

The Mission, Problems, and Directions of Library Science Research (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To clarify the mission and tasks of library science research, review the research status of library science since the beginning of the 21st century, and analyze its existing problems.

[Method/Process] Through a review of the current state of library science research in China, this paper proposes that the mission of library science research is to provide theoretical guidance, directional orientation, and solutions for library development, and argues that current Chinese library science research suffers from problems such as “publications without ideas,” “trends without direction,” and “methods without objectives.”

[Results/Conclusion] It is recommended that future research should focus on public libraries, documentary cultural heritage, nationwide reading promotion, library service innovation, and information literacy education.

Full Text

The Mission, Problems, and Direction of Library Science Research in China

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To clarify the mission and tasks of library science research, review the status quo of library science research since the new century, and analyze its existing problems. [Method/Process] By reviewing the current state of library science research in China, this paper proposes that the mission of library science research is to provide theoretical guidance, direction, and

solutions for library development, and identifies three major problems in current Chinese library science research: having writings but no thoughts, having trends but no direction, and having methods but no goals. **[Result/Conclusion]** It is recommended that future research should focus on public libraries, document and cultural heritage, nationwide reading promotion, library service innovation, and information literacy education.

Keywords: library science; mission; problems; direction

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Since the beginning of the new century, China's library industry has developed rapidly, and library science research has also experienced unprecedented prosperity. However, the flourishing of library science research often loses the radiance and true character of libraries, becoming bizarre and dazzling, causing the essence and reality of library science to be lost. This paper attempts to express preliminary views on the mission of library science research, its current problems, and its future direction, seeking guidance from colleagues in the library science community.

1. The Mission of Library Science Research

Library science is a social science—the science of libraries. As a social science, library science research must naturally dedicate itself to serving the development of libraries as social institutions. Any research unrelated to library development does not belong to the domain of library science research. For a long time, China's library science community has rarely discussed the mission of library science research, leaving many researchers unclear about why they study library science. Consequently, so-called research is often blind, useless, and even harmful to library development. Simply put, library science research has three main missions:

1.1 Providing Theoretical Guidance

Like other social sciences, the primary mission of library science research is to produce ideas and theories that provide ideological and theoretical guidance for library development. This guidance operates at two levels: first, at the macro social level, establishing and promoting the core values of libraries so that library professionals firmly embrace correct library values and all sectors of society clearly understand the value of libraries; second, at the micro professional level, establishing the basic principles and technical methods of library operations so that library business development follows clear rules and evidence-based procedures, progressing in an orderly fashion.

1.2 Providing Directional Guidance

Social development is often influenced by various factors, moving faster or slower, rising or falling, advancing or retreating. Library development is no exception. How to correctly analyze the complex factors affecting social development and provide accurate directional judgment to guide library development rather than drifting with the tide is undoubtedly an important mission of library science research. What constitutes the correct direction for library development? The national cultural development strategy and the public's demand for library development constitute the direction for libraries. This appears to be a simple truth, yet it is often ignored and overlooked in library science research. If library science research fails to align with the national cultural development strategy and public library development needs, or even deviates from this direction, it cannot correctly guide library development and loses its meaning and value. If it runs counter to this direction, it may lead library development astray.

1.3 Providing Solutions

In social development, libraries face various social challenges and difficulties. In the evolution of libraries, library professionals also encounter endless professional problems and difficulties. Library science research must provide timely and effective solutions to all kinds of problems confronting libraries to facilitate their development. Therefore, while aligning with the national cultural development strategy, library science research must also face library practice, deriving from practice and returning to practice, providing effective remedies for practical problems. Any research detached from library practice is a pseudo-proposition and pseudo-research.

