

**TOWARD THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY:
RESEARCH ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL
SCIENCE INFORMATION SERVICES OF UNIVERSITY
LIBRARIES IN CHINA***

By Wenfeng Ma and Liqing Wang

Abstract: At the turn of the century, China's social sciences and higher education is experiencing a great innovation and development. It is pressing for the university libraries to adapt themselves to the new situation and strengthen their social science information services.

This paper discusses some major problems of the social science information services of the university libraries in China, including the object, the aim, the users' needs of information, the requirement behaviours, the processed and transmitted content, the social and economic benefit as well as the theoretical research. This article also provides some specific and positive proposals concerning the related problems.

Introduction

Social science information services of higher education have always been neglected among all activities of information services in China today. They are not so attractive as the information services of science and technology of higher education and nor they can be compared with those in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in which they are also well concerned. It is by no means to say that the work is less important in the higher education in China. On the contrary, the teaching and research of social sciences rely more than ever before upon the library information services in higher education in China. It is more than necessary for social science information services of higher education to be seriously investigated so as to further the reform and improve their prosperity and development at this period of time. Therefore, in accordance with the characteristics of social science study and the law of the higher education development at this cross-centurial period of time, the writer did some research on some of the major questions that the social science information services of higher education's are confronted with.

* Paper presented at the 65th IFLA Council and General Conference, Bangkok, August 20-28, 1999

1. The Object of Social Science Information Services for University Libraries

Those who could get access to social science information services from university libraries in China used to be students of arts, teachers and academic researchers. So the users of Chinese university libraries at that time were unitary. There is a remarkable change nowadays. It is becoming the important direction of the reform for higher education to give more attention to the education of social sciences and to lay stress on humanistic spirit cultivating and talented students training. As a result, the range of Chinese higher education in social sciences has been widened more and more. This has appeared mainly in two ways: One is the educational scale of arts that has been expanded. In 1949, the university students of arts in China took 33.1% of the year total. There was a readjustment of universities and departments in 1952 and the number of the students of arts reduced to 20.5% and only 6.8% in 1962. The higher education of arts began developing when it came to the 1980s. There was a fast increase in 1995 for the number of the students of arts in universities, which in 1980 was 8.9% of the year total and became 37% of the total in 1995. The other is the criss-cross penetration between liberal arts and science and engineering. The science and engineering universities now began changing their attitude from which they used to give their consideration only to science and technology on campus to which now they pay equal attention to arts and humanities as well. It is becoming a trend of development in China for the science and engineering universities to set up departments of social sciences and open up new courses on social sciences.

For the reasons above, the objects of higher education on social sciences are enlarging and these objects are expanding from the subjects of arts to the subjects of non-arts in former concept. Learning social sciences is becoming more and more common to every student of universities. It is an inevitable responsibility for the social science information services of university libraries to play a part in training of talented students in higher education. The expanding objects mentioned above now surely decide the extension of the range of their social science information services for university libraries in China. The more consideration given by Chinese higher education to the training of more qualified students apparently suggests the necessity and the urgency of strengthening the social science information services in university libraries and much higher and more updated services being called for. Therefore, the libraries should be aware of their social status for their social science information work that ought to be adapted to the development of educational reform in China's higher education.

2. The Aim of the Social Science Information Services of University Libraries

The higher education exists differently from other social phenomenon in society. They are relatively independent and have their own inner laws, which decide the facts that they have to take the knowledge delivering and studying as their everlasting pursuit and the training of talented persons and scientific studies as their main tasks.

The following figures may be convincing properly: By the end of 1995, the universities totaled 1,054 and on campus were 5,400,000 students. There were 7,822 scientific research institutions and 44,800 professional scientific researchers at universities who undertook enormous tasks of the major national scientific research projects. There are nearly 100,000 research programs every year. A lot of accomplishments have been awarded by the national government or the provincial governments or the ministries of the state council.

In a new network environment, the university libraries will also serve all the public who need information from them through CERNET or other networks. But it doesn't mean that the basic task of the university libraries will be changed. It is still the most important work for the university libraries to meet the information requirement for the teaching and scientific researches to a maximum.

3. The Needs of Information on Social Sciences in Chinese Universities

Since teaching and scientific researches are major tasks of universities in China, there have been obvious differences in the needs of information on social science between the universities and the society. For example, in September 1997, the library of Renmin University made a sample survey of social science information needs in its twenty-four specialities and the result shows the problem.

In respect of document content, influenced by the research of social sciences, the needs of information on social science in universities appear diversified and extensive. The needs for comprehensive or interdisciplinary information, data information and countermeasure or decision making information are clearly growing up. In the survey, the need for the comprehensive or interdisciplinary information amount to 44%, data information amount to 47% and the countermeasure or decision making information amount to 43%. Meanwhile, universities must pass on fundamental theory systematically and basic knowledge and deepen study of basic scientific theory and improve teaching quality, which is the chief task of universities. So the needs for basic theory information of social

science and academic development information will be the main demand of social science information users.

