

A Preliminary Exploration of China' s Earliest Modern Library*

Wu Rennian

2026-07-24

ChinaRxiv

View the original and related papers at
<https://chinaxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202607.00225>

Source: ChinaXiv. Machine translation. Verify with the original.

Abstract

In the context of “taking America as a model,” the Chinese library community has become confused when discussing the origins of modern librarianship in China. The emergence of modern Chinese libraries was in fact similar to that in Europe, both beginning with the establishment of university libraries. This article argues that the fundamental distinction between a library and a book-collecting building is “public accessibility,” and proposes the historical requirements and three main criteria for measuring the emergence of modern libraries in China. On this basis, it elaborates and confirms six reasons why the book repository of the Tongwen Guan in the capital was the earliest modern library in China, and further proposes two requirements, in addition to the criteria, for determining the earliest modern library in China. It holds that, according to historical records from 1880, the already established and relatively sizable book repository of the Tongwen Guan in the capital was the earliest modern library to emerge in modern China.

Full Text

[Library Community • History]

A Preliminary Exploration of China’ s Earliest Modern Library*

Wu Rennian

Jiangnan University Library, Wuxi, 214122

Abstract In the context of “taking America as teacher,” China’ s library community has encountered confusion when discussing the origins of modern librarianship in China. In fact, the emergence of modern libraries in China was similar to that in Europe: both began with the founding of university libraries. This article argues that the fundamental distinction between a library and a traditional book-collection building lies in “openness,” and proposes the historical requirements and three main criteria for determining the emergence of modern libraries in China. On this basis, it expounds and confirms six reasons why the Book Pavilion of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan was China’ s earliest modern library, and further proposes two additional requirements, beyond the criteria, for identifying China’ s earliest modern library. It holds that, according to historical records from 1880, the already established and relatively sizable Book Pavilion of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan was the earliest modern library to appear in China.

[**Keywords**] Jingshi Tongwen Guan; Book Pavilion; earliest modern library; history of Chinese libraries

[**CLC Number**] G259.29 [**Document Code**] A [**Article No.**] 1003-7845(2026)03-0089-06

[Citation Format] Wu Rennian. A Preliminary Exploration of China's Earliest Modern Library[J]. *Library Work in Colleges and Universities*, 2026(3): 89-94.

In the teaching and research of library history courses, what theme should serve as the guiding thread so that the development of Chinese library history can be grasped in a relatively comprehensive way? With the accumulation of teaching experience in the course, interactive discussions between teachers and students have revealed that “the origins of modern librarianship in China” may perhaps be able to “shoulder this important task.” [1]

Since the 1980s, China has begun to pay more attention to research on issues in library history. After entering the twenty-first century, a large number of articles on library history appeared. The focus of research has been concentrated on the development of the “New Library Movement” period, followed by the development of the late-Qing New Policies period, namely the “Public Library Movement” period. By contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to the development of library history before and after the Reform Movement of 1898; research achievements on the development of modern librarianship in China during the Self-Strengthening Movement and related periods are even fewer. Yet this stage was precisely the crucial period during which modern librarianship in China emerged from nothing and began to take shape. Judging from the current state of research in China's library science community on modern librarianship in China, only by clarifying the question of origins can the course of development and its causes and consequences be made clear. The core issue among these is to determine when the first modern library created by Chinese people—including the government, organizations, individuals, and so forth—appeared, and on this basis to judge the starting point of the development of modern libraries in China. The development before that starting point may be called the stage of origins, rather than the initial stage of development of modern libraries in China.

1 The Confusion and Influence Produced by “Taking America as Teacher”

“Because the emergence and development of modern Chinese library scholarship was, to a great extent, ‘imported,’ from the late Qing to the present, library scholarship in China as a whole may be described as a kind of ‘learning-oriented’ research.” [2] Since the history of Chinese libraries began only after the acceptance of Western library ideas and management methods, some scholars have argued: “For the time being, we may call this the ‘Western-origin thesis of Chinese libraries.’ ” [3]

Since modern times, Europe and the United States have occupied a leading position in library scholarship. In the late Qing and early Republican periods, amid an atmosphere of “taking Japan as teacher,” China's library community introduced, via Japan, a large body of European, American, and Japanese library theories. Beginning with the “New Library Movement,” China gradually entered a stage of “taking America as teacher,” and the influence of European

library theory and practice on the development of Chinese libraries consequently declined step by step; American modern library theory and practice, meanwhile, took the public library as its core object of concern.

The theoretical methods used by European and American library communities to study modern libraries were first introduced into China through missionaries, translations by Chinese scholars, investigations, and other channels. Thereafter, Chinese students who had studied in the United States, having acquired the “true scriptures” of American library theory and practice, vigorously promoted them at home, thus forming a distinctive stage characterized by “taking America as teacher.” In addition, Bao Shiwei, around the important juncture in the development of Chinese librarianship before and after the founding of the Library Association of China, conducted investigations of China’s library community. Through an in-depth understanding of the state of development of Chinese librarianship, he vigorously promoted American public-library theory and practice, pushing the atmosphere in which China’s library community “took America as teacher” to a climax. “After the 1980s, American library scholarship once again became the mainstream of foreign library scholarship disseminated in China; as a result, the contemporary Chinese disciplinary system of library science based on American library scholarship was formed.” [4]

* This article is one of the research outputs of the key later-stage funded project of the National Social Science Fund of China, “Research on the Modern Library Movement in China” (Project No. 25FTQA004).

