

## The Review and Prospect of Library and Information Science Education in China

**Qingyuan Wei**

Tsinghua University Library, Tsinghua University, Beijing, P. R. China

E-mail address: [weiqy@tsinghua.edu.cn](mailto:weiqy@tsinghua.edu.cn)



Copyright © 2019 by Qingyuan Wei. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

---

### Abstract:

*The LIS education in China was started in 1920. In the past century, the LIS education completed its localization process and has been serving for the construction of an emerging state. By now, a comprehensive and professional LIS education system has been established. The literature review revealed that the development of LIS education in China can be classified into three stages: (i) the initial establishment stage, (ii) the slow development stage, (iii) and the rapid development stage. By analyzing the data collected through literature review and webpage investigation, three points were emphasized in the future development of LIS education in China. In the first place, inheritance and innovation should be adhered to in the specialty construction by strengthening the blending of traditional and emerging disciplines and finding out an inheriting and innovating path that integrates library science, archival science, and information science. Secondly, in professional education, importance should be attached to generality and specialty at the same time. The LIS-related colleges and schools should provide basic and general courses to broaden the students' knowledge as well as the specialized compulsory and elective courses to lay a foundation for expertise acquisition. General education and specialized education should be combined to cultivate specialized talents. Thirdly, evaluation and certifications should be highlighted in developing the major. Some practical measures should be taken such as enhancing the educating institution's evaluation and librarian certification, formulating certification criteria, raising the level of professional requirements, and improving the sense of recognition towards the profession to orderly and professionally develop our LIS education.*

**Keywords:** LIS education; LIS Challenges; Curriculum review and development; China

---

## **1 Introduction**

The modern library science education arose from Europe in the first half of the 19th century. In 1887, the first standard library science education institution, namely the School of Library Economy at Columbia, was founded in America by Melvil Dewey. He believed that being a librarian is a specialized job and that librarians needed specialized education in order to be more competent for the job. The establishment of the American library school is an epoch-making milestone in the modern LIS education history, not only in the US, but also in the whole world (Xiao, Yang, & Qi, 2018).

Deeply influenced by the US, the modern LIS education in China can be traced back to the Republic of China era. The library department of Boone University in Wuchang founded in 1920 by a friendly American personnel to China, Mary Elizabeth Wood, is the first specialized library science education institution within the country (Peng, 2015). The early Chinese library scientists not only learnt the concepts and contents of LIS education in America but also successfully completed a localized transformation and established a complete LIS education system (Yu, 2019).

In recent years, with the advent of digitization and network integration, the traditional LIS education is facing a severe challenge. For instance, iSchool movement promotes an interdisciplinary approach to harnessing the power of information and technology, and maximizing the potential of humans. Those Chinese scholars agreeing with ideas of iSchools believe that the variety of courses available in iSchools do extend the employment channels of students, enhance students' will to study LIS, and seize more funds, which should be considered as a direction for LIS development in the future (Zeng, 2018; Zhou & Zhang, 2012). However not all scholars agree with the idea of iSchools. Disapprovers believe too many information technology-oriented courses in iSchools ignore basics of LIS. iSchools weakens the general perception towards the term "library", and there is an apparent inclination to deviate from traditional concept of "library", which should be cautioned against (Xiao, Li, & Liu, 2017; Yu & Liang, 2017).

The issues described above are quite thought-provoking. How to solve the problems encountered by LIS education? How should the LIS education develop in the future? On the basis of reviewing the development course of LIS in China over the past century, this paper attempted to discuss its development trend in the future.

## **2 Research Methods**

This study used literature review and webpage investigation for the purpose of data collection. The webpages come from the key library colleges and departments in Chinese universities. By analyzing, investigating, and summarizing the history and status quo of LIS education in China over the past century, the retrospect and prospect of LIS professional education in China were presented.

## **3 The Development Course of LIS Education in China**

Ever since the establishment of the first library school in 1920, the development of LIS education in China over the past century has experienced the following three stages.

### **3.1 The first stage is the initial establishment (1920-1949).**

LIS in China got established and initially developed in an extremely tough social environment. The first generation of LIS researchers created the earliest LIS education institutions in China. Enduring great hardship in their pioneering work, they went from imitating to innovation. They set up several professional education institutions of different type and size, taught LIS curriculum with Chinese characteristics, used the self-compiled textbooks, and led China into a path of cultivating local LIS talents.

### **3.2 The second is the slow development stage (1950-1977).**

In order to adapt to the social reforms, LIS education in China stepped into a road of completely independent development. Serving the construction of the newly emerging state, the new government set up large amount of free libraries in factories and rural areas. Due to lack of professional librarians, the LIS education moved down its focus by training some selected workers and farmers as librarians offering them practical courses, and directly guided the actual work. The LIS education in China made some achievements and experienced twists and turns or even a standstill when advancing in exploration. Its development in this stage was relatively slow.

