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Current State of Library and Information Science Development in China

WENDY LIN HU

Since 1978, China has embarked upon an ambitious program of reform known as the "Four Modernizations," one of which stresses the importance of science and technology. Being aware of the urgency of needs in the realm of library and information science, party and state leaders, especially those in charge of education and cultural affairs, have called for all-out efforts to develop this aspect of Chinese education. As a result, a variety of formal and nonformal training programs have been introduced in educational institutions at both the secondary and higher levels. This article's objective is to survey the current state of affairs in library and information science development in China, as reflected in training programs that have been introduced in recent years, to present as a case study the establishment of a new department of library and information science at Sichuan University, and to survey briefly the curriculum now in use.

General Background

Since the Communist accession to power in 1949, libraries as institutions and librarianship as a profession have undergone what must be described as violent changes, ranging from some growth

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and development in the early 1950s to extensive disruption and destruction in the 1960s. The year 1978 marked the beginning of a new era in virtually all aspects of Chinese national life, and in March of that year the chairman of the Communist party declared in his report to the National People's Congress that "libraries of all types should be promoted so that a network serving the masses and scientific research can be established."¹ Since then, all-out efforts have been made to expand library facilities and services, to embark upon large-scale acquisition programs, and to train professional librarians through a variety of formal and nonformal educational means. Library and information science education had been given a relatively low priority by the state since the revolution in 1949. Even in the early 1950s, when the greatest efforts were made to restructure, reform, and develop education on all levels with massive Soviet aid, little was done in that field. It was not until 1958 that a program in library and information science was introduced at the China Research Institute for Scientific and Technological Information and a small number of students enrolled. This program failed to receive adequate support, resulting in intermittent suspension.² From 1949 to 1982 China produced few (19) graduate-level library and information science specialists, 1,600 undergraduates, and approximately 1,000 two-year-level special program graduates. Including correspondence school graduates, the total number of trained personnel was approximately 4,000.³ With such an insignificant number of trained people, it was obvious that the demands for librarians could not be met even in a minimal way.

Confronted with a shortage of trained professionals, the Ministry of Education in 1983 decided to accelerate the pace of development for library and information science.⁴ The results have been impressive. For more than thirty years prior to 1978, China had only two major universities, Beijing University and Wuhan University, that had professional programs in this field. From 1978 to the end of 1982, the number increased to 17, with more than 1,700 students enrolled. By 1985 there were 55 institutions, of which 10 were secondary and vocational schools, enrolling more than 1,000 students, while 45 were four-year undergraduate or two-year postsecondary special programs with more than 4,000 students.⁵ By 1986 most provinces and municipalities had established a center for library and information science education. In the meantime, the special field of archives management, which is professionally more closely related to library science, had expanded to 29 centers enrolling 2,600 students.⁶

In 1983 the Ministry of Education projected to have, nationally, from 20 to 25 four-year and two-year college-level educational

centers for the library science profession with an enrollment of 4,800 students, and to increase to 50 the number of institutions enrolling more than 10,000 students by 1990.⁷ Through the effort of a variety of governmental agencies at the central, regional, and local levels, by 1986 there were indications that the projections of 1983 were feasible and the goals attainable. On the basis of recent surveys and studies, the central authorities seem to be reaching their expansion goals, and the future appears promising for library and information science education development. There remain, however, a number of difficult problems that require not only further study but careful thinking and appropriate planning.

Nature and Scope of Problems

Library and information science, as a separate academic subject area, traditionally had always been located in a few universities with emphasis on the humanities and cultural subjects. This model still prevails and has the disadvantage of being narrow in content and uncoordinated in structure. Inasmuch as the needs of China, at a time of nationwide modernization and reconstruction, are both numerous and urgent, this institutional base for training librarians has proven to be far from adequate; hence great efforts are now being made to correct this unsatisfactory situation by shifting emphasis in the direction of science and technology and away from the humanities.

