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Cross Sector Collaboration Helps Public Learning across Boundaries--A Case Study of the Wuhan Area Library Consortium, China

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Abstract:

A library consortium, or cooperative organization of libraries, is formed in accordance with a contract or agreement reached by all members, usually for the purpose of improving services through resource sharing among its members. The library consortia in China have been greatly developed and emerged various forms of library consortia, including academic, public, special, multi-type library consortia at the regional and national level. This paper will take Wuhan area library consortium as an example to give a glimpse of the development and practice of the library consortia in China.

Key Words: library consortium, Library alliance, China

1. Introduction

A library consortium, or cooperative organization of libraries, is formed in accordance with a contract or agreement reached by all members, usually for the purpose of improving services through resource sharing among its members. In China, a library consortium might take such a name as “alliance,” “system,” or “association.”

During the past three decades, the library consortia in China have been greatly developed due to the construction of a national information highway system and a robust economic growth. Their aims are mainly at sharing resources in the areas of cooperative acquisitions and cataloging, reciprocal borrowing services, interlibrary lending, training staff and user, constructing digital databases etc. This paper will take Wuhan area library consortium as an example to give a glimpse of the development and practice of the library consortia in China.

2. Library Consortia in China

The library consortia in China emerged in the 1980s from the need to strengthen cooperation among libraries. At the first, the library consortia in China were single-type collaborative groups among academic libraries within the same geographical region, and its' efforts were limited to the sharing of collection information via printed bibliographies or catalog cards, later extended to the areas of interlibrary lending and cooperative cataloging in small scale, and occasionally to coordinated acquisitions. After 2000, the library consortia in China has developed various forms of library consortia, including academic, public, special, multi-type library consortia at the regional and national level, and have expanded the cooperation among libraries, some large consortia even have stepped up international collaboration efforts. These library consortia have played significant roles in library development in China.

The typical examples of library consortia in China are the China Academic Library and Information System (CALIS), National Science and Technology Library (NSTL), National Cultural Information Resources Sharing Project (NCRP), Capital Library Alliance (CLA) etc.

CALIS is a national academic library consortium established in May 1998. It aims to organize, promote, maintain and improve library resource sharing and technology innovation among Chinese academic libraries (as members of CALIS), and to provide a scholarly information service for Chinese universities, educational institutions, and the public. It currently has over 500 members in China. NSTL was established on June 12, 2000. It aims to carry out many cooperative activities, including literature collection, resource processing, data storage, online service provision, and data analysis, using principles of centralized procurement, standardized processing, unified on-line releases, and resource sharing.

NCRP was launched in April 2002. It is a cooperative project supported by the Central Government. It aims to build a national network to create and preserve the country's excellent cultural resources and then disseminate them through the Internet, satellite, television and mobile phone networks to the general public in the country. By the end of 2011, NCRP has connected 31460 library centers and stations that cover the majority of public libraries in China, including 33 provincial centers, and 2840 local libraries and stations and 28595 service points.

CLA was established in March 2012. It is a cross-sector collaborative alliance. There are 110 libraries consisting of public, academic, and special libraries and other kinds of libraries in Beijing. It aims to realize One Card Solution, a reader card applied from any membership is available in all membership, a book borrowed from any membership could be returned in all membership, an enquiry from any

membership is to be answered by all membership, collections, lectures or exhibitions from any membership are available in all membership etc.

3. Wuhan area Library Consortia- A Case Study

Wuhan lies in the central part of China and has a population of 10.33 million in 13 districts and 3 state-level development zones that cover an area of 8,494 k m²(as of 2014). With 3,500-year-long history, Wuhan is one of the most ancient and civilized metropolitan cities in China. In 2014, the city's GDP reach more than 10069.48 billion CNY and grew at an annual rate of 9.7 percent. With economic prosperity, libraries have been developed rapidly in Wuhan. According to the statistics, in Wuhan, there are 2 provincial public libraries and 1 children's library, 17 district public libraries, 80 college and university libraries, 98 research libraries and many other types of libraries. Wuhan Library, which was established in 1946 and is the earliest and largest public library in the city, with a collection of approximately 2.72 million items including over 220,000 thread-bound ancient books. Wuhan Library covers an area of 32,975 m². Besides, it has 2 branch libraries, 2 mobile libraries, 70 library service points and 78 self-service libraries.

