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Private Libraries in China: Their Diversity, Informatization, and Role as Public Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Private libraries in China—most of which were created by bottom-up processes, not top-down government mandates—offer a diversity of services to a range of constituencies. They offer *individuals* space for reading and study, information exchange, interpersonal communication, IT training, amusement, recreation, and entertainment. They offer *schools and communities* an aggregated abundance of social resources in a learning-centered atmosphere, which in turn enhances school- and community-based cooperation. For *society as a whole*, they offer support for the elimination of “knowledge poverty,” and a boost for public service and civil society. Thus they function, to some degree, as community informatization commons and community-based public space.

INTRODUCTION

The private libraries discussed in this paper are not-for-profit libraries founded by social entities including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), corporations, and individuals. Private libraries provide free services just like public libraries. But they are either privately owned (as in libraries founded by individuals) or operated by private organizations (as in libraries founded by NGOs or corporations). This makes them different from public libraries. They are not-for-profit, self-governed, and staffed by volunteers. And in mainland China, most private libraries are located in rural and urban low-income communities.

In mainland China, the twenty-first century brought with it a rise in social consciousness about public welfare and charity and an influx of NGOs and private libraries. We set out to research these processes—specifically, the state of Chinese private libraries—in 2008. In order to do so, we devised a website, named The Journey to Seek Cultural Kindling

文化火种寻找之旅 (<http://kindling.im.pku.edu.cn/index1.html>). We also collected information about private libraries from the Internet and conducted two library surveys. We began the first survey, which we administered from August to December 2009, by sending questionnaires to 332 private libraries. Eighty-eight libraries responded to our questionnaires, yielding a total of 86 valid questionnaires (a response rate of 46.8 percent and an efficiency of 97.7 percent). We supplemented this survey with another one from June to September 2011. This time we surveyed 140 individually founded private libraries. We received 114 complete responses to this survey (a response rate of 82 percent and an efficiency of 99 percent).

Meanwhile, from March 2010 to May 2011, we conducted field research at more than thirty private libraries in different areas, including in Beijing 北京, Hebei 河北, Shanxi 山西, Ningxia 宁夏, Gansu 甘肃, Zhejiang 浙江, Guizhou 贵州, Hunan 湖南, Hubei 湖北, and Sichuan 四川. We also hosted the first Private Library Forum in Bei Daihe 北戴河 on June 4 and 5, 2011, which was attended by directors of more than seventy private libraries. We browsed many websites and documents and sent questionnaires to more than 50 domestic NGOs involved in the development of private libraries (more than 40 of them responded). Taken together this research yielded abundant raw data about private libraries.

In this essay, we use this data to analyze the current state of private libraries in China. Results of our study indicate that private libraries exist in a variety of forms. Although their informatization levels are, overall, still very low, private libraries have played an important public role and often serve as the information hubs for local communities.

THE DIVERSITY OF PRIVATE LIBRARIES IN CHINA

Diversity is not only an essential need but also the basic impetus for cultural advance. Compared to public libraries established by government in a top-down way, grassroots private libraries display a much greater degree of variation of library patrons, founders, operations, and services (see table 1).

Table 1. Number of Different Patrons and Founders of Private Libraries

Founders Patrons	Grassroots				
	Individuals	Foundations	Organizations	Corporations	All
Rural primary and middle schools	20	23,700	760	2,500	26,980
Rural communities	330	300	100	200	930
Migrant childrens' schools	Not clear	1,000	100	300	1,400
Urban communities	50	Not clear	Not clear	20	70
Special populations	30	Not clear	Not clear	Not clear	30
All libraries (minimum)	430	25,000	960	3,020	29,410

Note: The data in this table are from 2010 only.

Patron Diversity

Rural primary and middle school libraries. Most primary- and middle-school libraries in rural areas (sometimes referred as “reading rooms” 图书室) were established by NGOs or grassroots organizations. Although these libraries are usually housed in a school, the books, documents, and equipment they contain generally belong to the sponsoring not-for-profit organization. They are generally managed by professional staff that have been assigned by schools or by volunteers sent by the sponsoring organization. In some cases private libraries have adapted their form of management to local conditions. Such is the case with the Pu Gongying Rural Library 蒲公英乡村图书馆—a project supported by the U.S.-based Pass Love Charity Foundation (PLCF) 美国爱心传递慈善基金会. Between 2007 and 2011, the PLCF built twenty-four Pu Gongying Rural Libraries in Guizhou, Anhui, and Guangxi provinces. Although these libraries are managed by local primary-school teachers, the foundation sends dozens of volunteers for staff training every year.

