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A Constant Library Book Acquisition Strategy to Meet All Changes

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Abstract

The procurement of Chinese-language books constitutes a key function for general libraries. Tender-based procurement, particularly government tender procurement, has become a widespread phenomenon, with such processes frequently resulting in the lowest bid being awarded. Faced with winning suppliers of varying quality, how can libraries ensure the quality of book procurement? This article begins by analyzing the key problems confronting library book procurement, comprehensively reviews the core processes, and proposes practical and feasible countermeasures.

Full Text

A Constant Strategy for Library Book Procurement

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Abstract

Chinese book procurement represents a critical function for most libraries. Tender-based purchasing—particularly government-mandated procurement—has become ubiquitous, with lowest-bid-wins being the prevailing norm. Confronted with vendors of vastly varying quality, how can libraries ensure procurement quality? This article analyzes the key challenges in library book acquisition, systematically examines the core processes, and proposes practical, actionable solutions.

Keywords: collection development; Chinese book procurement; tender purchasing; quality control; integrity and self-discipline

Before 2008, I was primarily responsible for Chinese book procurement at my institution; since then, my focus has shifted to digital resource development. A CNKI search for “book procurement” yields 806 results, with 22 articles published in just the first half of 2014, demonstrating that this is a perennial hot topic. Upon reviewing these works, I found many reflect an inadequate understanding of procurement principles and contain numerous strategic flaws—perhaps because sensitive issues are deliberately avoided. Drawing on my experience, I discuss control methods for library book procurement to ensure genuine support for teaching and research.

1.1 The Problem of Discount Books Masquerading as Regular-Priced Books

Discount books are remaindered or flawed titles that publishers or distributors heavily discount to clear inventory; in recent years, “new” discount books with artificially high list prices and low actual discounts have also emerged. Regular-priced books refer to newly published titles, typically within three years of publication, especially academic works that represent substantial scholarly effort and contain high intellectual value.

Discount books are generally inferior in quality—some fall apart when opened, feature blurry printing, or have uneven trimming. Their content is often outdated or shoddily produced, with most being “scissors-and-paste” compilations (rumored to be producible in mere days). Only a small portion of publisher-remaindered books maintain acceptable quality. Notably, many former piracy operations have shifted to discount books, which are cheaper to produce than counterfeits, legal, and highly profitable. These new discount titles are often thin volumes priced at dozens of yuan when their regular-priced counterparts cost only a few yuan; alternatively, they appear as thick “monographs” or “reference works” priced at hundreds or even thousands of yuan (most common in Beijing, frequently marketed via telephone under the guise of government ministries—the so-called “010 phenomenon”). Discount book markets exist nationwide, concentrated in Fengtai District (Southwest Logistics) and Chaoyang District in Beijing. Wholesale discounts typically range from 10-20% of list price, sometimes as low as 5%—meaning a book listed at ¥100 can be purchased for ¥5-20, then sold at street stalls for ¥8 per copy or ¥10 per jin. Regular-priced books are rarely wholesaled below 60% of list price, with scientific works and titles from prestigious publishers often exceeding 80%—a ¥100 book costs libraries ¥60-80 wholesale. Library tender prices for regular books are typically 70-75% of list price (libraries pay ¥70-75 for a ¥100 book), while discount book tenders are 20-30% (libraries pay ¥20-30). The price differential is staggering: if a library purchases ¥1 million worth of discount books at regular-book prices, the excess profit is enormous.

In business, vendors’ fundamental goal is profit—superior service merely serves greater profit, which is unobjectionable. However, in library supply, the greatest profit opportunity lies in passing off discount books as regular-priced stock. This

practice is not illegal, as discount status is determined by the seller, making it a key factor in the “active” library supply market.

One library, after thorough market research and scientific pricing, successfully procured ¥200,000 worth of discount books at an average 24% discount, including services such as library stamping, magnetic strip insertion, barcode labeling, 100% National Library MARC data, and delivery to designated locations [1]. Under the same service requirements, the library’s regular-book tender price was 71%. Had these discount books been supplied as regular stock, the library would have paid over ¥590,000—generating ¥390,000 in excess profit. Such massive profits drive some vendors, particularly private operators, to pursue low bids by any means necessary, then fulfill contracts with discount books masquerading as regular titles. Consequently, all library procurement problems revolve around this deception, which also represents the focal point of power rent-seeking and the core of private vendors’ so-called “flexibility.”

