

# From "Book Collection House" to Open Library: New Impression of Public Libraries in Shanghai, China

Xue-Ming Bao

**ABSTRACT.** Shanghai public libraries have experienced rapid development in the last ten years. The city has a network of four levels of public libraries with the Shanghai Library as a world-class model. Shanghai's district/county and street neighborhood/township public libraries, and residential community/village reading rooms play an important role in reaching out to the people. The "Book Collection House" mindset of library professionals has been transformed to that of professionals who believe in user-centered and service-oriented open libraries. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*; 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Shanghai, public library, library services, collections, funding, network

## INTRODUCTION

A traditional Chinese library is called "Cang Shu Lou," literally meaning "Book Collection House." As Sharon Chien Lin points out in *Libraries and Librarianship in China*, ". . . traditional Chinese

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libraries emphasized their function as depositories of valuable records of the past rather than as centers for distributing useful books to all classes of readers."<sup>1</sup> At the present time, the official names of most Chinese public libraries are place names, such as "The Shanghai Library." The word "Public" is usually not part of the official designation.

I grew up in Shanghai during the 1960s and 1970s. Even though "public" libraries were open to the public for in-house reading and book circulation, the "Book Collection House" mindset was still obvious among the library staff. During my visits to public libraries in those years, my impression was that libraries were inaccessible and inconvenient; library staff had priorities other than public service. I had to search for books through the card catalog, write down call numbers, authors and titles on a slip of paper, and wait for the items to be paged by a library staff member at the Circulation Desk. I would then wait and wait for the books to be retrieved from the closed stacks. Despite the stacks being closed, I might get only two out of five requested books.

I completed my graduate studies in Canada and the United States in the 1980s and worked as a librarian in New Jersey in the 1990s. I was thrilled by the user-friendliness and openness of North American public libraries. In April 2000, I had an opportunity to re-visit several public libraries in Shanghai. My former impression of these libraries as being inaccessible and inconvenient has changed. In my opinion, public libraries in Shanghai have experienced a transformation from the "Book Collection House" mindset of the past to that of an open library characterized by user-centered customer service. My meetings with library directors showed me a new orientation and eagerness to provide and improve personal services to library users. The purpose of this article is to describe what I learned from my April 2000 field trip to four public libraries in Shanghai.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE SHANGHAI PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM**

Shanghai is the largest city in China with a population of 13.05 million and an area of 6,340 square kilometers (2,447 square miles). Located on the west shore of the Pacific, Shanghai assumes a central location along China's coastline. Shanghai is a world-renowned port

city and is China's premier business, finance, and trade center. The city has three levels of government:

1. **Municipality.** The Shanghai municipal government has twenty district and county governments under its jurisdiction.
2. **District/County.** Fourteen districts are located in the urban areas of Shanghai and each has about twenty street neighborhood governments (a literal translation) under its jurisdiction. Six counties are located in the suburban areas of Shanghai and each county government has about twenty township governments under its jurisdiction.
3. **Street Neighborhood/Township.** In urban areas, a street neighborhood government has about twenty street blocks with an average area of four square kilometers (or 1.54 square miles) and a population of about 80,000 under its jurisdiction in Shanghai. Each street neighborhood government manages about twenty residential community committees. Each street block may have a residential community committee.

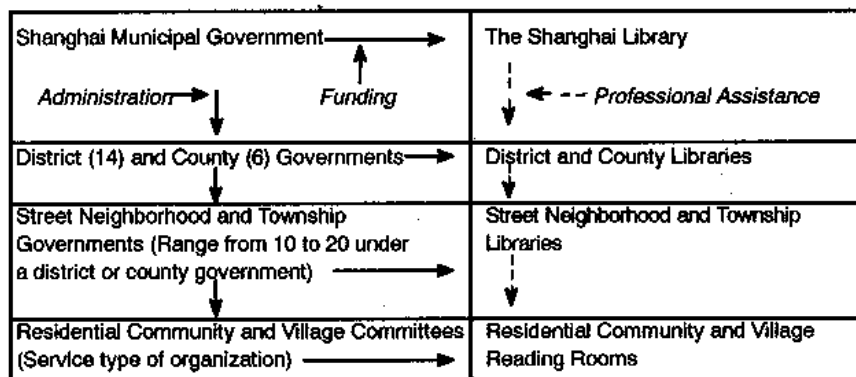
Whereas, in suburban areas, each township government has village committees under its jurisdiction.