Rural community libraries. These libraries are independent institutions that were created, usually, by local peasants or retirees—or, in some cases, by NGOs or grassroots organizations. Data gathered on the Journey to Seek Cultural Kindling website indicate that 45 of 332 not-for-profit libraries mentioned (or 40.4 percent) were established by peasants; 48 (or 42.1 percent) by retirees (cadre members, teachers, workers, clerks, doctors); and 21 (or 17.5 percent) by rural teachers and/or students. Generally speaking, the libraries founded by NGOs or grassroots organizations are of higher quality and have a greater impact than those established by individuals. For example, the grassroots organization China Rural Library (established in 2007) has built 12 private libraries—in provinces such as Hubei, Henan, Sichuan, Yunnan, Hebei, Jiangxi, Shanxi 陕西, Chongqing, Shanxi 山西, Guangdong, and Zhejiang. Each of these libraries is equipped with at least 6,000 books, as well as new furniture (shelves, chairs, and tables) and electronics (computers, TVs, and projectors).

City school libraries for migrant children. The recent expansion of the Chinese economy has prompted large quantities of agricultural laborers to move to the cities. The children of these migrants become “urban migrant children.” The number of children who can be characterized as “urban migrant children” is constantly growing. In Beijing, for instance, their number rose from 155,000 in 1997 to 504,000 in 2006. Between 2000 and 2006, the average annual growth rate of this group was 17.25 percent. These children cannot go to formal public schools in cities; they have to go to private migrant-labor schools in scattered suburban areas. The teaching environment in these schools is poor, and very few of them have good libraries. In an attempt to ameliorate these circumstances, many NGOs and grassroots organizations have started to build libraries in migrant-laborers’ schools. For instance, in 2005, the Beijing Tian Xiayi Education

Consulting Center 北京天下溪教育咨询中心 (Tian Xiayi, for short) (简称“天下溪”) built ten school libraries in places such as Xinghuo 星火学校和 Chunlei 春蕾学校. Meanwhile, the China Zigen North Liaison Group 中国滋根北方联络 built at least five libraries in Beijing and Hebei.

Urban community libraries. Most urban community libraries are located in locations beyond the public libraries' catchment areas. Among these are the Elephant Library in the Tian Tongyuan community of Beijing 北京市天通苑社区的“大象图书馆” (established in 2009), the Deserted Island Library in Xiaozhou village 广州市小洲村的“荒岛图书馆” (established in 2009), Our Library in the Tianhe District of Guangzhou 广州市天河区的“我们的图书馆” (established in 2010), and the 2666 Library on Nanjing West Road in Shanghai 上海市南京西路的 2666 图书馆 (established in 2011). Some urban community libraries have even embarked upon a path of chain-store type of development. For example, The New World Land of China (a well-known real-estate enterprise) combined the Deserted Island Library with the development of urban residential communities and opened a second Deserted Island Library in the Lingnan New World. Subsequently it duplicated this model in well-established communities in twelve cities—including Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Xiamen, Wuhan, Changsha, Zhengzhou, and Shenyang. To date, more than twenty Deserted Island Libraries have been built.

Libraries for special groups. Special libraries focus on certain subjects and target specific groups of patrons. For example, the collection at the Lanzhou Muslim Library 兰州穆斯林图书馆 (established in 1993) focuses on Islamic literature. The Beijing Huazang Library 北京华藏图书馆 (established in 2007) is strong in the areas of Buddhist and Classic Chinese literature. The Library for the Blind 盲人图书馆 (established in 1996 by the Guangzhou Disabled Persons' Federation 广州市残疾人, 联合会) and the Soul Eyes Library 心目图书馆 in Xi Cheng District 北京市西城区 of Beijing (established in 2011) serve disabled patrons with their large collections of audiobooks and films. The Picture Book TAXI 绘本 TAXI in Zhengzhou, Henan Province (established in 2009), lends picture books to children. The Douding Library 豆丁图书馆 in the Haidian District of Beijing (established in 2010) provides picture books for children under the age of six. The Zhangming Music Library 张铭音乐图书馆 in Hangzhou (established in 2002) contains classical music records and CDs from all over the world. Libraries for special groups also function as urban community libraries, especially in cities with large populations.

The Diverse Founders of Private Libraries

Libraries founded by individuals. These libraries include private libraries founded by a single person or a family or partners through agreement. For example, the One Lamp Rural Not-for-Profit Library 一盏灯乡村公益图书室, which was established in Yetang Middle School in the city of Xingning

city, Guangdong Province 广东省兴宁市叶塘中学, in 2009, is the result of a partnership of volunteer teachers, including Wen Liming 温丽明 and Xiao Jianping 肖建平. Private individuals and not-for-profit foundations provided the library with start-up monies and books, but the school covers rent and utilities. The library is run by eleven teachers and thirty student volunteers, and although it mainly serves the school's teachers and students, at night it is open to nearby primary- and middle-school students and community residents. Thus the One Lamp Library is not just a rural school library. It is also a public library serving the larger population of the village where it is located.

