

# Positioning and Implementation of Specialized Branch Libraries in University Library Subject Services: A Case Study of Tsinghua University Library (Postprint)

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## Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Specialized branch libraries have long held a marginal and dispensable position in the subject services of university libraries. In the Internet Plus era, as extensive subject services become increasingly refined, the positioning of specialized branch libraries in university library subject services is undergoing transformation. Redefining this positioning can help bring new growth points to university library subject services and inject vitality and vigor into them. [Method/Process] Taking the subject services of specialized branch libraries at Tsinghua University Library as a case study, this paper introduces positioning principles to explore the positioning and implementation of specialized branch libraries in university library subject services. [Results/Conclusion] University libraries with specialized branch libraries should position these branch libraries as the frontline and forefront of subject services, with the branch libraries serving as the core to establish close collaboration with teaching and research activities in their affiliated disciplines. They should conduct in-depth analysis and mining of faculty and students' information needs, take knowledge services and personalized services as fundamental points, and construct a pan-disciplinary service mechanism that integrates the library with faculties, departments, and other relevant departments.

## Full Text

### Preamble

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## Abstract

**[Purpose/Significance]** Branch libraries have long occupied a marginal position in university library subject services. In the Internet+ era, extensive subject services are becoming increasingly sophisticated, which is changing the role of branch libraries in university library subject services. Redefining this position can bring new growth points and vitality to university library subject services. **[Method/Process]** Taking the subject services of Tsinghua University Library's branch libraries as an empirical case, this paper introduces positioning theory to explore the positioning and implementation of branch libraries in university library subject services. **[Result/Conclusion]** University libraries with branch libraries should position them as the frontline and frontier of subject services. With branch libraries as the core, libraries should cooperate closely with the teaching and research activities of their affiliated disciplines, deeply analyze and excavate the information needs of faculty and students, and construct a ubiquitous subject service mechanism that integrates the library with departments and other relevant units, based on knowledge services and personalized services as fundamental points.

## 1. The Positioning of Branch Libraries in University Library Subject Services

In 1998, Tsinghua University Library pioneered the establishment of the subject librarian system in China, marking the beginning of subject services in Chinese university libraries. For two decades, branch libraries have remained in a marginal position within these services. As human society enters the Internet+ era, people's ability to discover and access information has greatly improved, and traditional extensive subject services can no longer meet the needs of university users, who now demand in-depth, one-on-one sophisticated subject services. In this context, branch libraries, with their advantages of geographical proximity and specialized resources, are gradually moving to the forefront of university subject services, necessitating a redefinition of their position.

### 1.1 “Branch System” in the History of Subject Service Development

Since the 1950s, subject service theory and practice have developed considerably in Europe and America, where the branch library system played an important role in the history of subject services. The first true university library with a subject branch system in the United States was established at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Based on disciplinary collection development, each branch set up independent reading rooms and reference desks. Within the scope of library operations, this system allowed subject librarians to undertake all aspects of work related to their professional backgrounds, including having dedicated subject librarians responsible for collection development and reader services in each branch, and implementing a professional librarian counterpart service model based on disciplinary classification. This maximized the value

of subject librarians and is regarded by academia as the formal establishment of the subject librarian system [1-2]. Subsequently, subject librarians became popular in comprehensive university libraries in developed regions [2], and by 1960, most American university libraries had undergone structural reorganization according to the branch system, giving rise to full-time subject librarians [3]. In China, universities began establishing professional branch libraries in the 1990s, but to date, most branch library operations remain limited to circulation services, and consensus on the importance and core status of branch libraries in subject services has not been reached in academia or the profession.

## **1.2 Positioning Theory and Its Application to Branch Library Positioning**

Jack Trout first systematically proposed the concept of “positioning” in his 1969 article “Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind” [4], originally intended to solve the problem of how businesses can stand out from homogeneous competition. In 1972, Al Ries and Jack Trout introduced positioning theory, creating a new marketing mindset and philosophy [5]. Positioning refers to identifying a product’s distinctive advantages based on in-depth analysis of competing products and accurate assessment of consumer needs, and establishing a privileged position for that product in consumers’ minds. Positioning is not product-centered but user-centered, aiming to differentiate competing products in users’ minds. The most important insight from positioning theory is that the ultimate battlefield for businesses lies in users’ minds, and any enterprise seeking competitive victory must resonate with users’ minds at the same frequency.