2. Problems in Current Library Science Research

Based on the aforementioned mission of library science research and examining the current state of library science research in China, it is not difficult to identify three major problems:

2.1 Having Writings but No Thoughts

Since the 1980s, professional library science journals have emerged, leading to the rapid rise of library science research. Entering the new century, under the guiding influence of core journal evaluation systems and particularly academic achievement evaluation mechanisms, professional library science journals began rapid expansion: first, by increasing frequency—from quarterly to bi-monthly, and even monthly—to shorten publication cycles and accelerate publishing speed; second, by expanding page count—from over a hundred pages to two or three hundred pages, or upgrading from small 16mo to large 16mo format, even reducing font size and line spacing to increase layout space and article volume. Consequently, the speed and quantity of journal publications increased

dramatically, surpassing any previous period. Meanwhile, as the number of library science research projects funded by various social science foundations at all levels continued to grow, publishing professional monographs became easier to obtain funding for. Thus, the number of published library science monographs also grew rapidly. The simultaneous surge in academic papers and monographs naturally presented a picture of prosperous library science research. However, behind this prosperous facade, finding theories that can guide library practice is extremely difficult. Within the flourishing texts of library science research, discovering any spark of brilliant thought is no easy task.

In the 1980s, a trend emerged in the library science community to shift research direction, emphasizing the transition from empirical library science to theoretical library science. At that time, numerous “theories” and “doctrines” indeed emerged. However, in retrospect, those so-called “XX theories” and “XX doctrines” were not summarized from practice but were created for theory’s sake—groundless complaints, mechanically copied and crudely digested in study rooms, not even reaching the level of basic experience summarization. Since the new century, the phenomenon of “forcing sorrow to write new poems” or self-amusing theoretical fabrication from the 1980s and 1990s has gradually declined, replaced by new research paradigms such as “based on,” “mechanism,” “model,” and “evaluation.” “Based on” flies everywhere, occupying the beginning of many paper titles; “mechanism,” “model,” and “evaluation” walk all over the place, occupying the ends of many paper titles. The research phenomenon of “based on” at the head, “mechanism” at the tail, and “nonsense” in the middle is extremely common, yet no one worries that these “tricks” and such “games” will ruin library science[1]. When browsing professional library science journals and reviewing professional monographs, library professionals often find it difficult to gain resonance or benefit, as if library science research is merely a word game for mutual entertainment among researchers, having little to do with library practice and development. Even the most renowned figures in library science, aside from their famous names due to former high positions, mostly lack recognizable thoughts and theories, let alone possessing ideological and theoretical labels that naturally evoke their names like Su Shi does with “The great river flows east, waves wash away all” or Deng Xiaoping does with “Development is the hard truth.”

Library science research must serve library practice and development, never becoming a word game for authors’ self-amusement. For example: Before the promulgation of the Public Library Law, countless “people of noble spirit” and “prophets” in China’s library science community wrote numerous articles on library legislation in a “savior” posture, even drafting the content and text of the law. However, when the National People’s Congress released the draft for comments on the Public Library Law, the library science community fell almost completely silent, collectively entering a state of quietude, as if it had nothing to do with library science researchers. Only the teachers and students of the library science program at Sun Yat-sen University stood out uniquely, fully participating with unparalleled academic mission and professional responsibility,

submitting over 150 amendment suggestions—the most from any institution nationwide. Because Sun Yat-sen University’s amendment suggestions accounted for a huge proportion of all submitted suggestions, they received the highest degree of attention and adoption. Comparing the draft for comments, the promulgated text, and Sun Yat-sen University’s submitted amendments reveals that Sun Yat-sen’s amendments covered all modified content of the Public Library Law, with many key clauses being identical in wording to those proposed by Sun Yat-sen University. After the promulgation and implementation of the Public Library Law, the public library community organized comprehensive study sessions, yet the library science community again entered the story-ending mode of Andersen’s fairy tales—“the princess and prince married and lived happily ever after”—showing no concern for the interpretive research and implementation status of the Public Library Law. This research phenomenon is indeed incomprehensible and irrational.

