

Information Science Advancing while Library Retreating: An Exploratory Study with LIS Education in Mainland China

Tianji Jiang^a

^aUniversity of California, Los Angeles, United States

tianji008@ucla.edu

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to highlight the evolving trend of 'delibrarization' in LIS school education in mainland China and to explore the underlying reasons for its emergence. To achieve this, the study employs discourse analysis to examine the nomenclatures and objectives of undergraduate degree programs at the top five LIS schools in mainland China. Furthermore, a critical analysis of the social background and academic evaluation system was conducted to further identify some contributing factors. The study concludes that the trend of 'delibrarization' in LIS education is driven by a combination of factors: the self-imposed perception of library science as 'restricted to library' and interdisciplinary, as constructed by some scholars in the field; the unfavorable nature of the current academic evaluation system; and the diminishing influence of library science within LIS schools.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Education programs/schools; Students; Research methods

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Library science education; Library school; Information science.

Introduction

In the early 1980s, great reform was witnessed in LIS (Library and Information Science) education in mainland China, marking a recovery effort in the establishment of high education since 1978. This period was characterized by the country's growing emphasis on the advancement of science and technology. As a result, a great number of Chinese library schools were innovated to align themselves with the new social development needs that emerged during this transformative era. Inspired by their colleagues in north America and elsewhere in the world (House & Sutton, 1996), the Chinese library schools have ceased using the word “librarianship” in their titles, opting instead for more interdisciplinary words such as 'library and information science' or 'library and information studies'. At the same time, the schools transformed their plan for future development, research and instruction (Ma, 2013), shifting away from the old notion of 'sticking to library collections' and instead focusing on all forms of information essential for the advancement of business, education, and culture. It involved integrating business and information technology courses into their core curriculum and increasing the diversity of educational backgrounds among their faculty members (Wei, 2017).

As the 21st century progressed, the iSchool Movement got popular among the library schools in China, leading to substantial transformations within LIS education. 14 Chinese universities have joined the iSchools organization. It was widely believed that the ideas of iSchools education 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 (Zhou & Zhang, 2012). In efforts to keep up with the times, these institutions launched new degree programs and increased enrollment, but observed a decline in the ratio of students majoring in library science to the total number of students (Fu et al., 2005). Faculty members with diverse backgrounds including computer science, statistics, communication, and management were introduced into the LIS schools and came to occupy a larger proportion of the faculty (Wei, 2017). Similarly, traditional library science courses were replaced with those focusing on various disciplines, leading to an increase in funding allocated to research unrelated to library science. Consequently, library science began to be perceived as a discipline 'restricted to the library,' often labeled as 'old-fashioned' and 'uncompetitive in the job market' by both students and some faculty members. In response to this perception, many LIS schools distanced themselves from their historical association with library science, opting to emphasize their commitment to innovation, diversity, and interdisciplinarity instead (Yu & Liang, 2017).

As a result, education of librarianship is increasingly marginalized in LIS schools in China today, leading to a trend of 'delibrarization' in the instruction offered by these schools. In this trend, the LIS schools are becoming more akin to secondary institutions for computer science, business, or media studies, yet they are stepping away from traditional library science education. Numerous discussions have been conducted by scholars in the LIS field regarding the uniqueness and future development of LIS schools over the past decades (Yu & Liang, 2017). However, no satisfactory direction has been identified up to now.

At the same time, with the rapid development of the economy and benefits, public cultural services are experiencing unprecedented prosperity in the last decades. Libraries, as one of the key components in modern public cultural services, have entered their golden age, receiving substantial recognitions and funding for development and improvement. From 2006 to 2021, mainland China witnessed a significant expansion in its public library infrastructure, culminating in the settlement of 331 new public libraries and the establishment of more than 20,000 grassroots-level branch libraries. During this period, the collective holdings of public libraries witnessed an impressive growth of 83.3% (Insight & Info, 2016). Furthermore, the development and operational efficiency of these public libraries emerged as pivotal criteria in the assessment protocols for designating National Public Cultural Service Demonstration Areas. The prosperity of library demands a greater number of skilled librarians and researchers to enter the field. Yet, the prevailing trend of 'delibrarization' within their developmental and educational frameworks has led LIS schools in mainland China to fall short in supplying the requisite number of qualified professionals and academic support essential for local library services (Fan, 2021). This shortfall has, in turn, imposed limitations on the growth and advancement of local library services. In this study, I aim to explore the emergence of the "delibrarization" trend within the current framework of LIS education. Furthermore, I intend to employ discourse analysis to elucidate the underlying reasons behind the infiltration of this trend into LIS schools in mainland China. Through this analytical approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and educational dynamics that contribute to the shaping of LIS education in the contemporary context.