Libraries founded by foundations. Various foundations have supported the building of libraries in Mainland China. Among these are not only foundations established by Hong Kongers and Overseas Chinese, such as the Xin Ping Foundation 心平公益基金会 (established in Hong Kong in 2008) and the Evergreen Education Foundation 青树教育基金会 (established in the U.S. in 2001), but also those organized by corporations, such as the TEN CENT Foundation 腾讯公益慈善基金会 (established in 2006) and the Maitian Education Foundation 麦田教育基金会 (established in 2010). This group includes foundations with official ties, such as the China Youth Development Foundation 中国青少年发展基金会 (established in 1989). The first foundation to start a library program was the Chinese American-sponsored Education and Science Society 科技教育协会. Their first projects—established in 1987—were the Donating Township Public Libraries 认助乡镇公共图书馆 and the Donating Rural School Libraries 认助乡村学校图书室 projects. By 2006, it had built twenty Ai Hua Libraries 爱华图书馆 in Guangxi. Overall, the foundation has contributed about 864,000 RMB and almost 200,000 volumes of books.

Libraries founded by grassroots organizations. Well-known rural libraries built by grassroots organizations include the Bai Caoyuan Not-for-Profit Library 百草园公益图书馆, founded by NGO China.net (2005); Shanghai's Sunrise Library 启明书社 (established in 2005); and the Candlelight Library 烛光图书馆 in Xi'an (established in 2007). The Sunrise Library is a grassroots organization founded spontaneously by a group of white-collar workers in Shanghai. These workers contribute financially as well as with their own labor, working as librarians at the institution itself. By May 2009, this group had built thirteen libraries and sixteen reading corners in Henan, Anhui, Shanxi 山西, Guangxi, and Sichuan provinces, each of which holds a collection of, on average, 2,000 books. Every year, each institution orders more than 10 newspapers and periodicals suitable for primary and middle school students. They also purchase more than 200 new books annually. The average number of cardholders at each library is over 500 individuals. In 2007 and 2008, the Candlelight Library organization of Xi'an built libraries at 11 remote countryside schools and filled them with 21,881 volumes of childrens' books. These institutions serve 3,295

children. Volunteers from the Candlelight Library organization occasionally return to these libraries to evaluate library management and service. They also organize a Candlelight Composition Contest 烛光作文大赛 for children in participating institutions.

Libraries founded by corporations. Between 2006 to 2008, China Mobile 中国移动 donated 30,000,000 RMB to the China Education Development Foundation 中国教育发展基金会. This money was used to build 1,000 China Mobile Love Libraries 中国移动爱心图书馆 (室) for primary and middle schools in poverty-stricken rural sections of 23 provinces and autonomous regions in Midwest China. In addition to this donation, public donors contributed a total of 2,317,000 books to the project. Similarly, in 2008 the Amway (China) Co., Ltd 安利 (中国) 日用品有限公司 launched the Sunshine Plan 阳光计划. This plan chose fifteen migrant-worker schools (serving a relatively concentrated floating population) in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Xi'an, and elsewhere to serve as pilot schools. Then it gave each pilot school a Sunshine Library 阳光图书馆—and equipped each library with a computer, a large-screen projector, shelves, chairs, tables, and a minimum of 10,000 books.

Corporations have also funded free-standing libraries. For instance, in 2004, Bao Shang Bank built its own library at No. 6 Steel and Iron Street in the city of Baotou. The library is over 400 square meters in size and contains about 13,000 volumes of books. It is also equipped with an automatic management system and electronic reading rooms. The library's annual book circulation is about 3,000.

Diverse models of operation

Traditional libraries. This category refers to libraries with buildings, book collections, chairs, and tables. Approximately 99 percent of all Chinese private libraries fall into this category—most community libraries as well as libraries in rural primary and middle schools and libraries of schools for migrant workers' children are traditional libraries. Some of these libraries are part of a networked system, in which one central library will set up and manage a number of additional "satellite" reading spots or stations. A good example of this kind of library is the Heart to Heart Family Library 心连心家庭图书馆 in Shang Matian Village, Matian Town, Zuoquan County, Shanxi Province 山西左权县麻田镇上麻田村 (established in the year 2000). This institution has 21,000 print books and 40,000 e-books. The library's founder, Zhang Xiaobao 张小宝, has also set up book corners containing books suitable for children in classrooms of nearby schools. In order to stimulate reading, Zhang Xiaobao changes the selection of books regularly and frequently arranges writing competitions and other reading-related activities.

Another example is the Zhao Liangbi Library 赵良弼图书馆 in Qujiang Village, ZanHuang County, Hebei Province 河北省赞皇县曲江村 (estab-

lished in 2005), with over 27,000 books in its collections. In order to make it more convenient for villagers to read, the founder, Zhao Dongqi 赵东其, also allocated bookshelves in the homes of six families with strong reading habits.

Internet libraries. Internet libraries are a new kind of library; they make it possible for patrons to borrow books on the web. These libraries are clustered mostly in developed cities. Most famous among these kinds of libraries are Booksfly 书飞网 (established in 2009; Chaoyang District, Beijing 北京朝阳区; <http://www.booksfly.com/index>); Wendi Jieshu Net 文迪借书网 (established in 2011; Tongzhou District, Beijing 北京市通州区; <http://www.jieshuwang.com>); and Qing Fanqie Library 青番茄图书馆 (established in 2010; Nanshan District, Shenzhen 深圳市南山区; <http://www.qingfanqie.com>). There are many advantages to this kind of library. After paying a deposit or membership fee, readers can borrow books for free, via express mail, instead of going to the bricks-and-mortar library. The books available on this site are updated synchronously with the bookstores.