In respect of document type, monographs of social sciences are still in users' good graces due to their enormous information capacities, complete discussion and mature content. (83%) Meanwhile, social science periodicals having strong effectiveness for a given period time, especially key periodicals, become the main part of users' demand day by day. (81%)

In respect of document information products, users have an urgent need for secondary documents of social sciences. The result of the survey shows that 63% readers hope that libraries could provide secondary information service such as bibliographies, indexes and abstracts.

In respect of document time limits, compared with natural sciences, the aging speed of social science documents is slow. In general, users of social science are still much more interested in historical materials. Particularly, those whose specialities are literature, history, philosophy, spoken and written language, need much more for retrospective documents. But with social scientific research gradually extending into practical fields, it is becoming a trend of social science needs in China universities to get the latest information conveyed fast. According to the statistics of the request forms, there are 85% persons having a need for social science books published after 90's and there are 80% persons needing social science periodicals published within recent one or two years'.

Information needs are the basis of university social science information work. If we didn't know well what users needed and didn't grasp the need features of users, we wouldn't serve the users well. University social science information work should be led by information needs of users and the ways of passive services should be changed. We should carefully look into users and find out the information needs and utilization in teaching and scientific research, and analyze the features and laws of social science information needs and take appropriate measures to meet the needs of users to a maximum.

4. The Requirement Behaviors of University Social Science Information Users

Affected and restrained by various factors including information environment and research system of social sciences, the need behaviors of university social science users have obviously traditional and backward characteristics comparing with that of natural science.

For example, in the way of exchanging and utilizing information, they like to get it in an informal way. Most of them gain the needed information in individual or from academic activities. We made the survey called "sample survey on humanities and social science information requirement." One of the questions is "How do you often get the documents and information?" There were 102 persons answered that they got their information by taking part in academic meetings, which amount to 58% of the total. Sixty-one persons choose the way of "communicate with colleagues," which amount to 35% of the total. As for the ways of information access, there are only 10 answers being "consult librarians," which amount to 6%. All of these figures demonstrate that social scientists are used to depending on themselves but not on libraries. Although they have the desire to obtain information, they lack the techniques of information retrieval. Most of them are willing to survey primary materials troublesomely, while the knowledge of using reference book or modern retrieval means are seldom known. According to the statistics, there are 54% researchers have never utilized the reference books. Only 0.5% researchers used CD-ROM or online retrieval. In the way of choosing the information, they are rarely influenced by new types of document media. Most of them take the printing document as their main information sources.

There are many reasons why the users of social science information in universities are traditional and backward. The main points are below: firstly, the research of social sciences hasn't completely escaped from the closed, half-closed and separated situation. Most social scientists are backward in their research means and methods, which leads to the backward requirement behaviors; Secondly, library users have an obscure recognition of the social science information work. When they need some information, they seldom think of depending on libraries for help. The third, most university libraries have not finished the change from document delivery to information delivery. The wholesome information consciousness of libraries is low. The ability of providing information is inefficient. It makes a great influence on the users' requirement behaviors.

To change this situation, we should develop information consciousness of university social science users and give more effective training on retrieval techniques to users in order to promote the adoption of advanced research means and methods in their work. Meanwhile, we will improve and deepen information service and make information environment better. We will try to make the role and value of information work fully embodied in the teaching and scientific research activities, so as to promote the users' requirement behaviors changing toward scientific direction.

5. The Content Processed and Transmitted by University Social Science Information Work

Scientific information is the core of social science information and also the major content processed and transmitted by university social science information work. Social science information has the general features of natural science information. However, the different research objects determine the different methods and result.

There are many features of social science information. Among them, the most important trait is the complexity of its content. It demonstrates as the following: Firstly, social science information is quite vague, because social phenomena are irregular and unrepeatable, and the body of knowledge can hardly be imitated, controlled or quantified. Secondly, research objects of social sciences are the current human beings as well as their activities, behaviors, consciousness, and relationships. The body of knowledge can't be taken with a neutral or purely objective attitude. Subjective factors affect the cognition a great deal. So social science information has strong subjective elements. Thirdly, because of the unrepeatability of social events and the strong penetration from the main body, the truth of social science knowledge is only relative and it takes a long time to test the theory of social sciences' correct or wrong. Fourthly, formal logic is often used in natural scientific research, while social sciences usually uses dialectical logic in its research, such as concept system, judgement and reasoning. There is a strong sense of sophistic thinking in the research of social sciences. Fifthly, affected by the vagueness of human knowledge and restrained by academic quality of knowledge body, there exist much invalid and redundant information in social sciences.