Library science research is not conducted for research’s sake, but to promote library development. However, current research aims more for fame and fortune. Consequently, the library science community pays little attention to the formulation and implementation of library policies that offer no personal gain. Since the new century, national and local governments have formulated a series of library policies, including legislation, standards, and norms, which embody many new library concepts and ideas. Although participants cannot be many, those who follow and study practical effects cannot be few either. If a library science researcher can integrate their academic concepts and ideas into national library policies and see them universally implemented nationwide, this represents the greatest academic contribution—nameless though it may be, far more important than publishing dozens of papers, publishing dozens of monographs, or winning some award. Because national policies directly guide library practice, and this is the ultimate goal of library science research. By carefully examining library laws, regulations, standards, and norms promulgated since the 1980s and listing their drafters, it is not difficult to identify which library science researchers are true scholars and which are true thinkers; those unrelated to this work are not worthy of being called library scientists or library science “gurus.”

What are the theoretical and ideological contributions of Chinese library science research since the new century? In summary, they are the library values of equality, openness, and sharing. The research, elaboration, dissemination, and establishment of these values have formed the theoretical and practical foundation for library development since the new century.

2.2 Having Trends but No Direction

Since the new century, networking and digitization have been transforming the development ecology of libraries, ushering them into a period of morphological transformation. Wave after wave of information technology trends—semantic web, cloud computing, big data, blockchain, artificial intelligence—have swept the globe, and the library science community, unwilling to lag behind, has

bravely chased these trends like Don Quixote fighting windmills, aping others clumsily and producing numerous library science papers on semantic web, cloud computing, big data, blockchain, and artificial intelligence. Professional library science journals have also taken pleasure in this, either actively fueling the trend or attempting to lead it, but in reality they are merely parroting or talking nonsense, because such technologies basically have little to do with libraries.

Since the new century, networking and digitization have brought a revolutionary change to libraries: the alienation of sovereignty over knowledge resources. In the print era, libraries owned the ownership and corresponding management rights of print knowledge resources, allowing library science research to make significant achievements and shine in areas such as classification and cataloging methods. However, in the digital era, libraries have lost ownership and management rights over digital knowledge resources, causing library science research to essentially lose its research objects regarding digital resources. All technologies and methods surrounding digital resource management no longer originate from the library community but from system vendors and data providers. For intellectual property and trade secret protection, these vendors only provide products without disclosing their core technologies and solutions. Faced with such a clear and harsh reality, research conducted by the library science community is probably nothing more than blindly chasing trends and hyping concepts.

Take big data research as an example. The data owned by libraries, whether print or digital, is merely ordinary data that does not possess the basic characteristics of big data. The owners of big data are national institutions and state-owned enterprises such as the National Meteorological Administration, Seismological Bureau, banks, telecommunications, and mobile companies, as well as internet companies like Tencent, Baidu, Taobao, and JD.com. Library science researchers have no access to the big data in these organizations' data centers, and it would be difficult to find even one or two library science researchers nationwide fortunate enough to visit such data centers. Interestingly, some experts have emerged in the library science community who talk extensively about big data despite never having touched it.

Another example is knowledge graph research. Perhaps the most scholarly and coolest papers published in library science journals today are those on knowledge graphs—colorful graphics and intricate structures that can indeed dazzle and even intimidate ordinary readers. As mentioned earlier, libraries' digital resources are controlled by data providers, and knowledge graphs are merely a way for these providers to visualize data relationships, only meaningful when querying data. However, the library science community does not see it this way, preferring instead to select a few scholars within their circle to create knowledge graphs of interpersonal relationships. The library science community is such a small circle with so few people—everyone knows everyone. Such interpersonal relationship knowledge graphs contain no real knowledge about relationships. In fact, there are dozens of knowledge graph tools readily available; it's no big deal. Using any knowledge graph tool and inputting some data can generate

various knowledge graphs. This is not research; at best, it merely tells the world that the author has learned to use a certain tool, nothing more.

