

Postprint: Strategic Analysis of Deepening CASHL's Subject Services in the Context of the "Double First-Class" Initiative

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The China Academic Humanities and Social Sciences Library (CASHL) differs from university libraries in terms of operational mechanisms and service content. Exploring how to achieve deep integration between CASHL and subject services is therefore of considerable significance.

[Method/Process] This study synthesizes the current challenges faced by CASHL to propose the necessity of deepening subject services within the context of the "Double First-Class" construction initiative. Using the focus group research method, we investigate users' personalized experiences with CASHL, their academic needs, and their recommendations for deepening CASHL's subject service functions.

[Results/Conclusion] CASHL can deepen its subject services through positioning subject service functions, planning specific service content and modalities, cultivating diversified service implementers, and establishing cooperative mechanisms.

Full Text

Strategic Analysis of CASHL's Deepening Subject Services Under the "Double First-Class" Construction Background

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The China Academic Social Sciences and Humanities Library (CASHL) differs from university libraries in terms of operational mech-

anisms and service content. How to achieve deep integration between CASHL and subject services warrants discussion. **[Method/Process]** By synthesizing the current challenges facing CASHL, this study proposes the necessity of deepening subject services under the “Double First-Class” construction background. Using the focus group method, we investigated users’ personalized experiences with CASHL, their academic needs, and their recommendations for deepening CASHL’s subject service functions. **[Result/Conclusion]** CASHL can deepen its subject services by positioning its service functions, planning specific service content and methods, cultivating diversified service executors, and establishing cooperation mechanisms.

Keywords: “Double First-Class” construction; CASHL; focus group; subject services

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1. Introduction

In November 2015, the State Council officially issued the “Overall Plan for Promoting the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines” (hereinafter referred to as the “Plan”). The Plan identifies building world-class universities and disciplines as a major strategic decision by the Party Central Committee and the State Council, which is of great significance for enhancing China’s educational development level, strengthening national core competitiveness, and laying a foundation for long-term development. The Plan explicitly proposes “adhering to a discipline-based approach” as one of its four fundamental principles, fully demonstrating the critical importance of discipline construction in the “Double First-Class” initiative.

Subject services aimed at promoting discipline construction have become not only an academic research focus in the library community but also the most important service innovation undertaken by university and research libraries in China in recent years. Institutions such as Tsinghua University Library, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Library, and the Documentation and Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences have conducted fruitful practices. Scholars like B.I. Dewey, D. Shumaker, and Professor Chu Jingli in China have conducted extensive research on the development history of subject services and embedded subject services. Some librarians have also actively explored subject services from their practical experiences. For instance, Li Jian et al., based on practices at Xiamen University, proposed combining WeChat with subject homepages to build a self-improving professional work system for subject services. Liu Shu et al., based on a case study of Peking University’s Ocean Research Institute, discussed how to innovate subject service mechanisms and improve service quality under the background of supply-side reform. Dong Ying et al. studied the dynamic characteristics of embedded subject services in big data environments. These studies emphasize the deep integration of subject services with the information environment, but their research subjects remain

largely confined to university libraries, with less attention paid to subject services of other information service institutions.

Since its establishment in 2004, the China Academic Social Sciences and Humanities Library (CASHL) has developed into the only national-level collection and service center for humanities and social sciences literature in China. As the information environment has undergone tremendous changes, CASHL faces more challenges, sparking numerous discussions. For example, Niu Aiju et al., based on a comparison between CASHL and the OCLC interlibrary loan platform, proposed multiple dimensions for sustainable development, including refined management, deep resource integration, and standardized workflow. Yang Xueping explored the application of mind mapping in interlibrary loan work based on practices at Beijing Normal University Library. Zhao Fazhen et al. summarized user experience characteristics in mobile environments and proposed a CASHL mobile service user experience model. Overall, scholars have conducted beneficial explorations from the perspectives of improving CASHL's interlibrary loan platform workflow and user experience in mobile environments. However, these studies have essentially revolved around CASHL's traditional service functions of document delivery and interlibrary loan, lacking in-depth research on other service functions. As an information service institution with different nature and operational mechanisms from university libraries, how CASHL should expand other service functions, especially subject service functions, deserves attention and exploration from practitioners.