### **3.3 The third is the rapid development stage (1978-present).**

This is a stage in which LIS was reestablished, reformed, and became prosperous in a brand-new environment. Right when China entered its comprehensive reform and opening up, LIS education also got into a fast traffic lane with its education scale being expanded in an unprecedented manner and a multi-level education system being gradually established and improved. The LIS teaching system and teaching pattern fitting into the development of times were basically established. Professional training was extended to high levels, whereas a complete library and information science education system composed of bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees was formed.

Ever since the implementation of reform and opening-up policy in China, LIS education within the country has welcomed the peak of the rapid development. In the 1980s, library-information integration was further enhanced and the department of library science was successively renamed in all the colleges and universities as department of library and information science. At this point, the traditional library science major had been replaced by the library and information science major. In the 1990s, the social informatization process was accelerated. As a result, the department of library and information science in the colleges and universities was renamed as department of information management. Accompanying the aforesaid renaming were some changes in the professional courses. In 1980s, the core courses in library science were still dominated by traditional courses, while in 1990s some courses about information science and computer science were added (Li & Xiao, 2018). In 2005, the iSchools Organization was formally founded by top information schools around the world. By now, the organization already has 102 members distributed in 30 countries and regions including the LIS schools of Wuhan University, Peking University, Central China Normal University, Nanjing University, Sun Yat-sen University, and Renmin University of China (iSchools directory, 2019). The iSchools Organization highlights the interdisciplinarity, focuses on the multidisciplinary fields concerning humans, information, and technology, and aims to develop pan-information professional talents. As for the curriculum setting, traditional library science courses are greatly cut down, whereas a lot of IT courses are provided. Affected by such trend,

the LIS education in Chinese universities have incredibly high ratio of IT courses and low ratio of library basics and literature knowledge courses in their curriculum. Some schools even offer no courses about the traditional basics of library science (Yang & Hong, 2013).

The ups and downs in the number of LIS education institutions since 1980s naturally reflect the demand of social reforms for talents. Behind the renaming trends and curriculum change, there is a great impact on the traditional teaching. The tremendous change in LIS education has puzzled the current scholars.

#### **4 LIS Education Development Trend and Prospect in China**

In this part the tendency of the LIS education in China was summarized, and its prospect was discussed based on the information about the curriculum settings, employment of graduate students, certification of librarian, and so on which were collected from the literature and webpages of the key typical university library schools in China and government.

##### **4.1 The inheritance and innovation of specialty construction**

The experience of Chinese LIS education in the past century tells us that library education keeps undertaking the task of developing talents for library work. Although library science was an empirical discipline in its early stage, great progress has been made in the curriculum after a century of exploration. The disciplinary theories are increasingly improved, and disciplinary features gradually appear. For the library work today, even though the methodology has changed a lot, traditional business work, such as acquisition, classification, cataloguing, and circulation service, has not functionally changed at all. Traditional library science still acts as the support for practical library work.

In the meantime, the development of new technology can never be neglected, because ubiquitous information environment is everywhere. If we choose to turn a blind eye to the internet, information technology, and Google users, library will miss its development opportunity. Therefore, inheritance-based innovation appears to be more important. The present society is facing abundant and widespread information resources, popular and accessible information technology, as well as cheap and convenient information tools. Hence, it will become an irreversible trend to marry the library science to information science. In recent years, rapid development of China demands more compound talents. A new disciplinary system integrating library science, information science, and archival science is naturally formed. In fact some universities in China, especially top 10 universities (including Wuhan University, Nanjing University, Renmin University of China, Nankai University, Central China Normal University, Sun Yat-sen University, Peking University, Jilin University, Heilongjiang University, Shanghai University) ranked in library science by Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) (China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center (CDGDC), 2019) have set up the interdisciplinary major integrating library science, information science, and archival science for the bachelor, or higher level (master and doctor) degrees.

We advocate cross research, teaching cooperation, and interdisciplinary course selection among different specialties. It is necessary to inherit strengths of traditional discipline and develop new ones so as to explore an inheriting and innovative path of development, which integrates library science, information science, and archival science on the background of general library science.

## 4.2 The generality and specialty of professional education

In 1992, the library and information science department in Peking University was renamed as information management department in the first place. After that, library science departments in other universities of China successively changed their names to contain the term “information”, indicating traditional library and information science was entering an era of information (Wang, 2009). With the rocketing development and widespread application of information technology, traditional LIS education got blended with a great number of information elements.

