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Selection Criteria and Development Characteristics of University Classic Recommended Reading Lists: Postprint

Authors: Zhang Wei

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Classical reading constitutes a core component of students' general education, and university classical reading recommendation lists play a vital role in the fundamental educational processes of "what to read" and "how to read." Analyzing and establishing selection criteria for university classical reading recommendation lists, and exploring their developmental characteristics, holds significant importance for optimizing list compilation and promoting classical reading.

[Method/Process] Through web-based research and telephone interviews, this study collates official classical reading recommendation lists from selected "Double First-Class" universities, analyzing the generation process and background of classical reading recommendation lists in Chinese higher education institutions.

[Results/Conclusion] University classical reading recommendation lists emphasize traditional Chinese classics while also drawing upon Western classics; the selection maintains relative balance between classics in humanities and social sciences and those in natural sciences; they excavate new dimensions in canonical texts and prioritize supplementing valuable influential works. Simultaneously, in reading promotion practice, they exhibit developmental characteristics of respecting reading subjects, emphasizing the primacy effect, enriching and innovating promotion carriers, as well as differentiation, layering, and customization, reflecting the attention from university Party and administrative leadership and the proactive initiatives of libraries.

Full Text

Abstract

[**Purpose/Significance**] Classic reading occupies the core of general education for students, and university classic recommendation bibliographies play a vital role in the essential educational dimensions of "what to read" and "how to read." Analyzing and establishing selection criteria for these bibliographies while exploring their developmental characteristics holds great significance for optimizing compilation and promoting classic reading.

[**Method/Process**] Through online research and telephone interviews, this study examined official classic recommendation lists from selected "Double First-Class" universities in China, analyzing the formation processes and contexts of these bibliographies.

[**Result/Conclusion**] University classic recommendation bibliographies demonstrate three key selection principles: emphasizing Chinese traditional classics while objectively drawing upon Western classics; maintaining relative balance between humanities/social sciences classics and natural science classics; and reviving foundational "yuandian" (元典) classics while enriching the collection with valuable influential works. In reading promotion practice, these bibliographies exhibit developmental characteristics that respect reading subjects, leverage primacy effects, enrich and innovate recommendation carriers, and emphasize differentiation, layering, and customization—all reflecting the attention of university Party and administrative leadership alongside proactive library initiatives.

Keywords: classic recommendation bibliography; selection criteria; development characteristics

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2. Current Development Status of University Classic Recommendation Bibliographies

Entering the 21st century, educational institutions and news media have gradually emerged as primary recommenders. Classic reading recommendation lists for university students increasingly demonstrate social responsibility and educational significance, with these organizations consciously recognizing and assuming this duty. A distinctive trend is the shift from individual to institutional recommenders [3].

University classic recommendation bibliographies serve three crucial functions in the core educational process: first, indicating reading pathways to help readers clarify reading frameworks, define purposes, and select appropriate materials [2]; second, planning reading stages to progressively guide readers toward deeper thinking according to their educational levels and knowledge needs; and third,

transmitting reading methods, where following the bibliography itself constitutes the primary approach, with analytical and thematic reading frequently integrated into the classic reading process.

In 2001, the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education forwarded the *Guide to 100 Reading Books for Chinese Language Undergraduates* compiled by the Chinese Language Discipline Teaching Guidance Committee of Higher Education Institutions [4], demonstrating universities' value as independent educational institutions in advocating classic recommendations and articulating academic positions. This bibliography was formally published in 2004, covering creation backgrounds, historical status, theoretical or literary value, reading key points, and clues for 100 works, with detailed reading guides, recommendations, and version information.

Wang Yuguang compiled *Ideal Library for Chinese Readers* in 1999 and later authored *Reading with Classics* in 2013, systematically 梳理 ing the developmental trajectory and trend characteristics of classic reading recommendation lists. Recent scholars have also analyzed the system construction and promotion strategies for university students' classic reading.

In 2019, the author conducted online and telephone interviews investigating official classic recommendation lists from over 60 "Double First-Class" universities and local institutions in China, comparing them with lists from internationally renowned universities. Through analysis of formation backgrounds, participating entities, selection content, release timing, and recommendation channels, this study examines current selection criteria and developmental characteristics of Chinese university classic recommendation bibliographies to provide valuable references for reading promotion and talent cultivation.

A comparative analysis was conducted on 19 relatively comprehensive and stable officially endorsed university classic recommendation lists .