1.2 Problems with Government Tendering and Procurement

Most large-scale library procurements employ tendering, which takes three forms: library-independent tendering, institutional logistics company-managed tendering, and government tendering (invitation-only tendering also falls under this category). Generally, in the latter two models, libraries lose their leading role and have virtually no voice. Under current government procurement law, bulk purchases primarily use government tendering, where lowest-bid-wins has become the norm, leading many libraries to lament that “vendors with excellent qualifications, legitimate supply channels, and comprehensive services often lose bids due to relatively higher operating costs” [2]. Government tendering issues thus concentrate on the lowest-bid-wins approach and libraries’ inability to secure preferred vendors.

The lowest-bid-wins approach faces near-universal criticism in the library community: “To maximize profits, discount-dependent vendors can only provide mainstream literature, substitute discount books for full-priced titles, pass off pirated books as legitimate copies, or simply refuse to purchase scientific works with low print runs and minimal publisher discounts. Worse, they may disregard library orders and maliciously substitute high-margin books, directly degrading collection quality” [2]. This portrays libraries as innocent victims of uncontrollable procurement problems, as if library-selected vendors would avoid these issues entirely.

1.3 Some Vendors Lack Integrity

Whether through government or library-independent tendering, libraries inevitably encounter dishonest vendors who: (1) Provide poor-quality catalogs dominated by recreational reading, with few titles from recent years or major publishers—essentially discount book information flooding regular-book lists. (2)

Refuse to supply quality books. As the saying goes, you get what you pay for: premium scientific works and excellent social science titles from major publishers are not cheap, sometimes wholesale above the tender price. Unscrupulous vendors either omit these from catalogs or, if selected, claim they are “exclusively distributed,” “out of stock,” or “out of print.” (3) Engage in “book stuffing”—inserting unrequested, high-margin books (including discount titles) into shipments for excessive profit. If discovered, they lobby aggressively, claiming the books are excellent recommendations; if necessary, they accept returns. (4) Manipulate on-site purchasing. When libraries reject their catalogs or make minimal selections, vendors often play their trump card: inviting librarians for on-site selection.

The location and duration of on-site purchasing are critical. Libraries typically establish procurement plans beforehand: total budget, approximate volume, subject distribution, etc. Yet these numbers prove meaningless at the venue due to time constraints or limited selection, with books often not arranged by subject, forcing selectors into a “carpet-bombing” approach [1]. Subject quotas become impossible to track; focus shifts merely to total list price value and whether the “target” is met. Some private vendors deliberately warehouse substandard stock: collecting aged discount books from publishers at rock-bottom prices and bulk discount market purchases, then presenting them as regular stock. For instance, one private vendor’s warehouse contained only four rows of regular books, with hundreds of shelves of discount titles. During a warehouse inspection, I observed that the *Chinese Library Classification* (4th edition) used by catalogers was heavily worn in social science sections, particularly fiction and biographies, while natural science sections remained pristine—revealing their supply orientation.

2. An Unchanging Strategy to Address All Changes

Can libraries guarantee procurement quality by selecting vendors themselves? I argue no—unless partnering with large state-owned Xinhua groups, whose internal structures prevent discount-book profits from reaching individual pockets, removing the incentive for deception. Try cooperating with China Publishing Group or Jiangsu Xinhua Group—they supply exactly what you order, with no access to discount or pirated books. So how should libraries respond to government tendering and a mixed vendor landscape? Complaining is meaningless.

2.1 Establish a Book Procurement Leadership Group

The tendering process, especially government tendering, appears transparent and fiercely competitive—but this only addresses “procurement price” and “which vendor,” not the crucial question of *how* to cooperate: what books to buy, how many, and what services to require. These decisions remain with the library, which holds the power over procurement quality. To prevent corruption or vendor manipulation, libraries should establish a procurement leadership group

comprising the library director, resource development department head, disciplinary inspection official, and reader representatives (including departmental leaders). The library must candidly explain procurement pitfalls, particularly discount books masquerading as regular stock, proposed countermeasures, and implement transparent operations—especially for order determination and acceptance, which require collective decision-making.

