature Librarian, and Education Librarian. These librarians generally work under a reference service department. Some libraries also add subject service duties to technical or public service librarians due to the shortage of reference librarians.

The study shows that the subject service in China is oriented toward the liaison service or liaison network. There is no significant statistical difference among the general duties for the subject librarians in the 13 universities because the sample is too small. The purpose of subject service is to establish a network between librarians and faculty. Subject service is concentrated on network and collection development. This phenomenon represents the progress from the traditional Chinese thinking of the library which is regarded as a place to read and check out books. Traditionally academic libraries put great emphasis on establishing a sophisticated collection as well as creating a search navigation system to assist their patrons in finding what they need. Information management and retrieval has become more complex with the changing information structure during the last two decades. The importance of reference and information literacy functions in the library has increased. Chinese academic libraries have extended the scope of reference service and improved the quality of service. The adoption of subject service has brought reference service to a new stage. Even though this study has not found the requirements of technology skills for subject

librarianship, the assigned duties such as editing websites, designing resource navigations, and creating subject blogs, imply that subject librarians are expected to keep up with current information technology beyond traditional librarianship skills.

Limitations and Further Study

This study was based on the content from libraries' subject service websites at a certain period of time. The content may be changed as time goes by. Further study is needed to investigate how subject service is implemented, performed, and evaluated.

Conclusion

In Chinese academic libraries, subject service has not been popularized (compared with US and UK academic libraries where it has existed for decades). Both the qualification requirements of the profession and the scope of subject service are left behind. Dougherty (2002) states that the availability of 24/7 reference is less crucial than the capability to offer it. Therefore, it is important to provide subject service with maximum capability. Subject service is a new trend of reference service in academic libraries. Subject librarianship will face great challenges and opportunities in the future.

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Table 1

Libraries that Offer Subject Service by CUA A Ranking

Ranking	University	Library Webpage	Subject Librarian
1	Peking University	http://www.lib.pku.edu.cn/portal/index.jsp	11
2	Tsinghua University	http://www.lib.tsinghua.edu.cn/	17
3	Fudan University	http://www.library.fudan.edu.cn	4
6	Shanghai Jiaotong University	http://www.lib.sjtu.edu.cn/welcome.do	6
8	Renmin University of China	http://www.lib.ruc.edu.cn/	31
10	Sichuan University	http://202.115.54.22:8080/portal/index.jsp	18
13	Nankai University	http://www.lib.nankai.edu.cn/	10
15	Shandong University	http://202.194.11.49/portal/index.aspx	11
19	Xian Jiaotong University	http://www.lib.xjtu.edu.cn/	3
23	Tongji University	http://www.lib.tongji.edu.cn/	7
25	China Agricultural University	http://www.lib.cau.edu.cn/	21
26	Southeast University	http://58.192.117.2/	13
29	Beijing Institute of Technology	http://lib.bit.edu.cn/	16

Table 2

General and Special Subject Service Duties

University	Reference Service	User Education	Collection Development	Library Promotion	Liaison Service	Special Subject Service Duties
Peking University	√	√		√	√	
Tsinghua University	√	√	√	√	√	➤ Develop net resources navigation website in key disciplines.
Fudan University	√	√		√	√	➤ On-site instruction and troubleshooting; ➤ Create resource navigations; ➤ Provide library news feed service.
Shanghai Jiaotong University	√	√	√	√	√	➤ Publish biweekly newsletter entitled "Subject Information Review"; ➤ Summarize academic achievements; ➤ Create subject blogs; ➤ Implementing of Information Commons Plan (IC1) and Innovation Community Plan (IC2). ➤ Create resource navigations website in core periodicals and subject disciplines.
Renmin University of China		√	√	√	√	➤ Provide training to faculty in using library collection management system; ➤ Participate seminars, collect information and conference papers; ➤ Keep statistics of faculty publications; ➤ Take relevant subject discipline courses; ➤ Follow up research project if possible.
Sichuan University	√	√	√	√	√	
Nankai University		√	√	√	√	➤ Conduct patron survey regarding the library resources and services regularly.
Shandong University	√	√	√	√	√	
Xian Jiao Tong University	√	√	√	√	√	
Tongji University	√		√	√	√	➤ Make recommendation and order foreign language books.
China Agricultural University		√	√		√	➤ Create web based communication platform for subject librarian, faculty and students.
Southeast University	√	√	√		√	
Total:	9 (75%)	11 (92%)	10 (83%)	10 (83%)	12 (100%)	



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