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Special Collections Services for Ancient Books at Three World-Class University Libraries Abroad and Their Implications (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Ancient books and special collections are important collection resources in university libraries, yet the services for these materials remain unsatisfactory. The National Ancient Books Protection Work Plan during the 13th Five-Year Plan Period emphasizes the utilization of ancient books as a key priority, while the Double First-Class construction initiative requires university libraries to actively expand their cultural service functions. Enhancing ancient books and special collections services is conducive to further realizing the value of these materials in teaching, research, and traditional culture. [Method/Process] Through investigation of foreign literature and online resources, this study introduces the ancient books and special collections services of three world-class foreign universities and analyzes their characteristics in supporting teaching, research, and cultural services. [Results/Conclusion] Services for ancient books and special collections in domestic university libraries should be improved in three aspects: conducting teaching activities, promoting collection-based research through open cooperation, and strengthening services for non-professional readers.

Full Text

Preamble

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Special Collections Services of Ancient Books in Three World-Class Foreign University Libraries and Their Implications

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Special collections of ancient books constitute important holdings in university libraries, yet the services supporting them remain unsatisfactory. The *National Plan for the Protection of Ancient Books During the 13th Five-Year Plan Period* emphasizes utilization as a key priority, while the “Double First-Class” university initiative requires libraries to expand their cultural service functions. Enhancing special collections services is essential for realizing the full academic and cultural value of ancient books in teaching, research, and traditional culture.

[Method/Process] Through overseas literature review and web-based investigation, this paper examines the special collections services of three world-class universities, analyzing their distinctive approaches to supporting teaching, research, and cultural services.

[Result/Conclusion] Chinese university libraries should improve their special collections services through three strategies: developing teaching activities, promoting collection research through open collaboration, and strengthening services for non-specialist readers.

Keywords: special collections of ancient books; service innovation; Double First-Class university

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1 Current Situation and Background

Special collections of ancient books represent vital resources in university libraries, yet services for these materials suffer from significant deficiencies. Compared with services for other types of collections within the same libraries, ancient book services lag considerably, with most special collections departments experiencing low patron traffic. This situation stems primarily from three factors. First, insufficient professional staffing and outdated service models. According to 2015 statistics from the National Steering Committee for University Library and Information Work, only 110 university libraries had dedicated ancient book departments, and merely 19 employed six or more full-time staff members [?]. Staff shortages make it difficult to develop subject services, reading promotion, and other outreach activities, leaving basic retrieval as the primary service. Second, the unique nature of ancient books creates an “isolation effect” for some readers. The archaic script and writing style result in low utilization, a problem extensively documented in the literature [?, ?]. In university libraries, the primary users of ancient books are graduate students, mainly in history and literature. Third, there is a lack of proactive service consciousness, and service models have not shifted from “resource-centered” to “reader-centered.” Although improvements have been made in recent years, most special collections departments still focus on “preservation” and “cataloging/research,” failing to innovate from the perspective of user needs.

University libraries are important institutions for collecting ancient books and serve as key venues for their preservation and research. Among national-level key protection units for ancient books, 36 are university libraries, accounting for 20% of the total. Many major ancient book cataloging projects originate from the academic contributions of university researchers. Universities' distinctive advantages in research and teaching provide considerable room for developing reproductive preservation of ancient books. Externally, two major drivers are spurring innovation in special collections services. First, the societal need to promote and inherit traditional culture. In 2013, the Chinese Library Association Annual Conference organized its first symposium on "Strengthening the Reading and Services of Ancient Books," marking the first national-level specialized conference on this topic and signaling a transition from "emphasizing preservation over utilization" to "balancing preservation and utilization." The Ministry of Culture's *National Plan for the Protection of Ancient Books During the 13th Five-Year Plan Period* [?] explicitly states that "tiered protection and revealed utilization should be prioritized" and that "ancient book utilization should be expanded through multiple approaches and methods." Bringing the texts in ancient books to life and fully leveraging their important role in transmitting excellent traditional Chinese culture represents the general trend in national ancient book protection work. Second, university libraries' need to support academic research and cultural services. The Ministry of Education's *Regulations on Libraries in Regular Institutions of Higher Education* [?] identifies university libraries as "important bases for campus culture and social culture," explicitly stating that their tasks include "actively participating in talent cultivation, informatization construction, and campus cultural construction," thereby expanding library services beyond information provision to broader cultural functions. Peking University has proposed a new vision for libraries as campus public academic and cultural spaces integrating learning support, research support, teaching activities, academic exchange, cultural inheritance, and social leisure [?]. This trend will define the future development of other university libraries as well. With their irreplaceable academic and cultural value, innovative services for special collections can better support libraries' research, teaching, and cultural functions.

