



УДК 027.4:028.5(510)

<https://doi.org/10.20913/1815-3186-2024-1-58-63>

Public Libraries: Readers and Books. A Case Study on Services for Minor Readers in Guangdong, China

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to clarify the evolving connotations of “readers” and “books” in public libraries, centers on a thriving segment of library patrons – minor readers. Taking the services for minors in Guangdong China as an example, the study examines and discusses how public libraries can play a proactive role in forging effective connections between readers and books, hence promoting the sustainable development of library services. The author has come to the conclusion that public libraries worldwide must proactively adapt to the ever-evolving environment, cutting-edge technologies, and emerging information needs.

Keywords: public libraries, readers, children, books, minors, sustainable development

Citation: Ling S. Public Libraries: Readers and Books. A Case Study on Services for Minor Readers in Guangdong, China. *Bibliosphere*. 2024. № 1. P. 58–63. <https://doi.org/10.20913/1815-3186-2024-1-58-63>.

Публичные библиотеки: читатели и книги. Тематическое исследование услуг для несовершеннолетних читателей в провинции Гуандун (Китай)

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Аннотация. Цель статьи – прояснить эволюцию таких понятий как «читатели» и «книги» для публичных библиотек. Исследование сосредоточено на развивающемся сегменте посетителей библиотек – несовершеннолетних читателях. На примере библиотечных услуг, оказываемых в китайской провинции Гуандун несовершеннолетним, рассматривается и обсуждается роль публичных библиотек в установлении между читателями и книгами эффективных связей, которые будут способствовать устойчивому развитию библиотечного обслуживания. Представлен опыт реализации двух библиотечных проектов: «21-дневный вызов чтению» и «Я – владелец библиотеки», но реализуются и другие проекты, направленные на популяризацию чтения среди юных пользователей.

Актуальность темы обусловлена острой проблемой кризиса чтения, с которой сталкиваются все публичные библиотеки сегодня; поиском путей привлечения в библиотеки потенциальных читателей, которые могут быть незнакомы с библиотеками или не испытывать энтузиазма по поводу чтения. Помимо проведения разнообразных мероприятий по чтению, сосредоточенных на литературных ресурсах, существует необходимость в разработке целевых программ, адаптированных к конкретным характеристикам аудитории. Эти стратегические проекты, направленные на приобщение более широкого круга новых читателей к эффективным и научно обоснованным инициативам по продвижению чтения, заслуживают внимания публичных библиотек. Автор приходит к выводу, что публичные библиотеки должны практически адаптироваться к постоянно меняющейся окружающей среде, новым технологиям и появляющимся информационным потребностям.

Ключевые слова: публичные библиотеки, читатели, дети, книги, несовершеннолетние, устойчивое развитие

Для цитирования: Лин С. Публичные библиотеки: читатели и книги. Тематическое исследование услуг для несовершеннолетних читателей в провинции Гуандун (Китай) // Библиосфера. 2024. № 1. С. 58–63. <https://doi.org/10.20913/1815-3186-2024-1-58-63>.

Статья поступила в редакцию 20.10.2023
Получена после доработки 31.10.2023
Принята для публикации 22.02.2024

Introduction

Determining how to draw potential readers – who may be unfamiliar with libraries or unenthusiastic about reading – into libraries and engage them with reading is a significant challenge faced by public libraries. Beyond hosting diverse reading activities centered on literary resources, there is a pressing need to design targeted programs tailored to specific audience characteristics. These strategic projects aimed at introducing a wider segment of potential new readers to effective and scientifically backed reading promotion initiatives, warrant the attention and emphasis of public libraries.

Readers and books stand as the twin pivotal elements in public libraries. Traditionally, readers have been seen as service beneficiaries who visit libraries with expectations of being served. Conversely, books, resting silently on shelves, await readership. However, in light of the global evolution of public library services, the classic roles of both readers

and books have been infused with renewed meanings, transitioning from simplistic and passive concepts to more dynamic, multifaceted, interconnected, and integrated notions.