Internet private libraries have proliferated rapidly in the past few years. By August 2012, Qing Fanqie Library had extended its service to fifty cities, including Shenzhen, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Suzhou. It now features 21,000 books in thirty-two subjects and genres—including novels, and books on art, culture, computers, politics, and law. Altogether, membership numbers over 600,000. Nonetheless, Qing Fanqie Library is presently operating at a loss. Although advertising and cooperation with large enterprises and government generates some revenue, the labor, book purchasing, storage, and physical distribution costs that this library confronts are enormous.

Diversity of Modes of Service

Single-service library. This kind of private library only provides the service of book circulation. It is the type of library most commonly found in rural primary and middle schools and urban schools for children of migrant workers. The shortage of free time has influenced the normal functions of such libraries. One child reader observed:

Although there is a library in school and it is free, often there is no librarian. Librarians are only on duty at physical exercise time or when we just get to school, before class. So it is impossible for us to browse books slowly, we must hurry.

Multiservice library. Most multiservice libraries are located in rural communities. They serve as cultural hubs for villagers, spaces not only for borrowing books but also for chess, cards, singing and dancing, skills training, and movie screenings. Some even have shops or clinics attached to them. For example, some of the groceries in Yeji Village, Zhangqi Town, Cixi City, Zhejiang Province are also libraries. There are thirty-three multiservice libraries in this small town.

Another example is the Family Planning Reading Room 计生书屋, established in 2004 by the disabled doctor Li Dasheng 李大胜 in Chenzhuang Village, Rendian Town, Queshan County, Henan Province 河南省确山县任店镇陈庄村. This library is a both a clinic and a place for reading. In Hunan Province there is a famous private library established by a villager named Wen Jianxiang 文见翔 in Longlian Village, Wangcheng County 湖南望城县龙莲村. It is a combination library, agricultural extension office, and village broadcasting station. Patrons can borrow books and periodicals while the radio station broadcasts agricultural information. These broadcasts can be heard within a radius of 1.5 kilometers.

INFORMATIZATION LEVEL OF PRIVATE LIBRARIES

Questionnaires sent out between June and September, 2011, found that individually sponsored private libraries maintain low informatization levels. Our study did not address the informatization of those private libraries established by foundations, grassroots organizations, and corporations.

Computer Ownership Rate of Private Libraries

Questionnaire results show that only 55 percent of the 114 private libraries founded by individuals possessed computers. That is, almost half of the private libraries surveyed (52) did not have a computer. Of the 62 libraries that do have computers, the mean of computer ownership is 2.6 while both the median and mode is 1. The maximum value of computer ownership is 25 and the standard deviation of computer ownership is 4.2. (See table 2.) We carefully analyzed private libraries on the upper end of computer ownership levels and found that private libraries with 3 or more computers sometimes have their own electronic reading rooms or provide electronic reading service. But the rate of computer ownership by private libraries in general is low, and only 42.7 percent of them offer Internet connections. These facts suggest that the informatization level of private libraries is low. Most of these institutions are in need of informatization hardware and software to support their community information service. The level of community information provided by those librarians barely meets the needs of peasants.

Computer Service in Private Libraries

However, most private libraries that do have computers (a total of 62 samples) provide computer access for their users (91.5 percent). Almost all—95.7 percent—provide free computer service. Of those that did not, 2.3 percent of them charged 0.5 Yuan per hour for computer service (which is less than the adjacent net-bar charges).

There are great differences in the annual fees for connecting to the Internet paid by private libraries. The minimum annual fee we found was 168 RMB Yuan while the maximum annual fee was 4,000 RMB Yuan. The mean, median, mode, and standard deviation of the annual fee are 927

Table 2. Computer Ownership Rate in Private Libraries With Computers

No. of Computers	Computer Ownership Rate (N = 62)
1	59%
2	23%
3-5	11%
≥6	7%

RMB Yuan, 700 RMB Yuan, 600, a RMB Yuan and 718 RMB Yuan, respectively. Table 3 shows the distribution of annual fees for connecting to the Internet paid by private libraries, and 76 percent of them paid less than 1,000 RMB Yuan annually. Those Chinese families with Internet connectivity paid 1,002 RMB Yuan annually for their connection fee in 2007 (Xiuqin, 2007). Thus we know that the mean Internet connection fee paid by private libraries is lower than the mean of national statistical data. There is a strong correlation between the Internet connection fee and the amount of Internet bandwidth used. A low fee means a slow Internet connection and limited Internet bandwidth, which would hinder the development of community information services provided by private libraries. Nevertheless, providing patrons with free computer service would make private libraries even more valuable.

