

## Reflections on Several Alienation Phenomena in Current Chinese Libraries: Post-Print

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### Abstract

Currently, China's library sector has witnessed several alienation phenomena that deviate from the fundamental nature and mission of libraries, including arbitrary appointments of directors and staff, the library council system becoming a mere formality, library space reconstruction degenerating into space abuse, university libraries transforming into study halls, and the neglect of physical library construction. The common thread among these alienation phenomena is their departure from the fundamental nature and mission that "libraries are specialized public welfare spaces dedicated to satisfying people's reading needs."

### Full Text

#### Preamble

#### Reflections on Several Alienation Phenomena in Current Chinese Libraries

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**Abstract** Currently, the Chinese library sector has witnessed several alienation phenomena that deviate from the fundamental nature and mission of libraries. These include arbitrary appointment of directors and staff, the library council system becoming merely ornamental, library space reconstruction degenerating into reckless construction, university libraries transforming into self-study halls, and the neglect of physical library development. The common thread among these phenomena is their departure from the core principle that "libraries are specialized public welfare spaces dedicated to fulfilling people's reading needs."

[**Keywords**] libraries; nature and mission; alienation phenomena

The operational process of libraries should consistently reflect their fundamental nature and mission. As the head of an institution, the library director need not attend to every detail personally. Rather than micromanaging, the director should focus on major governance issues—specifically, securing and allocating resources essential for sustainable, high-quality library development. Other matters should be delegated to assistants, deputy directors, and department heads for implementation. From this perspective, the director's core responsibility is to serve as the leader who secures all necessary resources for library development. A director's character and competence have a “lever effect” on a library's sustainable development. These resources encompass information resources, facilities, and equipment. Whether these resources can be secured in a timely manner depends on the director's sense of responsibility and work capability. In China's library sector, arbitrary appointment of directors has become widespread and appears to be intensifying—a deeply concerning trend.

## 1. The Phenomenon of Arbitrary Appointment of Directors and Staff

Arbitrary appointment of library directors represents a irresponsible practice that fails to consider actual library development needs, often motivated by mere personnel accommodation or the desire to elevate a cadre's administrative rank. To some appointing authorities, the library directorship seems a position anyone can handle, leading them to assign individuals who cannot be promoted elsewhere or those they wish to sideline. Such appointees typically lack library science literacy and professional competence. If a director cannot secure funding or resources, they are by definition unqualified.

This phenomenon is so prevalent that libraries have cynically been dubbed “post-doctoral mobile stations” for unwanted personnel. The irony is clear: if directorships can be arbitrarily assigned, why not other positions? Such appointments demonstrate a profound disrespect for the library profession and its cultural mission. Many appointed directors lack basic knowledge of library history and the institution's cultural responsibilities. As Mr. Cheng Huanwen has criticized, directors with professional library science education and experience are becoming increasingly rare, while those without such backgrounds proliferate.

Some may argue that non-professionals can also make good directors, much as any man can become a father. This facile analogy ignores that professional institutions require professional leadership—just as a hospital director must understand medicine, a library director must comprehend library science. While probability suggests some non-professionals might succeed, professional competence remains a critical selection criterion. The question remains: who bears responsibility for the damage caused by arbitrary appointments?

## 2. The Phenomenon of Library Councils as Mere Ornament

The library council system is a relatively new concept in China. Its origins trace to 1848 when the Massachusetts legislature passed an act establishing the Boston Public Library, stipulating that a council would oversee its operations. As China's public institution reform progressed, public libraries were incorporated into council governance systems. The 2007 *Decision on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensive Deepening of Reform* and the 2017 *Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China* provided the policy and legal foundation for establishing governance structures with participation from stakeholders and the public. Consequently, most municipal-level public libraries have now formed councils, gradually establishing governance structures.

Library councils are intended as deliberative and decision-making bodies responsible for major institutional affairs. According to the Shenzhen Library Charter, the council exercises decision-making power over development strategies, annual work plans, financial budgets, compensation schemes, and director appointments. However, in practice, this promising system has not been effectively implemented.

