

Reading Preferences and Reading Behaviors toward Classic Texts: A Case Study of Library, Information and Archives Undergraduates (Post-print)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To address the concerning status quo of classic reading among university students, this study investigates the reading preferences and behaviors of undergraduate students majoring in library, information, and archival science regarding classic texts, providing references for universities to develop classic reading instruction.

[Method/Process] Using the questionnaire survey method, this study surveyed students from the “Critical Reading and Writing” course at the School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University, regarding their basic conditions of classic reading, reading preferences, reading behaviors and habits, and their recognition of classic texts in library, information, and archival science, with analysis combined with students’ coursework.

[Results/Conclusions] Students majoring in library, information, and archival science intrinsically prefer paper-based reading, yet in reality they are addicted to digital reading; they enjoy making marks during the reading process, but are reluctant to engage in deeper reading behaviors such as translation and writing; they show low recognition of classic texts in library, information, and archival science. Teaching methods to strengthen classic reading among university students include mandatory reading, scaffolded reading, and writing.

Full Text

Preamble

Classic Text Reading Preferences and Behaviors: A Case Study of Undergraduates in Library and Information Science

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] This study addresses the concerning state of classic reading among college students by investigating the reading preferences and behaviors of library, information, and archives science undergraduates regarding classic texts, providing references for universities to develop classic reading instruction. [Method/Process] Using a questionnaire survey, this study examined students enrolled in the “Critical Reading and Writing” course at Sun Yat-sen University’s School of Information Management, covering their basic classic reading situations, reading preferences, reading behaviors and habits, and recognition of library and information science classics, with analysis supplemented by students’ coursework. [Result/Conclusion] Library and information science students psychologically prefer paper-based reading but are addicted to digital reading in reality; they enjoy marking texts during reading but feel intimidated by deeper-level reading behaviors such as translation and writing; and they demonstrate low recognition of library and information science classics. Teaching methods to strengthen college students’ classic reading include mandatory reading, stepwise reading, and writing activities.

Keywords: classic reading; reading preference; reading behavior; library and information science education

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Classic reading is closely related to the enhancement of college students’ humanistic qualities, formation of cultural identity, and cultivation of thinking, language expression, and writing abilities [1]. Professional classic texts serve as windows for students to systematically understand their discipline, signposts for delving into specific fields, and catalysts for developing professional identity. In reading education and promotion for college students, classic reading constitutes the most important component. The 2003 Shanghai College Student Development Report indicated that fewer than 30% of students regularly read classics in their major or humanities and social sciences [2]. With the rise of general education and renewed emphasis on classics, universities have offered classic reading courses to guide students back to the classics [3-4]. However, the current situation shows no significant improvement in college students’ classic reading. According to the 2019 New Era Shanghai College Student Classic Reading Index Report, college students have limited reading scope, lack professional reading guidance, and possess weak comprehensive reading abilities [5], while universities’ role in classic reading education and guidance needs enhancement [6].

1 Literature Review

Current research on reading preferences and behaviors is inseparable from the broader context of digital reading. Among numerous related studies, reading format preference has received the most attention. Over the past decades, the

influential “Academic Reading Format International Study” (ARFIS) has been a global research project on university students’ academic reading format preferences. In May 2018, the ARFIS research team published survey results covering 21 countries and regions [10], with the United Kingdom [11], Iceland [12], Croatia [13], and China [14] participating in the project and conducting related research. Japan also conducted reading format preference surveys among readers aged 18-69 [15]. Additionally, researchers have examined changes in reading content, methods, and time in the digital era, revealing that despite the digital reading wave, most readers still prefer paper-based documents. In daily life, one-time reading, selective reading, and skimming occur more frequently, yet paper media remains the better choice for in-depth reading [9, 16-17]. Meanwhile, internet reading utilization [18] and students’ information avoidance behaviors in academic reading contexts [19] have also attracted attention.

College student classic reading is a perennial research topic. Researchers analyze current situations and problems through investigations of reading methods, content, and purposes, discussing coping strategies [21-22]. Currently, college students are in a state of “having the will but not the strength” regarding classic reading—they recognize its value but read little, fragmentedly, and superficially due to heavy academic burdens and lack of atmosphere and guidance [23]. The two most important pathways to improve this situation are library reading promotion and university education and teaching [24]. University library reading promotion research focuses on discussing paths and strategies, commonly through organizing various activities [25], while embedding reading promotion into the classic education system by assisting in offering classic reading courses has also become a pathway [26-27]. In university classic education research, scholars have introduced cases of using literature retrieval courses to promote classic reading [28], but most discussions on classic education remain within the general education framework [29]. Overall, few studies focus deeply on college students’ classic text reading behaviors and preferences, and none have examined students’ specific reading actions and habits. Yet understanding students’ attitudes and behavioral habits is fundamental for classic reading promotion and education.

