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The Return of the Library's Mission from the Perspective of Book Collection History

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Abstract

Book selection and collection, as a fundamental library business operation, has long been severely neglected in importance, with fundamental theoretical research failing to achieve breakthroughs for an extended period. In the contemporary era where reading media are increasingly diversified, digitalized, massive, and intelligent, the lag in both theory and practice has already exerted non-negligible negative impacts on the long-term development of libraries. This paper aims to trace back to the origins, commencing from the collection development history of libraries both ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, endeavoring from the perspective of enriching and inheriting the knowledge system of human civilization, to conduct an examination and exploration of the fundamental attributes and ultimate mission of libraries from a new perspective.

Full Text

The Return to the Mission of Libraries from the Perspective of Collection History

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Abstract

Book selection and collection development, as fundamental library operations, have long been severely undervalued, with their underlying theoretical research failing to achieve breakthrough progress. In an era where reading media are becoming increasingly diversified, digitalized, massive, and intelligent, this lag in theory and practice has exerted a non-negligible negative impact on the long-term development of libraries. This article seeks to trace the origins, beginning with the historical development of library collections both in China and abroad, and aims to examine and explore the fundamental nature and ultimate mission

of libraries from a new perspective—one that emphasizes the enrichment and inheritance of human civilization’s knowledge system.

Keywords: libraries; book selection; collection development; knowledge system

Book procurement represents fundamental work for every library, whether public or private—what is commonly called “buying and acquiring books.” Regardless of how library forms evolve, how new technologies are applied, or whether we consider print or electronic books, this basic task of acquiring books can never be eliminated or avoided. Even if print books disappear in the future and new types of libraries emerge that only provide electronic reading services, the question of how to select electronic books will remain. Even super online reading platforms like Chaoxing cannot evade this issue when facing massive numbers of publications.

The issue of book selection has existed since the birth of the first library and persists to this day, though with different characteristics across historical periods.

1. The Nature of the Problem: Ancient vs. Modern Libraries

1.1 The Stage of Scarcity: Having Too Few Books to Collect

In ancient societies, low productivity, underdeveloped education, and backward printing technology resulted in extremely scarce documentation. Laozi, founder of Daoism, once served as the imperial librarian of the Zhou Dynasty (as Keeper of the Archives), yet the collection amounted to only a few thousand bamboo scrolls. The Library of Alexandria during the Ptolemaic period was the world’s largest library at the time, housing nearly all documented works of the Western world. Later accounts of its collection size vary widely, from 50,000 to over 200,000 scrolls—but even the highest estimate equals only a small contemporary county-level library in China today.

Chinese emperors frequently ordered the confiscation of private collections to enrich their imperial libraries. Whether it was the *Yongle Encyclopedia* commissioned by Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty or the *Siku Quanshu* compiled under Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, both attempted to capture all books under heaven. This illustrates a fundamental reality: in ancient societies, with low literacy rates and authorship limited to a tiny elite of monks, nobles, and scholars, the technical barriers to writing were extremely high. Consequently, the number of books was necessarily limited, and their information content was modest—many works contained only a few thousand characters, while those exceeding 100,000 characters were considered monumental (also reflecting the conciseness of classical Chinese). This bears no comparison to the present. Moreover, due to printing limitations, copy numbers were extremely low; before the invention of printing, duplication relied entirely on manual transcription. Thus, ancient libraries’ greatest dilemma was having too few books

to collect.

1.2 The Stage of Saturation: Having Too Many Books to House

Conversely, after the Renaissance in the West and throughout the 20th century in China, the popularization of education and rapid development of printing technology dramatically lowered the barriers to authorship while exponentially increasing publication speed and volume. Writing was no longer the privilege of a tiny elite; ordinary people could write and publish books. The number of publications exploded, a trend further amplified since the 21st century by the internet and digital technology. Today, global annual publications number in the millions. The U.S. Library of Congress, the world's largest library, holds over 100 million volumes, with total shelf length reportedly exceeding one hundred miles. Libraries worldwide soon faced three common challenges: too many books and insufficient space, how to achieve professional selection, and what value standards should guide this selection.