This article aims to explore CASHL's subject service functions under the "Double First-Class" construction background. By analyzing the challenges currently facing CASHL, we propose the necessity of deepening its subject services. Using the focus group method, we investigate users' academic needs during their application of CASHL, and based on CASHL's own characteristics, propose strategies for deepening subject services, including functional positioning, specific content planning, cultivating diversified executors, and establishing cooperation mechanisms, thereby providing experience for subject service practices among diverse entities.

2. The Necessity of CASHL Deepening Subject Services Under the "Double First-Class" Construction Background

2.1 Challenges Facing CASHL's Development

CASHL is a national-level, unique collection and service center for foreign language resources in humanities and social sciences established by the Ministry of Education to prosper and develop philosophy and social sciences. It is the first national humanities and social sciences information resource platform in China to provide literature services and ultimate guarantee for humanities and social sciences teaching and research, also known as one of the three major university information resource sharing systems in China (alongside CALIS and CADAL). Since its official launch in 2004, its document delivery and interlibrary loan

services have greatly enriched information resources for humanities and social sciences in universities, meeting users' teaching and research needs and receiving widespread welcome.

After more than a decade of development, CASHL's operation has entered a relatively mature period but also faces new challenges, primarily manifested in the gradual decline of document delivery volume. Liang Nanyan et al. statistically analyzed CASHL's main business volume from 2004 to 2014, showing that document delivery peaked in 2009 at nearly 160,000 requests, then declined year by year to only 110,000 in 2014. Correspondingly, book interlibrary loan requests have shown an upward trend since their launch in 2007, reaching approximately 3,000 volumes in 2014. As the CASHL history discipline center, Nankai University Library (hereinafter referred to as "our library") also undertakes important service functions. Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper] shows our library's statistics for CASHL document delivery and book borrowing requests processed from 2010 to 2016.

As shown in Figure 1, our library's CASHL business volume from 2010 to 2016 exhibits the same characteristic of document delivery volume rising and then falling. The only slight difference from CASHL's overall statistics is that our library's document delivery requests peaked in 2014 (6,000 requests), then began to decline significantly from 2015, while book interlibrary loan requests increased annually. This decline in document delivery volume is a common phenomenon across all service libraries. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex and multi-faceted, but the increase in free online resources and the emergence of convenient document access channels such as "BaiLian" are relatively major factors.

2.2 The Necessity of Deepening Subject Services Under the "Double First-Class" Construction Background

Facing these challenges, CASHL practitioners have been exploring practical solutions to rejuvenate the service. While continuing to enrich traditional document delivery and interlibrary loan functions, CASHL has begun actively attempting to expand innovative services by incorporating subject services into its service system. In 2013, it launched a pilot program for "CASHL Subject Service Promotion Bases," establishing two bases in education and economics to conduct discipline-specific promotion activities. However, this type of subject service aimed at increasing usage volume, and subsequent subject services have mostly appeared in the form of discipline resource promotion activities, oriented toward increasing document delivery volume. This approach cannot truly reflect the knowledge service essence that subject services should possess.

Subject services are user-centered, establishing a service model based on research and teaching, multi-party collaboration, and oriented toward frontline users. They provide personalized, specialized, and knowledge-based services to enhance users' information capabilities and provide strong information support

for independent innovation in scientific research. This represents an important shift for libraries from passive to active services. Subject services are not equivalent to simple push of discipline information, because in modern information society, our core competence lies not in the resources we own but in our ability to create value for users using extensive resources. Therefore, in the new information environment, positioning and practicing subject services solely from the perspective of resource acquisition cannot truly meet users' information needs. When resources become more easily accessible, users' focus has shifted from merely owning resources to possessing academic innovation capabilities. Users need knowledge services that can enhance their academic information capabilities. Thus, under the "Double First-Class" construction background, CASHL must change its current shallow subject service status characterized by simple discipline information push and develop into true deep-level subject services that can integrate into users' academic research processes, provide personalized, specialized, and knowledge-based services, and enhance users' academic innovation capabilities. In other words, CASHL must deepen its subject service functions.

3. Investigating CASHL Users' Subject Service Needs Through Focus Group Method

Subject services are based on the needs of discipline user groups. Therefore, taking user needs as the foundation and centering all work around this foundation is the core of subject services and an important characteristic that distinguishes them from traditional information services. To achieve true integration with subject services and provide in-depth services that can meet user needs, CASHL must establish a deep understanding of user needs. Consequently, this study applied the focus group method to investigate CASHL users' subject service needs.