Recently, blockchain has become very popular, and library science researchers will similarly produce a pile of blockchain-related papers. Editors of professional library science journals will also find it quite trendy and be happy to publish them, thus leading academic development trends for a period. It is truly unclear whether authors are fooling editors or editors are fooling readers, whether authors are deceiving themselves or editors are deceiving others. In any case, it will be another farcical academic drama.

Since the country's 11th Five-Year Plan, developing and prospering public culture with libraries at the forefront has long become a national cultural development strategy. Realizing and safeguarding the public's basic cultural rights and establishing a public library service system covering all society have become the era's theme and mainstream for China's library development. However, the library science community has consistently failed to devote sufficient effort in this direction. The most typical example is that the number of such research projects approved in social science foundations at all levels remains extremely limited.

2.3 Having Methods but No Goals

Since the new century, another major change in library science research has been the shift from qualitative to quantitative research, with empirical research based on surveys becoming very popular. This direction is correct, but the key problem is that existing research has methods without goals. Nowadays, many tools are available for survey research, including websites like "Wenjuanxing" for online questionnaires and all-powerful statistical software like SPSS for survey data analysis. Survey research has never seemed as simple and easy as it is today. The problem is that most current survey research and empirical studies do not know what their purpose is or what they aim to prove, essentially conducting surveys for the sake of surveys and empirical studies for the sake of empiricism. Generally, survey research should be problem-oriented: first, raise questions; second, break them down; then develop survey plans based on these questions, analyze results, and finally summarize conclusions, recommendations, and solutions. However, current survey research often neglects problem-raising and problem-solving, focusing only on fancy presentations of survey data because tools like SPSS are available. The purpose of survey research is to solve problems, not anything else. All problem-ignoring survey research is aimless and meaningless.

As for the credibility of survey data, it is even more questionable. The vast majority of survey research either provides no explanation or is evasive about sample selection methods and data sources, offering no detailed clarification. This makes it impossible to judge whether sample selection meets standards or whether data sources are credible. Little do they realize that this is the pre-

requisite for whether survey research is scientific and credible. Without this prerequisite, any reliability derived from analysis tools is fallacious, and survey results and research conclusions, due to untrustworthy data, will be off by a thousand miles despite being only slightly wrong. In short, for all survey research with non-standard samples, the more perfect the analysis, the further the error, and the less credible it becomes. In a word, many people are playing with research methods, and now research methods have been played with until they are broken, yet the problems existing in library practice remain unsolved.

3. Future Directions for Library Science Research

Faced with these problems in current library science research and in line with its mission, China's library science research should develop in the following directions:

3.1 Public Library Service System

Developing and prospering public culture and establishing a public library service system covering all society are major development strategies for China's present and future. Library science research must focus on the national cultural development strategy and cultural development needs; otherwise, it will deviate from the correct direction. Library science research must serve the country, society, and libraries; otherwise, it will lose its essence and become a useless discipline. The construction of a four-tier public library service system is the focus of current and future public library service system development, with township and street libraries being the difficulty, and village and community reading rooms being the most difficult of all. Library science research should prioritize this, investigating, analyzing, and studying all related problems, striving to provide solutions for every issue.

3.2 Document and Cultural Heritage

The mission of libraries is not only to disseminate knowledge but also to inherit civilization. In his reply to veteran staff at the National Library, General Secretary Xi Jinping particularly emphasized that the mission of the National Library is to "inherit civilization and serve society"[2], highly affirming the role of libraries in civilization inheritance. Libraries carry documents that best reflect and represent Chinese culture. Preserving, protecting, and disseminating Chinese culture and civilization through documents is both the mission of libraries and the mission of library science research. The library science community should, like the National Library, attach great importance to the protection, preservation, and organization of Chinese documents, as well as research on their exhibition and promotion, fully promoting Chinese documentary civilization to contribute to building cultural confidence.