Author profile: Wu Rennian, research librarian; research field: history of library science.

Date received: 2026-02-25 **Responsible editor:** Xie Weizhen

1.1 The Contradiction between “Taking the United States as Teacher” and the “Temporal Misalignment” of National Conditions

Influenced by American academic thought in library science, in research on the origins of modern libraries in China, by the 2010s the mainstream view in China held that the principal sign of the emergence of modern libraries was the appearance of public libraries: “The main marker of the evolution of ancient book-collection buildings into modern libraries was the establishment of public libraries.” [5] Under the influence of this idea, “the rise and development of Chinese library science in the twentieth century mainly unfolded around public libraries,” [6] and therefore Chinese scholars have focused on exploring the emergence of modern public libraries in China. By attempting to define the birth date of China’s modern public libraries, scholars sought to clarify the starting point of the development of China’s modern librarianship, thereby resolving the core question of the origins of modern Chinese librarianship.

Because scholars differ in their acceptance of the criteria for the emergence of modern public libraries, it has been difficult for the various parties to form

a unified mainstream conclusion. For example, some views hold that the earliest libraries to appear were the “book collection” of the Qiangxue Society, the Changde Library, the Guyue Cangshu Lou, the Hunan Library, the Hubei Provincial Library, the Jiangnan Library, and the Boone Library, among others. In discussing the process by which modern public libraries emerged in China, scholars have argued that “the founding of the Capital Library opened a new era in the history of libraries in China.” [7] Another view holds that the modernization process of Chinese university libraries preceded that of modern public libraries, and that their degree of maturity in the early stage was also higher; for example, the book-collection building of the Imperial University of Peking was the most complete in scale and the most influential library at the time, and “if counted from its predecessors, the library of the Tongwen Guan and the book collection of the Qiangxue Society, it was the earliest new-style library independently founded in modern China.” [8] Still other scholars believe that Peiyang University established a library in 1895, hired an American expert to direct library work, and adopted the Dewey Decimal Classification, making it arguably China’s earliest modern university library.[9] These differing views are difficult to reconcile, resulting in a “hollowing out” of the identification of the starting point of modern Chinese librarianship; the direct consequence is that it becomes difficult to determine the beginning of the development of modern libraries in China. There are mainly three reasons for this situation.

First, the standards of the mature stage of modern American public libraries have been used to study and measure the emergence of modern libraries in China. The main standards of modern American public libraries are publicness, openness, and sharing, embodied specifically in the following: first, free access for all readers; second, funding derived from taxes levied by local administrative bodies; and third, establishment and operation on a legal basis.[10] “This distinguished public libraries from earlier libraries that possessed elements of public character.” [11] *Encyclopedia of China* (Third Edition), *Library Science*, states that the appearance of public libraries maintained by public taxation and open free of charge marked the birth of modern libraries.[12] This standard led to divergences concerning private libraries, association libraries, school libraries, and the like in terms of service recipients, sources of funding, and other aspects, thereby giving rise to different views and research conclusions.

Second, adopting the standards of the mature stage of modern American public libraries produces the consequence of an “anachronistic understanding.” American public libraries did not originate in the mid-nineteenth century; by the time the American Library Association was founded, the development of American public libraries had already entered a mature and flourishing stage. The main forms of early public library development in the United States were “membership libraries” (along with circulating libraries, school-district libraries, and so forth) . In 1731, Franklin founded the Library Company of Philadelphia, marking the beginning of the era of American membership libraries; this was one of the most important milestones in the development of American libraries.[13] In *American Public Libraries*, published in 1894, the noted American library

scientist and Amherst College librarian Fletcher proposed that “when the membership library was founded, the public library movement had truly begun.” [14]8 The most classic work discussing the American public library movement is undoubtedly Shera’s *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England (1629-1855)*, published in 1949. Shera analyzed the origins, organizational forms, and economic and cultural background of membership libraries; the origins of circulating libraries; circulating libraries in Boston and other parts of New England; and the beginnings and developmental causes of public libraries. He regarded membership libraries and circulating libraries as the main forms of the early development of public libraries, and concluded: “In every sense, public libraries were long-standing derivatives of membership libraries, but their mode of management represented an innovation.” [14]10 It can thus be seen that Shera divided the development of the American public library movement into two stages: the membership-library stage and the public-library stage. These two stages differed greatly in their understanding of the meaning of “public.” Charles Jewett, a noted American library scientist and librarian of the Smithsonian Institution, defined “public” very broadly, in a manner markedly different from the definition used during the flourishing period of American public libraries. He held that, in the United States, any library that was not privately owned was a public library.[15] This concept of the public library encompassed membership libraries, circulating libraries, school-district libraries, and other libraries serving reader groups, rather than referring only to institutions later defined as being supported by local taxation. In the mid-nineteenth century, Jewett’s definition of the public library represented the consensus of most librarians at the time.[15] Today, if the concepts and standards of the flourishing period of American public libraries are used to understand and judge the early course of development of modern libraries in China, one will inevitably encounter the perplexity of “temporal misalignment” and find it difficult to confirm the starting point of modern library development in China.