3.1 Focus Group Method

The focus group method, also known as focus group interviewing, is one of the important usability evaluation methods. It brings together a group of people to discuss a specific issue, obtains qualitative data, and thereby understands users' views on new concepts and services, making improvements to meet user requirements. This is a qualitative research method that helps to more specifically understand and convey users' ideas, laying a foundation for further in-depth analysis. The application of the focus group method includes main steps such as selecting users, forming user focus groups, introducing research purposes and procedures to users, organizing discussion topics, conducting discussions, recording discussion content, and analysis and feedback.

3.2 Research Process

3.2.1 Forming a Homogeneous User Focus Group Sample selection for focus groups is critical. Typically, homogeneous group members with similar

backgrounds and experiences find it easier to communicate and exchange ideas. This study selected 30 members to form a homogeneous group. They were master's and doctoral students from Nankai University's School of History, School of Philosophy, and School of Marxism who had used the CASHL system for at least half a year, were familiar with interlibrary loan and document delivery services, and had also used the CALIS interlibrary loan system. The group members shared relatively consistent characteristics: they had similar social science disciplinary backgrounds, were at the stage of writing theses, had experienced CASHL's service process, and were also familiar with other interlibrary loan and document delivery methods. Forming such a homogeneous focus group was crucial for collecting users' CASHL application experiences and their views on deepening CASHL's subject service functions.

3.2.2 Determining Research Themes The purpose of this research was to collect users' personalized cognition of CASHL service processes and content, their current academic contexts and service needs, and their recommendations for deepening CASHL's subject service functions by investigating the experiences of specific user groups in applying CASHL. The main topics were open-ended questions at three progressive levels: (1) users' experiences with CASHL; (2) users' own academic contexts and needs; and (3) users' specific suggestions for deepening CASHL's subject service functions. Each level included several open questions. The overall research topics are shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

3.3 Analysis of Research Results

After the preparation phase, the author conducted focus group interviews in March 2017. Focus group members discussed 17 questions across three levels: CASHL application experience, academic context and personalized information needs, and future deepening of subject services. Each member spoke at the discussion meeting, and the author made careful and detailed records. After the discussion, focus group members organized their experiences and submitted them to the author in writing, completing the research. The author received 30 user experience reports, with 5 members providing more detailed elaborations in PPT format. Based on content analysis, the research results showed the following main characteristics:

3.3.1 On CASHL Usage Experience Although focus group members had relatively rich CASHL usage experience, they accessed CASHL through various channels, primarily through introductions from teachers and classmates and links on the library homepage. Regarding usage methods and quantity, most members currently mainly used the book interlibrary loan service. The most active user could borrow more than 20 foreign language books per semester through CASHL, which aligns well with CASHL's current trend of increasing interlibrary loan volume. In the process of using CASHL services, more than half of the users could subtly learn information knowledge such as the meaning

of ISBN, advanced search methods, and keyword field retrieval. Meanwhile, 95% of focus group members considered CASHL's service process reasonable and concise, though they suggested that fees could be reduced and logistics processes should continue to be improved. Although CASHL actively uses new media for promotion, users seem to pay limited attention to it—95% of focus group members did not follow CASHL's WeChat public platform, and they would not actively visit the homepage when not submitting requests. All promotional activity information was obtained through the library's homepage and WeChat. From the user experience perspective, they still focused on book and literature services related to their own academic processes. New media resource push forms did not fully attract them, but they affirmed the personalized experience of CASHL's service platform, with concise service processes being their expectation. Table 1 shows the specific research results on focus group members' CASHL application experience.

3.3.2 On Academic Context and Needs The second part of this research aimed to deeply understand focus group members' current academic contexts and information needs to determine how to design subject service projects that align with users' academic processes. Focus group members were primarily master's and doctoral students: 70% were first-year doctoral students at the stage of preparing dissertation proposals or writing small papers; 20% were master's students at the dissertation proposal stage; and 10% were third-year doctoral students at the dissertation writing stage. Evidently, thesis writing was their common academic context. In this context, their information resource needs were also relatively consistent. They most needed foreign language books and doctoral dissertations. Secondly, they needed books and journal literature in different languages, especially German and Spanish books. Additionally, 10% of members hoped to access Hong Kong and Taiwan books and Chinese and English archival materials. Specific needs are shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]. Regarding other channels and methods for obtaining literature information, 90% of focus group members primarily obtained literature from the National Library and Shanghai Library through the CALIS interlibrary loan and document delivery system. Their commonly used resource acquisition channels ranked as: National Library > Shanghai Library > OA literature > CASHL services > teachers or classmates. Most users also indicated that they frequently followed scholars' Weibo, WeChat, and academic WeChat accounts to obtain information closely related to their academic contexts. This level of research shows that users urgently hope CASHL can pay more attention to their academic contexts and provide the literature and services they urgently need at their academic stages.