Currently, a few Chinese university libraries have begun exploring innovative services for ancient books. A search of CNKI for papers on ancient book protection reveals that after 2015, topics gradually shifted toward service-oriented themes such as "reading promotion," "space design," "exhibitions," and "subject services." Notably, traditional Chinese medicine universities have made prominent progress, with institutions like Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine [?] and Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine [?] achieving remarkable results in using ancient books to support teaching and research. However, existing research in China primarily introduces case studies from individual libraries and has not yet summarized transferable service models or implementation pathways.

Special collections of ancient books are precious resources in university libraries.

How libraries can leverage their strengths in knowledge discovery and information services to realize the social and academic value of ancient books is an important proposition for ancient book protection in the new era and an inherent requirement for university libraries to elevate their service levels under the “Double First-Class” initiative. This paper proposes methods and pathways for improving special collections services in Chinese university libraries by analyzing innovative service cases from three world-class foreign universities.

2 Special Collections Services at Three World-Class University Libraries

2.1 Leiden University Library Special Collections: Supporting Academic Research and Socializing Collections

Leiden University is one of Europe’s most prestigious institutions, ranking first in Europe for humanities disciplines [?]. The Special Collections department of Leiden University Library primarily holds Western manuscripts, university archives, medieval Dutch materials, and Western printed books published before 1801, including incunabula. The department comprises two sections: professional librarians and service staff. Professional librarians, including some part-time staff, possess specialized knowledge of historical documents, enabling them to better understand content, editions, and value to facilitate collection development and utilization. The service staff handles basic reading services, cataloging, digitization, and routine operations. In recent years, Leiden’s special collections services have innovated in two main areas: first, promoting research and exhibitions in relevant fields and publishing promotional materials to reveal collections; second, actively responding to the digitalization of the academic environment and the online transformation of library services.

2.1.1 Promoting Academic Research: The Founding of the Scaliger Institute In 2000, Leiden University Library established the Scaliger Institute jointly with the Faculty of Arts, Theology, and Philosophy (now the Faculty of Humanities) to promote the use of special collections in teaching and research. The institute’s goal is to build close cooperative relationships with faculty through teaching and to help students and faculty understand the value and diversity of special collections by providing opportunities and spaces for exchange among those in similar research fields [?]. Teaching forms the foundation of the Scaliger Institute’s work, with rich formats including conferences, masterclasses, special courses, and lectures to meet different needs. Since 2003, the institute has collaborated with faculty to conduct high-quality cataloging and research. The “Bronnen Van Kennis” (Sources of Knowledge) project, conducted between 2003 and 2006, involved humanities faculty and professional librarians collaborating to identify materials from special collections that could illuminate Leiden University’s history. The research was published as *Bronnen Van Kennis: Wetenschap, Kunst En Cultuur In De Collecties Van De Universiteitsbibliotheek* (Sources of Knowledge: Science, Art, and Culture in the University

Library's Collections). This publication comprehensively revealed the core special collections of Leiden University Library, and "Bronnen Van Kennis" has become the slogan for the institute's research and educational activities.

Furthermore, the institute actively recruits scholars globally for collection research, supported by diverse research funding. The institute has proactively established partnerships with relevant foundations to sponsor researchers studying special collections. Currently, more than ten research funds exist, and nearly 100 scholars received support between 2001 and 2018 [?]. This approach has attracted increasing numbers of scholars from around the world to actively participate in research using Leiden's special collections, greatly accelerating the depth and breadth of collection research.