Methodology

This study employs discourse analysis to explore the underlying motivations driving the trend of 'delibrarization' within some of the leading Chinese LIS education institutions. It will focus on five widely-recognized LIS schools in mainland China, including School of Information Management, Wuhan University; School of Information Management, Nanjing University; Department of Information Management, Peking University; Department of Information Resources Management, Nankai University and School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University. All of these institutions are evolved from a conventional library school and boast a long-standing history in library science education. The study looks into the nomenclature of these institutions and the introduction documents of their undergraduate degree programs to understand the representation of library science within their discourse. This analysis aims to uncover which discipline exerts the most discourse power within these schools and their undergraduate programs, and to gauge the extent of influence that library science still holds.

The renaming history of the LIS Schools

As Table 1 shows, the title of the selected LIS schools have been changed several times since the 1980s. The changes can be categorized into three steps. The first step involved adding words like 'information,' 'bibliography,' or 'information resources' to their original names, which occurred in the late 1980s. The next step entailed removing 'library' from and incorporating 'management' into their names, a change that took place during the 1990s. The last step, which occurred in the new century, involved changing 'department' to 'school' or integrating the department into a school.

Table-1*History of renaming of the LIS schools*

Current Name	Original name & Year	History of renaming & Year		
School of Information Management, Wuhan University	Department of Library Science, 1956	School of Library and Information Science, 1984	School of Information Management, 2001	
School of Information Management, Nanjing University	Department of Library Science, 1985	Department of Bibliography and Information Science, 1987	Department of Information Management, 1992	School of Information Management, 2011
Department of Information Management, Peking University	Department of Library Science, 1947	Department of Library Science and Information Science, 1987	Department of Information Management, 1992	
Department of Information Resource Management, School of Business, Nankai University	Department of Library Science, 1979	Department of Information Resource Management, 1983	Department of Information Resource Management, School of Business, 1999	
School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University	Department of Library Science, 1983	Department of Library and Information Science, 1988	Department of Information Management, 1993	School of Information Management, 2010

The names of the LIS schools offer insights into their disciplinary orientation, research fields, and areas of focus, among other aspects. Ideally, these names should convey the scope and kernel of their educational offerings, and encapsulate their conceptualization of the discipline's essence and future trajectory. Moreover, the act of renaming can reveal the dynamic shifts within LIS schools over past decades, offering glimpses into how the perceptions and ideologies regarding LIS disciplines among school members have evolved. The history of renaming in these five LIS schools clearly mirrors the trend of 'delibrarization' in LIS education. It appears that school members harbored reservations about the future of library science within the LIS domain and consistently endeavored to align the field with modernity by incorporating elements of information science and management. However, in these efforts, library science was finally and entirely omitted from the names of these LIS schools, signifying a significant shift in focus and direction.

The Marginalization of Library Science in Undergraduate Programs

A detailed examination of the objectives outlined in the undergraduate degree program descriptions was conducted to further the analysis. In contrast to their counterparts in research universities in the United States, these undergraduate programs typically represent the historical cornerstone of their institutions, boasting the most distinguished students and receiving the biggest share of resources within their schools. The quality of undergraduate programs is a paramount consideration when it comes to ranking or evaluating the education of a school. y.

Consequently, given the constraints of time and resources, this study has strategically narrowed its focus to exclusively include the descriptions of the selected LIS schools' undergraduate degree programs for analysis.