Third, because the standards of the flourishing period of American public library development have been used one-sidedly to measure the development of modern Chinese libraries, the fact that the early characteristics of modern Chinese library development were much closer to those in Europe has to a great extent been overlooked. The important marker of modern American librarianship was the development of public libraries. In the mid-nineteenth century, American public libraries gradually took shape, and ideas about public libraries continued to develop; by the latter half of the nineteenth century, American public-library thought had become mature, covering public-library construction and services, popular education, and other aspects.[14]4 From the perspective of the course of world social development, “modern” usually refers to the capitalist era (mainly as applied to Europe) , generally beginning with the English bourgeois revolution of 1640 and ending with the Russian October Socialist Revolution of 1917.[16] “In examining modern li

libraries, the sequence was first the founding of university libraries, then the

establishment of national libraries in various countries, and subsequently the rise of large numbers of public libraries”

5

. In the Middle Ages, the University of Bologna in Italy, the University of Paris in France, and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in Britain were established one after another. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Europe enjoyed a flourishing scholarly climate; the development of universities and the Renaissance advanced in mutual reinforcement, and university curricula gradually broke free from the constraints of theology, moving toward the form of the modern university. By the sixteenth century, Europe already had more than seventy universities. Universities on the European continent were founded in imitation of the University of Paris and the University of Oxford, and they successively established libraries

10

¹⁹². In 1620, the Bodleian Library of Oxford University already held 16,000 volumes; by the early eighteenth century, its collection had increased to nearly 30,000 volumes, making it the largest library in Europe. Preparations for the Göttingen University Library in Germany began in 1735. The library had ample funding for books; book selection sought the opinions of professors, strove to satisfy their needs, and formulated a number of rules to facilitate readers’ use of the library. One of the library’s distinctive features was that readers could conveniently and freely make use of its collections; its internal management was regarded as exemplary in the eighteenth century, and alphabetical, classified, and subject catalogs were compiled for all holdings

10

143-144.

1.2 School Libraries: The Origin of Modern Libraries in China and Abroad

In light of China’s national conditions, the developmental course of modern Chinese libraries was similar to that of modern European libraries: in both cases, university libraries were founded first, and on this basis the modernization of public libraries and other types of libraries was advanced. Before the emergence of national libraries, the process by which university libraries assumed the functions of national libraries was also similar. For example, the Bodleian Library of Oxford University became the largest library in Europe in the early eighteenth century, and before the founding of the British Museum, the Bodleian Library in practice played the role of a national library

10

¹³⁵. In China, before the birth of the Metropolitan Library, the library of the Imperial University of Peking likewise in practice played the role of a national library.

China's modernization process began during the Self-Strengthening Movement, while school education was the earliest field to move toward modernization and to develop continuously. The earliest modern libraries to emerge in China were not public libraries, but school—or university—libraries.

2 Criteria for Defining Modern Chinese Libraries

The criteria for defining the emergence of modern Chinese libraries should take the requirement of contemporaneity as the overarching principle, so that once the main thread is grasped, all particulars become clear, and so that research on internal and external history can be integrated. At the same time, the criteria should be grounded in China's national conditions and take into account both localization and the elements needed for a systematic examination of libraries.

2.1 Overarching Principle: The Requirement of Contemporaneity

To be able to reflect contemporaneity means that the identified event or institution could adapt to and advance along the main trajectory of the times. The general trajectory of social development in late-Qing China may be roughly characterized by “the eastward transmission of Western learning,” “using the barbarians to control the barbarians,” “Chinese learning as essence, Western learning for application,” “democracy and science,” and “national salvation and survival.” According to the requirement of contemporaneity, the event or institution identified should naturally be integrated into this developmental trajectory of the age.

The characteristics of contemporaneity include universality, social recognition, and the authority and representativeness of the event or institution being identified. When determining the starting point of modern Chinese librarianship, one must, from the standpoint of the library's own characteristics, ensure conformity with the above features. Compared with other undertakings, modern Chinese librarianship likewise evolved continuously within the trends and context of the age marked by “the eastward transmission of Western learning,” “using the barbarians to control the barbarians,” “Chinese learning as essence, Western learning for application,” “democracy and science,” and “national salvation and survival.”

Entering the modern period, the development of Chinese society first manifested the contemporary characteristic of “the eastward transmission of Western learning.” This historical context triggered comprehensive transformations in China's politics, economy, culture, education, military affairs, diplomacy, and other fields. Modern Chinese librarianship originated in school education; viewed from this feature, it was closely connected with the cause of education. Schools may be regarded as the matrix of the early development of modern librarianship: libraries developed by relying on the development of education, and through education they extended into various sectors of society, producing mutual connections and influence.

The establishment of the School of Combined Learning in the capital was itself a major event brought about by “the eastward transmission of Western learning” and possessing the significance of a marker of the times; it was also the beginning of modern education in China. This beginning manifested the will of the state, bore the mission of transformation in the era, and was closely linked with the development of all sectors of society. Although the School of Combined Learning in the capital was initially intended mainly to train translators for foreign negotiations, its establishment exerted a major influence on the development of all aspects of Chinese society at the time, and the school’s development and social influence in the latter half of the nineteenth century also clearly corroborate the above conclusion.

The book room established within the School of Combined Learning in the capital played an important role in the school’s development. As a subordinate department, the book room likewise inherited the social and temporal characteristics of the School of Combined Learning in the capital. As a book room, however, it also possessed its own independent basic attributes—namely, the fundamental characteristics reflected by its collection of books as a material foundation. The building of collections as a material foundation should, in principle, be the first to demonstrate adaptation to the macrohistorical background of the time.