2.1.2 Promoting the Socialization of Special Collections: The Information Plan

In 2008, Leiden University Library's Special Collections department developed the "Information Plan" in response to the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's "Digitaliseren Met Beleid" (Digitization with Policy) initiative. The plan encompasses medium-term goals for digitizing Leiden's special collections and forms part of the university library's academic information strategy. It aims to integrate the functions of the Special Collections department and the Scaliger Institute by establishing a "Leiden University Special Collections Research Center" to provide both digital and physical materials in the most user-appropriate formats. Notably, the Information Plan fully considers the social dimension of special collections, moving beyond the conventional "building a special database" approach from the outset and instead structuring the entire initiative around the goal of "promoting the socialization of special collections." This is manifested in two aspects. First, in generating cataloging data and metadata, the plan abandoned institution-specific rules and instead adopted data standards provided by DEN (Digitaal Erfgoed Nederland), a Dutch company specializing in information and communication technology for libraries, archives, and museums. This approach effectively addresses the problem of information silos caused by non-uniform data resources, avoids waste in digital development, and lays a solid foundation for special collections to participate in public cultural services. Second, the plan involves collaborating with relevant institutions to store digital images. When creating digital images of special collections, three types are produced for different purposes: preservation, access, and thumbnails. Preservation files are stored uniformly at the Amsterdam Data Center, while long-term preservation collaborates with the Royal Library of the Netherlands and DANS (Data Archiving and Networked Services).

Digitized special collections are publicly available online through Leiden University Library's "Digital Collections" webpage. As of July 2018, the Digital Collections site offered 19 thematic collections for online access, including maps, archives, and photography [?].

2.2 Supporting Classroom Teaching and Disciplinary Development: Yale University East Asian Library

Yale University was among the first American universities to establish East Asian library collections, with the American Oriental Society's holdings deposited at Yale as early as 1855. Like other East Asian libraries, Yale's East Asian Library was established alongside the rise of East Asian studies in American universities. Among its most important holdings is a significant collection supporting Japanese historical research: the Japanese special collection assembled under the direction of Yale's Japanese history specialist Asakawa Kan'ichi. Between 1907 and 1948, Asakawa both conducted Japanese historical research and directed Yale's Chinese and Japanese Collections. As a world-renowned comparative historian and expert on ancient Japanese institutional history, Asakawa's unique scholarly vision played a special role in collection development. During 1906-1907, he employed 20 young scholars to transcribe irreplaceable documents from Japanese temples, private libraries, and government agencies, and personally sought donations from temples, museums, and libraries in Kyoto. Asakawa's efforts endowed Yale's East Asian collections with substantial strength and laid a solid foundation for East Asian studies at the university. His success was made possible by Yale's system of scholar-librarians, where academics concurrently serve as librarians, a model that not only benefits collection development but also promotes the use of special collections in teaching and research.

Today, Yale's East Asian Library continues to prioritize support for teaching and research, emphasizing the use of rare materials in classroom instruction. The library's homepage features specific instructions for using collection materials in classroom teaching, and all faculty can apply to use rare books and ancient materials. Both graduate and undergraduate students have elective courses based on special collections, and this model of integrating collections with teaching activities greatly enhances utilization rates and truly incorporates special collections into the core work of university teaching. The professor-led, librarian-supported model facilitates embedded teaching with special collections. Exchange among students and faculty from different academic backgrounds also broadens research perspectives on special collections. The library has extended some course research outcomes into part of its self-built special resources. For example, a faculty member in modern Japanese history used the Asakawa Kan'ichi special collection materials to offer a graduate seminar titled "Reading Asakawa." Through this course, one graduate student used digitized Asakawa correspondence as research material and, with assistance from Yale's Digital Humanities Lab, processed dates, locations, and correspondents to construct a digital map of Asakawa's social network [?]. This project later evolved into a planned project for the Digital Humanities Lab.

Additionally, to better serve teaching and research, the East Asian Library launched the "Know Before You Go: Researching East Asia in U.S." workshop series in 2016, in conjunction with visiting scholar programs. The series invites

experts from other major U.S. East Asian libraries to introduce their institutions' collection strengths, digital projects, and visiting scholar programs, enabling Yale students and faculty to better utilize special collections resources across U.S. East Asian libraries [?].