Table 2 presents a detailed breakdown of the majors offered and the enrollment figures for students, while Table 3 outlines the objectives of the undergraduate degree programs at the five LIS schools under study. Analysis of Table 2 reveals that, although four out of the five LIS schools maintain a library science major in their undergraduate curriculum, this major constitutes only a peripheral component of their overall program. For instance, at Peking University's Department of Information Management, there were 55 graduates from its undergraduate program last year; however, a mere 6 of these were library science majors. The majority, numbering 49, graduated with majors in Information Management and Information System (IMIS). The similar situation is observed across the other LIS schools as well.

It's worth noting that the Department of Information Resources Management at Nankai University might appear to be an outlier, with a majority of its graduates specializing in library science. However, this perception is somewhat misleading. Unlike other universities, Nankai University also hosts a Department of Information Management and Information System, a separate entity within the School of Business, originally branched off from the Department of Information Resources Management. The Department of IMIS boasts over 100 graduates annually, significantly overshadowing the Department of IRM, which graduates fewer than 30 students each year. This distribution further underscores the marginal status of library science within the broader context of these institutions' undergraduate offerings.

Table 2

Summary of the Undergraduate Programs of the LIS schools

School	Number of students every year	Library Science	IMIS	Archival Science	Editing & Publishing Science	Electronic Commerce	Digital Publishing	Information Resource Management
School of Information Management, Wuhan University	About 380	√	√	√	√	√	√	×
School of Information Management, Nanjing University	About 100	√	√	√	√	×	×	×
Department of Information Management, Peking University	80-100	√	√	×	√	×	×	×

Department of Information Resource Management, Nankai University	About 30	√	×	√	×	×	×	×
School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University	80-100	×	√	×	×	√	×	√

The investigation progresses to analyze the objectives of the undergraduate degree programs within these LIS schools. The stated goals of a degree program reflect the institution's expectations for its graduates, subtly revealing much about the current positioning of library science within these programs and the institutions' perspectives on what roles library science should play in LIS education today. Furthermore, these goals offer insights into the schools' vision of the future LIS profession and the competencies deemed essential for upcoming LIS professionals.

An examination of Table 3 indicates that most LIS schools emphasize concepts such as "adapting to new technology environments," "information resource management," "diluting specialization," and "broadening foundational knowledge" in their program goals. It is worth noting that the term "library" is mentioned by only one school. This pattern suggests a clear shift by the majority of LIS schools towards fostering interdisciplinarity, prioritizing new technologies, and distancing their programs from traditional library-centric content. These objectives imply an expectation for future LIS professionals to possess a strong grasp of contemporary information technology, innovation, and cross-disciplinary knowledge. In contrast, education in library science is portrayed as confined to the library, perceived as disconnected from modern information technology, and seemingly deemed less relevant by contemporary society. As a result, these LIS schools are orienting their instruction and training towards modern information technology and management theories, moving away from traditional library science or librarianship as indicated in their stated goals.

Table 3

The Goals of Undergraduate Degree Programs of the 5 LIS Schools

School	Goal of undergraduate program	Translation
School of Information Management, Wuhan University	学院始终把人才培养质量放在首要位置，致力于培养德、智、体、美全面发展，理论基础扎实，知识面宽广，富有创新精神和实践能力，厚基础、宽口径、复合型，适应新技术环境的信息资源管理高级专门人才。	Our college always prioritizes the quality of our students' development, dedicated to nurturing well-rounded individuals with moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic development. We aim to produce graduates with a solid theoretical foundation, broad knowledge base, a spirit of innovation, and practical abilities. Our focus is on building a strong foundation, wide-ranging expertise, and a composite skill set, preparing advanced specialists in information resource management who can adapt to new technological environments.