This study presents the experience of implementing two library programs: “21-Day Reading Challenge” and “I am the Owner of the Library”. Whereas there are many other projects aimed at popularizing reading among minors in Guangdong Province.

Reassessing the Two Core Elements of Public Libraries

The “Reader” in Public Libraries

The primary and rudimentary need for those entering a library is reading, a foundational service that global public libraries remain devoted to. These individuals are labeled “readers” in light of their reading needs. Modern readers are not merely confined to the act of reading; they encompass everyone visiting the library. Beyond the conventional tag of “reading”,

they manifest the plethora of needs such as participation, sharing, communication, and self-realization. In public libraries, while readers seek the pleasure of reading, they also yearn for a sense of engagement, belonging, and value. Hence, in this new era, readers are not only the service recipients of public libraries but also their collaborative partners, offering robust support to the library's endeavors.

The "Book" in Public Libraries

Books form the heart of the services libraries extend to readers. Physical books, in this context, are the longstanding resources within a public library's collection. Yet, with technological advancement and shifts in reading habits, print books no longer monopolize the definition of a library's collection. E-books, multimedia resources, display content, tangible items, and even human interactions and expressions can be perceived as "books" in the broader sense within modern public libraries, serving as resources for readers. On another note, these materials can range from formally published content by professional publishers and digital resource firms to independently created works by readers that are incorporated into the library's collection. If these materials are actively read and utilized by readers, generating positive impacts, they qualify as worthy "books" within the library.

Minor Readers: An Emerging Force in Public Libraries

Among the global demographic of public library patrons, the young emerge as a significant service constituency. Drawing upon the survey and statistical results from public libraries in Guangdong, China, as presented by the author, in 2021, minor reader receptions constituted over 30 % of the entire reader receptions in the province. Moreover, the book circulation among minor readers accounted for 40 % of the province's total book circulation. With the widespread promotion of "Universal Reading" and "Child-Friendly" ideologies, minor readers are increasingly gaining attention and importance within Chinese public libraries (Bai Wei, 2020; Pan Jinhui, 2020; Zhang Wenyan, Xu Shengguo, 2016). The Minors have, thus, positioned themselves as a critical reader group for public libraries, especially those serving communities at the grassroots level, making them a burgeoning force in the global landscape of public libraries.

Reception of Minor Readers in Public Libraries

In 2021, public libraries at the county level and above in Guangdong Province hosted 22.71 million visits by minor readers, accounting for 34.40 % of the total number of readers received by public libraries in the province that year. Specifically, provincial and sub-provincial level libraries welcomed 4.10 million minor readers; city-level libraries saw 5.08 million

minor readers, and district/county-level libraries received 13.53 million visits by minor readers. Out of the 21 prefecture-level city regions in the province, 5 of them saw the ratio of minor reader receptions exceeding 50 % of the total reader receptions in their area, with the highest ratio reaching 59 %.

Book Circulation among Minor Readers in Public Libraries

In 2021, the book circulation among minor readers in public libraries at the county level and above in Guangdong Province reached 66.98 million volumes, accounting for 40.00 % of the total book circulation in public libraries across the province. Specifically, provincial and sub-provincial libraries witnessed a circulation of 15.23 million volumes among minor readers; city-level libraries reported 10.87 million volumes, and district/county-level libraries had a circulation of 40.88 million volumes. Out of the 21 prefecture-level city regions in the province, 4 regions had the book circulation among minor readers exceeding 50 % of the total book circulation in their public libraries, with the highest proportion reaching 66 %.

Establishing Effective Connections between Readers and Books: A Case Study of Services for Minor Readers in Guangdong, China

Public libraries play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between minor readers and books. Doing so not only has the potential to turn today's young readers into lifelong adult library patrons in the future but can also influence their families and friends to become library users. Drawing upon the services offered to minor readers in Guangdong's public libraries as a representative example, this article delves into how modern public libraries can effectively connect readers with books, thereby amplifying the positive impacts of these two core elements.