Responses to our questionnaire revealed that 81.5 percent of private libraries have Internet access. The remaining 18.5 percent—which offer no Internet access—use computers only for knowledge training. This data also demonstrates that private libraries function as community information retrieval and computer knowledge instruction centers. Still, if the National Cultural Information Resource-Sharing Projects 国家文化共享工程 were to subsidize private libraries, these institutions could have a greater social impact than they do now.

Librarians' Attitude Toward Computer Learning

In general, the staff of private libraries have a strong desire to learn about computers. An overwhelming majority of the private librarians surveyed—92.2 percent—indicated an interest in computer training. This

Table 3. Distribution of Annual Internet Connection Fee in Private Libraries

Internet Connection Fee (RMB Yuan)	Rate (N = 48)
<600	46%
601-1,000	30%
1,001-2,000	20%
>2,000	4%

included librarians in their 80s—such as 85-year-olds Liu Baohuai 刘宝怀 (who works at Liu Bowen Library 刘伯温图书馆 in Nantian Town, Wenchen County, Zhejiang Province 浙江省温州市文成县南田镇), and Zhao Erying 赵二英 (who works at North Zheng Village Library 北正村图书馆 in Xin Zhaidian Town, Zhao County, Hebei Province 河北省赵县新寨店镇北正村).

By using SPSS software, however, we did find that age was one of the important factors in private librarians' interest in learning about computers. Using age as the test variable and computer learning as the group variable we found that the mean age of people who were actively interested in learning about computers was fifty years old. The mean age of people who were not, was seventy-nine years old—with $t = -5.511$, $df = 11.082$, $p < 0.05$. Generally, willingness to learn about computers corresponds in inverse proportion to a librarian's age. Thus we recommend that if the government of an NGO wishes to launch computer knowledge training programs, they should train young private library librarians in order to realize optimum training gains.

PRIVATE LIBRARIES' ROLES IN PUBLIC SPACE

In terms of public space, libraries are different from other types of facilities and businesses such as cafes, squares, meeting halls, parks, shopping malls, and theaters. Libraries provide both “one-dimensional space” 一度空间 (the physical space of public facilities and places) and “two-dimensional space” 二度空间 (a variety of media space transmitting information and knowledge). Overall, libraries could be considered “public knowledge spaces” 公共知识空间 with utility for individuals, schools, communities, and society as a whole.

Utility to Individuals

About 60 percent of libraries housed in rural and migrant children's schools provide *only* books, newspapers, and magazines. The remaining 40 percent are also equipped with computers, TVs, projectors, and other multimedia equipment. So the public space of private school libraries offer opportunities to read, learn, and transmit information. In contrast to urban private libraries—over 90 percent of which offer access to computers—only 55 percent of rural private libraries offer computer access. So the functions of private libraries in urban communities are more comprehensive. These institutions offer a public space where a person can read, study, and transmit information, and get training in IT.

In recent years, private libraries in rural communities have been developing gradually in the direction of the multifunctional Cultural Yard 文化大院. In 2000, the versatile villager Li Chenglin 李成林 in Cangwan Village, Haiyuan County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region 宁夏海原县苍湾村, converted 600 square meters of his farmland into a “cultural and sports

yard” 文体大院。He organizes peasant basketball games on this yard. Of the more than 4,800 villagers in Cangwan Village, about 40 or 50 of them come to this Cultural Yard to participate in activities each day.

The Yunyu Library 云煜图书室 was founded in 2004 (at a cost of 130,000 RMB) by the villager Ou Qingchu 欧清楚 and his three brothers in Siwei Village, Sulong Town, Luoding City, in Guangdong Province 广东罗定市素龙镇思围村。This library has a range of unusual features. In front of the library are basketball courts and table tennis. Inside, on the first floor, is a recreation area where patrons can access musical instruments, stage props, performing costumes, chess sets, cards, and mahjong games. The second floor's reading and collection rooms hold more than 5,000 books and dozens of magazines and newspapers. The library is free to the public. Local villagers go to the library to play music instruments, sing songs, read books, and do physical exercises in their spare time. It has entertained 8,000 people and hosted more than 100 art performances. More than 2,000 people have participated in these activities.

Some other examples of famous comprehensive culture service yards in local communities are the Cultural Yard, established in 1996 by Quan Yong 权勇 in Fengze Village, Qi County, Shanxi Province 山西祁县丰泽村; the Jinlong Cultural Yard 金龙文化大院, founded in 2006 by Tan Minghai 谭明海 in Xiongjia County, Wanzhou District, Chongqing City 重庆市万州区熊家镇; and the Zhangjia Cultural Yard 张家文化大院 founded in 2008 by Zhang Chongan 张崇安, Group 1, Beitunji Village, Nan Tunji Town, Dongfeng County, Liaoyuan City, Jilin Province 吉林省辽源市东丰县南屯镇北屯基村1组。This trend (of private libraries becoming cultural yards) has supercharged their utility as public spaces. They now provide opportunities for recreational entertainment, interpersonal communication, and public participation.