Similarly, to address the serious homogenization of resources and services in the Internet+ era and to stand out from competition with database vendors, publishers, and search engines, university libraries must create their own privileged position in readers’ minds. University libraries with professional branch libraries should position these branches as the frontline and frontier of subject services. With branch libraries as the core, libraries should cooperate closely with the teaching and research activities of their affiliated disciplines, deeply analyze and excavate the information needs of faculty and students, and construct a ubiquitous subject service mechanism that integrates the library with departments and other relevant units, based on knowledge services and personalized services as fundamental points. This will drive optimization of operational mechanisms including resource integration, institutional reorganization, and service design, safeguarding scientific research and teaching in universities and contributing to long-term disciplinary development. This is the branch library positioning defined in this paper.

## **1.3 New Relationship Between Main and Branch Libraries Under the New Positioning**

In the 1980s, the American Library Association defined the main-branch library system as follows: the main library is the primary location for collections

and centralized document processing in the library system, independently established as the management center; branch libraries are subsidiaries of the main library, extensions of its operations, with basic collections, regular staff, and fixed opening hours [6]. This definition clarified the status, roles, and relationship between main and branch libraries. After more than 30 years of development and change, this definition no longer reflects the main-branch relationship in the Internet+ era. The new positioning of branch libraries as the frontline and frontier of subject services reveals that the relationship should be: the main library serves as the management center and centralized acquisition and processing site for the entire library system; branch and main libraries have complementary collections that together form the library system's holdings; in terms of services, branch libraries are the core of subject services while the main library is the core of basic library services, with both cooperating closely to meet the information needs of teaching and research, and advancing university libraries along the path of knowledge services.

#### 1.4 Pan-Subject Service Ecosystem with Branch Libraries as the Core

After decades of development, subject services have evolved from traditional document resource construction and guarantee, and reference consultation, to embedded, knowledge-based, personalized, and ubiquitous proactive services within teaching and research processes, emphasizing equal partnership rather than hierarchical relationships with users. Within the university library system, branch libraries' physical spaces are closer to the departments they serve, with many sharing the same building; their specialized resources are far more systematic, concentrated, and in-depth than those of the main library, and are organized in ways that facilitate discovery and use by discipline-specific readers; branch librarians can more easily establish close, positive interactive relationships with their readers, enabling them to promptly understand disciplinary characteristics and trends, track disciplinary development, and provide personalized proactive services and special services needed by faculty and students, such as timely training and office visits [7].

Interaction, connection, and networking are essential characteristics of the Internet+ era, as people seek "arbitrary interaction and unlimited connection." In light of this, university libraries should strive to build a harmonious, balanced, continuously evolving, organic knowledge service system where readers and librarians coexist and prosper, forming a complete ecosystem. Specifically for subject services, this means creating a pan-subject service ecosystem with branch libraries as the core and user needs as the orientation, vertically integrating the library business chain and horizontally expanding the user relationship circle, breaking traditional library business boundaries and overturning old subject service models. As shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]:

## 2. Implementation of Branch Library Positioning

### 2.1 Key Issues in Implementing Branch Library Positioning

**2.1.1 User-Centric Thinking** Subject services must not be self-referential; everything must start from the user. Branch libraries can leverage their proximity to users to observe, analyze, and study users' daily teaching and research behaviors. What already exists in users' minds, or what can be excavated through combinational innovation, is what we should focus on and forms the basis for successful innovation. What subject services can offer is not the key; user needs determine success or failure.

**2.1.2 Competitive Thinking** Psychologist George Miller believed that human memory and storage capacity is limited to about seven items; in reality, most users' minds can only store two brands per category, following the binary law. If we cannot become one of these two, we need to create and dominate a new category, using it to open consumers' minds and occupy first place. Branch libraries should pay attention to competitors such as disciplinary database vendors and publishers, identify unmet needs of faculty and students in teaching and research, find differentiated mind-share models, create new subject service projects, and become first or second in their category.