2. Challenges and Reflections on Book Selection Work

The transition from having too few books to having too many has made the library profession's predicament more severe, because subtraction is far more difficult than addition. Addition is quantitative accumulation—a process of “the more, the better” with relatively low selection pressure. Subtraction, however, involves value choices. Selecting the best from millions of annual publications is exponentially more difficult than simply acquiring everything. Collection saturation constitutes the greatest crisis facing modern libraries.

Since its emergence, the library profession has studied collection saturation and proposed various theories and solutions. These can be summarized as follows:

2.1 Expanding Physical Capacity

This is the most intuitive response to collection saturation, yet clearly unsustainable. Even if funding were unlimited, physical expansion cannot continue indefinitely, while publications grow without bound.

2.2 Balancing Acquisition and Weeding to Maintain Stable Collection Size

Since unlimited expansion is impossible and publications increase infinitely, libraries cannot stop acquiring new books or updating collections. Consequently, most libraries simultaneously purchase new books while weeding old ones, or minimize acquisition quantities to maintain stable collection sizes. However, this approach has obvious drawbacks. Weeding becomes increasingly difficult in both quantity and criteria; old books are not necessarily worthless. Determining which books to discard and which to preserve involves complex value

judgments no less challenging than selecting new books. Using university libraries as an example: despite new buildings that greatly improved capacity, national requirements for per-capita collection size and per-capita new acquisitions continue to create enormous pressure.

2.3 Alleviating Pressure Through Interlibrary Resource Sharing

Some have proposed interlibrary cooperation, where geographically proximate libraries reach agreements on collection development and reader services, dividing acquisition responsibilities by subject to avoid duplication while allowing readers to share all participating libraries' resources through interlibrary loan. This approach's benefit—optimizing collection space across libraries and avoiding redundancy—is obvious. Interlibrary resource sharing gained popularity for a time but has recently fallen into decline. The reasons lie in operational difficulties: it requires rigorous coordination of acquisition plans, with strict division of subjects and quantities and no overlap in collections. While feasible for main-branch library systems, this proves difficult for parallel, independent libraries. Moreover, resource sharing ultimately fails because libraries differ significantly in their current resources, value orientations, and development potential. Forcing them to share would effectively require resource-rich libraries to subsidize resource-poor ones without compensation—an obviously unjust arrangement.

2.4 Can Electronic Resources Solve Collection Saturation?

Electronic resources seemed to offer a turning point. Many believe that e-books replacing print books and digital resources replacing physical collections represent the inevitable future. Electronic resources occupy negligible physical space compared to bookshelves, and their lack of required duplicates amplifies this spatial advantage. While this trend is acknowledged, electronic resources also face value selection issues: no matter how space-saving or convenient, they must still be selected and purchased. No library, regardless of financial resources, can acquire all electronic resources. In terms of value selection, they differ little from print resources. Furthermore, the mobile and online nature of electronic resources gives commercial platforms inherent advantages. If these platforms offer richer, faster-updated resources freely accessible to all, why would anyone go out of their way to visit libraries or access these platforms through library portals? Years ago, some lamented that the rise of electronic resources might lead to libraries' demise—a concern that is not alarmist.

This demonstrates that electronic resources cannot replace print resources or solve collection problems. Print resources remain fundamental to libraries' existence.

2.5 Is Book Lending No Longer Libraries' Main Business?

Another perspective holds that collection issues will no longer be libraries' primary concern, and that libraries should focus on literature and information

retrieval and consulting services beyond books, making traditional acquisition and collection development less important. This view is unconvincing for several reasons. First, libraries are not merely document centers. Second, most literature retrieval can be conducted online without requiring physical visits. Third, readers can often bypass libraries using other tools. Fourth, as retrieval technology becomes increasingly standardized, simplified, and intelligent, what value or advantage can libraries' traditional manual services offer? Fifth, if traditional businesses are allowed to stagnate or disappear, how can large-scale social activities like reading promotion be conducted?