The public offerings of private libraries in urban communities are not as spectacular as those in rural communities. But these institutions do offer sophisticated art and entertainment. For example, the 2666 Library (2666 图书馆)—a private membership library in Shanghai—is a combination library, bookstore, cinema, and café. It is equipped with a 150-inch large-screen projector and a Blu-ray deck, and holds over 3,000 books (one-third of which are novels and fiction in foreign languages). Although adjacent to the bustling Nanjing West Road, it is a perfect relaxation place where readers can enjoy a moment of peace.

Another example is the Hangzhou Zhangming Music Library, which opened in 2002, on Liugongyuan Walking Street near the West Lake of Hangzhou 杭州西湖边六公园步行街。It covers 200 square meters and is famous for its music collections. Altogether, it holds over 5,000 classical music records and 2,000 art books, both in Chinese and in foreign languages. It is decorated with elegant seating and shelves filled with books and CDs. Its walls are adorned with portraits of music celebrities. It has initiated a

“Music Salon” through its offerings of music books, CDs, occasional music lectures, and concerts. This kind of private library in urban communities serves the cultural tastes and artistic accomplishments of white-collar workers, university students, and migrant workers.

UTILITY TO SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

For schools and communities, each new library means a new public space. On the whole, there are few free public spaces in rural communities, so villagers gather next to wells, in small shops, and on cross streets, transforming them into public spaces for information exchange. The appearance of libraries—formal places for the reading of books and free communication—undoubtedly creates a new type of rural public space.

Private libraries in schools and communities have an important role in improving the lives of rural residents and improving their social capital. NGO-sponsored libraries situated in rural primary and migrant-children’s schools not only provide students with books, shelves, chairs and tables—even computers and projectors—but also organize volunteers to teach. For example, in 2004 a group of Chinese scholars and students at Duke University created the Dream Corps for Harmonious Development International 梦想行动国际 and initiated the School Library Project 学校图书室项目. This Project built twenty rural and community libraries in Beijing, Hunan, Henan, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Shandong, and other provinces. By the year 2011, the project had donated more than 30,000 books. Additionally, the organization recruits volunteers both from the U.S. and China to travel to these libraries during their summer vacations to teach English, hold drawing and storytelling contests, tutor poor students, and conduct information technology training workshops.

The Li Ren Rural Library 立人乡村图书馆 is another important example. In September 2007, Beijing scholar Li Yingqiang 李英强 initiated this project. By the end of 2010, the project had opened nine library branches in Hubei, Henan, Sichuan, Yunnan, Hebei, Jiangxi, Shanxi 山西, and Chongqing provinces; issued more than 3,000 library cards; invited more than 10 visiting scholars; and held more than ten large seminars. Each branch library is named after a local cultural celebrity and completely operated by volunteers. The project has focused on the development of social capital since the very beginning. For example, on the website (<http://www.xctsg.cn/index.html>) the library not only publishes news and donation information but also recruits volunteers, and recommends “the required readings for rural teenagers’ growth” 乡村青少年成长必读书目. In addition, each branch has developed a range of educational and recreational services and activities—essay contests, film showings, reading clubs, winter and summer camps, teachers and career training, scholarships and grants, small loans and pensions, international communications, a volunteer base, and a scholar house. Indeed, the Li

Ren Rural Library has created a new library development model meant to improve the social capital of rural communities by offering resources, information, and access to the “snowball effect” of weak links between friends or via social media.

Private libraries in schools and communities also play an active role in improving education standards and presenting positive cultural examples. For example, from August 2009 to November 2011, the Every Class Has a Book Corner 班班有个图书角 project, initiated by grassroots organization named Shoulder Action 担当者行动, built 889 book corners in 68 schools in 12 provinces—including Fujian, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Guangdong, Gansu, Qinghai, Hubei, and Zhejiang—and distributing 60,000 books to more than 35,000 children in poor areas. Besides the book corners, the project also provides comprehensive reading resources and extracurricular reading guidance by training teachers to be reading navigators, organizing all kinds of reading activities, organizing summer camps for outstanding readers, and setting up reading and study centers, all of which form the support system. In a review of this program, Shoulder Action found that the book corners were very popular with pupils. They not only inspired children to read but also improved the quality of teaching.

Private libraries also improve local cultural conditions in rural communities. The Peasants’ Library 农民图书室 established by the villager Jiang Xuanfa 姜轩发 in Sankou Town, Huangshan City, Anhui Province 安徽黄山市三口镇, often displays varieties of wall newspapers (news broadcasting on walls) and puts on exhibitions. From March 1996 to November 2007, it presented 1,268 wall newspapers, 192 art exhibitions, and 28 photograph exhibitions. Since its establishment, it has served 23,844 readers. Furthermore, Jiang Xuanfa also reconciles disputes and writes letters, indictments, and agreements on behalf of his fellow villagers, many of whom are illiterate. He has thereby gained great respect in the village.