2.2 Separate Tendering for Discount and Regular-Priced Books

Some libraries claim “we never buy discount books,” unaware of how many discount titles infiltrate their regular purchases. Generally, purchasing discount books is understandable—beyond meeting quotas, some discount titles are worthwhile, particularly for public libraries, though they require separating wheat from chaff, ideally through on-site selection or vendor delivery for careful screening. “Treasure hunting” aptly describes discount book procurement.

2.3 Improve Tender Contracts to Legally Protect Procurement

“Book tender procurement is a method where libraries announce requirements, methods, conditions, and procedures to potential vendors, then evaluate bids fairly and impartially to select winners and sign contracts” [2]. Regardless of tendering model, libraries draft procurement contracts reflecting their demands. Therefore, libraries must work with the leadership group to address potential bid abandonment, breach of contract, discount-for-regular substitution, refusal to supply, and service failures (acquisition data, cataloging data, fulfillment rates, delivery cycles, order accuracy) with sufficient penalty clauses to deter misconduct and ensure compliant service. Contracts require leadership group approval. To prevent abandonment, at least two vendors should be selected, retaining a second winner to take over if the first defaults. I have encountered malicious bidders who openly admitted their low bids were never intended for regular books—they planned to supply all discount titles, using bribery to smooth the process. If the library resisted, they would abandon the bid, forfeiting the deposit, gambling that one success in ten attempts would suffice.

2.4.1 Scientifically Collect Catalogs to Determine Orders

Catalog quality is the prerequisite for procurement quality—without quality bibliographic sources, how can quality acquisitions be achieved? Regrettably, no comprehensive “China Bibliography” or “China Available Books List” exists, making it difficult for libraries to easily obtain complete, especially regular-book, information from a single source. One private vendor’s so-called “China Available Books List” contains scant information from major publishers like Higher Education Press or Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, particularly for recent three-year publications. CIP data coverage is inadequate, inaccurate, and expensive. The China Publishing Group Digital Media Company’s “Available Books Database” suffers from reporting lags that fail to reflect actual availability, rendering it unusable for collection development [3]. On August 9, 2014, at

4:30 PM, I searched by publisher: Higher Education Press' s most recent listing was from April 2012 with only two titles; People' s Education Press showed five titles from 2013, none from 2012. Moreover, the data is prohibitively expensive: "Excel/DBF format acquisition data costs ¥5 per record, ISO format CNMARC data ¥5 per record" [4]. Libraries seeking thousands or tens of thousands of titles in a subject area cannot afford such outdated information.

The fundamental approach is conducting needs assessments, identifying core subject areas, selecting key publishers, and directly requesting catalogs. Large Xinhua groups generally provide catalogs free of charge, even without cooperation, as a goodwill gesture. Most winning vendors' catalogs require careful review and should be used only as reference, filtering quality titles by classification, publisher, and publication date. Consolidated catalogs should be recommended by readers, preferably combining expert and general reader input. Libraries with capacity should use patron-driven acquisition systems for greater convenience and accuracy.

Reasonable duplication policies should minimize copies while maximizing variety, adding copies later based on circulation data. Since government tendering "requires considerable time—three months at best, six at worst—during which routine procurement and on-site selection are suspended, causing order backlogs that disrupt continuity" [2], libraries should complete tender orders during this period. Ideally, orders should be finalized before tendering, allowing pre-tender publication of procurement lists for vendors to calculate costs accurately.

2.4.2 Legally Address Refusal to Supply

The tender price represents an average across all purchases; some items costing above the tender price is normal and should be supplied. However, unscrupulous vendors (especially private ones) often refuse to supply such titles, citing inability to obtain wholesale prices due to low publisher order volumes or wholesale prices exceeding tender prices. Libraries should contractually stipulate: "For any book a vendor claims is 'out of stock' or 'exclusively distributed' that library verification confirms as available, this constitutes refusal to supply. The library will directly purchase refused titles and deduct ten times the actual payment from the vendor' s total payment." With such legal protection, the library' s task is verifying refusals, direct purchasing, and providing evidence for deductions. One enforced penalty will immediately correct refusal behavior—the key is library adherence to principle.