Transforming Static Book Resources into Engaging Reading Activities

In the contemporary era, the term "book" has been endowed with diverse connotations. In China's public libraries, "book" resources predominantly comprise traditional print books, supplemented by e-books, multimedia videos, and three-dimensional reading materials. To ensure these resources are visible and actively utilized by readers, libraries organize various reading activities centered on these materials. These activities, presented in more intuitive, three-dimensional, and interactive formats, assist readers in willingly exploring the available resources. Such strategies are particularly effective among minor readers (Sun Jun, 2022). Taking Guangdong Province as a case in point, in 2021, over 20,000 children's reading events were organized, accounting for 52.8 % of all public library activities in the prov-

ince (Fig. 1, 2). Transforming static book resources into engaging reading activities is increasingly becoming an effective approach for public libraries to entice minors into the library and motivate them to actively engage with the available resources.

Offering Guided Pathways to Potential Readers for Utilizing Book Resources

Guangdong's provincial public library, Guangdong Zhongshan Library, epitomizes this approach. It has specifically crafted a "21-Day Reading Challenge" for minors by incorporating fun challenges such as on-site reading check-ins, book borrowing, and book recommendations, the initiative has garnered and driven increased attention from minors throughout the province to their local public libraries (Tao Jiayi, 2022). This offers these potential readers an introductory pathway to access book resources. Through such expertly tailored setups and guidance, book resources serve not only as an entry

point for readers to use the library but also as a tool for them to explore a broader world (Fig. 3).

Harnessing the Inherent Potential of Readers to Champion Library Resources

Readers, with their innate agency, play multifaceted roles within the library ecosystem. Beyond just being beneficiaries of information, they have the potential to be active contributors to the library's management and services (Chen Ying, 2019). With the adept guidance of library professionals, readers can engage deeply with the library's resources, partaking in the management, curation, and recommendation of materials. By involving readers in various activities and providing avenues for meaningful interaction and sharing, a profound bond is fostered between them and the library resources. This not only engenders a sense of fulfillment and appreciation among readers but also paves the way for a myriad of innovative library services.



Fig. 1. Transforming static books into fun activities
Рис. 1. Использование обычных книг в игре



Fig. 2. Providing potential readers with cleverly designed points to borrow books

Рис. 2. Обеспечение потенциальных читателей специальными точками для заказа книг



Fig. 3. Breaking through time and space limitations effectively by integrating online and offline methods to get necessary resources

Рис. 3. Способы объединения онлайн- и офлайн-методов для получения требуемых ресурсов

The initiative, “I am the Owner of the Library,” rolled out in Guangdong, China, aptly captures this ethos. Underage readers in Guangdong’s provincial public libraries are presented with children’s library cards and promotional brochures, both of which have been designed with the active participation of these young patrons. The libraries house books penned and designed by these young enthusiasts. Moreover, these young readers, after proper training from the library, routinely engage in storytelling sessions, curate book exhibitions, conduct library tours, and play a pivotal role in promoting reading among their peers.

Such novel approaches, which emphasize the symbiotic relationship between readers and library resources, truly transform the library into a sanctuary. A place where readers can not only relish reading but also see it as a platform for self-improvement and a realization of their intrinsic value (Fig. 4).

Conclusion

Readers and books represent an eternal theme in library studies. As we step further into the 21st century, public libraries worldwide must proactively adapt to the ever-evolving environment, cutting-edge technologies, and emerging needs. This entails diversifying resource content, reinventing service delivery forms, innovating project designs, and unearthing deeper values. Libraries must endeavor to forge seamless bridges between readers and books, foster pathways for sharing and communication among readers, and establish a symbiotic nexus between readers and the library itself. Such initiatives are paramount in ensuring the sustainable development of library services.



Fig. 4. Library patron can be not only readers but also participants and promoters of library services

Рис. 4. Посетители библиотек могут быть не только читателями, но и участниками мероприятий и продвигать библиотечные услуги

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