

# The Development and Role of Rural Libraries in China

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## Introduction

China is one of the largest agricultural countries in the world and has, by far, the greatest population. Agriculture production and farming are the primary positions in Chinese society and economy. Official data from the 1990 census in China (Adopt A Rural School Library, 2000) indicated that the total population in China is 1,200,000,000. Eighty-two percent of the total population resides in vast rural areas; sixty-six percent are farmers; sixty-four percent has an education level equivalent to or less than primary education; twenty-seven percent is illiterate and most of these illiterate people are farmers. Such figures illustrate the crucial and urgent need to strengthen basic education in rural China.

The rural library is an essential component of school education in China. It is an important forum that farmers can make use of to eliminate illiteracy and acquire life-long education. For those farmers and their children who live in poverty and remote areas, school facilities, resources, and reading materials are extremely scarce. Many rural farmers are live in poverty and cannot afford their children's tuition for school. In cases such as these, a rural library, or even one good book can mean brightness, happiness and hope for their future. Farmers form the largest group of patrons in Chinese rural libraries.

Over the past twenty years, Chinese agricultural policy has been relatively stable and the agricultural economy has developed rapidly. Farmers in relatively developed areas of China, besides longing to acquire an elementary education and a forum for their cultural and recreational needs, have more and more informational needs to obtain the knowledge of agricultural science and technology.

Therefore, rural libraries in China have multiple missions, among them spreading elementary education, propagating knowledge of science and technology, and providing information on agricultural production. However, compared with the development of urban public libraries in China, rural libraries have made relatively slow progress. The current overall nationwide situation of rural libraries can be outlined as such: a shortage of library collections, poor conditions of library facilities and equipment, a low service level from library staff, and uneven development among various rural areas of China. As a whole, the development of the rural library falls far behind in meeting rural economic development and farmers' needs. Therefore, at present and in the long-term future, the development of public libraries in China will concentrate on spreading and developing rural libraries.

## **Definition of “Rural Libraries” in China**

For a long time, the concept of a “rural library” in the Chinese academic world of Library Science was rather ambiguous. One cannot find the explicit definition of “rural library” even in textbooks from the most authoritative academic institutions with Library and Information Science programs. The term does not even appear in the *Chinese Encyclopedia*, the national authoritative encyclopedia. The reason for this is a common misunderstanding with regard to the concept of rural libraries among many scholars and the general public, i.e. rural libraries are regarded as county public libraries (Yang, 1999). As a result, local government agencies provide financial support only to county libraries, thereby excluding numerous town and village public and school libraries as their financial beneficiaries, heavily impeding the development of rural libraries. At present, more and more scholars realize what a true rural library is, who the main audience it serves is, and what the role of rural libraries is. They are strongly urging government agencies to transfer their focal points from developing urban libraries to spreading and developing town and village libraries and rural school libraries.

The definition of a rural library, in a broad sense, refers to libraries located in rural areas, serving people living in rural areas. Rural libraries can include county public libraries, town and village libraries (or book reading rooms), and school libraries in rural areas. In a narrow sense, rural libraries are libraries located in geographically isolated, predominantly agricultural areas, specifically serving farmers in their agricultural and life needs. In this narrow sense, rural libraries include town and village libraries (or book reading rooms), and town and village school libraries but do not include county libraries. The concept of rural libraries described in this paper refers to the latter one.

In China today, as mentioned above, there is a conflict between the undeveloped situation of rural libraries and farmers’ strong desire for elementary education, knowledge of science and technology, and information on agricultural production. The purpose of this paper is to present some problems and solutions to this conflict. To achieve this purpose, it is necessary to first discuss the history, current situation, and influential factors of rural libraries in China.

## **History of the Development of Rural Libraries**

During the past fifty years, rural libraries in China have gone through a rough and bumpy road, with several flourishing periods followed by several declining periods (Zhu, 1999). The first rural library was established at the beginning of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. At this time, there were many illiterate or semi-illiterate people in rural areas, especially in the countryside. In order to change this backward situation, Mao Zhedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China, appealed to the

Chinese people to make a great effort to improve the nationwide educational and cultural level. Since then, a movement of eliminating illiteracy has spread all over the country. More and more farmers have begun to read books and newspapers and study scientific knowledge. They have organized spontaneously and collected their own money to build rural libraries themselves. These rural libraries help farmers to eliminate illiteracy, read books and newspapers, and popularize the common scientific knowledge.