2.4.3 Strictly Control Book Acceptance

Before shipping, vendors must send electronic manifests. The library distributes these to all leadership group members for verification against submitted orders, ensuring transparent acceptance. Any stuffed books must be returned. If stuffed books are genuinely valuable, they can be added to the formal order but not accepted as fulfillment, decisively halting stuffing behavior. Contracts should

penalize stuffing, as it imposes labor and time costs on acceptance. Returns or exchanges for printing/binding defects in compliant orders are normal and should not be penalized.

2.4.4 Strictly Control On-Site Purchasing

Through catalog quality control, patron recommendation management, refusal control, and acceptance control, incompetent or unscrupulous vendors may find themselves “unable to fulfill the contract,” prompting their ultimate tactic: on-site purchasing.

Libraries must establish clear on-site purchasing principles: (1) Conduct regular-book on-site selection at publishers or large Xinhua groups whenever possible. If selecting at private vendors’ warehouses, experts must be warned to exercise extreme care. (2) Avoid “must select ¥XX worth” requirements; instead, set maximum selection values, prioritizing quality over quantity. (3) Require selection experts to take responsibility, with detailed criteria such as publication date and subject type. (4) Must take selection data on-site, with data processing supervised by at least two library staff.

2.5 Controlling Continued Procurement After Breach

Through these processes and strict controls, incompetent or unprofitable vendors may breach contracts mid-term. Emergency response plans must activate: (1) Strictly penalize breaches per contract terms. (2) Immediately activate the second winning vendor or transfer procurement to another winner. To prevent first winners from delivering only high-profit, easily obtained titles before abandoning difficult orders, contracts must contain sufficient penalties to deter such behavior.

3. Library Acquisition Department Heads Must Take Proactive Action

The acquisition department (resource development department) manages book procurement, with the department head as the pivotal figure controlling catalog collection, order determination, and acceptance—core processes that determine quality. Library directors typically focus on procurement targets and overall quality, not details, yet these details decide outcomes. Except for low circulation due to poor expert selection or patron recommendations, procurement quality is the department head’s responsibility. Therefore, acquisition heads must possess selfless dedication; otherwise, procurement quality cannot be guaranteed.

Book procurement is a major library operation, and we cannot expect all directors to be incorruptible. The downfall of numerous directors and department heads when private vendors were prosecuted demonstrates this reality. When directors engage in power rent-seeking, department heads face immense pressure: comply and be corrupt, sacrifice personal interests to resist, or resign. If

problems arise, unless evidence proves director bribery, the department head bears full responsibility—the director can simply claim, “Procurement is the acquisition department’s responsibility; how would I know about quality issues?” One associate research librarian department head, two years from retirement, accepted ¥100,000 in bribes alongside the director, was forced to return the money, and sentenced to eight years in prison. Pitiably? No.

As one corrupt leader claimed, bribery is known only to heaven and the two parties involved; if investigated, denial ensures safety. This is the 侥幸心理 (lucky mentality) of all criminals—what is the result? I write this specifically to remind acquisition department heads: remember your duties, live up to your trust, firmly guard procurement quality, and earn your salary. Heed this: reach out and you will be caught; look the other way and you will be implicated. If pressure is too great, resign.

Whether library-independent or government tendering, libraries must deal with vendors whose core strategy is substituting discount books for regular-priced ones to maximize profit. The acquisition department head plays the central role in quality control. Do not burden large Xinhua groups with excessive processing requirements—a vendor’s primary function is acquiring needed books, and much processing work requires no vendor involvement [5]. Do not use elaborate processing services as cover for supplying substandard collections.

To ensure transparent quality control and reduce department head pressure, establish a procurement leadership group including disciplinary inspection, subject experts, and reader representatives. The acquisition head should clearly explain quality risk points to this group, with collective decision-making and open operations at key stages, institutionally eliminating rent-seeking opportunities. Library directors must also study operations, guard against power rent-seeking, and work with acquisition heads under leadership group supervision to genuinely improve collection quality. Regardless of who wins or at what price, if library staff remain incorruptible, contracts are well-drafted, and procurement is strictly controlled, we can maintain constant quality amid all changes, fulfill our historical mission, and earn reader acclaim.

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