2 Research Methods and Process

This study primarily employed questionnaire surveys. The participants were students enrolled in the “Critical Reading and Writing” course at Sun Yat-sen University’s School of Information Management in Fall 2019. This course guides students to read classic literature in library science, archival science, information management and systems, informatics, information science, and related humanities and social sciences, with writing training. Therefore, surveyed students had necessarily been exposed to a certain number of classic texts. Most participants were first-year undergraduates who had not yet fully formed their academic concerns and research perspectives, making this survey a baseline assessment for further professional education and classic reading guidance.

The questionnaire comprised four parts: basic information, basic reading situations, reading behaviors and habits, and recognition of library and information science classics. Basic information covered demographic characteristics. Basic reading situations examined time spent on classic reading, reading formats, reading method preferences, and specific reading materials. Reading behaviors and habits focused on the frequency of various actions during classic reading, including marking texts and writing notes. The survey on recognition of library and information science classics, based on the premise that the course guides extensive reading of professional classics and that reading such classics is essential for professional growth, compared library and information science classics with other humanities and social sciences classics in terms of reading volume, reading willingness, and work quality to gauge student attitudes. The semi-open questionnaire used multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions for basic information and reading situations, while employing 5-point Likert scale questions for reading behaviors and recognition of library and information science classics, supplemented by a few additional questions about reading confusions and reflections. Students' classic texts included both teacher-recommended readings and self-selected classics outside class.

As a teaching assistant for the course, the author distributed the questionnaire online after the semester concluded, collecting 60 valid responses. Among valid respondents, 23.33% were male and 76.67% female. In the analysis, objective questions were quantitatively analyzed using the question stems as the analytical framework, while subjective open-ended questions were categorized under corresponding question stems and qualitatively analyzed in combination with students' coursework.

3 Results Analysis

3.1 Basic Reading Situations

3.1.1 Reading Duration As shown in Table 1, nearly 40% of students do not voluntarily read classics without mandatory requirements, the highest proportion among all options. Over half of students read classics for less than four hours per week, and fewer than 30% maintain an average of more than half an hour of daily reading. One student noted, "I read when I encounter interesting works, with inconsistent weekly time, generally 2-3 books per month." This data is similar to the Shanghai College Student Classic Reading Index survey result that "most students read classics for less than two hours per week" [30].

3.1.2 Reading Format Preference Regarding reading format preferences, Table 2 reveals that when conditions permit, most students prefer paper-based reading, with fewer than 15% preferring digital reading and 1.67% deciding based on reading scenarios. This aligns with previous research on university students' academic reading format preferences. However, students' actual behaviors diverge significantly from their preferences. According to the Shang-

hai College Student Classic Reading Index survey, paper reading only slightly outnumbered digital reading in classic reading format choices [30]. The 17th National Reading Survey showed that in 2019, Chinese adults' digital reading contact rate reached 79.3%, up 3.1 percentage points from 2018, while paper book and newspaper reading time decreased and the proportion of readers preferring paper declined [31]. Overall, new formats have increased students' "screen-swiping" enjoyment while creating inner contradictions.

3.1.3 Reading Method Preference This multiple-choice question, as shown in Table 3, indicates that the highest proportion of students (48.33%) prefer skimming entire books, with fewer than half preferring careful reading of complete works. Classics require immersive, in-depth, meticulous, and even repeated reading, yet reading methods have changed due to digital reading, task completion, and practical application needs. This is evident as 40% and 30% of students respectively choose to read interesting chapters only and retrieve specific needed content. Additionally, 3.33% selected "other," elaborating on their context-dependent choices: "For extracurricular self-selected reading, I read the full text carefully; for specific assignments, I only retrieve needed content" and "I delve deeper into important or interesting plots but skim other parts." Overall, whether intensive or extensive, completing the entire book is the basic requirement, while adjusting reading methods based on needs and contexts has gradually become students' habit.