Against the overwhelming information tide, how should the LIS education adapt to the change from the name to the contents? Recently the Chinese LIS undergraduate education implemented "general enrollment and wide-caliber cultivation" policy. The so-called general enrollment means undergraduate enrollment is carried out with several previous equivalent or similar disciplines being combined as a general class to recruit the students. After the students are admitted, they will spend 1-2 years to study general basics and then choose the specialties as per both the individual interest and bidirectional selection rules in their junior year. On the other hand, wide-caliber cultivation breaks through the shackles of school-based development system by executing credit system, cutting down compulsory courses, increasing elective courses about general knowledge in order to develop general talents.

Having an extensive knowledge scope alone can't meet the occupational demand, because employers don't need the “all-rounders” that fit all the posts but talents that are competent to specific posts with versatile skills. The development should highlight specialty. For undergraduate students, their freshman and sophomore years should be spent in learning public basics and general courses to extend their knowledge, while the junior and senior years should be used to absorb major compulsory courses and elective courses to lay a foundation for being specialized and concentrated. Give two typical examples. All the undergraduates in the information management department of Peking University are enrolled under the major “information management and information system”. In their junior year, the students can choose between “information management and information system” and “library science” specialties (Li, Lai, Liu, & Qin, 2018). Sun Yat-sen University also adopts the similar general enrollment pattern (Cheng, Pan, Zhang, Xiao, & Chen, 2019). The undergraduates learn the public basics and general courses in the freshman and sophomore years and the major compulsory and elective courses in the junior and senior years with all the courses amounting to 140 credits in total (“the Cultivating Program”, 2019). More and more schools of information managements in China have adopted the “general enrollment and wider-caliber cultivation” policy.

The implementation of the "general enrollment and wide-caliber cultivation" program well balances the generality and specialty of LIS education. After finishing the compulsory courses, the students can choose freely the elective courses according to their interest and consideration of future career. The aim of LIS education in School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University is to cultivate academic and industrial talents with solid foundation, wide education scope, and high qualification that are equipped with systematical LIS basics and techniques, master modern information technology and management science knowledge, proficiently employ modern technical means to collect, organize, retrieve, analyze, evaluate, develop, and utilize information, be competent for information and knowledge service and management in library, information service agencies and all sorts of public and private institutions, have humanistic feelings and pioneering spirit, and adapt to the demand of social development. On

the basis of general education, basic library science related courses should be reserved to adapt the students to extensive occupational demand. This is the right orientation for the development of LIS education in the future.

### **4.3 The evaluation, standardization and certification of specialty**

Standardization is an important mark of industrial society. In spite of a century's history in library science education, China started relatively late in its standardization.

It is necessary to execute the LIS agency certification system. Chinese MOE has initialized undergraduate teaching evaluation in institutions of higher education every five years since 2002. In 2009, MOE Library Science Education Guiding Committee for Institutions of Higher Education (2009) issued *Guiding Specialty Specifications for Undergraduate in Library Science of Institutions of Higher Education* to specify the LIS education evaluation from such aspects as specialty cultivation objective and specifications, specialty education contents and knowledge system, and specialty teaching conditions. It constitutes an important basis for the specialty certification and evaluation of LIS by MOE. *The National Teaching Standard for LIS and Archives Management (for Library Science Specialty)* (2018) formally published in 2018 offers more specific regulations on cultivation objective and specifications, curriculum system, teaching staff and conditions, and quality management.

The evaluation of LIS postgraduate cultivating institutions is also gaining more attention. By now, the first-level discipline evaluation of degree and postgraduate education presided by Chinese MOE has been implemented for four times (in the year of 2004, 2009, 2012, 2017). The evaluation indicators can be grouped into four categories, namely teaching staff and resources, scientific research level, talent cultivating quality, and disciplinary reputation (CDGDC, 2019). In the year of 2004, only 6 universities participated in the first evaluation. For the fourth evaluation in 2017, the number was increased to 39, indicating that the evaluation system has been well recognized in China. Obviously the evaluation serves to guide disciplinary construction and development, and the evaluation standards are critical indicators measuring the development of a discipline.

The quality of LIS education in university directly affects the competence of their graduates to be librarians. Librarian is a specialized occupation. Therefore the librarian qualification certification standards are basic requirements concerning the expertise, techniques, and abilities for working in the library, reflecting the capability of a librarian to employ specific knowledge, techniques, and skills in order to fit to the library work.

Since 2001, specific rules about public librarian certification have been enacted in the form of national or local institutions and regulations (Xiao, 2010). *The National Occupational Criteria for Librarians* was issued in 2004, as approved by Department of Social Security (DSS) and Ministry of Culture (MOC) of China ("National Occupational", 2004). The criteria classified the librarians into five levels, demanding librarians of all levels to assume both theoretical knowledge and specialized abilities in 8 aspects but at different weights.