The mission of Shanghai public libraries is to facilitate cultural and ethical progress, to enrich the life of people, to promote life-long learning, and to serve as an information center.<sup>2</sup> Libraries at different levels are governed by their respective funding governments. The Shanghai Library is funded by the Shanghai municipal government. District and county libraries are funded by their respective district and county governments while street neighborhood and township libraries are funded by their respective street neighborhood and township governments.

In addition, there are book and newspaper reading rooms at the residential community or village level. Books found in the residential community/village reading rooms are donated primarily by residents and villagers.

The Shanghai Library provides professional guidance to district libraries and street neighborhood libraries. District libraries also provide professional guidance to street neighborhood libraries which, in turn, offer professional assistance to residential community reading rooms. Table 1 illustrates the relationships between Shanghai government structures and the public library system.

TABLE 1. Shanghai Government Structures and Public Library System



### THE SHANGHAI LIBRARY

The Shanghai Library is a comprehensive research and public library.<sup>3</sup> Opened to the public in July 1952, it moved to its new magnificent building in December 1996. In speaking of the changes to the library over recent years, Deputy Director Shi-Wei Wang told me that the Shanghai Library had become increasingly more open. This openness is reflected in the following ways:

1. The library is now open to everyone in Shanghai. In the past, the Shanghai Library limited its library card memberships to 20,000 in a city of 13 million people. Thus, only those people with significant social status could receive a Shanghai Library card. Since 1996, however, the library has adopted a policy whereby anyone who lives and works in Shanghai may receive a library card and can access the library building. The library is open 365 days a year, 12 hours a day from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. It does not close even during the traditional Chinese Spring Festival. The new Shanghai Library building is an attractive modern complex of 83,000 square meters (893,503 square feet), and cost about one billion US dollars to build. The library building features reading rooms, meeting rooms, exhibition halls, stores, and even restaurants. Visitors do not have to show a library card to enter

the building, visit exhibitions, shop or dine. However, a library card is required to enter the reading rooms that have open stacks. Library users can search books through an integrated library information system that also supports the library's circulation system, and they can access frequently used collections. The library has a collection of 45,700,000 volumes and people still need to retrieve less frequently used books from closed stacks, but automatic book carriers speed the retrieval time.

2. The Shanghai Library started its digital library project in 1998 and has since created ten digital web-accessible databases with over eight thousand pictures of Shanghai. In addition, hundreds of full-text Shanghai annals are accessible through the World Wide Web.<sup>4</sup> The Shanghai Library provides an online index to 16,000 periodical and newspapers along with supplying full-text articles upon request. Another project presently underway is the digitization of audio speeches of well-known Chinese figures.
3. In 1998, the Shanghai Library created a Society Monitoring Program to ensure the quality of services. The board consists of twenty-five library users, such as retired government officials, college professors, teachers, professionals, and ordinary workers. Members serve a two-year term and function as a feedback focus group. Among their tasks, they complete a feedback form every other month to report service concerns/problems and to make suggestions and recommendations. The Library Director (or deputy directors) attends the focus group meeting every six months to gather input directly. My father, Si-Wen Bao, a retired health education professional, was invited to be a member of this feedback focus group. He submitted several comments about library services and regularly makes suggestions for improvement.

Deputy Director Shi-Wei Wang has also identified a number of opportunities for the improvement of the Shanghai Library. For example, the library was designed in the 1980s and built in the 1990s, but too much of the building space is allocated for book storage. This design makes it difficult for the library to open that space as an open-shelf reading area because the ceiling is too low. In addition, the educational background of the professional library staff needs improvement as only half of the 900 library staff members have a bachelor's

degree. In order to meet the service needs of library users and to focus on customer service, the library needs more staff with a higher educational background and employees who embrace the objective of serving the community.

### ***THE XUHUI DISTRICT LIBRARY***

Xuhui District is one of the central urban districts of Shanghai. It has a population of 850,000 and an area of 54.76 square kilometers (21.14 square miles), and is located in the southwest area of the city. Xuhui District has ten street neighborhood governments and three township governments under its jurisdiction. The educational level of the residents in Xuhui District is the highest among all the districts and counties situated in Shanghai. One-fifth of the residents have received higher education.

The Xuhui District Library is funded through the district government budget. The library's 1999 funding, which had increased significantly in the past few years, was about RMB1,265,000 (Chinese Yuan) in total (about US\$158,000).<sup>5</sup> The new building of the Xuhui District Library was built in 1990 and renovated in 1998. The building measures 4,652 square meters (50,079 square feet) and houses a collection of 320,000 books. The library is open to everyone in Shanghai and not limited to the residents living in the district. It is known for the first open competition to recruit its library director and professional librarians, and is strong in its collections of business and accounting materials. The library features a children's department with open shelves and a play area. A "little librarian" program helps to cultivate children's interest in the library. About forty children of different ages are selected to work as "little librarians" in the summer program.