In the early period after the founding of the School of Combined Learning in the capital, a book room had not yet been formally established, but the accumulation of books had already begun. Teaching reference books brought by foreign instructors were an important source of the holdings, and this group of books already displayed the contemporary feature of “the eastward transmission of Western learning.” When the Shanghai School of Combined Learning was established in 1863, it had already opened a course in “mathematics.” In 1866, Yixin submitted a memorial requesting that an Astronomical and Mathematical Institute be added to the School of Combined Learning in the capital, thereby triggering the first major collision and debate between Chinese and Western cultures in modern China. This shows that China’s conservative forces possessed deep social and ideological foundations. Under the influence of the circumstances, and with the persistence of the Westernization faction and the support of the Qing rulers, the Westernization faction won a temporary victory. This was a major breakthrough in China’s intellectual sphere against the background of “the eastward transmission of Western learning.” Thereafter, the School of Combined Learning in the capital successively established a series of courses, including mathematics, which in turn placed higher demands on teaching materials and reference books. In 1868 and 1872, respectively, the School of Combined Learning in the capital received donated books from the United States government and the Académie Française, inaugurating the practice in modern Chinese librarianship of mutual book donations between foreign governments and school institutions. Such intergovernmental exchanges

activities, represented governmental action; they were not only an important

link in the building of collections, but also a direct manifestation of “Western learning spreading eastward” in library holdings.

Identifying the earliest modern library to emerge in China is, in essence, also identifying the starting point of China’s modern librarianship—a task that carries the weight of its age. In future scholarly investigations of the history of modern Chinese libraries, this point will inevitably serve as a watershed for research, and studies of the history of Chinese (modern) libraries will proceed on this basis. Precisely for this reason, in discussing this issue, the characteristics of the age must be taken as the overarching framework, under which the specific requirements and principal features should be further clarified.

Identifying the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan as the earliest modern library indicates that it directly embodied the characteristics of the age, combined interactivity, progressiveness, and the capacity to bear the imprint of its time, and at the same time possessed the feature of leading the development of early librarianship—features that institutions such as the Gongdu Lou did not possess.

2.2 Principal criteria

At present, academia has not yet formed a unified understanding of the earliest modern library in China; the fundamental reason lies in the vagueness with which the criteria have been defined. The fundamental distinction between a library and a traditional book-collecting building lies in its “openness.” In light of China’s national conditions, the criteria for the emergence of modern libraries in China mainly comprise three points: first, with regard to the readers served, the use of books became public, open, and shared, which is the most essential distinction between libraries and book-collecting buildings; second, the acquisition of collections became open, and the sources of collections diversified, without distinction between ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, so as to meet readers’ needs—this was the principal sign that the concept of book collecting had thoroughly broken with the closed tradition; third, management had to be adaptive, for a complete set of supporting management methods is an inevitable requirement for library operation and sustainable development.

2.3 Two requirements beyond the criteria

2.3.1 An investigation grounded in localized characteristics

The earliest modern libraries to emerge in China, in addition to meeting the requirements of the modern age and the principal criteria for modern libraries, should also possess localized characteristics, including: first, being founded by Chinese citizens, including the government, organizations, private individuals, and so on; second, taking service to the Chinese populace as their principal aim. According to these two requirements, libraries such as the Shanghai Library Club and the Wenhua Public Library can only be classified within the category

of foreign libraries that appeared in modern China. To put it more clearly, the expression “the earliest modern library to emerge in China” should be “the earliest modern library established by Chinese people.”

2.3.2 An investigation grounded in the library system

In ancient China, four major systems of book collection took shape: official, private, temple/monastery, and academy collections. In the process of transformation toward modern libraries, official, private, and academy book-collecting institutions constituted the principal agents of transformation. All types of book-collecting institutions should be placed within the context of modern libraries and analyzed from the dimensions of library nature and type. From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, modern libraries were represented by two types: public libraries and school libraries; private book-collecting institutions may also be included within these two categories. In the process of transformation, regardless of a library's type or nature, so long as it conformed to the defining criteria of a modern library, it may be identified as one of the earliest modern libraries to emerge in China. To establish this understanding, it is necessary to eliminate one-sided interpretations of the public, open, and shared standards of modern libraries. The characteristic of a public library is that it is open to society as a whole, whereas the service objects of a school library are mainly teachers and students within the school. If one disregards differences in service objects and scope and uniformly measures everything by the public, open, and shared standards of public libraries, internal contradictions will inevitably arise, leading to confusion in understanding the establishment of the library system. Therefore, a school library need only base itself on its own service objects and carry out services and management that meet the standards of being public, open, and shared; in this way it can meet the requirements for the public, open, and shared standards of school libraries within the library system.

3 The Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan: the earliest library in the modern Chinese sense

To confirm that the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan met the above requirements of the age, the principal criteria, and localized characteristics, and that it satisfies the conditions for being examined within the library system, this can be demonstrated in light of the time and background of the Book Repository's establishment as well as its own inherent features.

