

# The Library System and Its Services in China's Radio and TV Universities

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## Abstract

This paper examines the library system and its services in China's Radio and TV Universities (RTVUs). The paper begins with an introduction about the profile of the library system in China's RTVUs, focusing on its dispersed and multi-level structure and division of functions. Then the paper examines the library services in RTVUs, stressing on its characteristics in Chinese context. Finally, the paper discusses the current innovation towards electronic and/or virtual library services within China's national RTVUs system, its problems and the future development.

## The Profile of Library System in China's RTVUs

Libraries, together with academics and laboratories are recognized as three essential elements of educational resources in China's universities. China's RTVUs, as a national distance teaching system, identify library together with course development center, computing center and laboratory center as the fundamental infrastructure and facilities for distance teaching and learning.

China's RTVUs have built up a dispersed library system with multi-level structure and division of functions. In the mainland of China, this national system of distance teaching constitutes 1 Central RTVU (CRTVU), 44 provincial-level RTVUs (PRTVUs), 831 city-level branch schools and more than 1,600 county-level working stations. Each of these RTVUs' institutions has built up its own independent library. It is a dispersed and hierarchical system with different functions for various level libraries. The library in CRTVU mainly provides services to its full-time academic and other professional staff, but not to students directly. The libraries in 44 PRTVUs serve for both academics and students. The libraries in branch schools and work stations mainly serve for their students locally, and the academics as well. Such a dispersed and hierarchical system of libraries is suitable for China's multi-level RTVUs and their teaching and learning nationwide. There were 21.1 million volume of total collections in whole library system of China's RTVUs in 1996. Taking CRTVU into account only, there were over 110 thousand volume of Chinese and other language books and other kinds of publication, and nearly 20 thousand units of audio-visual materials including computer diskettes and various kinds of laser discs.

## The Library Services and Some Characteristics in China's RTVUs

The library system in China's RTVUs provide various kinds of services for both academics and students. Except its dispersed and hierarchical structure and division of functions mentioned above, there are some other characteristics deserved to be discussed.

One of the most significant functions for libraries in CRTVU and 44 PRTVUs is to provide services for academics in course development. This is because that academics in PRTVUs, especially in CRTVU are responsible for both curriculum and course development. The rich collections in various subject matters and different media help academics and other professional staff in their designing, creating and producing multi-media course materials.

Another major function for libraries in CRTVU and 44 PRTVUs is to provide facilities for various kinds of research and faculty development. One of the planned goal for future development of CRTVU's library is to be built up as the first class one with rich collections in information technology and its educational application, distance education, open learning, adult education and life-long education. It is constantly encouraged that academics and other professional staff make greater efforts of using library's facilities in their research, educational innovation and teaching reform, and professional development and updating.

There are two essential elements for distance teaching and learning: pre-prepared and pre-produced multi-media course materials and student learning support services including various kinds of two-way communications. In Chinese context, a great number of students, especially those living in remote and rural areas, who need learning support services most significantly, have problems of getting access to library's facilities and services. Thus, one of possible and feasible solutions is to provide all students with carefully designed and produced set books, including main textbooks, study guides, readings, and other supplemental materials.

In Chinese context, a dispersed system of libraries is suitable for students' demands. In this case, 831 libraries in city-level branch schools and 1,600 libraries in county-level work stations are most helpful for satisfying students' needs locally. Another character of Chinese distance teaching and learning is group-based in their working place or other community institution. The most students are organized in TV classes locally. They are able to get access to the library's facilities and services in group. The group-based mechanism is a relatively easy way for management and a high efficient and cost-effective way of using learning resources. This is especially significant for China, a developing country with severe shortage in educational facilities and resources.

In the past decade, in some extent, China's RTVUs system has shown its trend of convergence towards campus-based and face-to-face teaching and learning. This is especially true since national enrollment of school leavers in 1986. These students (Puzuansen) are usually organized in special campus-based TV classes studying full-time, some of them even have campus-based accommodation. Here the campus could be one of the 44 PRTVUs, 831 branch schools or 1,600 work stations. During the same period, in addition to ordinary facilities of library, computing laboratory, audio-visual production center and satellite receiving system, some kinds of new infrastructure have been built up in many campuses of RTVUs, such as audio-visual reading-rooms, audio-visual classrooms, computer networked classrooms, laser disc base and multimedia classrooms, campus-based FM radio stations with small power, campus-based cable TV systems, multi-function conferencing halls, campus-based computer networks, and so on. In this way, the ordinary concept of library and its services has been expanded into a better facilitated information and resources center within the campus, and students, organized in TV classes are able to get access to these facilities while studying at one of these nearest campuses.

However, since 1995, a pilot program of enrolling free-entrance students has been developed in China's RTVUs system. Up to now, the total number of enrolled free-entrance students by 38 PRTVUs has exceeded 250 thousand. Free-entrance students are encouraged to study independently and individually, but not to be organized in fixed classes and to complete their learning in classrooms on campus. That is, to realize more open and flexible learning. It is in fact the developing direction for whole RTVUs education, but not only for the pilot program in the future. This change of teaching and learning mode at distance requires outreach services of library and other educational facilities and resources. China's RTVUs system is now facing such a great challenge and has started to initiate a series of strategies to respond the new change and challenge.

### **Towards an Electronic/Virtual Library Network: Innovations and Problems**

Information technology and its educational application provide China's RTVUs system with many new possibilities and opportunities in distance teaching and learning. Since last year, CRTVU and some PRTVUs has begun their exploration in this field. For example, CRTVU and more than 30 PRTVUs have built up their campus-based computer networks, some of them have set up their information and network centers connected with Internet and China's CERNet or other public communications networks. There have been established point-to-point communications between CRTVU and PRTVUs, and between PRTVUs and their branch schools and work stations as well for information exchange and educational administration and management. Other kinds of facilities for distance teaching and learning support services such as video-conferencing systems, consultant and tutorial e-mail boxes are also in practice. Among recent innovations, development of the electronic/virtual library and its outreach services is certainly a significant component. However, there is a long way to go to reach the destination. In today's world, there are more than 100 million users of Internet, but only 1 million (1%) is in China. In addition, the most Internet users in China are in business sector and concentrated in a few municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou etc.). Based on an incomplete survey on academics of China's RTVUs, around 10% of total academic staff use computers regularly in their professional work and less than 5% of academics are able to get access to Internet and to apply the e-mail facility. What about the students of RTVUs? There is no statistics on this matter. However, even for national key universities in China, it is not easy to get access to networked computers on campus for undergraduates and even for postgraduates. In July 1998, the first networked book shop in China has to be shut down in Shanghai because of the difficulty of its business. According to a professional sampling survey conducted in June 1998, the three major problems for Internet users in China are low speed, high cost and less information in Chinese. To make an electronic/virtual library system nationwide from idea to reality, China's RTVUs are planning to take following measurements of development with great efforts:

- to make libraries of RTVUs connected with their local campus based computer networks first, then to make major libraries accessible by RTVUs nationwide;
- to solve access problems for students in two modes: developing of home based PC connected with the various networks and building up of a study center network distributed nationwide with networked facilities;

- to organize cooperation and collaboration in developing of various teaching and learning resources, including various kinds of CAI and multimedia software and courseware;
- to encourage information exchange and to regulate various kinds of free and fee-paying services and management system; and
- to introduce and use educational resources outside RTVUs system in China, as well as from overseas institutions, especially other distance teaching universities in Asian region.

In short, China's RTVUs have decided to develop an electronic/virtual library system and other infrastructure of educational facilities and resources in responding to the challenges faced by distance education and open learning when approaching the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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