


THE UBIQUITOUS LIBRARY

Transition & Transcendence

WU JIANZHONG



Shanghai University Press

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The biggest difference between the traditional library and the modern library is the position of people.

The shift from a concern about the library itself to a concern about the relationship between the library and the society reflects the transformation of the library science from focusing on the structure to focusing on the function, placing the "people" in a more important position.

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Preface ■■■■

In the past, we often used the “Theory of Elements” to conduct a systematic examination of the library. Whether it was Du Dingyou’s “Trinity” (books, people and methods), or Liu Guojun’s “Theory of Five Elements” (books, readers, cadres, facilities and methods)^①, “books” were always in the first place, which shows that the early library science research focused on the library itself. However, from the 1980s onwards, the library science began to focus on the social level, and the “Theory of Communication” and “Theory of Knowledge” have flourished. People are more inclined to examine the library against the backdrop of the society, and explore the nature of the library through the relationship between libraries and the society and between library

① Cited from: Liu Wen, A Comparison of Liu Guojun and Du Dingyou’s Ideas of Library Science. *Tushuguan*, 2011 (4). Du Dingyou said in 1932: “The theoretical foundation of the entire librarianship may well be described as a ‘Trinity’. Of this trinity, the first is the ‘book’, including books and other cultural records; the second is the ‘people’, that is the reader; the third is the ‘methods’, including all the library facilities, management and management personnel. The combination of these three elements is the library as a whole. In 1957, Mr. Liu suggested that librarianship consisted of “five components: (1) books, (2) readers, (3) leaders and cadres, (4) buildings and facilities, (5) methods of work”.

science and other disciplines.^① Whether it is the “Theory of Communication” or “Theory of Knowledge”, they all observe the relationship between the library and the people and between the library and the society. The shift from a concern about the library itself to a concern about the relationship between the library and the society reflects the transformation of the library science from focusing on the structure to focusing on the function, placing the “people” in a more important position.

In contrast, European and American library science was concerned about the relation between the library and the society in earlier time. In the 1930s, Butler Pierce, an American library scientist observed in his book *An Introduction to Library Science* that the library is a social device that transplants the human memory into people’s consciousness today. Later, the American library scientist Jesse Hauk Shera also suggested that the library should be a social organ that accumulates knowledge in written form, and passes the knowledge to groups and individuals through librarians, so that they may conduct written communication. Therefore, the library is an important institute in the social system of cultural exchange.^② From Ranganathan’s *Five Laws of Library Science* (books are for use; every reader his book; every book its reader; save the time of the reader; library is a growing

① Li Huizhen, ed. A Review of Library Science in China for 50 Years — An Academic Seminar of the Guangdong Library Association. <http://www.lib.scut.edu.cn/xuehui/newpage11.htm>, Accessed 2012-3-1.

② Wu Weici. Introduction to Library Science (a Speech). Information Department, Beijing University. <http://www.im.pku.edu.cn/jpk/courseware/chapter3.ppt#390,1>. Accessed 2012-3-16.

organism), we can also see the position of “people” in library science.

Once library science was freed from the closed environment, it has demonstrated tremendous energy and broad prospects. Compared with other disciplines, library science is a young discipline more open and more suitable for change and innovation. Based on modern information technology achievements, library science has established positive crosslinks with the other disciplines, such as library sociology, library psychology, library economics, and library management, and drawn on the achievements of other disciplines for its own development and enhancement. For instance, “omnimedia” is a term the library science borrowed from communication science, which first became popular in communication science and later entered the field of library science. When library science is interacting with and moving closer to other disciplines, the other disciplines have also acquired the methods for the use of information from the library science. Such interaction and integration among different disciplines have in turn stimulated the further development of library science.

But it is undeniable that in the last twenty years or so, the library science has showed a tendency of derailment. People are focusing on information, data, network and information science, and they are more inclined to discuss library science from the technical perspective, gradually ignoring the nature of library science.

In a report, U. S. information scientist F. W. Lancaster

mentioned his concern for library science's negligence of its users. On reviewing Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science*, Lancaster said:

One thing that is very notable about these five laws is that three of them refer to the reader, that is, to the user of libraries, the user of information. What has happened to this user? We have forgotten him (or her). Try to find any reference to “users” in our curricula today. It is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Users of libraries, users of information, have been pushed aside by such things as metadata, ontologies, and data management. The focus of professional education and research seems to have shifted from people and services to data — to databases themselves, to the curation and preservation of data, even to the creation of data. We seem much less concerned about who uses these data and how they are used, if they are used at all. ^①

Lancaster's concern reflects that the tendency in library science is over-technical, and this tendency seems to be more serious in China. Those who favor “Technology First” regard technology as more important than anything else, and they only see technology, information and data. Technology is viewed as an end rather than the means and tools. The idea of “Technology First” has not only filled the library science literature, but is also

^① F.W. Lancaster. Survival is not Mandatory. *Zhongguo Tushuguan Xuebao*, 2011. (1).

reflected in library service. Some libraries regard modernization merely as high-tech, and they spare no expense to arm themselves with large amounts of high-priced and high-cost facilities, as if with these new facilities, they could be called modern libraries. After the boom of building new libraries, a boom of massive library facility renovations has set off. Nowadays, the library science education focuses on technology and library management focuses on facilities, the library is like an accelerating train speeding in the wilderness. The updating of library facilities and technology is a good thing in itself, indicating the great importance attached to the library by the state government, but when people find that these investments have not produced high returns, it can undermine the library's image. Today, the library has received much social attention and concern, it is all the more important for us to calm down and seriously consider what kind of libraries we need in the end? Whom should we serve and be responsible for?