Table 1. Sample Overview of University Classic Recommendation Bibliographies

University	Year	Number of Books	Classification Method	Notes
Example University A	2018	120	Divided into 4 themes: Chinese cultural classics, Chinese literary classics, world cultural classics, world literary classics (30 each)	
Nankai University Freshman Booklist	2018	Not specified	No detailed classification	

University	Year	Number of Books	Classification Method	Notes
Fudan University Recommended Bibliography	2018	100	Divided into 3 categories: literary works (32), social science works (49), science/technology works (19)	
Wuhan University Classic Guide	2018	115	Divided into natural sciences (5), language/literature (70), humanities/social sciences (11), philosophy (20), Marxism-Leninism & Mao Zedong Thought (9)	
Nanjing University Classic Bibliography	2018	60	Divided into 6 categories: literature & arts, history & civilization, philosophy & religion, economy & society, nature & life, globalization & leadership (10 each)	
Zhejiang University Classic Bibliography	2018	60	Divided into 6 categories: literature & arts, history & civilization, philosophy & ethics, economy & society, mathematics & engineering, cross-cultural vision & leadership (10 each)	
Shanghai Jiao Tong University Classic Bibliography	2018	80	Divided into 8 categories: Chinese & foreign literature (20), Chinese & foreign history (15), Chinese & foreign philosophy (15), aesthetics (10), arts (10), ethics (5), anthropology (5)	

University	Year	Number of Books	Classification Method	Notes
Xi'an Jiaotong University "100 Classics"	2018	141	Divided into 18 categories: philosophy (11), political science (5), sociology (11), psychology (3), ethics (2), law (3), military science (3), economics & management (7), history (4), literature (Chinese 33, foreign 33), natural sciences (4), mathematics (3), physics (5), chemistry (5), biology (4), astronomy (2), geography (3)	
Other University Lists	Various	100	No detailed classification	

Note: Yuandian (元典) refers to classics that best represent cultural spirit (see Section 3.3 for explanation).

From a disciplinary perspective, humanities classics dominate, with science/technology books comprising relatively low proportions—three lists contain no science/technology titles. Wuhan University's classic guide has the highest proportion of science books. In terms of quantity, mature recommendation lists typically feature around 100 titles, with yuandian classics constituting substantial portions and demanding significant reading accumulation from students. Classification methods vary widely, with discipline-based categorization being most common but lacking standardization. In terms of recommendation formats, integration with general education courses is emerging.

Notably, many prestigious "Double First-Class" universities lack official classic recommendation lists, while others have minimal lists lacking official representativeness, indicating that the importance of recommendation lists and reading promotion has not yet gained universal attention in universities, with unbalanced development across institutions.

3. Selection Criteria for University Classic Recommendation Bibliographies

3.1 Emphasizing Chinese Traditional Classics While Objectively Drawing on Western Classics

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasizes: "We must uphold confidence in our path, theory, and system, but fundamentally, we must also have cultural confidence." He notes that "cultural confidence is more basic, extensive, and profound." Reading Chinese traditional classics helps university students use excellent traditional culture to understand and interpret contemporary issues, strengthens national confidence, pride, and cohesion, and demonstrates "cultural confidence."

In recommendation lists, *The Book of Songs*, *Analects*, *Three Hundred Tang Poems*, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* appear most frequently, demonstrating that excellent traditional Chinese culture serves not only as powerful spiritual force for national rejuvenation but also as valuable capital of good governance for national development.

In the West, studying traditional classics similarly constitutes an important social and cultural undertaking. As early as the early 20th century, Columbia University established two required undergraduate courses: "Literature Humanities" and "Contemporary Civilization," providing canonical selections of European literary masterpieces and philosophical/social theory works respectively. By the 1940s, many American universities had introduced such courses [6]. In this study, the most frequently selected Western classics include *The Republic*, *The Spirit of the Laws*, *The Wealth of Nations*, *The Social Contract*, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, and *A Brief History of Time*, demonstrating that classic influence spans psychological, scientific, and social dimensions across multiple disciplines, helping readers understand, select, and comprehend world classics.

3.2 Balanced Selection of Humanities/Social Sciences and Natural Sciences Classics

Philosophy/social sciences and natural sciences are like two wings of a bird—the former needs to absorb methods and techniques from the latter, while the latter requires guidance and influence from the former. The primary manifestation of contemporary scientific development is the strengthening integration of natural and social sciences. Upholding the organic unity of social and natural sciences is necessary for talent cultivation and essential for achieving well-rounded human development.

Analysis reveals that humanities/social sciences classics are relatively concentrated in recommendation scope, while natural science classics are more dispersed, with most appearing fewer than three times. This finding aligns with Peking University's 2009 "Scholarship, Reading, Life—Peking University Pro-

fessors' Academic Insights Exhibition," where 145 professors recommended 675 books. Among them, 89 (61.4%) were STEM professors recommending 410 books (60.7%), while 56 (38.6%) were humanities/social sciences professors recommending 265 books (39.3%). Notably, over half of STEM professors' recommendations were humanities/social sciences books, while humanities professors rarely recommended STEM books [7]. Additionally, reading differences across age groups are evident, with younger professors showing lower recommendation overlap and significantly more original works and foreign translations.