3.1.4 Memorable Classic Texts Table 4 shows that no students had more than ten memorable classic texts, with over 60% having fewer than five memorable classics. Among remaining students, those with no memorable classics and those with 6-10 memorable classics each accounted for half, reflecting that few students engage in deep reading of classics. When asked to "list the three classic texts that impressed you most and explain why," students mentioned Chinese classics like *Laozi*, *Analects*, and *Great Learning*; literary classics like *Dream of Red Mansions* and *Walden*; and economics, history, sociology, and psychology classics like *Das Kapital*, *The Wealth of Nations*, *A Global History*, *From the Soil*, and *The Crowd*. The course required students to select classic books for reading and discussion, and their choices were largely these categories. Only one student mentioned a library and information science classic—*History of Chinese Libraries*. Reasons for deep impressions included "interest," "comfortable reading, strong immersion," "long reading time," "careful reading," "difficult reading," "wrote book reports," "course requirements," and "disagreement with authors." This shows students focused more on general humanities and social sciences classics, with library and information science classics not yet occupying a place in their minds.

3.2 Reading Behaviors and Habits

Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper] and Table 5 present the frequency and ratings of five behaviors: marking, writing reviews/notes, foreign language trans-

lation, content retrieval, and communication with others. Data show 45% of students always/often mark texts (underlining, circling, annotating) during reading, with marking being the most frequent and highest-rated behavior. Related content retrieval is also a relatively frequent behavior; in the era of digital reading and internet technology, searching while reading has become common and serves as a pathway to deepen and expand understanding. Reading communication, academic translation, and writing reviews/notes were included in course instruction, but students were clearly unaccustomed to these practices. Translating foreign texts (full text or key paragraphs) and writing reviews/notes were the least frequent behaviors, with over half of students occasionally/never engaging in foreign language translation or writing reviews during reading. This may be because these behaviors demand high time, energy, and difficulty. Some students expressed sentiments like “English translation is the hardest” and “writing is so difficult,” while also questioning the value of note-taking: “Is note-taking really necessary?” and “Organizing notes is time-consuming.” However, students showed willingness to further learn academic communication, translation, and review writing, with some suggesting increased classroom discussion and others hoping for specific methods and steps for note-writing to be taught and incorporated into regular assignments.

3.3 Recognition of Library and Information Science Classics

3.3.1 Reading Volume Table 6 shows that even with professional course reading requirements, students’ reading volume of professional classics still lags behind other humanities and social sciences classics, with over 60% reading more of the latter. This is normal for first-year undergraduates just entering professional study. Notably, 33.33% of students selected “can’t remember, very few of both,” indicating a casual attitude and low enthusiasm for classic reading.

3.3.2 Recognition of Work Quality Table 7 reflects students’ perceptions of library and information science classics’ quality within humanities and social sciences classics. While 30% and 6.67% respectively rated them as relatively high and relatively low in quality, over 60% chose “average,” showing neither dissatisfaction nor strong recognition. A survey of university librarians found that 66% also viewed library science literature as “average” [32]. Although students and librarians focus on different aspects, this suggests library and information science publications have room for improvement to satisfy readers.

3.3.3 Reading Willingness Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper] and Table 8 compare students’ willingness to read library and information science classics versus other humanities and social sciences classics. First, students show strong willingness to read classics during their studies. After graduation, willingness to read library and information science classics and other humanities classics respectively decreased by 0.59 and 0.28 points, with the proportion of those willing/relatively willing dropping by 23.33% and 5.01%, and those unwilling/relatively unwilling increasing by 8.33% and 5%. Second, students are more

willing to read other humanities and social sciences classics. Both during and after studies, library and information science classics received lower willingness scores and fewer willing/relatively willing respondents (83.33% and 60%) compared to other humanities classics (88.34% and 78.33%). This suggests students' reading motivations include academic requirements and personal development, particularly evident for professional classics. After leaving university, students may lack reading motivation, highlighting universities' important responsibility in cultivating classic reading habits.

4 Discussion

Analysis reveals that library and information science undergraduates exhibit unwillingness, inability, and difficulty in persisting with classic texts, with these emotions more explicitly expressed toward their own discipline's classics. This manifests in three aspects:

4.1 Contradiction Between Paper Preference and Screen Addiction

As previously mentioned, multiple reading surveys indicate digital reading occupies most of college students' reading time, with more screen time than book reading. However, far removed from their actual behavior is students' overwhelming psychological preference for paper reading. Like academic reading, classic reading requires more attention and memory retention than general reading, areas where paper reading holds advantages over digital reading [14]. This may explain students' paper preference for classics. Tangible paper also more easily connects with the profound heritage of classic texts, while electronic materials often correspond to browsing and skimming for task-oriented reading. On the other hand, the convenience and pleasure of "one screen, ten thousand volumes" in new media reading is irresistible. Students slide their mouse and phone screens while internally reproaching themselves for straying from deep reading, falling into contradiction between paper reading ideals and digital reading reality, thus distancing themselves from classics requiring quiet immersion. Faced with this reality, lamenting how digital reading dissolves classics' charm and value is futile; utilizing digital means to serve classic reading is imperative.