The complex nature of social science information content determines that its collection and sorting are more difficult than that of natural science information. The processing and handling depends more on the quality and the capacity of social science information work. Especially at present, the information of social sciences increases sharply and great changes have been taken place in the requirement content, the requirement methods and the requirement environment of the information of teaching and research. University social science information users are no longer satisfied with the access to books or periodicals. More and more users pay attention to obtaining the valid information of documents. As a result, university information services are transformed from document transportation to knowledge and information transportation. It is particularly imperative that university libraries organize information effectively and process

information deeply and make document information utilized validly to meet the requirement of users.

The complex nature of social science information content asks librarians to have more reasonable knowledge structure, richer practical experience, stronger theoretical thinking ability, selecting and judging ability, better psychological quality and more excellent thought morality. So it is an urgent and important problem to improve the quality capacity of university social science formation body as fast as possible.

6. The Benefit of Social Science Information Work in University Libraries

The beneficial result of social science information work in university libraries is different from other information institutions.

The social beneficial result is the focus of university social science information work. The objects of social scientific research are human and society. Its value shows even more in ideological, cultural and educational function and forecasting and decision making function, which determines that the social beneficial result is the main result of social science information. Social science information work in university libraries must serve for university teaching and scientific research. So its greatest and most important social benefit is to provide all kinds of services to improve the quality of teaching and efficiency of scientific research and adapt the trained persons to the all-round requirement of economic, political, cultural and social development. However, the social benefit has potential, slowly effective and indirect traits, the objective results can't be demonstrated in figures or indexes.

It is hard for social science information services in university libraries to create economic benefit. Except a few subjects closely related to economy, most research results in the fields of social sciences, especially literature, history, philosophy, religion and ethics, couldn't be changed into productive forces. So social scientific research results can't be totally merchandised. In subjects related closely to economy, only the researches for exploiting can get into economic field and produce economic benefit. But the benefit cannot be shown directly like natural science and technical science in quality, types, and nature of products. It reflects even more as indirect and macro economic benefit or economic benefit of society. The idea "social science information should be merchandised or industrialized" is not scientific. Certainly, social science information work in university libraries can also gain economic benefit. But the result is manifested indirectly by the way of serving for the teaching and scientific research and developing excellent market body and promoting the development of economic society in all side.

For the above reasons, the significance and value of social science information work in university libraries are always neglected. The only way to change this situation is that social sciences are developed, the public understanding is improved, and the information services of good quality and high efficiency are provided to win a new appraisal of teachers and students. Certainly, there is no cause for much criticism for university libraries to acquire some economic benefit by providing information to society. However, in the circumstance that there is a great deficiency of qualified social science information staffs, the economic benefit is gained at the cost of weakening information services for the teaching and scientific research, in which we lose more than we gain.

7. The Research of the Theory of Social Science Information Work in University Libraries

On the whole, we haven't made brilliant achievement in serving the teaching and scientific research. The scale and level of social science information work in China university libraries are much lower than that of developed countries. It is far away from the function that social science information work should exert. One of the important reasons is the lack of applicable theoretical guidance.

Surely, the theory and methods of traditional information science may direct the practice of social science information work to a certain extent. But it stresses science and technology information and ignores the particularity of social science information. When the cause of social science keeps advancing unceasingly today, it is evidently unsuited to the practice enriched day by day. The theory of social science information work comes from the information activities in social scientific research field and the guidable and inspirational role of it to practice is easy to be known. However, the theoretical system of social scientific information science hasn't been perfect. It overlooks the information activities in universities that are very important and have distinctive features. It couldn't answer many actual questions systematically and definitely that social science information work is faced with. Due to the lack of the proper theory's guidance, most of social science information work in universities is in a blind and passive situation.

Social science information work is restrained by the elements from two aspects. As a branch of social science information system, it is controlled by the general law of social science information work. At the same time, as a component part of university teaching and scientific research, it is dominated by the particular law of higher education development. Universities are not only the important base of social scientific research, but also undertake the historical mission of training qualified students, which determines that social science information work has its

inner laws and motion mechanism. It can't copy the work mode of science and technology or imitate that of the social science research institution as well as other information systems. If it is to extricate itself from a predicament, the information activities in social science teaching and scientific research of universities must be studied carefully. We must grasp the nature and the content of social science information work and go further into the mold and system of services. Besides, we must raise it to the level of theory to widen the practical basis of information science of social sciences and enrich the theoretical system. As a result, its theory and methods will play stronger and more widespread roles for the guidance of the practice. Thus, based on this solid foundation, social science information work will obtain energies of development and exert its functions and roles fully.

Concluding Remarks

The Twentieth Century is soon coming to an end and the social science information services of China's higher education are at a historical turning period of time. We ought to take the advantage of this rare and valuable opportunity and change the rigid way of thinking for a dauntless frontier spirit. We must do serious research and tackle well all the problems in front of us during the development of the social science information services of higher education and keep a close pace with the prosperous development of China's social sciences.

Wenfeng Ma and Liqing Wang
Library of Renmin University of China
Beijing 100872
P.R. China
Email: yangpj@sun.ihep.ac.cn