The Wuhan Area Library Consortium began working in 2003, much earlier than its normal agreement signed in 2012. It was proposed by the local government. In December of 2011, Wuhan government raised a plan of "the Reading City" Construction. In this plan, Wuhan will build a library service network of 15 minutes walking in the library by the end of 2016. With this background, Wuhan Area Library Consortium was officially launched on April 15, 2012. It is a cross-sector collaboration project that is designed to help public learning across boundaries by making full use of the resources in all libraries to benefit the population of the whole city with multifunctional services.

The first six libraries taking part in the Wuhan Area Library Consortium were Wuhan Library, Wuhan University Library, Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library, Huazhong Normal University Library, Hubei University Library and Jiangnan University Library. These first six libraries published an initial written proposal that called on more libraries of different levels and types to join the consortium and open to the public together. All member libraries follow an agreement that, a reader card applied from any membership is available in all membership, a book borrowed from any membership could be returned in all membership, an enquiry from any membership is to be answered by all membership, collections, lectures or exhibitions from any membership are available in all membership, and a single brand service from each library, many services from all membership come out. Subsequently, more libraries have participated in the Wuhan Area Library Consortium. Currently, there are 52 libraries in the consortium, including 32 university libraries, 17 public libraries, 2 research libraries, and 1 corporate library. These libraries come together based on common rules regarding equality, information sharing, complementary advantages and being open to the public, thus breaking down many barriers and constructing a library system with zero walls, full coverage, and high efficiency.

3.1 How do we run this consortium?

To integrate all types of resources in different types of libraries and to provide citizens more convenient library services, the Wuhan Area Library Consortium has adopted method of group

membership. All member libraries follow an agreement that, reader cards, a reader card applied from any membership is available in all membership, a book borrowed from any membership could be returned in all membership, an enquiry from any membership is to be answered by all membership, collections, lectures or exhibitions from any membership are available in all membership, and a single brand service from each library, many services from all membership come out. Thus, from a single brand of service from each library, many services are provided to all members. Therefore, all of the membership libraries act jointly, each single library is more powerful, and each library's resources are no longer isolated.

The first innovation of the Wuhan Area Library Consortium was One Card Solution. A reader card from any member library can be used at all of the members, and a book borrowed from any member can be returned to any member. Currently, the Citizens are able to borrow items from the reading rooms of the 18 public libraries, 2 branch libraries, 2 mobile libraries, 70 library service points and 78 Self-Service Libraries on the streets. Citizens can return items at all libraries and points, although they usually use the nearest one to them.

The second innovation of the Wuhan Area Library Consortium was the One Inquiry System. With the development of science and technology, information needs become more varied, specialized and digital. While academic libraries and special libraries are rich with resources, it is difficult for public libraries to meet these needs. Thus, the consortium is able to make up for these disadvantages. Currently, the consortium has established a system of united inquiry and integrated resources among the librarians and experts in all types of libraries. Inquiries raised by any of the member libraries are answered by any librarian or expert with resources in the respective libraries. In addition to inquiries, the consortium also provides subject searching and science & technology novelty searching services.

The third innovation of the Wuhan Area Library Consortium was the lecture and exhibition resources sharing. The lectures from any member library also can be held at other member libraries, in addition to this touring lectures, the consortium also provides live online lecture broadcasts. The exhibitions also can be sent to the any member libraries. Besides this, the consortium also uses mobile vehicle libraries to send the exhibitions to the many library service points. Based on this platform, lectures and exhibitions have been shared throughout the whole city. Furthermore, the consortium also provides outstanding exhibition resources from the National Library of China and the Shanghai Library, among others.