The Hanjia Reading Room 韩家书屋 opened by Zhang Entun 张恩屯 and Han Xueqin 韩学琴 in Shengli Village, Yongsheng Town, Zhaozhou County, Heilongjiang Province 黑龙江肇州县永胜乡胜利村, is another dynamic public space. In addition to lending books free of charge, the library offers all kinds of activities—including calligraphy contests, drawing and paper cutting, and karaoke singing, as well as competitions for titles like Culture Center Family, Science Model Family, Specialized Planting Family, Specialized Breeding Family, and Spiritual Civilization Family. This contributes to a strong sense of community and a lively and healthy cultural atmosphere among Shengli villagers.

Utility to Society as a Whole

Private libraries play a great role in eliminating knowledge poverty because they are mainly located in areas of lower socioeconomic standing.

Knowledge poverty means the lack of the ability to find, acquire, exchange, and use knowledge. This kind of poverty contributes to the marginalization of individuals and the formation of disadvantaged groups. Although it is closely tied with economic poverty, knowledge poverty is a deeper level of poverty that is difficult to change.

Research has shown that 80 percent of rural schools—especially in poor and undeveloped villages—lack high-quality extracurricular reading materials. Many of the children growing up in these poor communities have access to no reading materials at all and have never seen a library. To them, the idea that a “good book can change a person’s life” is a meaningless saying. The establishment of rural private libraries has begun to change this situation. The Quan Meng Reading Club 泉蒙读书会, organized by university students in Shanghai, is a perfect example: this organization not only donates books to children but also builds book corners in Cheng Magang Primary School, Hubei Province 湖北麻城乘马岗小学. The book corners are classified into three levels—primary, middle, and high. Books are rotated from classroom to classroom every two weeks. These book corners employ no professional librarians; students serve as their own librarians. Students can take books home, even on weekends.

All books donated by the Quan Meng Reading Club have been chosen carefully so that they will be very popular among students and teachers. Xu Nengying 徐能英, the Chinese teacher and headmaster of Cheng Magang Primary School, has said:

Students benefit from libraries established in rural schools directly. These institutions achieve long-lasting effects at low costs. . . . The cultural nutrition provided by libraries is amazing. Books are well-selected and read frequently. The information and knowledge that the children have absorbed from reading has far exceeded our imagination. Each book is a wonderful world with benefits for both the children and the teachers.

Funding for individually sponsored private libraries comes from small individual incomes. Meanwhile their service is public and free. It is indeed a kind of not-for-profit spirit that drives the contributions of private individuals to the public good. And when news of their work gets reported in the media, their deeds inspire others to act on behalf of the public welfare. For example, Xu Dawei 徐大伟, an ad designer, established a Private Mobile Library 民间流动图书馆 portal on his blog. Anyone can leave a message on his blog, naming titles of books they wish to read along with his or her name, address, and postal code. Within one week, the Mobile Library will reply by sending the requester their desired books. In order to promote reading, the person who receives the book must promise to pass on the book to other readers after finishing it. Thus, the adage “Everyone reads books, passes on books, and loves books,” comes to be. The Mobile Library sent out about 100 books per month in the first half of

2009. In October 2010, Xu Dawei used money from his company to establish a bricks-and-mortar Private Mobile Library (40 square meters in size) containing more than 3,000 books—covering the subjects of history, the military, economics, and 10 areas of social science. Like the original Web portal, this library also asks its users to pass these books on to other readers instead of borrowing and returning them. “On average, about twenty or thirty readers come to the library each day. On weekends the total number of readers always rises to over one hundred,” said librarian Duan Yahan 段雅涵. “The most important thing is that each person can take one book each time but no more than two books every month.” After some media exposure, Private Mobile Library became well-known and was highly praised by the public, especially netizens. One netizen commented, “Once the influence of a charity has been noticed, it will be highly admired and the founder’s business operation will be in a good condition. Money is a wonderful helper—not only to evil but also to kind people.”

Serving disadvantaged groups is the constant theme of private libraries. Since their emergence, they have mainly focused on the populations in underdeveloped areas. The libraries not only bring information and knowledge to a hugely disadvantaged group but also help to organize a variety of activities. For example, in Lin Quan County, a nationally recognized poor county in Linquan County of Anhui Province 安徽省临泉县, a scholar named Chang Kun 常坤 returned to his hometown and established a library—Chang Kun’s Home 常坤的家 (also known as AIBO Youth Center AIBO 青年中心) in Guang Ming neighborhood, Cheng Guan Town 城关镇光明社区. The library was established in 2010, with a collection of about 8,000 volumes and equipment such as TVs and computers. This library has provided eight types of free services for community residents twelve and older: (1) book reading and lending; (2) Internet use and training; (3) TVs and film screenings; (4) legal consultation and assistance (mainly relating to public welfare issues, such as public health and discrimination); (5) health education about contagious diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis; (6) public lectures and forums; (7) copying of household registrations and ID cards; and (8) sponsorship of a variety of interest groups that guide residents to pay attention to their own hometown and community. Patrons discuss a wide range of public and community issues, debating questions such as: “Should we live here?” “Everywhere is dust, lime, sand, and noise—do we deserve to live in such place?” “What a big tree it is! The government wants to cut it down just to broaden the road. Should the road be repaired?” “Should the street lamps be repaired? “Do boys often fight at schools without street lamps because of the darkness?” “If someone goes to the community office for birth control or something else, the charge is as high as 200 RMB. Should this money be paid?” Chang Kun’s Home has become a space for information exchange and public-affairs communication and thus plays an active role in arousing a sense of responsibility in local citizens.

