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## Challenges and Opportunities: A Survey of Practitioners' Perceptions on Risks in Chinese Library Transformation

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### ABSTRACT

Chinese libraries, from academic to public, are undergoing or preparing for transformation, to meet users' ever changing needs and expectations in the new social, economic, and technological environment. However, there are many factors deeply embedded in the process which may cause potential risks for the transformation. This paper has surveyed the perceptions of library professionals on such risks, and proposes 40 possible risk indicators (RIs) which comprehensively cover the entire life cycle of library transformation. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and multi-dimensional analysis have been used to categorize risks into different types and dimensions. It reveals that library professionals are aware of potential risks, especially the ones from inside the field. Their awareness is positively affected by their current positions in the profession. In general, they are likely to overlook some types of potential risks such as the ones from the leadership, originating outside the library community, or involving long-term uncertainty. The authors suggest library practitioners should be fully aware of the potential risks and their dynamic nature, and should take the opportunity to promote leadership and management in the process of transformation, and to cooperate with parties outside of the library community, thus making the library transformation rational and successful.

### Introduction

For several generations, libraries have been focusing on providing physical information from physical buildings (Barclay, 2016). However, with the advent of the Internet, information is becoming more affordable and accessible which in turn changes the behavior of traditional and potential users (Chu, 2013; Lewis, 2013). Some worried about the future of the library (Tonta, 2008), and even argued whether we still need libraries (Berndtson, 2012). Some others pointed out that “because faculty have easy access to academic content online, the role librarians play at this institution is becoming much less important”. They addressed the library's crisis for survival (Rochkind, 2013a), and even talked about the death of the library (Rochkind, 2013b). Around the global library community, the idea of “transformation” is becoming a trend to meet the pressure on library funds (Cuillier, 2012; Miller, 2012). Some researchers suggested that the transformation means to change the composition or structure, appearance, characters or conditions of the libraries (Neal, 2012). Nevertheless, transformation is becoming a hot issue at the center of attention of library professionals. From academic to public, libraries are all undergoing fundamental transformation (Himmel & Wilson, 1998; Lewis, 2013; Luo, 2016;

Wood, Miller, & Knapp, 2007). This trend has also inadvertently influenced the LIS education (ALISE 2016).

As part of the global library community, Chinese libraries also want to follow suit in this new trend. Transformation has been a buzzword for many years and will be the most distinctive key word for the next decade (Wu, 2016). In fact, as early as in 1985, library transformation has already been put into action in China, with the Chinese Academy of Sciences Library adopted its new name Center for Library and Information of Chinese Academy of Sciences, and later in 2001 it launched the Chinese National Science Digital Library (CSDL) project to build a “new service model of document and information in a digital and networked environment”. In 1995, Shanghai Library was merged with the Institute of Scientific & Technological Information of Shanghai. In 2009, Zhejiang University Library, one of the top university libraries in China, merged with the university's Network and Information Center. These activities highlighted the importance of information and new technology and services to some Chinese libraries and their need for transformation.

However, as there are many factors deeply involved in the transformation, it is hard to predict their effects. For example, some of those digital transformation projects never really got off the ground

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(Coffman, 2012). The only constant in this landscape is uncertainty (Wood et al., 2007), which we call transformation risks.

Either natural or manmade, “risks” are defined as “unrealized disasters with some potential danger. It is people’s subjective prediction which can be turned into reality” (Lin, 2013), such as intellectual property risks in digitizing collections (Chen & Wang, 2008; Ran, 2009), quality risks in library outsourcing (Chen, 2013; Wu, 2005). Risks cannot be eliminated with our technologies at hand and institutions in existence (Taylor, 2006). However, by appropriately evaluating potential risks and their impact on institutions, we can effectively manage and mitigate them to an acceptable level. Nevertheless, there are few if any Chinese researches conducted on risks involved in library transformation.

Although libraries in China began to enjoy their prosperity merely 40 years ago, they are growing rapidly and serving 18.84% of world population. At present, there are 3139 public libraries in China, with a membership of 57.21 million strong and an annual circulation rate of 588.92 million (Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). However, services in Chinese library are still subpar in comparison with their counterparts in developed nations. Because of that, library transformation is even more important, and it will help us improve services. Therefore, it deserves our attention to investigate the potential risks involved in library transformation by asking the following questions: How to evaluate risks in transformation? Why people view risks differently? What is the future of library transformation in China? Finding answers to these questions will have tremendous value in guiding further development of libraries in China. It is the goal of this research to identify differences in the perceptions of risks among library and information practitioners, and to offer some insight into the potential risks in library transformation, thus helping library practitioners find solutions to manage and mitigate them.