Individuals hired have been almost exclusively products of universities and four-year institutions. Yet there is great demand for competent middle- and low-level workers for library and information science settings. Very often individuals with high-level training are compelled by circumstances to perform middle-level work, while those at the middle level find it necessary to perform clerical and supportive tasks. If illustrated in graphic form, the present need for trained personnel could be represented by a three-tiered pyramid: the bottom, representing the junior or supportive staff, would be about 60 percent, while the middle- and high-level professionals would constitute 30 and 10 percent respectively.⁸

To remedy the imbalance of appropriate staff availability, as early as 1983 the Ministry of Education encouraged government agencies and educational institutions to establish library and information science programs at the secondary level. In the past few years, more than ten such programs have emerged, ranging from regular secondary schools specializing in library science to special vocational classes in senior high schools and similar programs in other types of special secondary schools. In addition, the Central Broadcasting/

Television University of China has also started a program in library and information science, with more than 10,000 regularly enrolled students by the end of 1985.⁹

The problems, however, remain serious. Recognition of the need and its urgency is but a first step; the establishment of all types of middle-level training programs does not, however, promise immediate results at a time of shortage of qualified personnel, financial stringency, inadequacy of basic facilities, and, above all, lack of coordination. In concrete terms the shortage of trained personnel is reflected in the dismally low ratio between library and information science personnel and the army of science and engineering workers, the former representing no more than 1.2 percent of the latter. As recently as 1985 it was estimated that between 70 and 85 percent of all library personnel had not yet had an opportunity to receive any form of library training, even in some of the universities where library and information science courses are offered. Creation of new middle-level programs to deal with such shortages has led to serious questions being raised about the quality of middle-level personnel being trained in such programs. A cursory survey of six of these programs shows that together they have a teaching staff of 85, of whom only 8 are associate professors, 33 lecturers, and the rest beginning instructors.¹⁰ Furthermore, the majority of this inadequate teaching staff has been transferred from other academic departments or programs. The widespread practice of using library personnel for teaching has also given rise to problems, since work experience in libraries cannot be equated with teaching ability. The pattern of geographical distribution of training centers is also skewed. Some areas or cities are oversupplied while many others have none.¹¹

Current Training Programs

In order to overcome the problems of personnel shortage, a variety of measures have been adopted to accelerate the training of professional library and information science workers. As of early 1988 training programs on four levels can be identified in China. At the lowest level there are special classes in library and information science that enroll junior and senior middle school graduates for a period of two or three years. These classes are run by libraries or secondary schools equipped with the necessary human and material resources. Graduates from such training classes are assigned to government units or educational institutions as entrance-level junior workers and are given, conditions permitting, opportunities to receive additional training for professional advancement.

Next are professional training programs at the junior college level. Students are drawn from the pool of senior middle school graduates who have taken part in the national university entrance examinations and from those already in library service with equivalent high school academic qualifications. These programs are sponsored by educational institutions such as the Central Broadcasting/Television University, Wuhan University, and the Self-Study University of Beijing Library. They last from two to three years. Graduates from such programs assume positions as junior professional librarians and information workers.

By far the most significant training programs are found in the regular full-fledged higher education institutions that offer four-year undergraduate degrees in library and information science. At this level there are two distinct types of programs. One is designed to train what may be termed generalists, who upon graduation are expected to assume administrative and/or supervisory positions as professional librarians. Such programs at present are offered in some of the major comprehensive universities, including Beijing, Wuhan, Sichuan, Nankai, Zhongshan, and a few national normal universities in Beijing and Shanghai. The other seeks to train students in higher polytechnical institutions, who are expected to provide the necessary professional service through combining scientific/technological expertise in one field with knowledge and skills in library and information science. Such programs are found in the Northwest Tele-Communication Institute in Xian, the College of Engineering in Dalian, the West China University of Medical Sciences in Chengdu, and several other similar institutions.