**2.1.3 Focused Thinking** Once branch library positioning is clear, resources must be allocated around this positioning to build core competitiveness. Core processes and resources that determine whether positioning can be achieved must be firmly controlled by the branch library, while others can be strategically abandoned or outsourced, such as outsourcing circulation services or centralizing resource processing at the main library.

**2.1.4 Strategic Thinking** Positioning addresses fundamental strategic questions and must be linked to strategy. University libraries must allocate resources according to positioning, build a main-branch system that aligns with positioning, and thereby construct their own competitive barriers. Libraries must identify value gaps in subject services from users' minds, allocate resources from the outside in, build a coordinated main-branch system, and establish competitive barriers.

### 2.2 Content of Branch Library Subject Services

Under the new branch library positioning, subject services form a partnership with the teaching and research of served disciplines, requiring branches to proactively and dynamically establish cooperation with corresponding departments and provide decision-making reference information for research projects, such as services embedded throughout the entire research lifecycle, including selective dissemination of information (SDI) and novelty searches. Therefore, based on foundational subject services, branch libraries must further expand and deepen services to develop subject knowledge services centered on user needs and based on knowledge and personalized services. This requires librarians to have system-

atic, in-depth professional knowledge in a specific discipline, timely and precise grasp of disciplinary frontiers, and solid library and information science fundamentals.

Branch library subject services can be divided into three layers:

**2.2.1 Foundational Subject Services** Traditional reference consultation, disciplinary resource construction (in addition to conventional resources like professional books, journals, and databases, non-publications such as teaching syllabi, plans, lesson plans, exam questions, grading standards, research archives, academic exchange documents, and graduate theses are also priorities), information literacy education, document delivery, interlibrary loan, citation retrieval, and recommending disciplinary resources to departments.

**2.2.2 Teaching and Research Services** Embedded course instruction, information services embedded in the research lifecycle (including research follow-up and embedded research assistance), disciplinary resource navigation, disciplinary characteristic databases, SDI services, novelty searches, and subject service platforms.

**2.2.3 Disciplinary Intelligence Services** Scholar repositories, institutional repositories, think tank information services [8], disciplinary hotspot tracking and push, disciplinary frontier guides, disciplinary development trend assessment, knowledge asset management, and disciplinary talent recruitment evaluation.

### **2.3 Branch Library Subject Service Model: The “Trinity” of Subject Librarians + Faculty Advisors + Student Advisors**

Subject services are essentially teamwork that relies on support and cooperation from all library business units and relevant university departments. For example, in embedded course instruction services, subject librarians work closely with instructors throughout the entire teaching process, including syllabi, classroom teaching, assignments, Q&A, and grading, requiring substantial support from library resource development, IT, and reference services, as well as frequent communication and coordination with the university’s academic affairs office, campus network center, and departmental teaching offices. In the process of providing subject services, branch libraries have developed a “trinity” team service model of subject librarians + faculty advisors + student advisors, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

In this service team, subject librarians are the core, while faculty advisors and student advisors are important components and primary channels for librarians to obtain disciplinary information needs and understand user requirements for teaching and research. The mutual support among different roles in the team facilitates targeted subject services. Referencing Cornell University Library’s CRIO (Collection, Reference, Instruction, Outreach) responsibility system for liaison librarians [9], the specific operational mechanisms of the “trinity” model

are as follows:

**(1) Collection:** Subject librarians accurately grasp disciplinary development trends, comprehensively understand the distribution of disciplinary collection resources, and take full responsibility for disciplinary collection development. With the help of faculty and student advisors, they maintain close contact with teaching and research staff to identify their real needs, while communicating closely with circulation and acquisition departments to satisfy user demands.

**(2) Reference:** Subject librarians participate in reference services, understanding research project progress in served departments through faculty advisors, and embed themselves throughout the entire research lifecycle to provide more specialized, in-depth, dynamic, and proactive consultation services.