This is the motivation and passion for me to write this book, *The Ubiquitous Library: Transformation and Transcendence*, after publishing *New Perspectives on the Library of the 21st Century* (hereinafter referred to as *New Perspectives*). In *New Perspectives*, I proposed three shifts of focus (namely, the focus of work shifts from book-oriented to people-oriented; the focus of operation shifts from backroom production centered to front-desk service centered; the focus of service shifts from "one size fits all" to tailored service), and three extensions (namely, the extension of collection to the various records of civilizations and

their carriers, the extension of work to outside of the library, and the extension of service to the community and families), as well as two centers (namely, the library is a center of life-long education and cultural entertainment, the library is a center of information dissemination and exchange). Today, this view is not outdated, but it has gained new meaning and new perspectives, and we need to find motivation for setting off from a new starting point.

It is gratifying to see that since the reform and opening-up, librarianship in the country has had a full development, and the proposals raised in *New Perspectives* have been realized or are in practice. The main line of the book is people-orientation, stressing reader first and service first. But at that time, the emphasis was on the transformation of the traditional library. Today, the social environment in which the library exists has undergone major changes, and digitalization has gained recognition and is changing the way people live, work and learn. Not only have the information resources and the object of services changed, but also the library management and service models are changing. The three elements of the library, namely, people, resources and space, are not the same, and we need to redesign the library and its development according to the changing external environment.

We are in a period of transition from the old paradigm to the new paradigm. The main feature of the old paradigm is that paper-based resources are taken as the main entity, while the new paradigm will take digital resources as the main entity.

It is not easy to redesign the library, and the most important thing is to change the ideas and tradition first. MARC has to accommodate itself to the requirements of cataloging cards, the implementation of RDA has encountered difficulties, and library websites are always designed according to the traditional requirements; there are many other such examples. The root cause of all these is the inertia of the traditional library which is hindering the development of modern library. The basic functions of a library are book acquisitions, cataloging, circulation and preservation, and the library has been engaged in such practices for many years. Later, the library began to provide additional services such as reference services, document supply, lectures and exhibitions. Although we emphasize that such services have become part of the library's core services, they are not effectively integrated into one but remain as two separate bodies. When the digital library is developed, its basic function has not changed, and it remains to be collecting, describing, disseminating and preserving information. They are revising themselves in terms of the traditional library, as a result, traditional library and digital library still remain as two separate bodies, kept apart from each other and each operating on its own. Yet the fact is that the basic functions of both are the same, namely, acquisitions, cataloging, circulation and preservation.

The library is a growing organism, with every cell being an integral part of the library. When the library operates through acquisitions, cataloging, circulation and preservation, it also stimulates the formation of a knowledge flow consisting

information of various themes. Every point and every project are interrelated and they affect each other. The boundary line between each point and each project is obscure and open, forming an organism with the components linked closely to each other. The entire process starting from the collection of omnimedia resources, including books, periodicals, electronic resources, audio-visual resources as well as blogs and RSS, to the cataloging, knowledge service and long-term preservation of these resources needs to be redesigned.

Today, the library is in the exploratory phase of transition from the old paradigm to a new paradigm, and there is no mature model to follow. The author attempts to sort out a main line from the complex and changing environment and apply it to the whole process of the library operation. This main line is people-orientation. Only when it is people-oriented and demand-guided, can the library advance with the times and adapt to the changing environment. Starting from the three elements of “people”, “resources” and “space”, this book will stress the position of people in the library, integrate omnimedia resources and explore the value of the library as a place. At the same time, from the three aspects of the library’s “back line” (technical services), “front line” (reader services) and “the line beyond” (extension services), it will discuss how to expand the knowledge services of modern libraries in the new omnimedia environment through resource integration and process reengineering.

The author realizes that as a growing organism, the library needs a continuous process of adaptation in the complex social

environment and technological progress. At the same time, library theorists and front-line practitioners also need a continuous process of cognition for the paradigm shift of the library and its future development.

As always, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to the Shanghai Library for supporting the publication of this book. I wish to thank Ms. Feng Jieyin, Ms. Shen Liyun and Ms. Li Danni for their generous assistance. Also, special thanks go to my editors, Ms. Jiao Guiping, Ms. LiuJing, and Ms. Wu Xuemei. There remains room for improvement and I am grateful for any valuable suggestion and criticism.

Wu Jianzhong

Director, Shanghai Library

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