3.1 The time and background of the Book Repository' s establishment

China' s early modern libraries gradually emerged along with the rise and development of modern education. The Jingshi Tongwen Guan, founded in 1862, marked the beginning of China' s modern new education^[17] and was also a milestone in the beginning of the modernization of Chinese education.^[18] The most important reform in this type of new-style school lay in the renewal of teaching content, thereby forming a new learning opposed to the old learning. "The so-called new learning included the social doctrines and natural sciences of that time, and was opposed to China' s feudal culture, namely the so-called old learning." ^[19] The founding of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan marked the fact that China' s process of learning from the West had moved from the introduction of ideas into the stage of practical implementation. In the course of the development of modern new education, the Jingshi Tongwen Guan continuously expanded its holdings of documents, established a specialized book repository, and, under the new educational environment, gradually built a school library with the characteristics of a modern library. At the end of the twentieth century, Wu Xi pointed out in a monograph that the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan in fact already possessed the nature of a modern library,^{[8]54} and considered the Jingshi Tongwen Guan to be the embryonic form of China' s earliest university library. The present author further holds that the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan may be regarded as the earliest library to emerge in modern China.

Regarding the view that the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan was China' s earliest modern library, apart from Wu Xi, a number of other experts and scholars have also held the same opinion. Ren Jiyu^[20] believed that the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan had broken free from the confines of the old-style book-collecting building, was a new type of book repository with the nature of a school library, and could be called the origin of school libraries. Li Minghua^[21] stated: "The 'Tongwen Guan' established in the latter half of the nineteenth century was an institution for both translation and education, and it already had a modern school library." Yuan Yongqiu and Zeng Jiguang, meanwhile, included historical materials related to the collections of the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan in *Selected Biographical Accounts of State Book-Collecting Institutions and Famous Collectors and Readers through Chinese History*. Although these scholars did not clearly specify the exact time at which the Book Repository of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan came into being, they generally held that by no later than the thirteenth year of Guangxu (1887), the Jingshi Tongwen Guan had already established a dedicated book-collecting institution—the Book Repository.^{[8]53} This statement comes from *Register of Names of the Tongwen Guan* (fourth edition, published in the thirteenth year of Guangxu); Li Ximi and Zhang Jiaohua, in *Zhong*

Historical Materials on Ancient Chinese Book Collections and Modern Library History (from the Spring and Autumn Period to around the May Fourth era)

also excerpts this content.

Regarding the exact time at which the Library Room of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan was established, the author has so far found one record. *A Centennial Chronicle of Chinese Libraries (1840-2000)* states that in 1877, “the Jingshi Tongwen Guan established a dedicated ‘Library Room’ ”; and that in “1902 it was incorporated into the book-collection building of the Imperial University of Peking.” [22] However, the claim that the Library Room of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan was established in 1877 is only a chronicle entry in that book and is not supported by historical materials. In the course of searching for sources, the author has likewise found no historical basis for it; therefore, this paper does not for the time being adopt that date as a conclusion. Scholars mostly rely on historical materials from 1887 and cautiously point out that the Library Room of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan already existed in 1887; as for the specific year of its founding, there is as yet no settled conclusion. While organizing historical materials, the author found an earlier record, namely the entry “Continuation of the Register of the Tongwen Guan: Books Held in the Library Room” in issue 586 of *Wanguo Gongbao* in the sixth year of the Guangxu reign (1880): “Chinese and Western books are stored for consultation, and there are also books needed by students for various courses, to be distributed at any time to the various departments for reference: there are 300 Chinese-language volumes (with few duplicates) and 1,547 Western-language volumes. The books for various courses include: 1,653 volumes of Chinese-language mathematics and related works, and 1,067 Western-language volumes. Apart from the textbooks for coursework, which are distributed at any time to the various departments, the remainder may be borrowed at will by instructors, students, and others, with registration and record-keeping to prevent loss.” [23] On this basis, the historical fact can be established: by 1880 at the latest, the Library Room of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan already existed and had reached a certain scale.

3.2 Characteristics of the Library Room of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan

3.2.1 Changes in the Content of the Collection The holdings of the Library Room of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan thoroughly broke through the earlier antiquarian orientation. Upholding the collection concept of the modern library, it took reference books needed for teaching as its targets for acquisition, and its holdings accommodated all kinds of documents, ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign. At the very beginning of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan, it was equipped with the necessary teaching reference books. In the memorial proposing its establishment, Yixin and others requested: “Please order the governors-general and governors of Guangdong, Shanghai, and other places to assign persons who understand foreign languages and scripts to bring books from various countries to the capital.” [24] The teaching reference books brought by the hired instructors became among the earliest holdings of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan; thereafter the size of the collection continued to increase. By 1877, “the Jingshi Tongwen Guan established a dedicated ‘Library Room.’ ” Accord-

ing to materials from the Jingshi Tongwen Guan dated 1887, in that year the Library Room held “300 volumes of Chinese classics and other books, 1,700 Western-language volumes, and, among books for various courses, 1,000 volumes of Chinese-language mathematics and related works.” [25] According to another set of Jingshi Tongwen Guan materials from 1896, the Chinese classics had increased by 500 volumes, and Western-language books had increased by 200 volumes.[26] The Library Room’s holdings were centered on Western-language books and reference books for various disciplines, thoroughly breaking through the “official-school collection” model in which Confucian classics and standard histories formed the core; this was also one of the basic requirements of a modern library.

3.2.2 Collection Acquisition and Exchange The adoption of international exchange methods vividly reflects an open approach to collecting books. In the seventh year of the Tongzhi reign (1868), the U.S. minister to China, J. Ross Browne, donated several books to the Jingshi Tongwen Guan, and the Jingshi Tongwen Guan also purchased books in return.