In 1955, county-level libraries were built and sponsored by local county governments throughout the country. These county libraries bore the responsibility for offering administrative, organizational, and professional instruction to the local rural libraries, and strongly promoted the establishment and development of rural libraries. By the end of 1956, nearly 18,000 rural libraries had been built all over the country; by 1958 this number had reached 47,000. It should be pointed out that the rapid increase in the number of rural libraries was a by-product of political movement, and once this political movement passed, many of these rural libraries no longer existed. During Deng Xiaoping's time, at the end of the 1970s, the agricultural economy undertook a dramatic development period in most rural areas of the country due to the success of the implementation of the policies on agricultural production and the reformation of the agricultural economic system. The living standard of farmers improved greatly. Their desire to acquire elementary education, cultural entertainment, and agricultural scientific technique helped them rise above the poverty level and become quite well off. The establishment and development of rural libraries once again turns out to be a focal point of both government agencies and the majority of farmers. Because of this focus, rural libraries experienced a period of recovery and development under the assistance of national and local governments.

## **Current Overall Situation and Problems**

Still, compared with the nationwide development of urban public libraries, rural libraries have experienced a relatively slow development and fall far behind the need to develop the agricultural economy and fulfill the farmers' educational needs. The overall current situation of the rural library can be summarized as follows: a shortage of library collections; poor conditions of library building, facilities and equipment; a low organization and service level of library staff; and an uneven development among various areas of the country. The following is an in-depth discussion on these issues.

### **Deficiency**

There are more than 2000 counties in China. Among these, more than 500 counties had not established a county public library as of the end of 1998.

Among existing county public libraries, fifty-five percent or more do not reach the minimum requirement for a county library based on national standards (Wang, 1998). For example, in the Sichuan province, which is situated in the Western area of China, there are a total of 179 counties. Among them, at least thirty-one counties fall into the national poverty level and have slow-growing economies, inconvenient transportation systems, and enormous populations. Although the province government pays a good deal of attention to the establishment of libraries and the maintenance of financial support, there are still forty-eight counties that have no county library (Yu, 1998).

From the figures described above, it is easy to understand that one cannot expect a rural library in areas where there is not even a county library (Chou, 1996). Even in counties where the county public libraries reach minimum library standards, there are sometimes only a few rural libraries. For instance, the Guangdong Province has many county libraries that are established and well organized; however, the rural libraries are still underdeveloped. Likewise, in the Jiangsu Province, one of the most advanced provinces in the development of rural libraries, twenty percent of the towns and villages are still without a town or village library (Wang, 1998). In addition, it is not only the lagging economy that contributes to the deficiency of rural libraries; the same situation occurs in some highly developed economic areas. In these cases, the chief reason is the government agency is lack of desire to develop rural libraries.

## **The Low Horizon**

The low horizon of rural libraries can be briefly presented as follows:

- **Poor condition of library building, facility and equipment.** The space of most rural libraries is very limited, with the area commonly being less than 30 m<sup>2</sup>. Basic equipment such as bookshelves and chairs are scarce and old, and there is no modernized library technology, such as audio-visual equipment or computers.
- **Lack of library collection, and low effectiveness of service.** Rural libraries normally have library collections between 1,000 and 5,000 volumes, although many of them possess even less than 1,000 volumes. With this type of collection they can usually only provide farmers with low quality materials and limited kinds of service (Wang, 1998).
- **Low quality of library staff.** Most of the staff members of rural libraries have obtained only a middle school education, if not less. In addition, they commonly hold two or more positions at a time. This low level of education and professional knowledge makes them less qualified to

serve their patrons effectively. They hardly work actively or creatively, and some of them even lack enthusiasm and responsibility; after awhile, many are unwilling to continue their rural library profession.