3.3 Nationwide Reading Promotion

Reading promotion is the basic mission of libraries, without exception worldwide. Promoting nationwide reading and building a learning society are national development strategies and fundamental state policies. Government work reports for the past six years have all listed nationwide reading promotion as a key focus of government work, and the Public Library Law also identifies promoting, guiding, and serving nationwide reading as an important task for public libraries[3]. For a long time to come, nationwide reading promotion will be the most important mission of libraries, for both public and academic libraries. Nationwide reading is the cornerstone and lifeline for libraries' survival and development. Libraries will never perish due to challenges from any information technology, but if they depart from nationwide reading, they will lose their social value and will automatically wither away. Today, with the Party and state attaching great importance to nationwide reading and learning society construction, libraries have encountered unprecedented development opportunities. Library science research must seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, focusing on studying the theories, techniques, and methods of reading promotion to empower nationwide reading promotion.

3.4 Library Service Innovation

Times are changing, and public demand for libraries is also changing. Library services must keep pace with the times and continuously innovate to adapt to these changes and meet public needs. The public library community has many service innovations, such as urban 24-hour self-service libraries, "Library Plus" (Library+), library + bookstore, + café, + shopping mall, + factory, etc.[4]. Academic libraries also have many service innovations, such as learning spaces and creative spaces. For all service innovations emerging in the library community, library science research should promptly conduct in-depth investigations and studies, summarize experiences, and promote them to foster comprehensive development of library services.

3.5 Information Literacy Education

Information literacy education is also a common mission and eternal theme of libraries worldwide. In the digital era, information literacy education has become increasingly important as a crucial method for narrowing the digital divide. There are probably only two outcomes of library science research that are well-known and widely utilized by society: one is citation indexes originally used for journal selection, such as SCI and SSCI, which are now widely used for scientific evaluation but unfortunately overused and criticized in China; the other is information literacy education courses. The recently popular "Xuexi Qiangguo" (Study the Great Nation) platform has selected a batch of national-level premium MOOCs. Among the four courses selected from the Library, Information, and Archival Management discipline, three are information literacy education courses: "Information Literacy General Education—A Required

Course for Digital Survival” taught by Professor Pan Yantao from Sun Yat-sen University’s School of Information Management, “Information Retrieval” taught by Professor Huang Ruhua from Wuhan University’s School of Information Management, and “Information Literacy—A Required Course for Academic Research” taught by Research Librarian Lin Jia from Tsinghua University Library. The selection of these three information literacy education courses for “Xuexi Qiangguo” illustrates one fact: information literacy education is a societal need. Since information literacy education is a societal need, library science research must attach great importance to it to fully realize the role of library science in serving society.

Conclusion

Library science is an applied social science, and library science research and library development influence each other. In the new era, the state has created an unprecedented golden age for public culture development through relevant legislation and policy formulation. Driven by the wave of prosperous public culture development, people’s demand for a better life has provided library science research with too many new propositions worthy of study. This is the time when the library science academic community should awaken its sense of mission. Library science researchers should take promoting library development as their responsibility, providing theoretical guidance, direction, and solutions for library development. Academic journals also play an important guiding role, offering more encouragement to library practitioners when recommending topics, stimulating their research enthusiasm, enabling everyone to dare to speak, enjoy speaking, and not be afraid to share problems encountered in practical work, so that library science research can return to its essence of serving the library cause and truly play its role in guiding library practice with theory. Ultimately, library science research can become an academic force that truly promotes development in the construction of public culture.

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] To clarify the mission and purpose of library science research. [Method/process] Reviewed the development of library science research in China in the new century, then described the missions of library science research which include providing theory, guidance and solutions for the development of library, and pointed out the major problems in the library science research. [Result/conclusion] It suggests that library science research in the future should focus on public library, culture heritage, reading promotion, service innovation and information literacy education.

Keywords: library science; mission; problem; trend

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

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