Another important role of private libraries is to strengthen the mutual trust among individuals and stimulate them to participate in all kinds of activities. For example, the Rural Women's Reading Club project 农家女书社—initiated in 2007 by the Beijing Rural Women's Cultural Development Center 北京农家女文化发展中心—aims to encourage rural women to form their own libraries. By 2010, the project had established forty-eight Rural Women's Reading Clubs in Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanxi 山西, Gansu, Anhui, Guizhou, Inner Mongolia, Hubei, Henan, and Sichuan provinces. Each library is furnished with books, computers, TVs, and DVDs. Each one is operated voluntarily by local rural women. In these libraries, villagers can read books, exchange information, and take part in a variety of skills trainings. They can even use the library to help them form small-loan and organic architecture mutual-aid teams. The Cultural Development Center for Rural Women also publishes a monthly newsletter—*Reading Rural Women* (书女)—the content of which is produced by rural women from all parts of China. The newsletter contributes to improving the writing skills of rural women (many of whom have not touched a pen for many years) and strengthens the contacts between them. The “Rural Women's Reading Club” is more than a library for book circulation; it is also a center for information transfer and cultural communication. It supports rural women's ability to evaluate or comment on news events, and raises consciousness and self-empowerment.

Private libraries create a new model of social participation for community citizens—one that has helped to push public welfare activities from the edge of society into the mainstream of rural public affairs. They offer disadvantaged individuals the opportunity to participate in a range of social activities and give them access to a range of mechanisms through which to voice their opinions. Private libraries have also encouraged citizens to express concern about, and discuss, sensitive public questions, thereby breaking through the limitations formed by policy and convention. All of this contributes to a healthy civil society.

CONCLUSION

Private libraries have emerged to play an important role in undeveloped areas of China. The diverse characteristics of private libraries originate from their spontaneous bottom-up growth: each library's uniqueness arises from how it came into existence. If these libraries had been funded and established by the government in a top-down fashion, their uniqueness would never have developed.

The Farmer's Bookstore Project 农家书屋—launched by the government in 2007—is a typical example of top-down initiatives. By the end of 2011, the central and local governments had invested up to 100 billion RMB, and more than 500,000 farmer's bookstores had been established. The Farmer's Bookstore Project was implemented relatively rapidly under

the mandatory economic planning system. But as far as information efficiency goes, it had only moderate success. The information required to achieve an effective allocation of resources in this project was greater than would have been the case under competitive market mechanisms. Also, the operational cost was higher. Public criticism about this project was reported in the media, and its value was diminished by its reputation as an "Image Project."¹ In contrast, people-powered private libraries have a higher efficiency rate—one that compensates for deficiencies of both the market and government. The rise of private libraries testifies to the importance of diversity in social values and culture and helps to inculcate values of democracy and freedom. These institutions also reflect China's cultural richness.

The informatization level of private libraries is relatively low, especially in those sponsored by individuals, in which only 55 percent have computers and 42.7 percent have Internet access. But these libraries have the power to play a part in community information communication. Private librarians understand the importance of information technology—92.2 percent of them indicated they were strongly interested in computer training. It is very obvious that information technology could improve the functions of private libraries.

Private libraries provide a public space for those who live at the bottom of society, especially in rural areas. They certainly provide their patrons and communities with venues for reading, information exchange, interpersonal communication, IT training, recreation, entertainment, and public participation. But they also support the aggregation of social capital in rural schools and communities, improving the cultural atmosphere and enhancing community cohesion. Private libraries help to eliminate knowledge poverty, cultivate a spirit of public service, strengthen mutual trust among individuals, inspire participation in activities, and promote the development of a civil society. Private libraries are effective because they are self-organized and offer a social "participation network" 参与网络 that supports lateral ties within communities. Their existence has introduced the important cultural values of equality, justice, trust, mutual benefit, cooperation, and a sense of community to the nonurban population in China. As the sociologist R. D. Putnam (2001) has asserted, a civic participant network can generate social trust; compared to a vertical participant network (such as the one that exists between the upper and lower membership of a family enterprise), lateral networks promise more equality and help establish mutual trust and cooperation among people. These sorts of civic participant networks can not only increase social capital but also foster the growth and formation of a rural public service spirit and a healthy civil society.

NOTES

1. An "Image Project" is a project that flaunts the achievements of the government and is intrinsically wasteful of manpower and money.

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