## **Uneven Development and Distribution**

Generally speaking, the development of Chinese rural libraries can be categorized into three levels according to their geographical location. Among the first level are the rural libraries in the Eastern area of China, including Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province and Shanghai City; Guangdong Province in the South of China; Beijing, the capital of China; and Tianjin City, which is directly under the jurisdiction of national government. In these areas, rural libraries have experienced rapid growth and are well developed. In contrast to the above-mentioned areas, in the Southwest and Northwest areas of China, development of rural libraries is at the lowest level. Rural libraries in these regions are very slow to develop and are continually experiencing difficulties and setbacks. Some of them are even stagnant, having not developed a library at all yet. The development of rural libraries in the Northeast and central region of China are between the highest and lowest level, which is, then, classified into the second level of Chinese rural libraries (Wang, 1998). In this level there exists significant uneven development among the rural libraries in different regions, provinces, cities, counties, towns and villages. For example, in Shanghai City there are 220 subordinate towns with 293 full-time librarians and staff working in the towns' libraries; each town library has in average 70 m<sup>2</sup> building area, 7,000 books and magazines in their collection, and 7,000 RMB yuan annual funding for book purchases. (Among them, the best are three libraries in Nantou County, which possess a collection of 44,000 books and other materials each, and occupy 584 m<sup>2</sup> area of library building on average). However, some other rural libraries under the jurisdiction of Shanghai City have less than 2,000 books in their collection and 30 m<sup>2</sup> area (Wang, 1998).

Let us also compare and contrast the following statistical data from underdeveloped and relatively developed areas. In the underdeveloped Sichuan Province, situated in the Western area of China, there are 179 counties. Among these, thirty-one counties fall into the national poverty level and have slow growing economies, inconvenient transportation systems, and enormous populations. And, although the province government pays great attention to the establishment of libraries and tries to increase the financial support annually, there are still forty-eight counties that have no county library.

Statistical data from developed areas is much different. In Yusan, Changsu City, Jiangsu Province, the town library possesses a building with the size of 3,500 m<sup>2</sup>, a collection greater than 70,000 (mainly books and magazines),

170,000 RMB yuan annual book purchase fund, and ten staff members. It is one of the best town libraries in China (Xia, 1998). Similarly, in Suzhou City, Jiangsu province, which controls over six counties, and 152 towns, there are several established town libraries. As of 1994, each of these town libraries possesses collections greater than 10,000 (mainly books and magazines), library building area of 16,780 m<sup>2</sup> and a total of 450 staff (Huang, 1999). And as of 1996 in Shandong Province, 1,902 town libraries have been established in its 2,554 towns (Xia, 1998).

## **Analysis of Impact Factors**

### *Economic factors*

The economy is the most influential and objective cause of the overall low level of development of Chinese rural libraries. In the past twenty years, the agricultural economy has grown rapidly in China. However, the development of this economy has been relatively unbalanced throughout the country. In areas where this growth has been slow, the poor and insufficient agriculture economy has inevitably lead to a lack of financial support for the construction and development of rural libraries. It is this discrepancy in economic development that has lead to the uneven development of rural libraries in different regions throughout China. In the Eastern areas of China such as Jiangsu Province, Shandong Province, and Zhejiang Province, where the economy has flourished, rural libraries have increased and have been modernized rapidly. The positive change in the economic condition in these areas is mainly due to a large amount of town and village enterprises that have emerged and have, in turn, promoted the development of the economy as well as the improvement of farmers' wealth. It is this increase in wealth that has strongly supported the establishment and survival of the rural libraries in this area. In contrast, the economy has been slow to grow in the Western area of China, and the lack of funding severely impedes the survival and development of rural libraries in these areas (Xiao, 1999).

### *Government factors*

Administrative management by the local government plays another crucial role in the development of rural libraries. If the local government pays a great deal of attention to rural libraries and supports the rural libraries financially, the libraries will be prosperous even if the local economic condition is not good. On the other hand, if the government neglects the funding and support of rural libraries, these libraries will face a survival crisis, even if they are located in more developed areas.

It can be seen that, while the economy is the most important objective factor that affects the development of rural libraries, the government's recognition and attention to rural libraries is the most significant *subjective* factor. For

example, in Xifeng County, Liaoning Province, in the remote mountain area in the Northeast of China, the economic condition is poor. However, the government officials in this county emphasize the construction and development of rural libraries. As a result, by the end of 1998, rural libraries were built in every town and village of the county (Wang, 1998). This figure is much higher than in many rich counties.

### ***The Recognition Factor***

The recognition of rural libraries, both by government officials and local farmers, greatly influences the development of rural libraries. As discussed earlier, whether or not government officials realize the importance of rural libraries contributes vitally to the rise or decline of the rural libraries. The administration of the rural library depends largely on the leaders of the county, town, village, middle school and elementary school, respectively. They possess or control the power and right to handle the human, facility, and financial resources.

