Chinese Public Library Services for Vulnerable Groups

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ABSTRACT: Public libraries in China invariably provide services to vulnerable groups. However, based on the content analysis of Chinese public libraries' websites, it is not clear what their service objectives are or the essence of such services. Obviously, public libraries provide services to youth and children, seniors, and the disabled. Yet, they lack an institutionalized implementation scheme. There are some correlations between the services provided by public libraries to vulnerable groups and the development of economy. To serve the true needs of vulnerable groups better, public libraries in China need to delineate motivation factors, outline the service essence, provide the guarantees, and implement evaluation systems.

I. Introduction

Studies on library mission and library core values that started in China in the late 20th century (Yu, 2007; Fan & Ni, 2007) have inevitably led to the question why libraries exist. Furthermore, these studies became the theoretical foundation of the subsequent research topics, such as library service systems. In the context that both library research and practice in China began to lay emphasis on humanistic approaches and institutional construction, libraries services for vulnerable groups originated from Western countries came into the view of Chinese scholars and have since become a hot topic. During the period of 2010-2012, China's National Social Science Fund has funded 7 research projects related to vulnerable groups.

The current study is based on the data retrieved from CNKI (China National Knowledge

Infrastructure). "library service" and "vulnerable groups" were used as search terms and 133 papers published between 2003 and 2012 were retrieved on November 8, 2012. Among the 133 papers, there is one similar to our research interest. It was written by Wang Sufang from the Department of Information Resources Management at Zhejiang University entitled *From Physical Environment Accessibility to Information Accessibility: Survey and Analysis of Problem and Countermeasure of Public Library Services to the Disabled in China*. However, her object in the study is only one vulnerable group.

It is necessary to define vulnerable groups in the context of Chinese economy and social culture. The status quo of Chinese public libraries services for vulnerable groups should also be assessed. Based on the above considerations, public libraries in all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in Mainland China have been analyzed in detail via network content analysis and telephone interviews regarding their services to the vulnerable groups.

II. Research Type and Phenomenon

The current researches on public library services for vulnerable groups in China are mainly of four types.

The first type is the macroscopic study on libraries services for vulnerable groups. It analyzes, on the theoretical level, the meanings, measures, and methods of such services. But as most of these studies are still in the stage of induction or deduction of theories, they lack solid theoretical foundation or support of scientific methodology.

The second type is case studies. It reviews libraries services for vulnerable groups in foreign countries (Wang, 2010; Xiao & Wang, 2006; Chen & Yao, 2008). This type of studies is of high value in the light of citing newest foreign research findings and practices.

The third type focuses on particular vulnerable groups (Shi, 2010), such as the following projects funded by the National Social Science Fund: *Research and Innovation on Libraries Promoting Seniors' Reading* (2010), *Research on the Protection Mechanism for Daily and Community Information Needs of the Urban Low-income Residents in Western Region of China* (2011), and *Empirical Research on Digital Reading of Chinese Minors* (2012).

The fourth type are studies on the rights or the legal protections of vulnerable groups, mainly funded by the National Social Science Fund, such as *A Study on Legal Issues Related to the Public Information Services for Socially Vulnerable Groups* (2012), *A Perspective of Citizenship and Rights on Public Information Services for Vulnerable Groups in Society* (2012), *Research on the Development of the Rights for Socially Vulnerable Groups to Receive Public Information Services Related to Their Information Needs* (2012), and *Countermeasure Research on Libraries Protection of the Rights of Vulnerable Groups to Access to Public Information* (2012).

There are a few phenomena of the studies on library services for vulnerable groups in China.

First of all, various concepts are used to indicate the same service, for instance, "knowledge aids" by Wang Zizhou, "elimination of library knowledge sharing inequality" by Zhou Jiuchang, and "extended services" by Dan Bixia.

Another phenomenon is that a big chunk of research in this area is carried out by a few key scholars. For example, Wang Sufang has published nine papers, most of which are focused on foreign research analysis relating to the library services to vulnerable groups. Her papers have been cited most frequently in CNKI.

Thirdly, most studies in this area are either macro analysis based on theories or microscopic case studies. There is not much research carried out in theoretical analysis of the services for vulnerable groups.