In 1872, the French minister Refuli, on behalf of the French Academy of Literature, donated books to the Jingshi Tongwen Guan: “Soon afterward, according to the statement submitted by Ding Weiliang, chief instructor of the Tongwen Guan, one chest of books has now been received, totaling 188 volumes.” [27] The donated books covered categories such as chemistry, medicine, mathematics, and geography. To thank the French side, “we ministers have now purchased and prepared Chinese books, including six sets of the *Kangxi Dictionary*, four sets of *Imperially Selected Tang Poems*, four sets of the *Imperially Commissioned Ci-Poetry Prosody*, forty sets of *Exegeses of the Classics of the Imperial Qing*, twenty sets of the *Thirteen Classics*, two sets of *Selections of Refined Literature* by Zhaoming, six sets of the *Complete Works of Zhu Xi*, six sets of *Ancient Prose: Profound Mirror*, twenty sets of *Classified Compendium of the Profound Mirror*, and two sets of *Copybooks of the Eight Masters of the Tang and Song*, and have likewise handed them nearby to Chief Instructor Ding for transmission.” [28] Collecting books through international donation, exchange, and other channels fully embodied the open concept of the modern library.

3.2.3 Management Methods and the Concept of “Books for Use”

With regard to collections and reader services, the Library Room of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan began to adopt certain management methods of the modern library, such as registration, record-keeping, and lending. It was among the first to put into practice the modern library concept of “books for use,” providing public access services for its users; this is the fundamental feature that distinguishes the modern library from the traditional book-collection building. “The Library Room of the Tongwen Guan stores Chinese and Western books for consultation, and there are also books needed by students for various courses ... Apart from the textbooks for coursework, which are distributed at any time to the various departments, the remainder may be borrowed at will by instructors,

students, and others, with registration and record-keeping to prevent loss.” [25] The service users of the Library Room were all teachers and students of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan, and readers could borrow books freely; this is the most fundamental marker of a modern library.

3.2.4 Practice of “Books for Use” By carrying out the modern library concept of “books for use” and providing resource support for teaching, practice, and research, the Jingshi Tongwen Guan came to possess, in a preliminary way, the library function of serving teaching and research. The Jingshi Tongwen Guan had an eight-year curriculum; in addition to regular instruction, students also had to participate in the translation of Western books: “Graduating students in the eighth year must translate books during the final two years, and students retained at the Guan also devote attention to translating books.” [29] In connection with their courses, students used the collection to translate a large number of works in international law, economics, geography, chemistry, and other social and natural sciences. Relying on the Library Room as a base for practice, and upholding the principles of applying learning to practical ends and giving priority to use, collection development was advanced simultaneously, enabling the Library Room’s holdings to basically meet the needs of teaching, practice, and research.

3.2.5 Library Room Readers Introduced European and American Library Ideas The teachers and students of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan broadened their international horizons by serving as interpreters on European tours and through other channels. After gaining an in-depth understanding of conditions in foreign libraries, they fed back information and promoted the construction of the Library Room. Take Zhang Deyi as an example: he was one of the first ten students of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan in 1862, and he was also among the earliest persons in the Guan to participate in European travel. In 1866, he was first ordered to travel to Europe; thereafter he made eight overseas visits in total. During his various travels and diplomatic work, he recorded one by one information on the mountains, rivers, landforms, customs, social life, culture, education, and other aspects of various countries, and compiled them into books. During his first European tour in 1866, Zhang Deyi visited the British Museum and left the following record: “Arriving at the book repository, I found that it contained books from all under Heaven, altogether more than 800,000 volumes, and also books in Manchu, Chinese, Hui, and Tibetan. In the center there was a glass-lit canopy, with tables and chairs below; all nationals could enter to read, and could also

copied out.” [30]506 In 1868, he again visited Yishe and Yishutang in New York, recording that “inside were stored more than seventy-five thousand volumes of books, ancient and modern, from various countries; those of our countrymen who wished to view them were allowed to browse freely, so as to broaden their knowledge.” [30]653 Zhang Deyi became assistant instructor of English at the Tongwen Guan in the capital in 1884. In 1895, in his preface to *English Conver-*

sation Rules, he wrote: “If learners can suddenly comprehend it thoroughly and know it as clearly as the palm of their hand, then I shall not have failed in my thirty-four years at the Guan.” [31] From the time he entered the Guan to study, whether or not he was physically within it, he consistently regarded himself as a person “of the Guan.” From Zhang Deyi’s introductions to European and American libraries and from his consciousness of being “at the Guan,” it can be seen that his observations and records played a positive role in the construction of the library room of the Tongwen Guan in the capital; the library room of the Tongwen Guan also became a practical example in modern times of readers within an institution taking the initiative to introduce European and American ideas of library construction.

3.2.6 The Long-Term Stable Existence of the Library Entity

That a library can persist over the long term in its construction and improvement is one of the factors by which it continuously develops and sustains its influence. The school system of the Tongwen Guan in the capital continued into the early twentieth century. In 1902, “on the fifth day of the tenth month of the twenty-seventh year of Guangxu, an imperial edict was received: an edict had already been issued yesterday ordering the establishment of the Imperial University, and Zhang Baixi was appointed minister in charge of education. As for the Tongwen Guan previously established, there is no need to operate it separately; it shall be incorporated into the University.” [32] The library room of the Tongwen Guan in the capital was likewise incorporated into the Imperial University, and its collection continued to play an important role.