The farmers' recognition refers to their knowledge and use of rural libraries, and their desire to utilize the rural libraries meet their educational, cultural, recreational and informational needs. In both the countryside of Jiangsu Province where the economy is highly developed, and in the countryside of Sichuan Province where the economy falls below the average level, a large number of farmers are poorly educated and are deeply affected by the notions and thoughts of traditional Chinese culture. For these people, the sense of rural libraries is rather blunted (Liu, 1998). They regard the library as a place for entertainment only and have not realized that it can also be an arena to overcome illiteracy, read books and newspapers, and gain access to information on agricultural production and knowledge of science and technology. Still, it is encouraging that with the growth of the economy and the civilization of society, more and more young farmers are beginning to realize the important role of the rural library. They are learning that the rural library is an indispensable place for them to acquire basic education, obtain information on agricultural production techniques, and enrich their living lives.

The financial sources for rural libraries come mainly from the county government, the town and village government, the donations of town and village enterprises, and farmers themselves. Therefore, it is easy to see that the recognition of rural libraries by government and farmers directly affects the survival and development of rural libraries.

Another element of rural library recognition is the sense of rural library staff. With a high sense of responsibility and enthusiasm for serving farmers, library staff could work actively and creatively, make great efforts to provide multiple services, propagate the importance of rural libraries, and expand the influence of rural library. This, in turn, would attract attention from the

government and vast audiences of rural farmers, and thus further promote the development of the rural library. However, without such effort and creativity, the development of the rural library will be stunted.

## **Necessity of the Development of Rural Libraries and Future Strategies**

The fundamental social function of the public library is to collect, organize and provide knowledge and information to the public. Under this premise, different types of libraries in different regions and on different scales have specific social functions. For example, national libraries bear a special mission to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the nation. Academic libraries play a vital role in curricular support, teaching, research, publication and self-education on the part of the student. And rural libraries focus their resources and energies on the function of basic education for farmers.

In China, rural libraries having been regarded as merely a cultural facility or community activities center, functioning only as a place for farmers' entertainment and amusement in their spare time (Yang, 1999). The fact that people stress the amusement role of rural libraries and neglect the educational role restricts the recognition of the functions of rural libraries. It is very important to emphasize the function of education in rural libraries, i.e. the function of popularizing basic education, spreading agricultural scientific technique, and improving overall population quality in the countryside. Keeping this idea in mind, one may fully realize the necessity of the development of rural libraries in China.

## **The Main Functions and Roles of Rural Libraries in China**

Public libraries, as social organizations, play significant roles in social education. They are indispensable in supporting and strengthening nationwide compulsory education and in raising quality citizens. Therefore, public libraries are intended to serve important social ends by provided an education that no one should underestimate. Education is the key to individual achievement and national strength. Lack of education begets illiteracy, illiteracy begets ignorance; and ignorance begets poverty for the individual, the society and the nation. But knowledge combats ignorance and help build one's confidence and self-respect. For many young farmers who suspend their school education halfway through, the rural library is an important social utility to regain basic education (Chen, 1998). The following is an excerpt from a letter of Zhou Wei, the president of Scientific Education Institute of Ning Xia Islamic Autonomous Region (a province in the Northwest of China):



“For a city student, one book is fairly an ordinary thing. However, can you imagine what it means for a student who is living in poor and remote mountain regions? He resides in a mountain area without any transportation system. His parents have never visited the county and the town center. The disaster of drought happens frequently in this area. His family often has not enough food to eat and even their drinking water is hard to find. He can fortunately go to school because his brother or sister lost their chance to continue study in the rural school. He has not one penny to buy a book. A good book for him means brightness, happiness and hope for him. From the book, he may find how colorful the external world is. Books can increase his faith and encourage him to pursue a bright future.”

(Adopt A Rural School Library Chinese version, 2000)

Science and technology are the primary powers behind agricultural production and the key factors in the development of the rural and agricultural economy. However, the task of disseminating knowledge of agricultural science and information about agricultural production techniques for farmers can not easily be fulfilled, as it depends on a limited number of agricultural technicians (Zheng, 1997). In this case, scientific books and other media provided by rural libraries serve as a practical and effective means for extensively spreading basic knowledge and skills of agricultural production throughout the countryside. Therefore, a well-developed rural library is of profound social significance in agricultural science popularization and the spread of information.

Rural libraries in China need to play a more important role in disseminating information relating to agricultural production techniques, with more emphasis on information consulting services. Rural libraries should extensively and quickly obtain information about agricultural science and technology, such as knowledge and information about plantation, breeding, product processing, and agricultural machine maintenance, among other things. The above-mentioned information offered by rural libraries can be converted into enormous economic benefits and can help to further promote the development of the agricultural economy.