III. Problem Statement

Vulnerable groups have become a hot topic in recent years. However, people do not have a common definition of vulnerable groups. Generally speaking, vulnerable groups are short for the socially vulnerable groups. And most scholars in China think that the definition of vulnerable groups is dynamic, open, and patulous (Luo, 2007).

For the current study, vulnerable groups are defined by their physiological or social vulnerability in society, such as seniors, youth and children, the disabled, low-income citizens, migrant workers, and prisoners.

IV. Research Methodology

The current study employed network content analysis and telephone interviews, both of which belong to empirical research methodology, to survey public libraries in every province, autonomous region, and municipality in Mainland China on their services for vulnerable groups. Network content analysis, by definition, analyzes the contents of the networks (Zhou & Qiu, 2005). This is the main research method adopted to ensure the breadth of the study. Through analyzing pertinent words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and sections on the library's website, the quality of its services for the vulnerable groups was assessed. As the objects of content analysis are those that have already been expressed through communication, they do not change with time or the subjective factors of researchers. Therefore, they are relatively objective. Telephone interviews were used as a supplemental tool in circumstances where the web contents were not sufficient to represent the actual contents on the subject.

V. Scope of the Study

The current study covered one national library (National Library of China), 4 municipal libraries (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing), 22 provincial libraries (Hebei, Shanxi,

Liaoning, Jilin, Heilingjiang, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, Jiangxi, Shandong, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Hainan, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai), 5 autonomous regional libraries (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Ningxia, and Xinjiang), and 81 prefectural libraries (Tangshan, Shijiazhuang, Handan; Alashan League, Baotou, Erdos; Taiyuan, Datong, Shuozhou; Dalian, Shenyang, Anshan; Changchun, Jilin, Songyuan; Harbin, Daqing, Qiqihar; Suzhou, Wuxi, Nanjing; Hangzhou, Ningbo, Wenzhou; Hefei, Wuhu, Anqing; Quanzhou, Fuzhou, Xiamen; Nanchang, Ganzhou, Jiujiang; Qingdao, Yantai, Jinan; Zhengzhou, Luoyang, Nanyang; Wuhan, Yichang, Xiangyang; Changsha, Yueyang, Changde; Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Foshan; Nanning, Liuzhou, Guilin; Haikou, Sanya, Danzhou; Chengdu, Mianyang, Deyang; Guizhou, Zunyi, Bijie; Kunming, Qujing, Yuxi; Lhasa, Xigaze, Qamdo; Xi'an, Yulin, Xianyang; Lanzhou, Jiuquan, Qingyang; Xining, Haixi, Haidong; Yinchuan, Shizuishan, Lingwu; Urumqi, Karamay, Erie) in Mainland China. The 81 prefectural libraries are actually public libraries in the top 3 cities in each province or autonomous region by GDP (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2012).

As some of those 113 public libraries do not have their own websites, public access or any content related to vulnerable groups, only 81 libraries were considered as valid samples in this study.

VI. Findings and Discussions

1. Network content analysis

The same content analysis code table (see *Table 1*) was used to analyze the network contents available on the website of the 81 public libraries in Mainland China. This table mainly displays relevant information in two aspects. One is whether a library provides services to vulnerable groups or not. If it does, what services does it provide? The other is whether a library has recognized or not the importance of developing services for vulnerable groups, including the meanings and the status of such services.

Here are two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The language on a library's website relating to providing services to vulnerable groups shows the recognition of the importance of such services.

Hypothesis 2: The contents relevant to services for vulnerable groups in the structure of the library's website indicate the status of such services provided by the library.

Table 1. Network Content Analysis Code Table
of Public Library Services for Vulnerable Groups

	Whether developed services for	Type of services	Home page display	Other pages display	No display	Telephone interviews	Remarks

	vulnerable groups						
Seniors							
The disabled							
Youths and children							
Low-income citizens							
Migrant workers							
Prisoners							

Each website of the 81 public libraries has been analyzed according to *Table 1*. Summaries and comparisons were made based on the findings.