3.3.3 On Recommendations for Deepening CASHL Subject Services Focus group members had extremely enthusiastic discussions about deepening CASHL subject services. Starting from the elements of discipline construction, they believed CASHL could align with the "Double First-Class" construction

background and undertake the following subject service tasks: integrating OA resources, establishing academic discussion areas, creating submission guidelines, pushing discipline big data, publishing interlibrary loan book rankings, granting readers the right to recommend book purchases, using indicators to reveal core journals, providing the latest academic information and conference live streaming, refining discipline-specific resource classification, and many users expressed willingness to become CASHL service volunteers. The focus group members' discussions on these ten topics fully reflected users' personalized cognition of discipline construction. They hoped that CASHL, as an information service institution, could not only provide fixed academic literature but also pay attention to and be rooted in users' academic contexts, deeply 挖掘 dynamic academic information and research data during the research process, and guide them to enhance their innovation capabilities in the complex Web 2.0 information society. Only this can truly contribute to discipline construction and improve research quality. Table 2 details the focus group's feedback on this section.

4. Strategic Analysis of CASHL's Deepening Subject Services

As an information service institution with a different nature from university libraries, CASHL has its unique operational mechanisms, service content, and processes. How to propose suitable subject service methods based on CASHL's characteristics is crucial. Based on the research results and current service and operational status, this article proposes that CASHL can deepen its subject services from four aspects: positioning subject service functions, planning service content and methods, cultivating diversified service executors, and establishing cooperation mechanisms.

4.1 Positioning Functions

CASHL's active expansion of subject service functions aligns well with its overall goal of building a "national humanities and social sciences information resource platform" and the "Double First-Class" construction background. How to deepen these subject service functions requires alignment with the characteristics and development patterns of subject services themselves. As a humanities and social sciences literature collection and service center with a long development history, CASHL's advantages lie in its rich resources and relatively smooth document delivery and interlibrary loan services. The characteristics of subject services lie in being user-centered, integrating into users' research environments, and enhancing innovation capabilities through providing professional and knowledge-based services. The key to deep integration between these two lies in actively understanding users' academic needs and embedding services into users' academic contexts. Only through resources and services can they truly combine and become information support for innovation capabilities. Therefore, CASHL's subject services cannot be defined solely by academic literature usage volume but must establish a subject service model that is CASHL user needs-

centered, embedded in users' research processes, and enhances users' research innovation capabilities and humanistic literacy through providing various literature resources and dynamic knowledge services. By deepening subject service functions, CASHL itself will transform from a "literature provider" to a "capability cultivator," which not only helps solve its current dilemmas but also represents its prominent participation in the "Double First-Class" construction.

4.2 Planning Specific Content

University library subject service content is multi-level and integrated, generally including liaison with departments, daily consultation, discipline resource construction, discipline information push, embedded services, and high-end research support. CASHL's subject service content should be reasonably planned based on user needs and combined with CASHL's service characteristics. The focus group research shows that users hope CASHL can develop subject services from aspects such as deeply 挖掘 and integrating resources, enriching discipline dynamic information, information literacy education, and improving academic research support. Based on the research, this article proposes the specific content for CASHL's deepening subject services under the "Double First-Class" construction background, as shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper].

The specific details and implementation methods for these content items include:

- (1) **Focus on One Indicator:** Improve the organization and revelation of core journal indicators. Research results show that users pay great attention to journals, especially core journals. They urgently hope CASHL can further improve the organization and revelation of core journals and provide clear identification. CASHL can learn from some databases by making prominent marks on its homepage for core journals, such as marking CSSCI and SSCI, which would facilitate user identification and improve journal utilization rates.
- (2) **Integrate One Type of Resource (OA):** Improve the integration of OA resources by posting links to these resources on CASHL's homepage. For users, integrated links to OA resources are not only an important channel for quickly accessing OA resources but also a window for understanding and recognizing OA resources, allowing users to dynamically follow the complexity and diversity of information.
- (3) **Publish One Ranking List:** Regularly publish interlibrary loan book borrowing rankings on the homepage so that more users can timely track high-quality academic literature. Humanities and social sciences users' needs for academic works are no longer merely satisfied with acquisition but hope to deeply explore book content and research backgrounds. Therefore, regularly publishing interlibrary loan book borrowing rankings can meet users' information needs for timely tracking of high-quality academic literature.