Aside from the regular four-year undergraduate program, a few leading institutions with an established reputation in library and information science, such as Wuhan University, have been authorized to offer bachelor's degree programs through correspondence to those who have had some postsecondary technical training and work experience in libraries. This arrangement clearly has the advantage of retraining those already on the job with a consequent upgrading and elevating of their professional status.

At the top are postgraduate programs that enroll students with bachelor's degrees (but not restricted to library science majors) and library workers who possess academic credentials considered equivalent to the bachelor's. One is for regular full-time graduate students working for their master's degree. In addition to meeting the curricular requirements, students must submit a master's thesis that is closely related to subject areas covered in the curriculum and written under the supervision of a major thesis advisor. These programs are offered by not only such major comprehensive

universities as Wuhan, Beijing, and Zhongshan, but also special institutions that are concerned exclusively with library and information science, such as the China Research Institute for Scientific and Technological Information, the Library of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the Center for Documents and Information of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Usually, three years' residence is required for the completion of the master's degree program.

The other postgraduate program calls for the same coursework but without a thesis. After graduation, however, those who are employed by libraries and are prepared to write a master's thesis can be awarded the master's degree upon successful thesis defense.

In addition to the above there now exists the so-called "dual degree" program, which enrolls students with bachelor's degrees in any subject area for a two-year library and information science course. Successful completion of the program leads to another bachelor's degree in library and information science.

The Case of the Sichuan University

Sichuan, the most populous of the twenty-two provinces of China, is located in the southwest and has been a key region in the long history of China. Before 1984 the entire southwest region that comprises Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou did not have a single training center for library and information science. Between the years 1949 and 1976 only two professional librarians with bachelor's degrees came to serve in the province of Sichuan.¹² Efforts to improve this highly unsatisfactory situation since 1976 have been met with very limited success. It was in view of this situation that the Ministry of Education decided in 1983 to authorize Sichuan University to establish a new department of library and information science to offer both the bachelor's degree and a two-year special training program in library and information science. After a year's preparation, the department began to enroll students in the fall of 1984. The enrollment of the entering bachelor's class was thirty-three. Because of a variety of factors, the number of students majoring in library science has remained low. Enrollment for 1987 is no more than forty.¹³ The majority of students are from the metropolitan area of the capital city of Chengdu who have taken the national university entrance examination. This undergraduate program is of four years' duration and leads to a bachelor's degree in library and information science.

While graduates with the bachelor's degree are given jobs by the state in university libraries, public libraries, and other cultural

institutions, graduates from the two-year special training program have to find positions themselves. The two-year program accepts applicants, mostly from the Chengdu area, who have taken the national university entrance examination but have failed to achieve scores high enough for admission into regular four-year undergraduate programs. A rather stiff tuition fee of RMB 1,300 (\$342 U.S.) per year is required, and students do not have the privilege of living in dormitories on campus. Since a tuition fee at this rate is almost equivalent to the annual wages of most workers and is therefore clearly beyond the financial capacity of most students, those who enroll in the two-year special program are usually sent by their places of work with the proviso that they return to this workplace upon completion of training. In 1986 the first class that started in 1984 graduated, and all graduates have returned to their original places of employment, which are almost exclusively institutions of higher education, including the College of Medicine and the College of Telecommunication Engineering.

When the department was first organized in 1984 it had a faculty of 10, of whom 6 were transferred from either the university library staff or other departments. Three brought in from outside of Sichuan had library science degrees from Beijing and Wuhan, and one had recently returned from the United States with an M.L.S. degree. By 1988, with the arrival of new members from other parts of the country, all having library science degrees or other credentials, the faculty increased to 22 full-time instructors. The teaching staff is complemented by a supporting staff of 9 in administration, research, and managerial activities. In terms of age only 23 percent of the teaching faculty is 50 or above, while the majority are is 30. Nine of the faculty have undergraduate degrees in such diverse fields as Chinese literature, mathematics, physics, and computer science. Three are working for their master's and doctoral degrees in U.S. institutions, while 3 others have had one year's special training at Beijing University.