The library also has a reading room for the blind as evidenced by the portrait of Louis Braille hanging on the reading room wall. Collections include books in braille, audio-tape books, and a computer. When I visited the reading room, I saw a group of blind library users meeting to discuss how they could help with the Shanghai sports meet for disabled people planned for May 2000. One blind library user demonstrated to me how he typed words into the computer, which were then read back to him and printed in braille. I was happy to learn

that the use of adaptive technology to provide library services for the blind was implemented in such a pronounced manner.

In order to support street neighborhood libraries with their limited resources, the Xuhui District Library has a "mobile books program," which sends a collection of new books to each street neighborhood library for up to three months. The district library also holds a monthly meeting with street neighborhood library directors, and I had the rare opportunity to attend such a monthly meeting. The subject of this particular session was to prepare for National Library Week at the end of May 2000. However, the topic changed since they were very eager to learn about public libraries in America. They wanted to know how public libraries were funded and what services were provided, and in turn I shared with them my working experience at the Paterson Free Public Library and the Belleville Public Library & Information Center in New Jersey.

The library also collaborates with a local prison to provide library services. Library staff members visit the prison regularly to bring books and reading materials along with offering workshops and book exhibitions for prisoners.

Library Director Ming-Hua Wei spoke about the continuing educational needs of her library staff. Most of the staff members are graduates of vocational schools and have had an equivalent of only one or two years worth of college education. At the time of my visit in April 2000, the library had no Internet access but was planning to include it as part of a multimedia computer lab that was expected to open in a few months.

It was at this library where I saw a notice to users: "This library participates in the service evaluation program of Shanghai public libraries. The service criteria are that library users and services come first; library staff should wear uniforms and name tags on duty; they should provide courteous services to users; they should try to respond to every question from library users; and the library should maintain the equipment well and keep the library building clean."

### ***THE TIANPING STREET NEIGHBORHOOD LIBRARY***

The Tianping Street Neighborhood Library is under the jurisdiction of its street neighborhood government, which is one of ten street neighborhood governments under the Xuhui District Government.

The Tianping Street Neighborhood Library serves a population of 88,900 and is located in a cultural and recreational building owned by the street neighborhood government. When I walked into the library, I saw senior citizens playing cards in a recreation room adjacent to the library. The whole library occupies a large, single room (about 200 square meters or about 2,153 square feet) on the third floor. On the front wall of the library, I saw a banner with the slogan "Books are the stairs of human progress." Two library staff members manage the library. The library is open Monday through Saturday, 8:30-11:30 a.m. and 1:30-5:00 p.m. In 1999, the library had 1,200 registered library card users. Most of its users are local residents, elementary and middle school students in the area. Other users work in this area. The library has a collection of 21,800 books. Most of its books are available on open shelves. Some older books are stored off-site. The library has a branch serviced by two library staff members.

Library Director Ji-Ping Wu told me that she had been a librarian for twenty years. In the last few years, she took some courses in Library Sciences at a university on a part-time basis and earned a specialized program certificate while working on the job. According to Ms. Wu, there are two major characteristics of her street neighborhood library. The first is the library's involvement in community activities organized by the cultural department of the street neighborhood government. The second is its collaboration project with both local schools and local law enforcement in the area. The library participated in the celebration programs for Hong Kong's and Macao Island's reunification with China, and knowledge competition programs by providing books and information. The library has provided popular science books to local middle school students and run theme newsletters jointly with the students. It has loaned mobile books on a quarterly basis to the local law enforcement residing in the area. The library also provides outreach of its services to employees of foreign consulates and their families who live in the area.

When talking about the challenges she faces as a library administrator, Ms. Wu spoke about the important role of the leaders of the street neighborhood government in understanding the public library since these leaders are key in setting community standards. Some people still narrowly think that public libraries only spend money and provide no economical benefits in return. To outsiders, a librarian's profession is not well understood; thus, librarians find that they have to work hard



to prove their worthiness. When government leaders recognize the importance of public libraries and see the educational, social, cultural, and ethical benefits created by public libraries, librarians will have a less stressful environment in which to work.

I asked Ms. Wu what she would do if her library had an ample supply of money. She said that acquiring new books would top her list since they would help to draw people to the library. Providing public access to the Internet is something which will likely happen within a few years. The library is already planning for computerized circulation and cataloging. The library receives about RMB10,000 (about US\$1,200) a year for new books from the Xuhui District Library, which also provides professional assistance in managing the library and organizing related promotional activities. But the library staff members' salary and benefits are funded by the Street Neighborhood Government.

