



Exploring Chinese Students' Perspective on Reference Services at Chinese Academic Libraries: A Case Study Approach



Jingzhen Xie^a, Lili Sun^b

^a Macau University of Science & Technology, Macau, China

^b Eastern Shores School Board, Quebec, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 January 2015

Accepted 4 April 2015

Available online 18 April 2015

Keywords:

Reference services

Chinese academic libraries

Chinese university students

User services

ABSTRACT

Reference services have been developed in China for nearly a century; however literature shows that very little research has been done on users' perception of reference services in Chinese academic libraries. To fill the research gap, this study aims to examine how Chinese undergraduates perceive, understand and use the reference service. A survey was employed and conducted in a comprehensive Chinese university with about 19,000 undergraduate students. 433 valid questionnaires were received. ANOVA was adopted to examine overall reference service satisfaction variation among respondents in different programs. The study reveals that library resources and reference services have been improved in China during the past twenty years, especially with the great support of Project 211 and Project 985 by the Ministry of Education of China. However, there is still more to do to change libraries from book repositories to modern user-centered information services and to improve historically underdeveloped user services in Chinese libraries. Libraries and librarians in China need to more actively embrace the philosophy that library resources are to be used and librarians are there to serve, to thoroughly promote reference services and render them more visible, and to diligently learn, adopt and apply technology to provide quality reference services.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Reference services in China originated from the 20th century. In the 1920s Tsing Hua University in Beijing founded the first modern reference department, which is regarded as the beginning of modern library reference services in China (Zhan, 2000; Huang, 2013). After that, many Chinese academic libraries and public libraries started reference services (Zhan, 2000). After the People's Republic of China was founded, Chinese academic libraries continued to offer reference services in the 1950s. In the late 1970s and early 1980s when the tumultuous political movements finally ended, China provided a series of regulations related to library services. Some of them are directly related to academic library services such as *Work Regulations for Libraries in Higher Education in the People's Republic of China* (1981) and *Regulations for Libraries in Regular Institutions in Higher Education* (1987). These regulations clearly state that academic libraries should provide and be committed to reference services. Since then, Chinese academic libraries have been offering reference services under national guidance. Academic librarianship has made great progress since the late 1990s when China's economic boom started to occur. Funding was never so abundant, collections were frequently updated and enlarged, expensive electronic resources were purchased, extensive collaboration between top university

libraries were accomplished, and more user services were offered. China has a nearly 100-year long history of offering modern reference services, despite partial or complete interruptions in World War II or during major political movements after 1949.

WHY THIS STUDY?

It is important to find out users' perception of the reference service and how the service in Chinese academic libraries is truly serving Chinese students. Reference services have been discussed heavily in literature. On the one hand writings on user services composed by Chinese librarians and scholars offer rich information on what has happened in Chinese academic libraries. They discussed the varieties of reference services, argued the strengths and weaknesses of different services, and drew visions of reference services. These studies indicate that reference services have been taken into consideration and carried out in Chinese academic libraries. However, few accomplished the research based on a field study to examine the current status of reference services in Chinese academic libraries and Chinese students' perception of reference services. On the other, literature on the same topic published in English demonstrates that reference services are still under-developed or under-used and Chinese students have not fully realized the function of the service and tend not to use it.

Second, the reference service demonstrates its importance and relevance as a core library service usually by its evaluation conducted

E-mail addresses: xjingzhen@hotmail.com (J. Xie), lily1997yy@gmail.com (L. Sun).

and reported by the library. For example, library administration often publishes reference service statistics and conducts readers' satisfaction assessment to show the recognition of the importance of the service by the management and the profession, which has not been reflected in Chinese librarianship. Does this imply that user services have not been set as a priority? Scholars such as Fang (2005) point out that with the rapid development of academic libraries in China, instead of spending too much on collection and hardware, more emphasis should be placed on the efficiency of the facility or equipment utilization and the efficiency and quality of the information service for "these are akin to more dynamic criteria of evaluation and equally crucial to a modern library" (p. 226). In 2013 the National Library of China published the first *Blue Book on the Development of Libraries in China 2012*. It is composed of the following six parts: overview of the development of the libraries in China in 2011, macro-situation, development of the profession, regional practices, special researches, and events (Zhou, 2013). The development of the profession part has seven chapters which are indeed seven reports respectively on the National Library of China, public libraries, academic libraries, special libraries, other libraries, private libraries and library associations in China. These reports provide data and information on collection development, improvement of library facilities, staffing, publication by librarians, resource sharing, digitization, etc. Information on user services is not the key information in the reports. The usage of the reference service was reported only in the report of the National Library of China and none of the other reports mentioned it. In contrast, detailed information on the static hardware of libraries such as collections, staffing and library facilities is provided in every report. Lack of sufficient information on user services in the Blue Book about nationwide librarianship echoes Fang's criticism and indicates that user services have not been considered as important as the development of static hardware of a library.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written regarding reference services in Chinese academic libraries in both English and Chinese. For writings in Chinese, the first article on reference services was published in the journal *Library Work in Colleges and Universities* in 1981 (Fu, 2011). After that, more articles about the service were published gradually but slowly. There were 35 articles published during 1981–1993 and only one article was published in 1993 (Fu, 2011). From the mid-1990s to 2010 publication on the service by both Chinese librarians and library administrators became active (Fu, 2011; Huang, 2013). In 1994–2010, around 47 articles were published each year while 22.31% of all the articles were published in the core journals in librarianship (Fu, 2011). These researches summarize the reference service offered at academic and public libraries, discuss the characteristics of specific services, examine their strengths and weaknesses, and anticipate the trends. However, with only 22.31% of the articles published in the core journals in librarianship, Fu (2011) argues that reference services had indeed never become a top research topic in librarianship in China. This characteristic may indicate that reference services have not truly become a core library service in China.