2. Status analyses of library services for vulnerable groups in Mainland China

Table 2. Status of Library Services for Vulnerable Groups in Mainland China

	Total number of public libraries providing services for vulnerable groups	Type of services (divided in 0-9 categories*; the number indicating how many libraries developed this type of service)										Number of libraries revealing services for vulnerable groups on homepage	Number of libraries which revealing services for vulnerable groups on other	Remarks
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9			
Seniors	66	8	8	26	14	39	5	6	11	14	9	4	61	
The disabled	68	56	56	27	24	11	14	7	18	16	21	9	59	
Youths and children	80	66	66	64	11	42	7	4	46	60	4	48	32	
Low-income citizens	18	0	0	3	2	7	2	2	2	4	1	3	15	
Migrant workers	39	1	1	21	2	8	9	4	13	3	2	2	35	

| Prisoners | 37 | 2 | 1 | 11 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 32 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 36 | |

*0 indicates barrier-free facilities.

 1 indicates a special reading room for vulnerable groups.

 2 indicates special activities held for vulnerable groups, such as calligraphy, painting, photography, recitation, competitions, singing, and dancing.

 3 indicates preferential treatment for vulnerable groups to get a library card or receive free ones.

 4 indicates lectures for vulnerable groups.

 5 indicates sending books or donating books, audio and video materials to vulnerable groups.

 6 indicates providing skill training for vulnerable groups.

 7 indicates a library books station or a branch library or a children's department or branch of the library that are accessible to vulnerable groups.

 8 indicates developing special resources for vulnerable groups.

 9 indicates special services for vulnerable groups.

Table 2 shows that public libraries in Mainland China provide more services to such vulnerable groups as youths and children, seniors and the disabled than to the low-income citizens, migrant workers, and prisoners.

Youths and children are the focus of the vulnerable groups that public libraries have endeavored to attract and provide services to. 0n December 30, 2008, Shenzhen Children's Library opened to the public. Since then, the Children's Branch Library of the National Library of China and a number of provincial and municipal children's libraries have been established. Children's libraries have started a fast development with the boost of economic growth.

In September 2010, China's Ministry of Culture held a national conference on children's libraries. It was the first such meeting since China's reform and opening up to the world. At that meeting, policies and specific initiatives on the development of children's libraries were promoted (Wang, 2012).

However, no evidence showed clearly whether youth and children have grabbed the attention of researchers because they are a vulnerable group.

In recent years, migrant workers have become a heated topic. Since 2008, there have been nine papers on how to serve migrant workers in public libraries. Again, migrant workers are not clearly indicated as a vulnerable group in these papers.

The other aspect of the general characteristics shown in *Table 2* illuminates that public libraries in Mainland China provide services to vulnerable groups in a number of ways. 0-9 indicates different types of services respectively. Looking at the categories of these services, it is clear that the services for seniors, youths and children, and the disabled take the lion's share. Looking at the individual type of services, the special activities (such as calligraphy,

painting, photography, recitation, competitions, singing, and dancing) held for vulnerable groups are what public libraries have provided most to vulnerable groups while skill training is the least.

Nevertheless, there is one shining exception. The Shanghai Pudong New Area Library, China won the Ulverscroft Best Practice Award from the Ulverscroft Foundation and the IFLA Libraries Serving Persons with Print Disabilities Section in 2010 for offering "extensive free ICT training for the local visually impaired community" since 2002 (IFLA, 2010).

Judging by the quantity and quality of service contents as shown on their websites, the current library services for vulnerable groups in China still remain on the surface. There have been no effective measures to eliminate barriers for vulnerable groups to access library resources.

Table 3. Types of Vulnerable Groups that Libraries Provide Services to

	Comprehensive Service Coefficient						
Value	0	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.7	0.8	1
Number of Libraries	1	2	9	19	26	16	8

The comprehensive service coefficient is achieved from the calculation of the number of public libraries that have provided special services to the six types of vulnerable groups (i.e., seniors, the disabled, youths and children, low-income citizens, migrant workers, and prisoners). If a library has provided pertinent services to each vulnerable group, its comprehensive service coefficient is 1; if a library has not provided any pertinent services to any of the 6 vulnerable groups, its comprehensive service coefficient is 0. Likewise, the comprehensive service coefficient is 0.2 for providing one pertinent service, 0.3 for providing two pertinent services, 0.5 for providing three pertinent services, 0.7 for providing four pertinent services, and 0.8 for providing five pertinent services, that is, 0/6, 1/6, 2/6, 3/6, 4/6, 5/6, and 6/6, with 1 digit retained after the decimal point.