4 Conclusion

Setting aside the frames imposed by names such as “book-collecting building,” “library,” and “library room,” and evaluating the institution on the basis of its mode of operation and content, as well as by its essential characteristics and standards, the library room of the Tongwen Guan in the capital had been established no later than 1880. Until an exact founding date can be verified, 1880 may provisionally be taken as the temporal marker: that is, no later than 1880, a modern library had already been born in China, and from that point onward the Chinese library enterprise entered the stage of modern-library development.

Notes:

The earliest institution in modern China to possess the characteristics of a modern library was the Shanghai Book Club, founded in 1849 and later renamed the Shanghai Library. It was both the earliest public library in Shanghai and the earliest public library to appear in modern China. Although this library was not founded by Chinese people, it provided a reference and model for Chinese people in establishing modern libraries of their own.

References

- [1] Wang Ping, Wang Yuxiao. The Social Origins of the Modern Chinese Library Enterprise [J]. *Library Tribune*, 2018(8): 68–76, 16.
- [2] Cheng Huanwen, Wang Rui. Eight Historians Who Influenced the Study of Twentieth-Century Chinese Library History and Their Representative Works—This Article Congratulates Professor Xie Zhuohua, Historian of Library History, on His Seventieth Birthday [J]. *Library Tribune*, 2005(6): 59–63.
- [3] Wu Xi. On the Emergence of Chinese Libraries [J]. *Library Work and Study*, 1992(2): 22–24.
- [4] Cheng Huanwen. On the Relationship Between Chinese Library Science and American Library Science—Preface to *A Study of American Public Library Thought, 1731–1951* [J]. *Library Journal*, 2015(10): 110–112.
- [5] Department of Library Science, Nankai University. *A Course in Theoretical Library Science* [M]. Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 1986: 143.
- [6] Cheng Huanwen. The Rational Return, Inheritance, and Promotion of Public-Library Values—Preface to *A Study of Chinese Public-Library Thought over the Past Nearly Sixty Years (1949–2009)* [J]. *Library Research and Work*, 2011(2): 2–4.
- [7] Hu Junrong. The Three Social Transformations of the Late Qing and the Modernization of Chinese Libraries [J]. *Chinese Classics & Culture*, 2000(2): 36–41.
- [8] Wu Xi. *From Book-Collecting Buildings to Libraries* [M]. Beijing: Bibliographic Literature Press, 1996.
- [9] Fu' an. Do You Know the Earliest Library Established by a University in China? [J]. *Journal of Academic Libraries*, 1989(5): 9.
- [10] Yang Weili. *A History of Western Libraries* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1988.
- [11] Wang Dongbo. *Introduction to Public Libraries* [M]. Beijing: National Library of China Publishing House, 2012: 8.
- [12] Editorial Committee of the *Encyclopedia of China*, Third Edition. *Encyclopedia of China*, Third Edition: Library Science [M]. Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2022: 193.
- [13] Shera. The American Library Movement [M] // Yuan Yongqiu, Li Jiaqiao. *Selected Readings from Famous Works in Foreign Library Science*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1988: 202.
- [14] Zheng Yongtian. *A Study of American Public Library Thought: 1731–1951* [M]. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2015.

- [15] Wiegand. *A History of American Public Libraries* [M]. Translated by Xie Huan and Xie Tian. Beijing: National Library of China Publishing House, 2021: 25.
- [16] Editorial Committee of *Cihai*. *Cihai* (1979 Edition) [M]. Abridged reprint. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 1980: 1046.
- [17] Sun Peiqing. *A History of Chinese Education* (Revised Edition) [M]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2000: 305.
- [18] Tian Zhengping. *Research on the History of Chinese Education: Modern Volume* [M]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009: 31.
- [19] Li Hongfeng. *Allusions Used by Mao Zedong* [M]. Beijing: Xuexi Publishing House, 2023: 151.
- [20] Ren Jiyu. *Chinese Book-Collecting Buildings: Volume 3* [M]. Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2000: 1557.
- [21] Li Minghua. *Information Exchange and Modern Library Systems* [M]. Beijing: Bibliographic Literature Press, 1996: 134.
- [22] Chen Yuanzheng, Zhang Shuhua, Bi Shidong. *A Century of Chinese Libraries: Chronicle, 1840-2000* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Library Press, 2004: 2.
- [23] Continuation of the Tongwen Guan Roll: Books in the Library Room [J]. *The Globe Magazine*, 1880: 317.
- [24] Shu Xincheng. *Materials on the History of Modern Chinese Education: Volume 1* [M]. Beijing: People's Education Press, 1981: 115.
- [25] Wang Angong. *Where Should Books Belong: Book-Collecting Culture and Society since Modern Times* [M]. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 2022: 52.
- [26] "The Tongwen Guan Roll" Records the Books in the Library Room [M] // Zhu Youhuan. *Historical Materials on the Modern Chinese Educational System: First Series, Volume 1*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 1983: 157.
- [27] Memorial by Yixin and Others of the Office for the Management of the Affairs of All Nations, on the Twenty-Third Day of the Tenth Month of the Eleventh Year of Tongzhi (1872.11.23) [M] // Zhu Youhuan. *Historical Materials on the Modern Chinese Educational System: First Series, Volume 1*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 1983: 155.
- [28] Copy of the Letter to the Frenchman Refuli [M] // Zhu Youhuan. *Historical Materials on the Modern Chinese Educational System: First Series, Volume 1*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 1983: 156.
- [29] (E) Activities of Graduates [M] // Zhu Youhuan. *Historical Materials on the Modern Chinese Educational System: First Series, Volume 1*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 1983: 205.