## Literature review

### Literature review

The international library field is fully aware of the necessity of library transformation. *The 2014 State of America’s Libraries Report* stated that “libraries continue to transform and to meet society’s changing needs” (ALA, 2014). In the 2015 ALA annual conference, ALA Chairman Sari Feldman also had “Libraries Transform” as the topic of his keynote speech. Pew Research Center, an American think tank, released a report named “Libraries at the crossroads” (Horrigan, 2015) In the 81th IFLA World Library and Information Congress, the topic of transformation was emphasized with “Dynamic Libraries: Access, Development and Transformation” as its main topic. The *2016 State of America’s Libraries Report*, “libraries transform” was the key word in order to shift people’s mindset that “libraries are obsolete or nice to have” to “libraries are essential,” and change the perception that “libraries are just quiet places to do research, find a book, and read” to “libraries are centers of their communities: places to learn, create, and share, with the help of library staff and the resources they provide” (American Library Association, 2016).

There are many scholarly researches which expressed concerns over the future of libraries. Some questioned if libraries are still needed after Google (Jaeger, Bertot, Gorham, & Sarin, 2014). Byrne (2014) stated that libraries and librarians should assist the process of digital transformation. In Turkey, transforming public libraries was a part of their national development plans (Kandur, 2015).

Scholars have addressed different aspects of library transformation: Shepstone and Currie (2008) put forward a transformation proposal from the perspective of organizational culture, including values, organizational structure, leadership, and management initiatives. Brunner, Borovsk, Osorio, and Benedetti (2013) and some others believed that staff restructuring and improving services are essential. Some scholars focus on the transformation of library reference service in information

environment (Gibson & Mandernach, 2013). Others analyzed classical examples of library transformation. Using “in-house leadership training” in the University of Saskatchewan as example, Mierke (2014), who was the director of human resources for the library, emphasized the importance of leadership training inside institutions.

There is scarcely any direct scholarly research on the risk of transformation, but Nicholson (2015) warned that libraries should adhere to their own cultural values, and before thinking about “how to transform”, libraries should first of all consider “what to transform for”. What’s more, some scholars have studied the risks in the development of digital libraries and library risk management. Based on case study, Han, Huang, Li, and Ren (2016) assessed the information security risk of digital libraries, which found that 10.1% of projects in the library system under study reached a high level of risk, and 2% reached a very high level. On the basis of extension theory, Li, Zhang, and Lan (2016) used analytic hierarchy process to explore the potential risks of copyright in digital libraries. Velasquez, Evans, and Kaeding (2016) made a qualitative research about risk management and recovery in Australian public libraries, and found that none of the participating libraries had a risk management or disaster plan, and library managers did not rate the risk of disaster as high, nor did they consider risk management and disaster recovery as an important part of their business. In China, we also failed to see any Chinese researches with in-depth evaluation on risks involved in library transformation. Instead, a few scholars have noticed that there may be some misunderstandings in the process of library transformation. Tang (2016) considered that reasonable transformation will promote the development of libraries, otherwise it would create an illusion of “traditional libraries may be dissolved by similar industries”.

### Research questions

Literature review indicates that, while library transformation has drawn wide attention, the risks involved in the process are often ignored by librarians and library researchers. To ensure successful library transformation, it is essential to properly predict potential risks and to effectively avoid them. Investigating librarians’ perceptions is a direct way to explore risks in library transformation. Therefore, this research intends to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the perceptions of Chinese librarians on the risks in library transformation?
- (2) How do the perceptions of risks vary among library practitioners?
- (3) Do the concerns of librarians coincide with the reality of library practice in China?

## Methodology

### Data collection

Using literature review, questionnaires, interviews, and case studies, we managed to identify key indicators of risk perception from library practitioners.

In *Research Libraries, Risk and Systemic Change*, published by OCLC in 2010 (Michalko, Malpas, & Arcolio, 2010), risks are classified into five distinct categories: “Value Proposition”, “Human Resources”, “Durable Goods”, “Legacy Technologies”, and “Intellectual Properties”. The *2013 Library Survey*, released by Ithaka S + R (Long & Schonfeld, 2014), indicated that “there was an especially steep decline in libraries’ share of respondents invested in the research support role”, and the importance of local libraries’ print resources is also in decline. For case studies, we studied transformation cases of Harvard University Library, Shenzhen Library, and Shanghai Library, as well as merger cases between library and information center around the world, and summarized success stories and potential risks from our investigation. We contacted many libraries using online social networks such as Sina

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