**(3) Instruction:** Subject librarians are responsible for teaching information literacy courses and embedding themselves in professional course instruction, developing training content according to student needs with the help of student advisors.

**(4) Outreach:** The “trinity” interface of subject librarians, faculty advisors, and student advisors facilitates both active promotion of resources and services to departmental faculty and students and in-depth understanding of disciplinary construction and teaching/research needs.

Overall, branch library subject services are deep, multi-dimensional services that, through cooperative relationships between the library and university teaching/research activities, construct a multi-integrated service mechanism with departments and other relevant units, driving optimization of operational mechanisms including resource integration, institutional reorganization, and service design, thereby safeguarding scientific research and teaching and contributing to long-term disciplinary development.

### 3. Tsinghua University Case Study: Concrete Implementation of Branch Library Positioning

Tsinghua University currently has six professional branch libraries: the Economics and Management Library, Architecture Library, Law Library, Arts Library, Fine Arts Library, and Finance Library. Due to historical reasons, these branch libraries were established at different times and under different circumstances, with varying relationships of affiliation to the main library. The relationship between main and branch libraries in Tsinghua University’s library system is shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]. The main library provides guidance, supervision, and coordination for all branch libraries to ensure the entire system operates as a unified whole, maximizing the effectiveness of limited human, financial, and material resources to contribute to Tsinghua University’s “Double First-Class” construction. For disciplines with branch libraries, these branches should be the focus and frontline of subject services. At Tsinghua, except for the Arts Library, the other five branch libraries are located

within the buildings of the schools they serve. Branch librarians work and study alongside faculty and students like family members, making them the librarians closest to departments. Their communication is most convenient, timely, and effective, and through daily interactions, branch librarians can obtain considerable implicit information, understand readers' latent information needs, and identify "pain points" in teaching and research—the key to successful subject services.

### **3.1 Finance Library as the Core of Finance Subject Services**

The Finance Library is a professional branch library serving all Tsinghua University faculty and students with specialized finance subject services. Located within the Tsinghua University PBC School of Finance, off the main campus, its special geographical position and professional orientation determine that its primary users are faculty and students of the School of Finance.

#### **3.1.1 Clarifying Service Mission and Streamlining Relationships with Served Departments**

The Finance Library has clearly defined its mission to serve the teaching and research of the School of Finance, taking proactive steps to establish communication channels and properly manage relationships with various school departments. Specific measures include: (1) Establishing a business contact network with the school's information office, general affairs office, administrative office, alumni office, teaching affairs office, and research office; visiting school leaders and disciplinary experts to explain future collection development plans and challenges; securing funding support from the school; identifying fixed contacts in relevant departments; and establishing real-time communication channels. (2) Forming a library liaison support group in the School of Finance comprising the vice dean in charge of teaching and research, faculty advisors, student advisors, and directors of research and teaching affairs offices to ensure the library's resource organization and development meet disciplinary construction and professional development needs. (3) Using every opportunity to communicate with users (such as in the cafeteria, walking on campus, in elevators, or when users visit the library) to identify key needs ("pain points") in the school's teaching and research, and leveraging the entire Tsinghua University Library system and global resource control to solve these pain points and create highlights for the Finance Library's work.

#### **3.1.2 User-Centered Services for Different User Groups**

User needs are always the driving force of services. The Finance Library provides appropriate subject service projects for different user groups to improve service efficiency. Finance faculty and students have diverse information usage habits and preferences, varying widely in scope and depth of expertise, and with different language preferences—undergraduates and master's students prefer Chinese resources, while doctoral students and faculty prefer foreign resources. Therefore, subject librarians must be able to quickly make accurate judgments and provide different services based on specific situations. Finance users are most concerned with real-time data and news events, requiring timely information; thus, vari-

ous numerical databases and current affairs databases are the focus of collection development, while print resources serve only as supplements due to their lower timeliness. The Finance Library emphasizes electronic resources in its collection development. Beyond providing targeted resources and services, the library also offers needs guidance services. Currently, libraries offer more than ten types of information services, such as information consultation, network services, mobile services, self-service, and database training, but are all these services accepted and frequently used by departmental faculty and students? Do they play significant roles in users' information acquisition processes? The library needs to collect and analyze such information to maximize needs guidance services.