### ***THE XINCUN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY READING ROOM***

The Xincun Residential Community Reading Room is located in the meeting room (about 20 square meters or about 215 square feet) of a two-room office suite of the Xincun Residential Neighborhood Committee. There are three paid staff members on the committee who are funded by the Tianping Street Neighborhood Government. The main function of this committee is to keep in touch with about 1,000 families of the 3,900 residents in the residential community by organizing cultural, recreational, health, fire-prevention and many other awareness programs related to the residents' needs and interests. They even provide mediation services when neighbors have a dispute. As part of these cultural and recreational programs, a small reading room has been provided for community residents.

Mr. Bo'en Wu is responsible for the reading room along with other prescribed duties. As one of the paid members on this committee, Mr. Wu told me that he had no specific book budget and that all of the 1,000 books on the three shelves were donated by community residents. They have a slogan to encourage people to donate their books: "If you donate one book, you are able to read one thousand books." The reading room hosts about thirty regular readers with about ten readers visiting the reading room on average each week, most of

whom are retired senior citizens. The Shanghai Library is located near Mr. Wu's residential community, and he has worked out a mobile book agreement with the Shanghai Library whereby his reading room receives a loan of 300 books every three months. Mr. Wu said that the convenience to community residents is the reason that his reading room can still co-exist next door to the Shanghai Library, one of the largest public libraries in the world.

### CONCLUSION

I would like to summarize my new impression of Shanghai public libraries as follows:

1. The "Book Collection House" mindset of library professionals has been transformed to that of professionals who believe in user-centered and service-oriented open libraries. This change is related to the newly defined mission of public libraries, namely, to facilitate cultural and ethical progress, to enrich the life of people, to promote life-long learning, and to serve as an information center.
2. Many new public libraries' building facilities were built and renovated in the last ten years. The Shanghai Library is one of the most modern and technologically equipped public libraries in the world with respect to its collections, services, and facilities.
3. A network of four levels of public libraries provides the people of Shanghai with local libraries close to their home. Public libraries at all levels are innovative in providing various programs to reach out to potential users.
4. While public libraries' funding had increased significantly in the past few years, district/county public libraries and street neighborhood/township public libraries need to receive more funding to purchase new books and provide Internet access in order to attract more users.
5. Chinese higher education institutions need to train more library professionals to work at all levels of public libraries. This would aid in providing high quality services and raising the status of the library profession as a whole.

## NOTES

1. Sharon Chien Lin, *Libraries and Librarianship in China* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 4.

2. Yanhong Yang, "Library and development of city residential areas," *Library Journal* 1 (1999); Dinglong Yu, "The development of district and county public libraries in Shanghai" *Library Journal* 6 (1999): 26; Guoying Yuan, "Exploring the establishment of residential neighborhood (village) reading rooms," *Library Journal* 8 (1999): 42; Jiaqi Xu and Baoqing Pu, "New developments of street neighborhood and township public libraries in Shanghai," *Library Journal* 6 (1999): 29; Zhonglin Zhu, "The current status and development of information services in local public libraries," *Library Journal* 2 (2000): 43; Jiming Zu, "On the development of community public libraries," *Library Journal* 1 (2000): 38. *Library Journal* is published by the Shanghai Library Society and the Shanghai Library. Language: Chinese. [Online]. Available: <http://www.libnet.sh.cn/tsgzz/tsgzzns.htm> (Last accessed July 28, 2000).

3. *The Shanghai Library Home Page* [Online]. Available: <http://www.libnet.sh.cn/> (Last accessed July 28, 2000).

4. *Shanghai Digital Library* [Online]. Available: <http://www.digilib.sh.cn/digilib/index.html> (Last accessed July 28, 2000).

5. Of the RMB1,265,000 budget (about US\$158,000), RMB785,000 (about US\$98,000) is for salary and operational expenses; RMB480,000 (about US\$60,000) is for books, periodicals, and other library materials. A Shanghai librarian's annual salary is about RMB20,000 (about US\$2,500) on average. A book costs about RMB20 (about US\$2.50) on average. According to a survey conducted by China's State Statistics Bureau, the per capita annual disposable income in Shanghai was RMB10,932 (US\$1,321.89) in 1999. [Source: China Online. Available: [http://www.chinaonline.com/issues/econ\\_news/NewsArchive/secure/2000/march/C00032101.asp](http://www.chinaonline.com/issues/econ_news/NewsArchive/secure/2000/march/C00032101.asp) (Last accessed August 22, 2000)]