The new department in Sichuan University typifies the recent endeavor to develop library and information science on a regional basis. It seeks to get personnel and material assistance from all parts of China but stresses the training of students only from Sichuan and neighboring provinces.

*The Curriculum*¹⁴

For library and information science majors working for a bachelor's degree at Sichuan University, the four-year program is divided into 8 semesters of 18 weeks each. To graduate a student

Required Courses		
Course Title	No. hrs.	No. credits
Political Theory	324	18
Physical Education	144	4
Foreign Languages	288	12
Advanced Mathematics	108	6
Classical Chinese	108	4
Natural Sciences	72	3
Humanities	72	3
Foundation of Lib. Sci.	54	3
Intro. to Information Sci.	54	3
Bibliography	54	3
Classification of Books	72	3
Library Bibliography	54	3
Western Language Cataloging	72	3
Library Management	54	3
Info. Retrieval & Consultation	72	4
Computer Programming	72	3
Library Automation	108	3
Info. Analysis & Research	36	2
Subject Heading Methods	54	3
Collection & Readers' Services	54	3
History of Chinese Books	54	3
Ancient Books Management	36	2
Library Modernization Technique	36	2
Practicum		4
Junior Year Term Paper		4
Thesis		8
Elective Courses		
Periodicals Management	36	2
Book Preservation Technique	36	2
Library Statistics	36	2
Social Science Source Materials	36	2
Science & Tech. Source Materials	36	2
Selected Works in Marxism-Leninism	36	2
History of Chi. & Foreign Libs.	36	2
Foreign Literary Works	36	2
Chinese Literary Works	36	2
Sci. & Tech. Info. Retrieval	54	3
Russian Book Cataloging	36	2
Second Foreign Language	288	12
Foreign Lang. for Lib. Sci.	36	2
Logic	36	2
Study of Sciences	36	2
Chinese Composition	36	2
Intro. to Jurisprudence	36	2
General Psychology	36	2
Classification of Chi. Characters	36	2
Excerptation and Indexing	36	2

Figure 1. Four-Year Curriculum at Sichuan University

must accumulate 144 credits, totaling 2,592 class hours. Of the 144 credits 112 are of required courses, leaving only 32 for electives. The curriculum is shown in figure 1. For almost all courses, both required and elective, standard textbooks in Chinese are now available. Increasingly, however, books, monographs, and articles by foreign authors have been adopted and incorporated into the curriculum, often through translation.

Concluding Remarks

While the foregoing cannot claim either breadth or depth, it does seem to warrant a few general observations concerning the present state of library and information science development in China. In the first place there has been a complete reversal of the disastrous educational policy position of the Cultural Revolution days and the earlier attitude of neglect. On national, regional, and local levels, a conscientious effort is now being made not only to correct past mistakes but also to mobilize human and material resources for the development of library and information science education. Second, for that purpose, formal and informal educational measures have been adopted to promote the development of this field, and the number of individuals involved in this task has been growing at an impressive pace. Third, as part of the national policy of openness to the outside world, international exchange has increased in both frequency and subject area coverage, as can be seen in the number of Chinese scholars going abroad and the number of foreign experts visiting China. Fourth, in spite of the sense of dedication and the eagerness of the Chinese to implement the national policy for development, the area of library and information science, like all other aspects of the modernization program, still suffers from some of the pressing problems common to all developing countries, of which the shortage in both human and material resources is perhaps the most serious. Finally, the pattern of development in the near and distant future will, in the final analysis, depend upon the degree of political and social stability the new leadership is able to maintain. In respect to this crucial point there appears to be a consensus on the part of Chinese scholars in the West that the prospect seems promising.

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3. Xiao, Zi-li: "Current State and Trends in Library and Information Science Education in China," *Information and Source Material Work*, no.4:11 (1986).
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5. Xiao, p.11.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p.12.
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