Currently, council chairs are typically local cultural bureau deputy directors, while executive directors are usually the library directors themselves—a composition that perpetuates traditional administrative management patterns. Many libraries still operate under the “superior leadership decides” model, rendering council deliberation and decision-making functions nominal. Astonishingly, many library staff remain unaware of their council's existence. When asked about the council's purpose, the response is often merely “director's advisory body.”

This raises fundamental questions: When will library councils truly function as deliberative and decision-making institutions? Why do good systems like library councils fail to take root? Drawing from institutional economics, which examines why bad institutions persist, we must ask: What value does a council system have if it exists only as an empty formality?

## 3. The Phenomenon of Reckless Library Space Construction

Libraries are fundamentally public spaces—what social psychologist Schutz termed “second living rooms” or “third spaces.” Functionally, library space divides into collection space and reading space. Reading space extends beyond library walls to community venues. American library scholar Wiegand identifies three reasons people value public libraries: they provide useful information, reading materials that deepen understanding of the world, and public space.

Tragically, space reconstruction has degenerated into reckless construction. Some libraries prioritize aesthetic appeal over functionality, designing spaces for sightseeing and photography rather than reading. Walls display decorative

grids instead of inspirational reading quotes. Some libraries even aim to become “internet-famous” attractions, sacrificing their core mission. As one critic aptly noted, when books become mere scenery and space becomes mere background, the library loses its meaning.

Fan Bingsi and colleagues argue that space reconstruction must follow three principles: creating environments that guide and promote reading, protect and serve reading, and stimulate and motivate reading. Better space does not mean newer or more novel space, but space that better satisfies reading needs.

#### 4. The Phenomenon of University Libraries Becoming Study Halls

What is the fundamental nature and function of university libraries? According to the 2015 *Regulations on University Libraries* issued by the Ministry of Education, university libraries are academic institutions serving talent cultivation and scientific research—the school’s information resource center and crucial component of campus culture. Their primary functions are educational and informational.

In essence, university libraries are specialized reading spaces that fulfill their functions by providing reading services. However, a troubling phenomenon has emerged: most users are now students studying for exams rather than reading library materials. Libraries have become “study halls” where students occupy seats daily while rich information resources remain untouched.

Some argue that restricting self-study users would cause space utilization to plummet. However, this reasoning commits a logical fallacy of confusing means with ends. Following this logic would lead to the absurd conclusion that universities should build study halls instead of libraries. While self-study is legitimate student behavior, libraries must not abandon their core reading mission. The challenge is guiding students toward reading rather than merely occupying seats.

#### 5. The Phenomenon of Neglecting Physical Library Construction

Libraries exist in both physical and non-physical forms. Physical libraries have tangible existence; non-physical libraries (digital, virtual, metaverse) emerge from applying modern IT, AI, and VR technologies. While adopting advanced technology demonstrates progress, technology is merely a means, not an end.

When “library extinction” theories and technology-determinist thinking proliferate, many lose sight of libraries’ cultural and reading-centric values. Some university libraries, despite high occupancy rates, see minimal use of their collections—a clear case of means-ends confusion. Digital libraries are not true libraries but merely databases. Physical libraries purchase database access and transform exclusive products into public goods—this is their unique social value.

The IFLA Trend Report, an authoritative document on library development, emphasizes the indispensable value of physical spaces and print resources. It reminds us that physical and non-physical libraries should coexist and prosper, not replace each other. The current bias toward non-physical libraries at the expense of physical ones must be corrected.

## 6. Conclusion

Since reform and opening up, China's library sector has achieved unprecedented progress. Yet historical and contemporary factors have also produced undesirable alienation phenomena. This paper enumerates several such phenomena, though these are not exhaustive. All these phenomena share a common feature: they deviate from the fundamental nature and mission of libraries as specialized public welfare spaces dedicated to reading.

The arbitrary appointment of directors and staff reveals flaws in personnel management systems. The ornamental status of library councils shows that this decision-making system, transplanted from abroad, requires further adaptation. The transformation of university libraries into study halls raises questions about whether they can maintain their reading-space nature and fulfill their educational and information functions. The neglect of physical library construction reflects misunderstanding of the relationship between physical and non-physical libraries.

These alienation phenomena all point to one core issue: the need to reaffirm that libraries are specialized public welfare spaces that meet reading needs through professional means. Only by returning to this fundamental principle can China's library sector achieve healthy development.

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