

EAST MEETS WEST

**THE SELECTING AND TRAINING OF SUCCESSORS FOR
MEDICAL LIBRARY DIRECTORS IN CHINA**

By Dizhi Xiong

Historical Perspective

Modern medical librarianship began in China in the early years of this century. About twenty libraries are very influential in the medical community, because they are very well staffed and equipped. Careful and thoughtful selection of the leaders has been a decisive factor for their development. Up to the mid-eighties, most of the directors of these libraries had medical degrees. Less than one third of them were graduated from general university library schools in the thirties or later. Through decades of experience, Chinese administrators at larger medical institutions reached the consensus that a competent medical library director should have a satisfactory background in medicine, foreign languages (English in particular), and an improved knowledge of library management.¹ These have been regarded as routine criteria for selecting directors at medical school libraries.

By the late eighties, library directors at 17 national medical universities and academies were graduated from medical schools. Some changes occurred in the nineties. In 1995, three directors had background in humanities, while 14 held medical degrees.

The Selecting of Library Directors at Larger Medical Settings from the Eighties

The transition began in the mid-eighties when college librarians were being to deliver more quality services for the faculty, libraries were beginning computerization, and many senior directors were to retire. The selection of successful candidates became crucial for the development of medical librarianship. The choices were as follows:

1. Some medical professors were persuaded to take the position, or at least to be a concurrent director with an assistant one accompanied;

2. More managerial division heads, such as the managers for teaching or research affairs, were assigned as library directors.
3. A few experienced successors of middle age were selected from within.
4. A few young librarians with background in medicine or medical information science who had been working in the library were appointed to associate directors from late eighties on.
5. A small number of associate directors were invited from larger institutions to smaller ones to be the full directors.

Discussion: Advantages vs. Disadvantages

In a developing country where libraries must strengthen their functions of instruction and information, and they are relatively poorly staffed, not only senior professional „transplantation“ is necessary, but also inevitable. As medical library education in China is just in its childhood² and the administrators do not intend to give up their criteria, most of the leading members will be imported for a certain period of time. Obvious achievements have been made in many influential libraries since the new directors came. Their contributions are:

1. raising the visibility of the library thus gaining more opportunities for the library both on the campus and outside;
2. accelerating the development of the staff;
3. widening the horizon of the librarians on staff;
4. enhancing the automation of library management;
5. improving the information services in particular;
6. bettering the academic atmosphere of the library.

A farsighted approach is to appoint young librarians with medical subject backgrounds to the leading positions. In the early eighties, administrators at some medical schools, foreseeing various kinds of possibilities, assigned medical graduates to their affiliated libraries. They took advanced courses in library science, foreign language medical literature and retrieval, and then worked in the library. Gradually some devoted young people became experienced and were appointed to the leading positions, though many left the library for other jobs. At some medium sized medical schools young graduates from medical library schools are now assistant directors. These promising young people have displayed their dynamic and aggressive spirit.

The device factor for such a choice is a foresighted administrator and tutor capable of training the candidate. As a rule, successful candidates cannot grow up spontaneously. In the presence of colleagues of the same age or even older, these young directors are facing problems: how to establish their image and credibility?

how to organize team work without jealousy? As is the Chinese tradition, age is both their potential and shortcoming. They must find their optimum solution.

Transplanting directors from larger libraries may be feasible in some speedily progressing districts, such as Hainan and Shenzhen. In less attractive provinces, it may be problematic.

The Future

In the era when the information superhighway is rapidly advancing, the senior administrators at Chinese medical libraries will be increasingly specialized. Not only should they have a better knowledge of health sciences, foreign languages, and library management, but they must also be skillful in information technology. The requirements of a competent medical library director will be increasingly sophisticated.

Authorities at medical schools are more and more convinced by the trend, that they will find it more difficult to persuade a professor or managerial head to accept a new position which will be even more complicated to control. The needs for successors will be met mainly in two ways:

Supplementary Training Courses

In the eighties, two national courses for training teachers of medical bibliographic instruction were organized in Nanjing and Shenyang respectively³. Consecutive courses for training librarians with subject background were held later. These were all successful. Some of the trainees became leading library practitioners later. Past experience is of value for the future, though training topics will vary with time. Larger libraries with more qualified staff have played their educational role and will contribute more to the training of future directors. On-the-job training and the exchange of interns are also of assistance, which we have experienced on the basis of mutual agreement.

The Required Personality of a Young Successor

Directors in the future will be younger. Problems facing them are similar to those faced by their predecessors. As compared with the older generation in China, because of the open policy and high technology, there are and will be more competition and temptation for the young. As we know, discrepancies and conflicts may produce a poor image. An empty boaster may damage a highly modernized library, whereas a practical director works miracles. We must learn useful lessons from those tragedies. Devotion, fairness, compatibility, and practicality are values necessary for all directors old or young at home or abroad.

We must re-emphasize their importance. These should be our guidelines in selecting young successors.

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