Currently, both traditional recommendation lists and online book rankings lack evaluation of academic resources, rarely featuring professional recommendation lists in natural sciences, engineering, economics, and other disciplines for undergraduate general education [8]. Since 2018, Wuhan University has included *Guide to Humanities and Social Sciences Classics* and *Guide to Natural Sciences Classics* with admission letters, balancing content while leading the construction of Wuhan's general education system. University life thus begins with classic reading, and general education achieves institutionalization.

3.3 Reviving Yuandian Classics and Enriching Valuable Influential Works

The concept of "yuandian" (元典) originates from Feng Tianyu's *The Spirit of Chinese Yuandian* [9], referring to classics that best represent cultural spirit—texts that profoundly influence a nation's or humanity's spiritual development. Yuandian selection emphasizes ontological, foundational, core, and original characteristics, focusing on two functions: revealing timeless principles and generating new academic topics. Yuandian are like disciplinary roots; reaching higher research levels requires faithfully returning to Chinese and foreign yuandian without shortcuts. In the 19 recommendation lists, *Analects*, *Communist Manifesto*, *The Republic*, and *On the Origin of Species* appear most frequently, reflecting broad professional vision.

Yuandian revival and valuable, influential works entering the field proceed hand-in-hand. Influential bibliographies are curated lists purposefully selected based on books' impact on human historical life, representing the most socially influential and publicly appealing type of bibliography [10]. In university classic recommendation lists, influential works comprise the majority, reflecting how reading's keen sensitivity is profoundly shaped by social development and intellectual progress.

The core of the current "profound changes unseen in a century" also lies in "change"—the transformation and reshaping of world order, the improvement of global governance mechanisms. With China's long book history and intellectual culture, particularly with socialism with Chinese characteristics entering a new era, the construction of a human community with a shared destiny and the unfolding "Belt and Road" initiative mean that Chinese path, theory, system, and culture continue developing, making influential bibliography recom-

mendations ever-evolving. New classics are quietly permeating students' reading choices. For example, Xi'an Jiaotong University's "100 Classics" recommends *Xi Jinping's Seven Years as a Sent-Down Youth*, *Learning Philosophy, Using Philosophy*, *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*, and *Zhijiang Xinyu* by grade level, progressing from simple to profound with great benefit.

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4. Development Characteristics of University Classic Recommendation Bibliographies

4.1 Respecting Reading Subjects in Recommendation Purposes

Heidegger once observed: "No era has possessed so much knowledge about human beings as the present, yet no era has understood human beings so little as today." This judgment equally applies to the current state of university classic recommendations. Superior classic reading experiences should be psychological journeys of self-discovery and wisdom enhancement, guided by interest and progressive dialogue with classics. Only by respecting reading subjects can classic recommendations achieve ideal outcomes.

Classic recommendation compilation demonstrates understanding of readers' psychological states, acceptance habits, and preferences. For instance, in 2017, Tsinghua University changed its bibliography title from "Must Read" to "Recommended Reading," showing respect for reading subjects. Wuhan University selected classic content from 22 great Chinese and foreign works to offer two foundational general education courses—*Guide to Humanities and Social Sciences Classics* and *Guide to Natural Sciences Classics*—for all undergraduates, marking the university's first university-wide general education required courses in its 120+ year history. This approach both supports general education and institutionalizes classic reading recommendations, representing a beneficial attempt at top-level talent cultivation design.

4.2 Leveraging Primacy Effects in Recommendation Timing

The serial position effect is often used to discuss working memory operation [17], with the primacy effect being one manifestation. Primacy effect refers to the dominant first impression formed during initial encounters, where initially contacted information is better recalled than subsequently contacted information [18].

University classic recommendation bibliographies demonstrate increasingly thoughtful timing in education, with universities attaching greater importance to primacy effects and enriching flexible implicit education methods. Whether through creative admission letters providing visual impact to freshmen and parents, or thoughtful welcome gifts in admission packages, recommendation lists serve as the most effective carriers for early implicit education before students even arrive on campus.

Since 2016, Shanghai Jiao Tong University has implemented the "Siyuan Shared Reading Program," promoting shared reading of a selected book upon admission, preferring titles like *Old Jiao Tong University Stories* to help freshmen understand university history and enhance identification with its century-long tradition. East China Normal University's Party Committee leaders have personally created booklists for freshmen since 2016, sending them with admission letters alongside digital products like university image videos, history animations, and annual reports. Hunan University, leveraging China's first specialized research institution for nationwide reading—the China National Reading Research Center—analyzes college student reading practices and impacts, selecting 10 classic books for freshmen based on three criteria: "reasonable content, broad appeal, and strong interest stimulation," additionally recommending *How to Read a Book* to enhance reading guidance. Chongqing University invites disciplinary experts to recommend books for freshmen, while Tianjin University conducts vigorous "Joy of Reading" programs for new students.