The following is a personal experience described by a county library staff member (Yang, 1999):

“I visit a village and see such an impressive scene. When a fruit tree technician goes to the village from an agricultural scientific station, fruit tree farmers gather round him immediately. You can never forget the scene that farmers are so eager to obtain scientific knowledge and the technology which they can make use of to become rich. I also visit a

middle-age farmer's family and see his self-collected newspapers with scientific plantation techniques on the newspapers. He tells me that he will no longer depend only on those old experiences inherited by his parents. He desires to learn new knowledge and skills on agricultural production. Because of the absence of rural libraries, he has to cut and preserve carefully the newspapers edited and printed by the local county with related information on them.”

The popularization of rural libraries provides farmers with a healthy culture and entertainment place where they can read books, newspapers, magazines and participate in cultural and recreational activities. This increases their cultural quality, and stabilizes social order in the countryside.

## **Future Strategies**

According to the current situation of the libraries in China and the development of the economy, it is the opinion of this paper feel that the forthcoming strategies of spreading and developing rural libraries in China should include the following points:

First, government participation is the key factor affecting the development of rural libraries. The governors of local counties, towns, and villages must bring rural library development and construction into the over all plan of local society development, and must draft special policies and projects for the development rural libraries. It is necessary for government officials to increase financial support, enlarge library buildings, and employ more qualified rural library staff. This government involvement will assure the success of the development rural libraries.

Secondly the support from the whole society is essential for the development of rural libraries. There are many approaches that can contribute to rural libraries, such as financial collections from the whole society, private investments and donations from farmers, and support from the town and village enterprises, residents, people, and overseas community members. In this way, a new mode of rural library development will be created which assembles the national, local and personal support together (Zhang, 2000). “Adopt A Rural School Library” is such a successful example.

ARSL is one of several programs sponsored by the Education and Science Society (ESS), a nonprofit organization formed in 1980 by Chinese Americans, many of whom are educators and professionals (Adopt A Rural School Library, 1999). While China has made

considerable strides in strengthening the education system as a whole, basic education resources in some of the poorest and most remote regions of the country are still lacking. In most rural schools, for example, the only materials children see are textbooks, and most families cannot afford to send their children to secondary school. In addition, village residents have little access to general or technical information that might improve their farming productivity or living environment.

Targeting those regions with greatest needs, ARSL seeks to improve basic education for millions of Chinese who reside in rural areas by providing their schools with books and other reading materials that are donated and contributed by ARSL members. The adopted local school libraries are established with the assistance and supervision of ARSL- appointed local representatives. These libraries are managed by the schools and are required to make books easily accessible not only to students and teachers, but also to local residents who may be an individual, a group, or an organization in the United States, Hong Kong, Taiwan or China. As of 1999, 1521 such school libraries have been established in China by this program.

In addition, rural libraries should be popularized and established gradually in every county, town and village (Zhang, 1997). On this basis, a computer network should be set up so as to realize the aim of sharing resources among rural libraries.

Finally, drawing on the experience of ARSL, I feel that the popularization of rural libraries should start from the establishment of rural school libraries. Currently, the financial support and benefits of Chinese rural school libraries are much higher than those of any other types of rural libraries. Therefore, it would be more feasible and welcomed by farmers to first establish rural school libraries.

## **Conclusion**

In China, most of the population resides in rural areas and the countryside. Agriculture production is the largest part of the national economy. However, compared with urban areas, the quality level of rural economy, culture, education and the population fall far behind. Nationwide, rural libraries that are affected negatively by governmental and economic factors make slow progress and lag far behind the development of the agricultural economy and the needs of farmers.

Therefore, at present and in the long-term future, the development of the public library should focus on the popularization and development of rural libraries. According to the current situation of agriculture and economic development, both the national and local governments should draft a special

plan to develop local rural libraries. These approaches should include increasing financial support, improving administrative management, enlarging the library building, and enhancing the quality of the library staff. It is the responsibility of the whole society to support rural libraries. The basic goal should be to establish rural libraries in every county, town and village.

In conclusion, rural libraries can play significant roles in serving farmers by strengthening basic education, disseminating knowledge of science and technology, collecting and providing information on agricultural production, and enriching cultural and recreational activities. They contribute greatly to improvement of the Chinese farmer's overall quality, and can ultimately advance the whole society and economy.

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