**3.1.3 Case Studies** The Finance Library has implemented many subject service projects; here we share several typical cases.

**(1) Supporting Student Entrepreneurship: The “Air Library” Project of Shu Lei (FMMBA 2015, CEO of Shanghai Xirang Culture Communication Co., Ltd.)** Finance is a highly practical discipline, and most students in programs such as the Tsinghua-Cornell Dual Degree Finance MBA (FMMBA), Finance EMBA, and Global Finance Doctorate (GFD) are finance industry practitioners. Therefore, supporting student entrepreneurship is an important component of the Finance Library's subject services. Using combined expertise in library science and finance, subject librarians provided exemplary knowledge services to Shu Lei's “Air Library” startup project during its product design and development phase.

In January 2016, Shu Lei sought technical consultation at the Finance Library for his “Air Library” startup project. The finance subject librarian provided professional opinions on book metadata standards, circulation, and project prospects. After multiple phone calls and emails, they clarified Air Library's positioning: a physical book sharing and reading social platform based on user location relationships, offering services such as quick sharing, posting, searching, borrowing, deposit guarantees, credit evaluation, social circles, and offline reading clubs. During Air Library 2.0, the subject librarian provided detailed guidance, offering data on library collection sizes and book metadata standards in China, personally registering as a test user, posting books, participating in testing, and communicating feedback on test results and improvement suggestions. In December 2016, during a business trip to Beijing, Shu Lei again discussed promotion ideas with the finance subject librarian. During Air Library 3.0, the librarian introduced Shu Lei to Blue Book Data Company to solve ISBN database technical support issues and suggested comprehensive promotion throughout Tsinghua's campus after product launch.

**(2) Transnational Subject Services: Support for Sino-Foreign Joint Programs** Tsinghua University has many joint programs with foreign universities. How to fully utilize academic resources from both Tsinghua and partner universities to better provide subject services for such programs is a new challenge. Since 2015, the Finance Library has collaborated with Cornell University's Johnson Management Library to provide transnational subject services

for the “Tsinghua-Cornell Dual Degree Finance MBA” (FMMBA) program.

First, the two libraries formed an FMMBA subject service group composed of librarians from both sides, led by the deputy director of the Finance Library, and jointly issued a support plan: “Cornell-Tsinghua Dual Degree MBA/FMMBA Library Support Plan,” to support the program’s teaching and research. To enable FMMBA faculty and students to seamlessly access database resources from both libraries in China and the US, the Finance Library remotely tested more than 70 Cornell economic and management databases and issued detailed test reports, providing users with first-hand information on resource availability. Second, the libraries exchange staff for month-long visits, during which visiting librarians serve as subject librarians at the partner library to gain firsthand experience of service models, resources, and organizational structures, enabling them to provide more practical solutions for future project services. Third, the libraries use LibGuides to create a bilingual joint navigation portal for FMMBA subject services, jointly determining main content, homepage templates, update frequency, responsible librarians, and cooperation models. Using this portal, the Finance Library conducts annual orientation for FMMBA freshmen, holds lectures on data collection and utilization for thesis proposals and writing for graduating FMMBA classes, and provides embedded instruction for each FMMBA course, answering daily inquiries from FMMBA faculty and students.

**(3) Special Subject Services: Special Treatment for Wudaokou Alumni** Wudaokou is known as China’s “Financial Whampoa.” Its alumni include numerous finance “big shots,” “gurus,” and “moguls” who constitute valuable human resources for the School of Finance and its disciplinary development. Many alumni serve as adjunct professors participating in graduate teaching and supervision. Providing special subject services for Wudaokou alumni is an innovative initiative jointly launched by the Finance Library and the school’s alumni office. The Finance Library and the School of Finance Alumni Office jointly signed the “Regulations on Wudaokou School of Finance Alumni Use of Tsinghua University Library,” and with technical support from Tsinghua’s Information Center, spent nearly two years completing alumni card production, usage and management regulations, alumni database construction, and data integration with the library’s access control and integrated library system, enabling Wudaokou alumni to use the Finance Library like on-campus readers.