Table 3 shows a normal distribution of statistical results. Of the 81 valid samples, only one library has not provided any special service for vulnerable groups. Eight libraries have provided special services to all 6 types of vulnerable groups. The above analysis indicates that the services provided by public libraries in China to vulnerable groups are at an inchoate stage of development. The services for vulnerable groups are universal but not covering all.

3. Relationship between library services for vulnerable groups and economic development

From the theoretical perspective, there are at least two factors, external environment and internal environment, that affect library services for vulnerable groups. As the current study is at the macro level, it has concentrated on the analysis of the external environment to examine

the relationship between economic development and library services for vulnerable groups. Based on the different standard of economic development for the Eastern, the Central and the Western region, as formally announced from China's seventh five-year plan in the fourth session of the sixth National People's Congress in 1986, the statistics were adjusted in *Table 4*. The Eastern region includes Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong, and Hainan; the Central region includes Heilongjiang, Jilin, Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei, Hunan; the Western region include Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Guangxi, and Inner Mongolia.

Table 4. Library services for vulnerable groups in Eastern, Central, and Western regions

	Seniors	The disabled	Youths and children	Low-income citizens	Migrant workers	Prisoners
Eastern	26	28	31	8	16	13
Central	19	20	24	4	11	11
Western	21	20	25	6	12	13
Total	66	68	80	18	39	37

According to *Table 3*, the provinces and cities with comprehensive service coefficient as 1 include Sichuan Province, Chongqing Municipality, Yinchuan, Wuhan, Fujian Province, Anhui Province, Zhejiang Province, and Jiangsu Province. The provinces and cities with comprehensive service coefficient as 0.8 are Dalian, Changchun, Harbin, Shanghai Municipality, Suzhou, Wenzhou, Wuhu, Jiangxi Province, Shandong Province, Yichang, Guangzhou, Foshan, Nanning, Liuzhou, Guilin, and Kunming. Of these, 10 provinces and cities are in the Eastern region, 7 in the Central, and 7 in the Western.

From the above analysis, it is clear that the economic development is somewhat positively related to the services public libraries have provided to vulnerable groups. However, Beijing is among the most developed areas in China, but its comprehensive service coefficient is just 0.5. On the other hand, there are three libraries in Guangxi Province in the least developed western region, and their comprehensive service coefficients are all at 0.8. Two questions thus came to mind: One is whether one library can reflect the overall conditions of its city or region. The other is what factors do play if there is no causal relationship between library services for vulnerable groups and economic development.

4. Cognitive analyses of library services for vulnerable groups in China

The current study was conducted on the hypothesis that the explicit language of "vulnerable groups" on a library's website and the position of the contents about the services for vulnerable groups indicate the cognition of the library management in providing services to vulnerable groups. Language reflects one's intent. Accordingly, no explicit language about vulnerable groups on a library's website reveals the neglect on the library's part, intentionally or unintentionally. Even so, during the study, a conscientious effort was made to call the

libraries which do not have description of services for vulnerable groups on their website. In general, they answered the call but the authenticity of their statements needs to be verified.

Looking at the data in *Table 1*, the number of libraries whose homepage display services for vulnerable groups is obviously lower than that with other pages display such services. Furthermore, of the 28 libraries that display the library mission on their websites, only 14 have mentioned about vulnerable groups. And even with these 14 libraries, there is no mentioning of the essence of serving vulnerable groups.

VI. Conclusion and Further Thoughts

Through the analysis of the valid 81 sample websites of public libraries in Mainland China, it is concluded that the types of vulnerable groups have not been defined clearly in the services provided. They are conventionally defined as seniors, youths and children, the disabled, low-income citizens, prisoners, and migrant workers. Nor have these libraries spelt out the essence and necessity to serve vulnerable groups.

Of the vulnerable groups served by public libraries in Mainland China, youths and children, seniors, and the disabled are the focus of the services while low-income citizens and migrant workers are gradually catching the attention with the development of local economy.

The contents of the library websites suggest that library services for vulnerable groups in China remain on the surface level. There are no institutionalized implementation plans or measures to eliminate the barriers for using libraries by vulnerable groups.

The library services for vulnerable groups in Mainland China are positively related to the level of economic development to some degree. Still, the extent of such services varies in regions with the similar economic conditions.

As a whole, library services for vulnerable groups in Mainland China are in the self-development stage, without clear definitions of their nature, meaning, system or necessity. In other words, there is no evidence of the impetus or deep roots of library services for vulnerable groups in China.