The fourth innovation of the Wuhan Area Library Consortium was a single brand service from each library. The consortium has followed this concept throughout its history. Each member library establishes its own featured resources or services. For example, the Huazhong University of Science and Technology Library features mechanical, electronic, and photo communication resources; Wuhan University features mapping, chemistry & chemical industry, water & electric power facilities, and biological medicine resources; and Huazhong Agriculture features farming, breeding and biology resources. Based on the features of the member libraries, the consortium is able to construct databases jointly and make plans for the whole consortium so that it can provide personalized and diversified services.

3.2 What do we receive from this consortium?

As predicted, the Wuhan Area Library Consortium's innovations have worked quite fruitfully over the past three years. The consortium provides a larger circulation and citizens read more books, inquiries are answered online using librarians from different libraries, academic libraries are made available to the public, lecture resources are shared online, exhibitions travel to many libraries, and overall library services are enriched by the many new brands provided by each member.

(1) There are 16 public libraries, 2 branch libraries, together with the 66 mobile service spots and 78 self-service libraries of Wuhan Library. Most of the city is covered by member libraries. People from every part could find a membership library easily near places they are living or working. All of these libraries have introduced the unified Library Management System and the One Card Circulation Service System. Among the 18 public library pioneers, 2,975,552 items circulated among 1,096,084 people in 2014.

(2) Currently, the consortium is establishing a system of united inquiry that integrates the resources, librarians and experts of all of the different types of libraries within the consortium. Inquiries raised by any of the member libraries are answered by any librarian or expert with resources in the respective libraries. In addition to inquiries, the consortium also provides subject searching and science & technology novelty searching services. There are more than 30 experts from 23 libraries or scientific research institutions working online on inquiries. Users are able to choose experts by professional field. After the Wuhan Area Library Consortium was established in 2012, 3,449 inquiries have been answered online. For example, Zhang Weisheng, a retired worker from the Changjiang River Shipping Board, sought to develop innovations for floating swimming pools. After his visit to the Wuhan Library, the consortium helped him use the united inquiry system to acquire patent information online for his Boat-Style Swimming Pool invention.

(3) Master Forum, a large-scale public lecture held by the Wuhan Library, has turned into a well-known national public lecture brand. Well-known experts from all over China are invited to give the lectures. After ten years of effort, people now call the forum "Citizens' Happy Class", it has held 545 lectures with 200,000 attendees. In May 2010, the members of the consortium signed the Wuhan Public Libraries Lectures Consortium Motivation Letter, which established a union of lectures. Since then, there are 141 lectures has been held or broadcasted live online over long distances at member libraries. Over 72,000 people have attended the lectures.

In addition to the lecture union, the consortium also includes an exhibition union. The consortium selects outstanding exhibitions on many different subjects and brings them on tours to the consortium's member libraries. Since 2012, there have been 154 exhibitions made available to the public, with 38,000 citizens attending. The consortium also makes use of mobile vehicle libraries to travel to troops, communities, high schools, elementary schools, prisons, and government and tourist spots, which is very popular among citizens.

(4) Many featured service brands have been developed by members of the Wuhan Area Library Consortium based on their respective featured local resources. For example,

a. Master Forum is a brand developed by the Wuhan Library. The idea of “Masters Serve the Public” has become well known nationwide. A total of 545 lectures were held over the past 10 years. It was ranked one of the Top Ten Reading Activities Brand in China in 2013.

b. The Farmers’ Reading Knowledge Game is a brand developed by the Jiangxia District Library that has been held for 3 years. It aims to enrich farmers’ cultural lives and agricultural literacy.

c. Authors’ Literature of Hubei Province is a brand developed by the Dongxi Lake District Library; the featured literature center has collected 11,700 items, including manuscripts, brief biographies and photos from 4600 authors within Hubei province.

d. Jinqiao Book Reviews is a brand developed by the Jiangnan District Library. It guides citizens on selecting the right books to improve their cultural literacy and find inspiration. Twenty-five sessions have been held since 2014.

e. Developing Agriculture with Science and Technology is a brand developed by the Caidian District Library. At least 10 activities are held each year in which over 10000 people attending.