This leads to an unavoidable question: what is the essential nature of libraries, and what is the most fundamental characteristic that makes a library truly a library? The answer remains books—especially print books and their lending services.

3. Returning to the Root: Rediscovering Libraries' True Mission

In our complex, rapidly changing, and tempting world, recognizing one's true mission is no easy task. Using libraries as an example: society places too many expectations on them, demanding they undertake numerous responsibilities and missions. So many high-profile tasks overwhelm librarians that many fundamental, unglamorous, basic works are neglected, causing many to forget their true mission.

Infrastructure investment is perpetually lagging and endless. No matter how large or luxurious the building, it only temporarily delays collection saturation and provides more study seats, offering little other benefit. No matter how many data resources are purchased, they represent only a drop in the bucket in today's information explosion and quickly become outdated. No matter how many electronic publications are acquired, they cannot surpass commercially operated online reading platforms. Manual literature and intellectual property retrieval services will inevitably be replaced by artificial intelligence in the near future. Moreover, whether a subject librarian can truly provide valuable academic consulting services involves significant ambiguity in both evaluation standards and practical implementation. Ancient book collections are primarily historical, archaeological, cultural artifacts with limited practical value for most readers, serving mainly to satisfy curiosity. None of these areas justify becoming libraries' most essential, core, or representative business. Libraries' essential characteristic and core business can only be print book-related services and reading promotion.

A library's ability to attract readers does not depend primarily on building size, collection quantity, facility sophistication, or service variety. If every book is carefully selected, embodying the selector's rigorous values, then even a small village library room or modest private study possesses its own charm and value. Books are not decorative scenery, and bookshelves are not satisfactory simply

when filled with beautifully bound volumes. Every librarian should calm their mind, endure the loneliness, and year after year, book by book, carefully select titles within their areas of expertise while sharing the rationale for these choices with colleagues and readers. We need not worry about collection saturation. Whether comprehensive large libraries, small but complete specialized libraries, or mobile reading stations that are small and incomplete—as long as every title is carefully and responsibly selected, quantity and space are not the main issues.

What is the essence of books? Our familiar library classification systems represent an articulation of the architecture of human civilization's knowledge system. From ancient times to the present, libraries have had only one true mission: to accumulate and inherit this knowledge system. This system grows infinitely and at an accelerating pace. No single library can contain it all. In this sense, all libraries worldwide constitute a whole, with each library representing a component of this collective mission, differing only in division of labor. From this same perspective, each library should also be personalized and unique. This distinctive individuality constitutes its charm and value. Imagine how terrible and tragic it would be if all libraries were uniform, with small and weak libraries emulating large and strong ones, making collections and services identical.

Regarding value judgment, standards are relative overall—there exists no supreme, eternal, unchanging criterion, particularly for human civilization's knowledge system. However, advocating relativity does not mean individuals can choose irresponsibly. In this sense, value also possesses absoluteness. In book selection, good books may not be popular, but they withstand the test of time. Whether the decision-maker is a library director, acquisition manager, or subject librarian, they need not cater to every reader preference. They must stand at a higher perspective, using their vision and insight to examine and judge, thereby determining the library's resource position and value position within the entire human civilization knowledge system.

Advocating a return to the ancient, ultimate mission of collection does not mean creating a new superstition about books and reading. In today's era of exploding knowledge and information, where access methods are increasingly diversified, visualized, digitalized, and convenient, reading newspapers and books is no longer the primary way people obtain information. We cannot claim that those who don't read are necessarily ignorant or ill-informed. So why do we still advocate reading and promote it? Why do we remain convinced that libraries will not disappear and should return to their mission? Because books carry systematic, refined knowledge that can transcend temporal and spatial limitations to be passed down to future generations. Information obtained from the internet and mobile devices, however abundant and convenient, remains fragmented and quickly outdated. Therefore, we have every reason to believe that libraries will not disappear, good books will not become obsolete, and reading will not become outdated. Selecting and collecting good books constitutes the best service to readers, the greatest respect for them, and the most successful reading promotion.

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

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