Due to limitations such as lacking Tsinghua University status and fixed offices, adjunct professors face difficulties accessing library resources. Finance Library subject librarians always try to provide convenience for adjunct professors, such as using their own accounts to help retrieve and download materials, maximizing satisfaction of their teaching and research needs within reasonable and legal bounds. Additionally, the Finance Library has established a special alumni shelf to collect books donated by School of Finance alumni, enhancing their sense of belonging and encouraging more alumni to contribute to school development.

### 3.2 Fine Arts Library as the Core of Fine Arts and Design Subject Services

The predecessor of the Academy of Arts & Design was the Central Academy of Arts & Crafts, with disciplines covering fine arts, design, and art studies, which are the primary service areas of the Fine Arts Library. In recent years, the improved knowledge structure of Fine Arts Library users has placed higher demands on the content and quality of subject services. Fine arts is a highly practical discipline, such as painting and sculpture, and also requires substantial non-textual resources. During the creative process, artwork production requires extensive supporting materials. Fine Arts Library subject librarians provide creators with relevant historical materials, images, pictures, and other academic resources based on their needs and collection status to help complete their works. In subject services, librarians flexibly apply the latest information technologies and tools such as Fetion, QQ, Weibo, and WeChat to expand service scope and enhance service capabilities, establishing ubiquitous and seamless connections with faculty and students. For example, when Professor Dai Daquan from the Printmaking Department was creating a portrait print of Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945, German printmaker and sculptor), the subject librarian provided images via WeChat, which was convenient and timely.

Subject librarians maintain weekly contact with the Academy's research secretary, professional professors, and student union leaders to obtain the latest updates on teaching and research, enabling proactive services. In early 2014, the subject librarian learned that 13 faculty members from the Academy had been selected for the "Chinese Civilization Historical Themes Art Creation Project." This project, jointly planned, organized, and implemented by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Culture, was officially launched at the end of 2011 with a five-year completion plan. The completed works will be displayed in important venues such as the National Museum of China and the Great Hall of the People, holding significant historical, artistic, and practical value. The creation content covers politics, economy, culture, education, science and technology, military affairs, diplomacy, and other fields. Faculty members use visual art forms such as painting, sculpture, and printmaking to present 5,000 years of historical civilization. During the creation process, due to the need for extensive materials, subject librarians proactively researched project topics, visited and contacted some faculty members to understand their creative needs, and provided information services support including historical materials, images, pictures, and digital electronic resources based on collection status, pushing resources via electronic resources, email, and telephone to support the Academy's disciplinary development.

Due to the demands of the times and their own characteristics, branch libraries have become the frontline and frontier of university subject services. However, due to historical reasons, branch libraries lag significantly behind the main library in human resources and physical space, which severely limits the realization of branch library positioning. From this perspective, university library

subject services still face a long and arduous road ahead.

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## Author Contributions

**Author Contributions:** Sun Yang: Responsible for writing Section 3.2. Yan Ling: Responsible for writing Sections 1, 2, 3, 3.1, and 4, as well as overall manuscript editing.

## English Abstract

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Redefining this position can bring new growth points and vitality to university library subject services. [Method/Process] Taking the subject services of Tsinghua University Library's branch libraries as an empirical case, this paper introduces positioning theory to explore the positioning and implementation of branch libraries in university library subject services. [Result/Conclusion] University libraries with branch libraries should position them as the frontline and frontier of subject services. With branch libraries as the core, libraries should cooperate closely with the teaching and research activities of their affiliated disciplines, deeply analyze and excavate the information needs of faculty and students, and construct a ubiquitous subject service mechanism that integrates the library with departments and other relevant units, based on knowledge services and personalized services as fundamental points.

**Keywords:** branch library; university library; subject service; positioning

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

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