Prompted by research in other related disciplines, introduction of foreign research findings, and domestic societal opinions, library and information professions in China began to pay attention to vulnerable groups at the start of the 21st century. Studies on the "Spirit of Library", "21st Century New Library Campaign", "Library's Core Value", and "Library's Missions" all touch upon vulnerable groups.

Professor Wang Zizhou's project "Building a New System to Provide Knowledge Assistance to Disadvantaged Groups" won a research grant from the National Social Science Fund.

The *Outline of the National "11th Five-Year Plan" Period Cultural Development Plan* called

for public cultural institutions, including libraries, to realistically safeguard "the basic cultural rights and interests of low-income people and special groups. Adopting steps such as government procurement and subsidies, etc., to open service channels, enrich service content, guarantee and realize basic cultural life requirements of groups such as urban low-income residents, the disabled, the elderly and peasants or industrial labourers, etc."

The *Outline of the Cultural Reform and Development Plan during the National "12th Five-Year Plan" Period* further emphasized the services for vulnerable groups such "Perfecting public cultural service facilities facing women, minors, the elderly and the handicapped." and "With the support of public libraries, schools' electronic reading rooms, and community cultural centres, establishing and perfecting public service-type online venues for minors."

The Manifesto of Library Services published by the Library Society of China proposes that "Libraries make efforts to eliminate the difficulties for vulnerable groups' use".

Undoubtedly, the government, researchers, and practitioners have all recognized the importance of public libraries in serving vulnerable groups. And there has been some progress. However, the following questions remain according to the findings of the current study.

What are the ultimate motivations for public libraries to provide services to vulnerable groups? As the findings of the current study show, most public libraries in China do not explain clearly in the library mission why they provide special services to vulnerable groups as compared with ordinary users. Many libraries regard services for vulnerable groups as adding icing to the cake rather than services inherent in libraries. Only by recognizing that serving vulnerable groups is a fundamental requirement for the existence of a library can it really deliver substantive work and guarantee its fulfillment. This point has been articulated and solidified in the form of manifesto and legal documentation in the development of public libraries in the Western countries. Therefore, it is also important to conduct comparative studies on how public libraries in China and abroad provide services to vulnerable groups.

What is the essence of the services provided by public libraries to vulnerable groups? The *Public Library Manifesto* (UNESCO, 1994) proclaimed that:

> The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison.

Therefore, the essence of library services for vulnerable groups is to take measures to eliminate the barriers for vulnerable groups in using library services and materials. Therefore, libraries need to have a new understanding of the types of vulnerable groups and their special needs and provide them with substantive services in differential forms.

What are the guarantees of library services for vulnerable groups? Lack of libraries act is a serious obstacle to the development of public libraries in China, especially for providing services to vulnerable groups. At the macro level, the direction and policies of the national development have provided some assurance to the position and function of libraries in protecting equal rights. Nevertheless, how to provide guarantee remains a problem. Guarantee with legal foundation, system measures, and administrative means will be the key.

How to evaluate library services for vulnerable groups? The evaluation of library services has always been performed at the institution level. The improvement of library services for vulnerable groups relies on the evaluation of current services. It is of especial importance to adopt appropriate theories and methods to evaluate library services for vulnerable groups. Users' perception of the quality of services is a decisive factor which affects their satisfaction. Therefore, an assessment of the quality of library services for vulnerable groups should be based on users' perception, not the services per se.

The current study aimed at ascertaining the status quo of services provided by public libraries in Mainland China to vulnerable groups through the analysis of sample data collected nationwide. Due to some objective and subjective factors, some limitations and uncertainties of the findings are inevitable. The two main aspects of such limitations are as follows:

(1) The data was collected from the website of selected libraries. The objectivity and comprehensiveness of information could be enhanced with other research methods such as questionnaires and interviews.

(2) The standards used to select samples and the limited number of libraries selected for the study may be detrimental to the comprehensiveness and authenticity of the findings. For instance, the differences of various types of vulnerable groups may be easily ignored in the analysis of library services.

Besides, this research answers part of the questions concerning library services for vulnerable groups in China. There are other questions worth in-depth analyses and research, such as the root of the current status of library services for vulnerable groups in China, the evaluation of library services for vulnerable groups, and the factors that influence library services for vulnerable groups.

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