2.3 A New Perspective on Heritage Science: Oxford University's Weston Library

In 2015, Oxford University established the Weston Library within its central library system to house the university's rare books and special collections. The Weston Library holds manuscripts and rare books, maps, and other materials collected by Oxford since 1602, reflecting the university's disciplinary development history. Its collection of medieval European and Byzantine manuscripts is the largest among world universities, and it holds 6,755 incunabula [?]. The Weston Library's most distinctive work includes rich special exhibitions and advanced heritage science. For exhibitions, the library maintains a permanent rare books display and offers "online exhibitions" on its homepage. In heritage science, the library has designated this as a specific work area, introducing modern conservation technology equipment and establishing a research support laboratory for all faculty and students. The lab's two most important instruments are a Raman spectrometer and a hyperspectral imaging system, which can reveal hidden images or text in documents or identify pigment types [?]. The lab has established cooperative relationships with multiple researchers to explore the hidden mysteries of collection materials. Research on the library's parchment letters and Mexican manuscripts has achieved progress, with findings published online for readers to deepen their understanding of the collections [?].

The Weston Library's exhibition and heritage science-oriented work model has transcended traditional library service paradigms, resembling museum operations more closely in its organization and staffing. A dedicated conservation team of 19 staff members handles preventive conservation planning, restoration, and conservation research. The Weston Library maintains detailed reports and photographic documentation of restoration processes to record important but previously unnoticed aspects of manuscripts and rare books discovered during conservation. These analysis and restoration processes have also been presented as exhibition content, enhancing exhibitions' intuitiveness and interest while educating more readers about scientific conservation and restoration.

Precious documents themselves constitute part of cultural heritage. However, libraries have traditionally emphasized their information value while downplaying their artifact value, marginalizing conservation management. The Weston Library breaks through the limitations of "document services" by further exploring and utilizing the artifact value of special collections, integrating library and museum functions to provide readers with new tools and perspectives.

3 Implications: Innovating Ancient Book Services in Chinese University Libraries

The gradual advancement of the “balancing preservation and utilization” concept and the expansion of libraries’ cultural service functions provide strong impetus for innovating special collections services in Chinese university libraries. The cases of Leiden University, Yale University, and Oxford University offer numerous transferable lessons.

3.1 Promoting and Utilizing Collections Through Teaching

Special collections have a relatively narrow audience but represent invaluable resources for specialized learning. How to promote their use in teaching and research is a crucial mission for collection managers. Leiden and Yale employ two distinct models—“self-designed courses” and “embedded courses”—to promote teaching use of special collections. In reality, university libraries’ ancient book collections are often inseparable from their institutions’ disciplinary history and development, and deep exploration will benefit teaching and research. Both models merit consideration.

Regarding self-designed courses, Chinese university libraries currently limit their self-developed courses primarily to information retrieval, with no institutions yet offering specialized courses on special collections utilization. Special collections managers possess both specialized knowledge of ancient books and detailed understanding of their holdings, qualifying them to develop professional courses. Integrating ancient books with certain disciplines creates new interdisciplinary research fields. For example, the field of art bibliography, which uses ancient books for historical art research, has produced notable results in recent years. However, students with art backgrounds face certain barriers in using ancient books. If special collections departments could independently develop relevant courses analogous to information retrieval courses and offer them as electives, it would greatly benefit students from different disciplines in utilizing ancient books. Additionally, libraries should actively invite internal and external experts to conduct academic lectures and seminars related to collections to promote faculty and student awareness and enhance libraries’ cultural service functions.

Regarding embedded courses, special collections themselves serve as important supplementary materials for some courses. They can be applied to general education courses such as college Chinese and traditional Chinese culture, or leveraged for their unique value in disciplinary history courses and graduate seminars. Offering embedded courses represents an important manifestation of libraries’ subject services. To ensure successful implementation, three aspects should be addressed: First, strengthen connections with other university administrative units such as the academic affairs office, graduate school, and academic departments to introduce faculty to teaching services using special collections, with professional subject librarians providing instructional support. Second,

incorporate classroom teaching support into regular services with publicized procedures. Making the instructional support process publicly available on the library homepage through online forms or subject librarian contact facilitates convenient teaching arrangements. Third, improve space design and supporting facilities to better meet teaching needs. Additionally, adopting the foreign practice of hiring faculty as part-time special collections librarians could further promote embedded teaching.

Both self-designed and embedded courses help students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds understand ancient book special collections. Conversely, introducing students from different backgrounds also diversifies research directions and perspectives, benefiting collection development.