4.2 Preference for Marking, Fear of Translation and Writing

Annotation is crucial for absorbing classroom and textual knowledge into personal knowledge systems. Marking texts (underlining, circling, annotating) is students' most habitual and willing classic reading behavior. On one hand, marking requires little deep thinking or mental effort, allows "instant annotation," and enhances reading experience. On the other hand, this "effortless" behavior is also essential for noting key points and deepening understanding when reading classics. Translation and writing reviews/notes are considered time-consuming, deeper-level, and difficult reading behaviors. Translation requires mastery of two languages and cultures, possibly involving professional knowledge. Note-

taking requires systematic organization, often consuming equal or more time than reading itself. Book reviews test students' grasp of materials and writing abilities. Although students recognize the value of these behaviors and wish to master these skills, they remain confused about academic translation and note-writing, with some questioning note-taking's value: "Is note-taking really necessary?" and "Organizing notes is time-consuming." Students' translation and review assignments sometimes reveal an "addressing the matter at hand" and "just complete the task" attitude, lacking deep exploration spirit. This indicates that while students desire to enhance reading effectiveness through advanced reading behaviors, they also experience apprehension about difficulty.

4.3 Low Recognition of Library and Information Science Classics

Comparisons of reading volume, quality recognition, and reading willingness between library and information science classics and other humanities classics, along with comparisons of reading willingness before and after graduation, clearly show the weakness of library and information science classics. Students are more willing to read general humanities classics than library and information science classics, with many expressing decreased post-graduation reading intentions. Reasons for this situation are multifaceted: First, first-year undergraduates may still have a "reading for academic requirements" mentality. Second, students have short exposure to the discipline with narrow and shallow understanding; their attitudes toward library and information science classics may change as their professional foundation strengthens and experience grows. Finally, lack of reading guidance is a key factor causing low recognition of professional classics. Professional texts require more guidance than general classics. Many students reported that professional reading content is obscure and difficult: "hard to understand without basic knowledge," "really can't understand even after reading others' explanations," difficult to remember ("can't remember what I've read," "often forget after reading"), and lacking critical thinking ("easily agree with authors," "hard to break free from the circle defined by classics after reading them"). Students expressed desires for special lectures, believing "specific documents or books could be analyzed to deeply dissect authors' intentions," and hoping for "enhanced book recommendations and professional extensions" and "more detailed teacher explanations." This shows students' professional foundation negatively affects their attitudes toward professional classics. Beyond enriching professional knowledge, offering reading guidance courses with carefully selected teachers and well-planned content is necessary to improve students' reading abilities and professional identity.

5 Strategy Recommendations

Based on the above analysis and conclusions, library and information science students' classic reading conditions generally align with other college student reading research and surveys. Reading preference guidance and behavioral habit cultivation urgently require "guides." Combining the "Critical Reading and

Writing” course design, the following teaching strategies are recommended:

5.1 From Passive to Active: Mandatory Reading

College students’ unwillingness to read classics mainly manifests as unwillingness to read actively. After narrow reading in primary and secondary school, students entering university often experience “not wanting to read after starting university.” However, this reluctance is not abandonment of knowledge expansion but confusion and inertia toward unknown, richer, and more professional knowledge. They deeply understand the importance of classic reading but more often experience the ease and pleasure of not reading or reading popular materials, while also recognizing the difficulty of translating reading willingness into action. In response, reading can be linked to grades, credits, or even degrees, adopting mandatory strategies to incorporate classic literature into students’ learning systems. The “Critical Reading and Writing” course explicitly requires students to: read professionally-related classic literature in regular assignments, conduct group discussions via email lists, present discussion results in class, and submit individual reading notes; translate important paragraphs of professional classics, compare Chinese and English versions, provide ideal translations, and answer class questions; and conduct reading analysis and elaboration on professional classics for the final exam. Combining classroom assignments with instruction gradually guides students from passive to active reading and writing, providing a good start for future reading and learning. Rather than complaining or engaging in idle discussion, rigid systems can effectively intervene in students’ reading behaviors [33]. South Korea’s Kangwon National University graduation qualification reading certification system [34] and reading credit systems implemented by many universities [35] represent such reading motivation mechanisms.