*The National Occupational Criteria for Librarians* covers almost every aspect of practical library work at that time. Because it was issued as early as in the year of 2004, it puts more importance on the traditional library work. With the penetration of the information technology into the library science, the criteria should be revised, and updated. Obviously, if the librarian occupational qualification certification system had been implemented in China, the Chinese

library cause should have achieved a more orderly and specialized development. Unfortunately, no occupational certification system has been actually enforced in China by now. The librarian admission system is not established in China yet. The colleges and universities specialized in LIS should collaborate with administrative management departments in drafting the certification criteria and promoting the certification system so that the certification can actually work in improving library work.

## 5 Conclusions

By reviewing the development course of Chinese LIS education in past century, this paper attempts to discuss the future orientation of LIS education in China. Attention should be paid to the following three key points in the LIS development. Firstly, inheritance and innovation should be highlighted in the specialty construction in order to explore a path of inheritance and innovative development that integrates library science, archival science, and information science. Secondly, attention should be paid to the balance between generality and specialty in professional education. The students should learn public basic and general courses to extend their scope of knowledge. At the same time they should investigate into major compulsory and elective courses to lay a solid foundation for future profession. Generality and specialty should be combined in talents cultivation. Thirdly, equal importance should be attached to evaluation and certification in specialty development. More specifically, it is necessary to certify the education institutions and librarians so as to improve the library work as well as the social status and cultivating level of LIS education.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the support from National Social Science Foundation of China (No. 15BTQ003).

## References

- Cheng, H. W., Pan, Y. T., Zhang, J., Xiao, P., & Chen, R. H. (2019). A trend of library science education in China in the new era. *Journal of Library Science in China*, 45(3), 14-24.
- China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center (CDGDC). (2019). *China Discipline Ranking*. Retrieved May 17, 2019, from <http://www.cdgdc.edu.cn/xwyyjsjyxx/xsbdxz/index.shtml>
- iSchools Directory. (2019). Retrieved May 13, 2019, from <https://ischools.org/members/directory/>
- Li, Q. S., & Xiao, X. M. (2018). Changes and prospects of library science education system in China since reform and opening up. *Documentation, Information & Knowledge*, 186(6), 75-85.
- Li, Y., Lai, J. Y., Liu, S. W., & Qin, Y. (2018). An analysis of current situation and trend of personnel training in Chinese library and information science—Based on enrollment

- and employment data of department of information management of Peking University. *Journal of Academic Library*, 2018 (2), 92-99.
- MOE Library Science Education Guiding Committee for Institutions of Higher Education. (2009). *Guiding Specifications for Undergraduate in Library Science of Institutions of Higher Learning*. Retrieved May 15, 2019, from <http://www.doc88.com/p-3377475854116.html>
- MOE Teaching Guiding Committee for Institutions of Higher Education. (2018). *National Teaching Quality Criteria for Undergraduate Specialties in General Institutes of Higher Learning (2nd volume)*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- National Occupational Standard-Librarian. (2004). Beijing: Beijing Library Press.
- Peng, M. H. (2015). From Boone Library to the Library of School of Information Management, Wuhan University. *Library & Information*, 2015 (06), 134-139.
- The cultivating program for Bachelor degree. (2019). (2019). Retrieved May 15, 2019, from Sun Yat-sen University, School of Information Management, <http://ischool.sysu.edu.cn/cn/content/benkejiaoyu-tushuguanxue>
- Wang Z. Z. (2009). The review and reflection on the nine decades of library science education in China. *Journal of Library Science in China*, 35(184), 70-78, 96.
- Xiao, W. (2010). Study on Supporting System of Librarians in Public Libraries. *Journal of Library Science in China*, 36(188), 10-16.
- Xiao, X. M., Li, Q., & Liu, Q. Y. (2017). Be alert to “Delibrarization” in iSchools. *Documentation, Information & Knowledge*, 175(1), 19-25.
- Xiao, X. M., Yang, J. T., & Qi, B. D. (2018). A research review on the history of library science education in America and other countries in the world. *Library and Information Service*, 62(19), 120-128.
- Yang, Q., & Hong, Q. L. (2013). The reasonability analysis of LIS courses in 8 universities in China. *Journal of the National Library of China*, 88(4), 33-43.
- Yu, L., & Liang, S. C. (2017). The iSchool myth: A reflection on iSchool movement’s conception of LIS, iField and their relationship. *Journal of Library Science in China*, 43(229), 18-33.
- Yu, Z. M. (2019). Internationalization and localization: Two-way pursuit of modern academic transformation in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Period of Republic of China: Focusing on the establishment of “Chinese Library Science”. *Ludong University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 36(2), 6-11.
- Zeng, Y. L. (2018). Characteristics and enlightenment of cultivation mode of data science programs in iSchools abroad. *Documentation, Information & Knowledge*, 184(4), 109-118.



Zhou, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2012). An analysis of the characteristics and distinctions of information management major in the iSchool movement background. *Library Journal*, 31(8), 72-78.