3.3 More examples of cross-sector collaboration

Beyond the Wuhan Area Library Consortium, which mainly combines different types of libraries, the region has also established collaborations across many other sectors, including with municipal governments, local governments, disabled persons’ federations, labor unions, broadcast stations, and metro companies. The region has established increasing numbers of platforms that are open and available to the public in which residents are able to take part and interact. All such activities benefit society and foster a good image of libraries.

(1) The Citizen’s House Branch, jointly built with the municipal government.

The Citizen’s House in Wuhan is a government affairs service center that was established by the Wuhan Municipal government. It acts as a window to show the styles and features of the city. The Wuhan Library established a library branch in this service center called the Citizen’s House Branch. It provides convenient services such as self-service library card applications, OPAC searches, online book renewal, government affairs information searches, online references, online lectures, digital reading and cultural resource viewing.

(2) The Tanghu Branch, jointly built with the regional government.

The Wuhan Library joined hands with regional government of the Wuhan Economic and Technological Development Zone to establish the Tanghu Library. It opened at February, 2015. Up to now, there are over 100,000 people has come to the library and 7000 reader's card has been provided. It has become a space for learning and leisure for 200,000 industrial workers, where people are able to enjoy many convenient services, such as book borrowing, reference services, lectures, exhibitions, digital resources and reading promotions.

(3) The Taobao Cloud class, jointly opened with the Disabled Persons’ Federation.

To improve the quality of life of vulnerable groups, we invited teachers from Wuhan University to provide courses on electronic commerce theory, professional literacy, psychology, electronic commercial customer service knowledge, cloud customer service, etc. Together with the Jiangnan District Library on Disability, disabled people were provided with courses in Taobao Cloud Customer Service. They learned how to run a business and found job opportunities; for example, soon after the class, one of the learners created a Taobao Store to sell Wuhan Local Products online.

(4) The Rural Migrant Workers Reading Room, jointly built with the Labor Union.

Library branches were also established at construction sites in which books are delivered to the sites and refreshed regularly. Moreover, the branch provides videos on practical technologies, healthcare and the rights and interests of labor. The branch also provides computer training. When the fingers that used to work with bricks or welding guns instead play on keyboards, the workers' cultural life is enriched through music, films and online chats. The branch has become a sort of paradise of learning.

(5) Together with the Library of Wuhan Commercial Service College.

Wuhan Library and the Library of Wuhan Commercial Service College provides laid off women with courses such as marketing, financing and stocks. Soon after the class, one of the learners found a job in a beauty salon with a considerable income.

(6) The Voice of Wuhan Library, jointly established with the Broadcasting Station.

Wuhan Library and the Broadcasting Station of Wuhan Classical Music opened the Voice of Wuhan Library, and its Reading Column is divided into three channels: Lectures Broadcasting, Exploring Wuhan by Reading and Recommended books. It provides selected book lists on favorite topics for readers, histories of the city for residents, and lectures by well-known scholars. Thus, the people are able to learn just by listening.

(7) 24-hour Self Service Libraries, jointly built with the Metro Company.

Wuhan Library has 50 self-service 24-hours library machines that are distributed throughout the three towns of Wuhan city, and 311,600 items were circulated among 141,000 people. Wuhan Metro Company has other 33 more self-service 24-hour library machines. By the end of 2014, all of these library machines were combined together in the unified library management system to save significant costs in human and material resources and provide convenience to the citizens for reading, thus breaking down boundaries across distances and sectors.

(6) Citizens' School and Readers' Salon, jointly operated with society.

The consortium has cooperated with many social organizations to hold readers activities, for example, jointly invited the teachers to come to the Citizens' School and Readers' Salon to give some lectures of cooking, singing, taking photographs etc. This year, there are over 5000 people to join the activities.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that clear benefits have achieved from the activities of China library consortia since 1980s. The innovations developed by the Wuhan Area Library Consortium have