- [30] Zhong Shuhe. *A Series on Going to the World* [M]. Changsha: Yuelu Press, 1985.
- [31] Zhong Shuhe. *For a Thousand Autumns, I Borrow My Wife's Mirror* [M]. Beijing: Dolphin Books, 2015: 194.
- [32] Qu Xingui, Tang Liangyan. *A Collection of Historical Materials on Modern Chinese Education: Evolution of the Educational System* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Publishing House, 2007: 9.

An Inquiry into China's Earliest Modern Library

Wu Tunian

Jiangnan University Library, Wuxi, 214122

Abstract In the context of “taking America as a model,” confusion has arisen in discussions of the origin of modern libraries in China. The origin of modern libraries in China is actually similar to that in Europe, beginning with the establishment of university libraries. The fundamental difference between libraries and traditional book halls is “publicity,” and three standards for measuring modern libraries in China are proposed. On this basis, six reasons are expounded to confirm that the book hall of Jingshi Tongwen Guan (School of Combined Learning) is China's earliest modern library. Additionally, two supplementary requirements beyond the standards are proposed. According to historical records from 1880, the book hall of the Jingshi Tongwen Guan, which was already established and of considerable scale, is identified as China's earliest modern library.

Keywords School of Combined Learning; Book hall; Earliest modern library; History of Chinese libraries

[Information • Updates]

The Fragrance of Books Pervades Sanxiang Campuses!

Hunan Province Regular Undergraduate Universities' “One University, One Book” Reading-Promotion Campaign Opens

As the 31st “World Book Day” and the first “National Reading Activity Week” approached, on April 17, 2026, the launch ceremony for the 2026 “One University, One Book—Classics, Close Reading, and Engagement with the World” reading-promotion campaign and “National Reading Activity Week” of Hunan

Province's regular undergraduate universities was held at Hengyang Normal University. With the theme "Books Enrich Sanxiang; Reading Opens a New Journey," the event brought together more than 200 representatives from the libraries of 41 regular undergraduate universities across the province and from public libraries in Hengyang, as well as more than 400 university student representatives, gathering in Yancheng to share in the promise of reading.

At the launch ceremony, Chen Min, Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of Hengyang Normal University, delivered a welcome address on behalf of the university. He stated that reading is an important pathway for carrying forward civilization, cultivating moral character, and forging the soul. Drawing on its profound Chuanshan cultural heritage, Hengyang Normal University has long carried out distinctive reading-practice activities. He expressed the hope that this event would serve as an opportunity for mutual learning and exchange with fellow institutions, guiding young students to cultivate character through reading, shoulder the mission of the times, jointly promote the building of book-loving campuses, and contribute to the strategy of building a culturally strong nation. Zou Xuming, Chairman of the Hunan Library Society, pointed out in his speech that 2026, as the opening year of the 15th Five-Year Plan period, marks a time when nationwide reading has been elevated to a national cultural strategy. Universities are important arenas for fostering virtue and cultivating talent. In the face of the development of artificial intelligence and the trend toward fragmented information, he urged young students to persist in deep reading, consolidate their foundations through close reading of the classics, and make reading a lasting driving force for growth. Gong Jiaoteng, Secretary-General of the Library and Information Work Committee of Hunan Higher Education Institutions, introduced that, after 13 years of cultivation, the "One University, One Book" campaign has become a distinctive brand for reading promotion among Hunan universities. In the new year, it will continue to advance the normalization of reading, the classicization of close reading, the intelligentization of services, and regional collaboration, so that the fragrance of books fills campuses and higher education contributes strength to nationwide reading.

At the event site, a number of honors were announced and presented, including the 2025 Hunan Provincial Department of Education "One University, One Book" Outstanding Organization Award, Outstanding Reading Promoter Award, the Outstanding Organization Award of the Provincial University Library and Information Work Committee, awards for the champion, runner-up, and third-place teams in the provincial reading debate competition, and the Best Debater of the Entire Competition.

As an important academic component of the event, Professor Jin Shengyong of Hebei University, Professor Song Defa of Xiangtan University, and Ye Yanming, Vice President of the China Society of Indexers, respectively delivered academic lectures titled *Regaining the Power of Reading*, *The Four Postures and Four-fold Significance of Reading*, and *A New Era, New Reading—New Perspectives*

on Classic Reading Empowered by AI. Participants also visited the Hengyang Normal University History Museum, the Chuanshan Thought and Culture Exhibition, and the joint exhibition of cultural and creative works from universities across the province.

It is reported that since its launch in 2013, the “One University, One Book” reading-promotion campaign has become a landmark reading brand in Hunan Province. In 2026, the campaign will continue, in diverse forms, to promote the deep integration of reading with education, teaching, culture, and services, steadily building a distinctive university reading ecosystem, allowing the fragrance of books to permeate Sanxiang campuses and using reading to support the growth and success of young people.

(Secretariat of the Library and Information Work Committee of Hunan Higher Education Institutions)

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

Source: ChinaXiv. Machine translation. Verify with the original.