3.2 Broadening Cooperation to Promote Special Collections Research

While some Chinese university libraries have undertaken ancient book cataloging and research, limited staffing and research capacity constrain the depth and breadth of development, which focuses mainly on digitization, facsimile publication, and collection guides. A comprehensive analysis of foreign cases, special collections' unique characteristics, and libraries' limited resources reveals that the "do-it-all" model no longer suits ancient book development. Special collections represent both valuable research resources for universities and cultural heritage belonging to all society. Scattered, singular, and low-level development cannot meet academic development needs. In special collections cataloging and development, libraries should adopt broad perspectives to establish external partnerships, primarily with: first, expert scholars who can deeply explore collection value. Ancient book value development extends beyond documentary value to include artifact value. Participation by scholars from different research directions can greatly expand the depth and breadth of collection development, improving development efficiency and outcome quality. Second, enterprises and institutions providing technical support for digital services. Currently, most digital development of ancient books in Chinese libraries consists only of image databases without OCR or full-text retrieval capabilities and poor extensibility. Against the backdrop of digital humanities development, demands for openness, extensibility, and refinement in ancient book digitization are increasing. Professional equipment and companies can improve digital resource quality and facilitate long-term preservation and secondary development. Third, institutions and publishers providing funding for collection development. Leiden's special collections research fund system provides strong support for attracting researchers worldwide. While some Chinese university libraries have staff exchange programs to promote inter-library learning, these remain limited to libraries, with funding derived from limited library operational budgets. University libraries could attract experts and scholars and elevate special collections development by establishing horizontal research funds.

3.3 Actively Developing Cultural Services for Non-Specialist Readers

Beyond serving teaching and research, campus and social cultural service represents a new function university libraries must develop. For ancient book services, this means adhering to a “reader-centered” service philosophy and expanding services targeting non-specialist readers with cultural promotion as the goal. In recent years, public libraries have achieved remarkable success in this area. For example, the National Library established the National Museum of Classic Books, and multiple provincial libraries have repeatedly held thematic exhibitions and citizen experience activities. Nanjing Library and Shanghai Library have also planned publications related to thematic exhibitions. Exhibitions and experience activities have become a hallmark of ancient book protection in public libraries. However, university library exhibition development has progressed slowly. While Peking University, Nanjing University, and Hubei University of Chinese Medicine have opened exhibition spaces, their scale and impact remain largely confined to campus. Leiden University and Oxford University maintain permanent exhibition spaces with rotating thematic displays and online exhibitions that expand reach and impact. These exhibitions are open to the public, enabling broader audiences to learn about library special collections and securing social resources for the university.

As societal attention to cultural heritage grows, the value of special collections as cultural heritage represents a new focus for libraries. Ancient book special collections have inherent advantages for library cultural promotion due to their close connections with traditional culture, notable figures, and collection history. Establishing permanent exhibition spaces serves both campus culture construction and helps identify potential readers. Services for non-specialist readers differ from those for specialists and may require reference to museum and art gallery service models.

First, exhibition themes should connect with disciplinary specialties, life interests, or offer strong visual appeal and practical engagement. Themes could align with campus culture construction, focusing on university history, notable professors, or disciplinary development history. Hands-on experience activities such as “woodblock printing experiences” or “ancient book restoration experiences” could also be offered. Second, exhibition formats should incorporate multimedia equipment and develop cultural and creative products to enhance visitor experience and reveal stories behind collections from multiple angles. Third, emphasis should be placed on exhibition interpretation, including on-site explanations and supporting lectures. Experience shows that on-site interpretation significantly enhances exhibition effectiveness. Since audiences are non-specialists, simple bibliographic descriptions cannot convey collection value. Professional librarians’ on-site explanations and active interaction enable visitors to enhance their understanding of special collections through exhibitions, achieving promotion goals and identifying more potential readers. Inviting relevant experts to deliver lectures further promotes academic research. Finally, digital extension services can strengthen impact through online exhibitions and social media plat-

forms like Weibo and WeChat to promote special collections and establish broad interaction with readers.

In summary, most Chinese university library special collections departments continue traditional service models with narrow audiences and suboptimal results. Against the backdrop of the National Ancient Books Protection Plan and the functional expansion of university libraries, innovating ancient book special collections service models is an inevitable requirement. “Better utilization” is the starting point and ultimate goal of ancient book protection work. The cases of three world-class foreign university libraries offer considerable inspiration for Chinese university libraries to enhance their special collections services and actively participate in university teaching, research, and cultural construction.

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