5.2 From Easy to Difficult: Stepwise Reading

A major reason for college students’ low classic reading volume is the perception that classics are too voluminous, obscure, boring, and difficult to persist with. Consequently, students hope for increased interest in guided reading, leading to phenomena of classics being “diluted” and superficial contact with classics, with expert “proxy reading” like “Let Li Ao read books, we read Li Ao” becoming popular [36]. These phenomena superficially “loosen” requirements for readers but actually deviate from original texts. A better approach should be based on original texts, progressing from simple to difficult, first arousing student interest then gradually guiding them toward stepwise reading. The “Critical Reading and Writing” course begins with academic blogs in the library and information science community, using classic blog posts as windows into the professional field for preliminary understanding of relevant content and viewpoints. Next, it selects classic papers from various sub-disciplines to familiarize students with professional research methods and writing paradigms, while granting students the right to self-select other humanities and social sciences classics to expand

scope while accommodating interests. Finally, it introduces and guides reading of longer book-length works to experience professionally canonical texts tested by history and understand the discipline's core mission and responsibilities. Reading difficulty escalates progressively, leaving buffer space for students, complemented by teacher explanations and in-class and after-class exchanges. After one semester of training, although students still haven't fully absorbed everything, their recognition and acceptance of professional classic literature have improved.

5.3 From Reading to Writing: Writing as Feedback for Reading

Writing and reading are two sides of the same coin, complementing each other. Reading provides the foundation for writing, offering interest and material, while writing feeds back into reading, helping improve reading abilities. The writing process is also one of digesting, accumulating, and reflecting on textual content. In course instruction, writing is a supporting measure for mandatory reading and the best way to test reading effectiveness. With only one-way reading input and lacking writing output, students find it difficult to retain impressions of texts they've read, and critical thinking remains undeveloped. The course comprehensively introduces methods for classroom notes, reading notes, and translation, requiring students to conduct textual discussions on each classic document read, organize discussion drafts in groups, write individual end-of-term reading notes, translate professional classics, all of which represent secondary deepening of reading and help reorganize knowledge structures and content of classic texts. Students who continuously absorb without awareness of potential "indigestion" issues are unclear whether they understand or can apply what they've read, but these problems become apparent in writing. Writing not only exercises students' critical thinking and writing skills but also deepens reading comprehension and clarifies reading status, providing help for future reading.

This study reveals that library and information science students' reading practices and willingness are mismatched. Quantitative data show that students currently perform relatively negatively in classic reading, deep reading, and especially professional classic reading, failing to meet cultivation requirements for cultural quality, professional competence, and independent personality. These problems are not new; what should be explored are the deeper thoughts beneath students' surface behaviors and the information revealed in their specific reading actions—these are crucial breakthroughs for improving the situation. Despite electronic temptations and academic pressures, students still harbor aspirations for classics and desire to improve reading levels through deeper reading behaviors. However, the lack of good reading atmosphere and professional reading guidance makes them hesitate. In this situation, incorporating classic reading into the curriculum system seems feasible, supplemented by mandatory, gradual, and professional guidance. Although it's difficult to determine how immediately effective one semester of teaching is, it genuinely prompts students to reflect on

classic texts, especially professional classics. As one student said, “If there were such a course in the first year, I believe students would benefit throughout their four years of university.”

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] This paper aims at the current situation of classic reading of college students, reveals the reading preference and behavior of the student of library and information science, and provides reference for the teaching of classic reading in universities. [Method/Process] The paper used the questionnaire survey method, surveyed the students of the critical reading and writing course in School of Information Management of Sun Yat-sen University, on the basis of classic reading, reading preferences, reading behavior and habits, and their recognition of the classics of library and information science, then combined the students' work to carry on the analysis. [Result/Conclusion] Students of library and information science prefer reading on paper, but they are addicted to digital reading in reality, they like to make marks in the reading process, and are afraid of reading behavior at deeper levels such as translation and writing. They have a low regard for the classic works of library and information science. The teaching methods of strengthening university students' classic reading include compulsory reading, step reading and writing.

Keywords: classic reading; reading preference; reading behavior; library and information science education

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.