4.3 Enriching and Innovating Recommendation Carriers

In the United States, recommending summer reading lists has become a university tradition. Domestically, summer/winter vacation booklists are also taking shape in some universities, gaining popularity in recent years thanks to refined reading promotion and innovative carriers. For example, university libraries annually release reading behavior analysis reports, "speaking with data" about student reading conditions to inspire and promote holiday reading.

Only with university-level integration of educational resources and demonstrated attention to reading education can various resources be mobilized to create waves and closed loops in recommendation methods. In 2016, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Library invited then-President Zhang Jie to serve as the university's first reading promotion ambassador, with 12 student ambassadors "exploring" the president's personal bookshelf and discussing reading with him. University of Electronic Science and Technology of China used its 60th anniversary in 2016 to launch the "Classic 60 Reading Recommendation List," incorporating reading promotion into top-level design.

4.4 Emphasizing Differentiation, Layering, and Customization in Content Selection

Different universities employ varying selection and classification standards, reflecting distinct educational philosophies and characteristics while demonstrating differentiated promotion of university culture. For example, Nanjing University's classic bibliography comprises six themes—"Literature & Arts," "History & Civilization," "Philosophy & Religion," "Economy & Society," "Nature & Life," and "Globalization & Leadership"—closely echoing its talent cultivation plan. During Peking University's centennial in 1998, over 50 professors jointly recommended 30 must-read and 30 selected classics in the *Peking University Student Reading List*, reflecting the university's "professor-governed" tradition.

Customized recommendations also map subtle differences in university culture. Grade-differentiated, layered recommendations are particularly illuminating. For instance, Xi'an Jiaotong University's 2018 "100 Classics" divides recommendations by grade into required and selected reading lists, tailoring selections to different grade characteristics: 5 required and 20 selected books per grade, emphasizing humanistic thought and disciplinary knowledge complementarity across Chinese and foreign classics in science, engineering, medicine, and humanities, demonstrating value guidance, wisdom inspiration, and growth assistance.

Classic recommendation lists are not static. Comparing lists over nearly 20 years reveals approximately 10%-20% turnover every four years, reflecting evolving understanding and continuous exploration to better meet "reader development" needs, extending to individual solitary thinking and rational judgment, truly becoming creative activities that disseminate reading experience, expand reading choices, and enhance reader confidence.

4.5 Demonstrating Leadership Attention and Library Initiative

As noted earlier, universities increasingly recognize the social responsibility and educational significance manifested through classic reading. Shanghai Jiao Tong University's president serves as the first reading promotion ambassador; Zhejiang University's president and academicians jointly recommend books for freshmen; Xi'an Jiaotong University's Party Secretary inaugurates the "100 Classics"; East China Normal University's Party Secretary creates booklists for freshmen; South China University of Technology holds "Secretary and President Recommend Good Books" events; China Agricultural University's leaders recommend books on Youth Day. University leaders frequently appear in news reports on reading recommendation activities.

Attention to classic recommendation work reflects a university's comprehensive consideration of talent cultivation and cultural inheritance, and clear planning for disciplinary development and university direction in top-level design. Therefore, university classic recommendation bibliography compilation mirrors profound thinking about talent cultivation goals, courageous commitment to cultural inheritance missions, strategic positioning of library development, and systematic construction of university management service systems. Wherever universities achieve success in compiling and promoting classic recommendation lists, Party and administrative leadership attention alongside proactive library initiatives constitute essential prerequisites.

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] As classics reading is at the core of general education, recommended bibliographies for university classics play an important role in the core educational links concerning "what to read" and "how to read." Analyzing and establishing selection criteria and exploring development characteristics are significant for optimizing classics list compilation and promoting classics reading. [Method/process] Analysis is done concerning selection criteria and developmental characteristics of classics reading recommendation bibliographies in China based on studies of certain mature bibliographies from Double Top universities through network research and telephone interviews. [Result/conclusion] In selection of classics, they attach importance to traditional Chinese classics while objectively drawing on Western classics; they show balanced development between humanities and social sciences classics and natural science classics; they feature the revival of original classics and enrichment of books with valuable influence. They display development characteristics of respecting reading subjects, paying attention to primacy effect, enriching innovating recommendation carriers, and differentiation, layering and customization, all of which reflect attention by CPC and administration leadership in colleges and universities and initiative of libraries.

Keywords: classics reading recommendation bibliography; selection criteria; development characteristics

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

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