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Chinese academic libraries serving international students and scholars: An assessment of three case studies

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Abstract The authors of this study assess the attitudes and perceptions of academic librarians at three university libraries in China regarding library services for international students and scholars. The study directs particular focus on librarians at Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, Fudan University in Shanghai, and Wuhan University of Technology, China, and follows logically upon a study conducted in 2008 that explored the perceptions of international students at two Chinese universities regarding the effectiveness of library services and collections for their research needs. In particular, this study documents information about Chinese academic librarian perceptions regarding services for international students and attitudes toward future outcomes. The ultimate goal of the study is to lay a foundation for developing strategies for improving library services and resources for international students and scholars in Chinese academic libraries in particular, which in turn can serve to improve services for international students world-wide. The results support the assumption that academic librarians in China are strongly interested in improving services for international students and scholars while continuing to face challenges and trying to find ways to fulfill the information needs of international students and scholars.

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Introduction

Universities in China have seen a steady growth in their number of international students and scholars since China initiated reforms and expanded student exchanges in the

late 1970s. By 2007 over 195,000 international students from 188 countries and regions came to study in China, enrolling in 544 universities and other educational institutions. Of this number, over 7000 came from the United States (Fan, 2009; People's Daily, 2008). Meanwhile, the

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number of foreign students in the United States also continued to increase.² Over 670,000 international students attended U.S. colleges and universities during the 2008–2009 academic year, with 98,235 of those students originating from China (Fischer, 2009). University librarians in both the United States and China began to realize the need for a coordinated effort in both countries to address the special research needs of visiting student and faculty populations.

A major step in the direction of serving this growing constituency is to first assess how library administrators, faculty, and staff members in both regions regard the challenge of international users in their libraries. The aim of this study of librarian perceptions and attitudes seeks to determine how librarians in China regard various aspects of serving international students and scholars. Undergoing an investigation of librarian perceptions follows logically upon a study that explored the perceptions of international students at two Chinese universities regarding the effectiveness of library services and collections for their research needs (Jiao, Zhuo, Zhou, & Zhou, 2009). Such ongoing studies, it is hoped, will help to better understand how to integrate this growing constituency into the Chinese academic library user community. The investigators of this study focus on the perceptions of librarians at three university libraries in China: Fudan University in Shanghai, Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, and Wuhan University of Technology in Wuhan.

The genesis of this study arose in 2008 when the authors, Xiaorong Shao and Allan Scherlen, traveled with a delegation of librarians from Appalachian State University to China to discuss developing a librarian exchange and collaboration agreement with librarians at Fudan University, a prestigious comprehensive university. Consequently, a formal library exchange agreement was signed with Fudan University in Shanghai. During that 2008 trip, the researchers also visited Shaanxi Normal University, which has a curricular focus on the discipline of education, and discovered that librarians at Shaanxi Normal University had an interest in and need for developing services for foreign library users. After visiting those two universities, the researchers decided to include the third institution, Wuhan University of Technology, in order to add more disciplinary diversity to the study. Wuhan University of Technology differs from the other two in that it focuses more on technology and engineering programs rather than the traditional academic disciplines and it also has a substantial though smaller number of international students and scholars.

Table 1 presents the number of students, library personnel, and international students and scholars at each university examined in this study, as well as the students' country of origin. The data were extracted from the survey for the library administrators distributed in January 2010.

² For the sake of stylistic variety, the terms "international" and "foreign" are used interchangeably throughout this paper in reference to library users in Chinese universities originating from other countries and/or for whom a Chinese language such as Mandarin is not mastered enough for them to be self-reliant at doing research in that language. The authors also shorten references to international students and scholars to simply "students" or "users" but are referring to scholars as well.

The table shows that Fudan, which serves the fewest overall number of students, has far more international students than the other two. Wuhan, in contrast, with almost three times the number of students has only one-tenth of the number of international students as Fudan, while roughly paralleling it in the number of foreign scholars. Shaanxi fits between them in the number of overall students and number of international students but has fewer foreign scholars and librarians than the other two.

Literature review

The urgency to address the information needs of international students for services has resulted in an emerging literature on the topic in recent years. Within the professional library literature in English, there is a large body of scholarship that has focused on services within predominately English-speaking university libraries for users whose native language is not English (Allen, 1993; Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001; Brown, 2001). These papers have investigated or discussed various aspects of service for international students ranging from improvement of bibliographic instruction, reference assistance, resource accessibility, to marketing, and outreach. For example, in 1993, researchers surveyed foreign students at the University of Toledo in Ohio to better understand their library service needs and to improve bibliographic instruction for these students (Garcha & Russell, 1993). In 2000, Kumar and Suresh noted that reference librarians play a key role in assuring that international students are successful. In 2001, Baron and Strout-Dapaz determined from a thorough review of the literature to that time that the literature "supports libraries taking an active role with international students, regardless of a formalized instructional program or the number of international students" (p. 318). The two dominant "themes" of the literature in the nineties, they argued, were institutionally focused: the importance of staff training and collaboration among departments. They also discovered in the literature emerging interest in other issues such as the value of outreach to international students, the effect of specialized orientation sessions, and the usefulness of ethnic diversity within the library. In 2002, librarians in Oregon described in the "Helping Hand Project" how they translated a two-page library handout into 14 languages (Chau, 2003). In 2003, researchers conducted a survey of incoming international students at San Jose State University. They found that international students are far more information literate than librarians had expected but generally benefit from librarians possessing improved intercultural communication skills as well as from library services directly designed for international students (Jackson, 2005). In 2006, a case study at the University of Alberta Library examined the success of Chinese graduate students in navigating and utilizing library resources (Morrissey & Given, 2006). In 2007, researchers interviewed Asian international students at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and determined that library information services must be specially marketed to international students to make them feel comfortable about using the library (Mu, 2007). Most recently, librarians at the University of Tennessee conducted a research project to explore how ethnic minority groups and international students perceived and made use of library services (Puente, Gray, & Agnew, 2009). Finally, Yunshan Ye (2009) argued in an introduction to a collection of papers on

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