- (4) **Understand One Academic Context:** In May 2015, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released the “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” conveying the latest concept of information literacy education—that regardless of the form of information literacy education, it must be integrated into users’ academic contexts. The importance of “academics” and “academic context” is evident, which aligns with our focus group research results. Users hope to deeply reveal the characteristics of their academic contexts, such as the process of dissertation proposal and writing, submission guidelines, and academic norms. Therefore, through CASHL’s subject services, interpreting an academic context and demonstrating the research process within it would greatly benefit users.
- (5) **Establish a Free Academic Discussion Community:** Users need to fully exchange ideas on academic issues, making it imperative to establish an academic discussion community. One of the important characteristics of the Web 2.0 information society is participation and sharing. Establishing a free academic discussion community for CASHL users allows humanities and social sciences users to actively engage in academic discussions, share and exchange academic information, and track the latest research trends, fully reflecting the subject service functions contained in CASHL as an important humanities and social sciences information portal.
- (6) **Cultivate One Skill:** The research shows that focus group members learned retrieval skills and improved retrieval efficiency from their CASHL usage experience. They hope CASHL can bring them more information skills. Therefore, in the process of deepening subject services, CASHL should focus on training information literacy skills, such as how to correctly read foreign literature and how to select English journals for submission. In future CASHL promotional activities, each year’s event can be themed as “One CASHL Promotional Activity + One Academic Context + One Information Literacy Skill.” Such design and planning can cultivate users’ academic information literacy capabilities beyond literature acquisition, including literature application abilities and critical thinking skills.
- (7) **Open a CASHL Volunteer Community:** The research shows that many users who have used CASHL services, as gold users, are willing to actively participate in CASHL construction, offer their suggestions, and serve as volunteers to convey CASHL’s culture. The traits of participation and sharing are fully embodied in these CASHL users. Actively participating in CASHL services, expressing their information needs, and transmitting and sharing information literacy skills are characteristics of everyone as both information contributors and consumers in the Web 2.0 information society. Therefore, opening a CASHL volunteer community is a novel manifestation of CASHL’s personalized and humanistic academic services.

4.3 Cultivating Diversified Service Executors

Subject librarians are the main executors of university subject services. Different from university libraries, CASHL's current primary service executors are interlibrary loan staff. Therefore, who will execute these subject service contents is a challenge. Interlibrary loan staff at various service libraries have different working conditions—some engage in full-time interlibrary loan and document delivery work, while many university librarians simultaneously serve as both interlibrary loan staff and subject librarians. Faced with this situation, CASHL should consider the diversification of subject service executors and cultivate the role transformation of interlibrary loan staff into information experts to promote the practical implementation of subject services.

4.4 Establishing a Collaborative Cooperation Mechanism

Subject services are a service form based on multi-party cooperation. Many university libraries primarily rely on close collaboration among subject service teams, departmental management institutions, and users. The deepening of CASHL subject services similarly requires establishing a collaborative cooperation mechanism to ensure smooth work. What is gratifying is that the CASHL Management Center has already begun establishing service working groups to expand functions and achieve transformation through close collaboration among various working groups. On January 17, 2018, the CASHL WeChat public platform released news about the establishment of the CASHL Service Working Group and the 2018 work conference held at Xiamen University from January 4-7. The establishment of service working groups and collaborative cooperation mechanisms precisely reflects CASHL's efforts to promote its own service transformation and deepen service content.

The “Double First-Class” construction background endows CASHL with the motivation and responsibility to expand its service functions. As the only national humanities and social sciences literature collection and service center in China, CASHL needs to deeply integrate its operational characteristics with subject service mechanisms, actively integrate into users' academic contexts, center on users' academic needs, provide deep and efficient subject services for them, assist discipline construction, cultivate users' academic literacy, and convey CASHL's humanistic spirit.

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Author Contributions

Zhang Di: Determined the paper framework, wrote the paper, collected materials, and revised the paper;

Zhao Lin: Guided the paper topic selection.

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Keywords: "Double First-Class" construction program; CASHL; focus group; subject service

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

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