School of Information Management, Nanjing University	该项目培养理论基础厚、知识面宽、文献功底深、掌握现代信息管理理论、技术和方法，能够承担各级各类组织机构的资料收集、整理、组织、分析和服务工作的专门人才。	This program aims to develop specialists with a strong theoretical foundation, broad knowledge base, and deep understanding of literature, who master modern information management theories, technologies, and methods, and are capable of undertaking tasks of data collection, organization, analysis, and service for organizations at all levels and types.
Department of Information Management, Peking University	在本科层次，遵照学校的“加强基础、淡化专业、因材施教、分流培养”十六字方针，培养学生的创新意识。	At the undergraduate level, following the school's principle of 'strengthening fundamentals, deemphasizing specialization, teaching according to aptitude, and diversified training', we aim to cultivate students' innovative consciousness.
Department of Information Resource Management, Nankai University	专门培养各类信息资源管理人才以及图书情报档案高级专门人才	Specifically designed to cultivate various types of information resource management professionals, as well as high-level specialists in library, information, and archival studies.
School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University	培养掌握现代信息技术和管理科学知识，具备熟练地运用现代化技术手段收集、组织、检索、分析、评价和开发利用信息的能力，以及信息资源集成管理与服务应用的知识与技能，能在国家机关、企业、事业单位及其他社会组织从事信息资源管理工作的高级复合型、创新型专门人才	Foster expertise in modern information technology and management science, equipping individuals with the skills to adeptly use modern technology for gathering, organizing, searching, analyzing, evaluating, and leveraging information. This includes knowledge and abilities in integrated management and application of information resources. Such training prepares individuals to become advanced, innovative specialists, capable of managing information resources within government bodies, corporations, public institutions, and other organizations.

Conclusion

In this study, the renaming history and descriptions of undergraduate degree programs of the 5 leading LIS schools in mainland China was taken as a window to observe the 'delibrarization' trend in LIS education. This study led to the conclusion that the trend of 'delibrarization' in LIS school education in mainland China can be partially attributed to the 'restricted to library' image and the push towards interdisciplinarity in library science. The motivations behind this trend will be revealed in future studies.

It is suggested that Chinese scholars in library science should moderate their pursuit of new technologies and theories and instead engage in a reflective reassessment of the fundamental questions: What is library science, and what are its core principles? While these questions may not yield universally agreed-upon answers in the short term, the pursuit of these answers will enable library science scholars to gradually recognize their unique contributions to academia.

This process is key to regaining their discursive authority in library science research and education and may ultimately lead to a redefinition and revitalization of the entire LIS field.

REFERENCES

- Fan, Z. (2021). The Construction of Library Science in China under the Background of “New Liberal Arts”: Discourse, Logic and Path. *Information and Documentation Services*, 2021(1), 28–36. <https://qikan.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=7103814483>
- Fu, W., Liu, W., & Jiang, X. (2005). The actualities, problems and countermeasures about undergraduate education of Library Science recently. *Research on Library Science*, 2005(10), 60–63. https://qikan.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=20435288&from=Qikan_Article_Detail
- House, N. V., & Sutton, S. A. (1996). The Panda Syndrome: An Ecology of LIS Education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 37(2), 131. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40324268>
- Insight & Info. (2016). 2016-2022 In-depth Survey of China’s Public Library Industry and Research Report on the Future Prospects of the “Thirteenth Five-Year Plan” (239537). Insight & Info Consulting Ltd. <https://www.chinabaogao.com/detail/239537.html>
- Ma, F. (2013). Historical Reviews of the Development of Information Science with Proposing Frontier Topics. *Document, Information & Knowledge*, 2013(2), 4–12.
- Wei, M., Mostafavi, I., Savage, R., Feng, C., & Moradi, S. (2023). Exploring the Evolution and Characteristics of the iSchool Movement in China. *College & Research Libraries*, 84(5). <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.84.5.693>
- Wei, Q. (2017). The Review and Prospect of Library and Information Science Education in China. <https://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/2549/>
- Yu, L., & Liang, S. (2017). The iSchool Myth: A Reflection on iSchool Movement’s Conception of LIS, iField and Their Relationship. *Journal of Library Science in China*, 2017(3), 18–33. <https://doi.org/10.13530/j.cnki.jlis.170013>
- 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. <https://qikan.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=42906513>