Literature in English examined reference services in Chinese academic libraries mainly from the following three aspects: the under-development of user services in Chinese libraries and its reasons (Nofsinger, 1988; Liu & Winn, 2009; Liao, 2004a; Liao, 2004b; Wang et al., 2004); perception of international students or scholars regarding Chinese academic library services and that of Chinese students regarding Western academic library services (Jiao et al., 2009; Liu, 2013; Nzivo & Chen, 2013); and overview of reference services in Chinese academic libraries (Wu & Huang, 2003; Wang, Niu & Hubbard, 2004; Min & Yi, 2010). None of these studies is focused on the reference service itself. The reference service is often one of the questions being studied in the research.

Literature review indicates different views with regard to the development of reference services in China. On the one hand, reference services have been well developed and offered in Chinese academic libraries. Wu and Huang (2003) in their study claim that "the reference service has become a top priority" in Chinese universities (p. 252). New positions such as "subject librarian" and "reference librarian" have been created. Reference services are offered both on and off campus and in a variety of formats such as e-mail, BBS, the virtual reference desk and call centers (p. 252). Wang, Niu, and Hubbard (2004) point out that "the literature indicates a growing body of research on academic library reference service in China. An important aspect of the research is the variety of reference services and information academic libraries make available to their users through the Internet" (p. 106). Min and Yi (2010) also highlight that libraries offer various methods of providing answers to reference enquiries, such as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), and services via web forms, via e-mail, via chat, on the telephone, as well as in person. In addition, in some libraries there is a University Librarian's Day at the reference desk one afternoon a week for the library director, or associate director, to meet with users and answer their questions. Shao and Scherlen (2011) point out that all the three universities in their study provide many basic user services such as "face-to-face reference service at a desk, online chat reference service, e-mail reference service, and individual library research assistance by appointment" (p. 58).

On the other, literature shows that user services are under-developed in Chinese libraries due to different reasons. First, libraries are meant to store and preserve books. In her research on academic libraries in Sichuan Province, Nofsinger (1988) points out that "in most academic libraries it appears that preservation has a higher priority than access to information" (p. 354). She also remarks that there are no qualified reference librarians in an academic library. Liu and Winn (2009) comment that in the eyes of the Chinese the role of the librarian in China is to develop and maintain collections (p. 589). Liao (2004a) points out this feature as well and argues that the under-developed user service in Chinese libraries is deeply rooted in the Chinese philosophy of librarianship. Traditionally and culturally books were considered personal possessions and were meant to be a way of self-empowerment. They were to be stored but not to be shared because an individual gained knowledge and power through reading. This is why Chinese libraries put more emphasis on preservation and expansion of collections than on user services, and many librarians continue to "regard themselves more as custodians of books than as the servants of readers" (Liao, 2004a, p. 114). Moreover, Liao (2004b) argues that "serving the public was never a clearly articulated ideal or an established library practice in traditional China" (p. 164).

Second, user services are under-developed because Chinese have a different understanding of the function of libraries; libraries are considered primarily as a good place for studying. When researching how Chinese students are satisfied with user services in U.S. academic libraries, Shao, Scherlen, Johnson, Xu, and Hu (2014) find out that "Chinese students appear to like to use the library for studying but are often not aware of the role of the reference librarian" (p. 34). Wang (2006) points out that Chinese students use the library mainly as a study place and the under-use of some services such as reference services is an issue which needs to be resolved. Wang et al. (2004) remark that if Chinese students do not use the reference service, it is "partially because most Chinese regard the library as a place to read and study, but not to ask, which is quite different from the Western tradition" (p. 109).

Third, lack of qualified reference librarians is another reason for the under-developed user service in China. Lo (1987) addresses the disqualification of librarians and inadequacy of reference services in academic libraries, which implies a main reason why students do not use the reference service. Nofsinger (1988) in her study on the academic libraries in Sichuan Province points out that there are no qualified reference librarians in academic libraries: "reference materials are scattered into many subject rooms where often employees with little or no library

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/358246>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/358246>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)