

Public Library Services in Underdeveloped Regions in China —A Case Study of Shanxi Province

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Abstract:

In recent years, the public libraries in China are experiencing a rapid development period, showing a significant feature--regional integration and alliance. Shanxi province, an underdeveloped area in north China, had quite limited public investment in the public library development, yet it has paid great attention to explore a suitable development road in the province-wide public library service, which not only has an important reference value to other underdeveloped areas in China, but can also bring a new view to the world.

Keywords: Shanxi, Public Library Services, Underdeveloped Regions, Main-branch Libraries

The public libraries in China are experiencing a rapid development period in recent years. By the end of 2011, there are 2,952 public libraries at or above the county level. What's more, the public library development in China is showing a significant feature--regional integration and alliance. A few cities, such as Jiaxing(Zhejiang province), Hangzhou(Zhejiang province), Shenzhen(Guangdong province), had actively made some explorations in building their own public library service systems, and achieved remarkable success in construction of library branches, mobile services, self-help library services, and other new modes of services, which vigorously promoted the coverage ratio of the library services in localities. However, imbalance in public library service remains in China, especially in the western and other underdeveloped regions where they are facing serious difficulties due to the shortage of funds, talent, and idea, thus library development in such regions had a stark contrast comparing to the eastern coastal areas. Shanxi province is one of these typical regions. With quite limited investment, Shanxi has found out a suitable way of sustainable development in the province-wide public library service, we call it the 'Shanxi Model'.

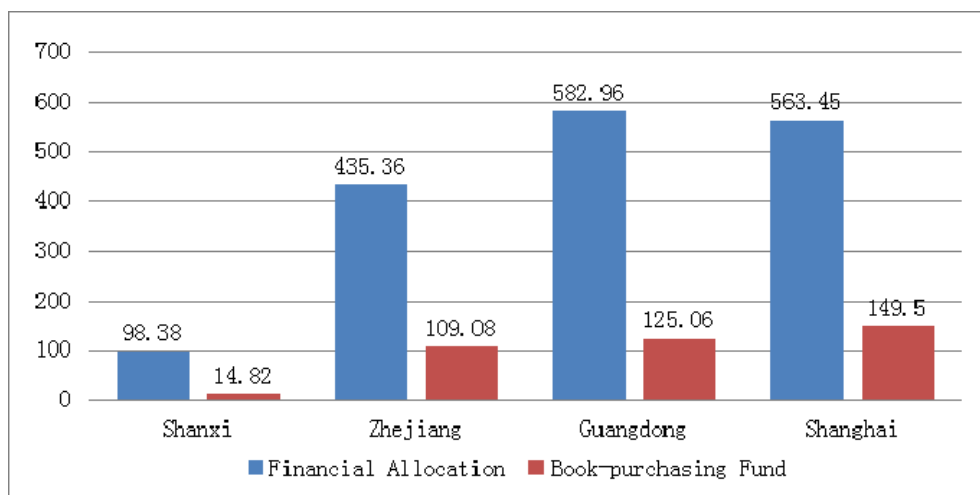
1. How does 'Shanxi Model' come about?

Shanxi is the largest coal-producing province, located in the north of China, in the middle of the Yellow River valley, with an area of 156.7 thousand square kilometers. It is one of the

birthplaces of the Chinese nation, famous for a large number of ancient temples, murals, cave, etc. By the end of 2011, Shanxi province had a population of 36 million, and its GDP reached RMB 1.11 trillion yuan(USD 179 billion), ranking 21st in China's mainland 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, and the financial income reached RMB 121 billion yuan (USD 19.5 billion), ranking 19th nationally.¹ According to the 'Report on overall Competitiveness of China's Provincial Economy during the Eleventh Five-year Program', Shanxi ranked 22 in the 31 mainland provincial regions². Thus, the level of economic development in Shanxi is relatively backward. It is also because of the economic restrictions, the development of the public libraries in Shanxi province has been relatively slow. An early report showed that until 2008 there had been 126 public libraries at or above the county level, in which 43 county libraries had no book-purchasing funds, and 41 county libraries had no electronic reading rooms. There were 11 prefecture-level cities, in which 6 cities had not built the prefecture-level libraries. Besides, nearly half of the townships had no libraries or reading rooms, and a township library with 2000 books would be considered in good condition³.

The situation of economic development also affected the government's investment in public libraries. Take the year 2010 as an example, the financial provision of public libraries in Shanxi was only RMB 98.38 million yuan (USD 15.87 million), while some provinces in China's coastal areas had much more financial support than Shanxi: for example, Shanghai, RMB 563.45 million yuan (USD 90.88 million); Guangdong, RMB 582.96 million yuan (USD 94.03 million); Zhejiang, RMB 435.36 million yuan (USD 70.21 million). At the same time, book purchasing funds in Shanxi was only RMB 14.82 million yuan (USD 2.39 million) , while in the same period, Shanghai, RMB 149.5 million yuan (USD 24.11 million), Guangdong, RMB 125.06 million yuan (USD 20.17 million), Zhejiang RMB 109.08 million yuan (USD 17.59 million).⁴

**Financial Allocation and Book-purchasing Funds
in Some Regions in China 2010 (RMB million yuan)**



¹ National Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2012/indexch.htm>, May 1st, 2013.

² Report on overall Competitiveness of China's Provincial Economy During the Eleventh Five-year Program, Social Sciences Academic Press(China), 2012.

³ 公共图书馆：突出重围要加速，山西日报，2008年6月16日。

⁴ 中国图书馆年鉴 2011 卷，国家图书馆出版社，第 600 页。

Due to the economic issues, the development of public libraries in Shanxi was facing serious challenges: the foundation of primary-level libraries was weak; the number of libraries was small; libraries were scattered; literature resources and facilities could not meet the needs; the problem of repetitive construction was quite serious.

In condition of such limited financial support, Shanxi province achieved full utilization of the library resources, stimulated the development of the primary-level libraries, and further promoted the sustainable development of the public libraries in the whole province, through the reform of the management mode and the construction of the public library service system covering the whole province.

2. What are the characteristics of ‘Shanxi Model’?

There are mainly four remarkable characteristics of ‘Shanxi Model’ as follows:

2.1 Library resources ‘flow’ among all levels of the libraries in the whole province

In November 2008, Shanxi began to build the main-branch library service system, aiming to achieve ‘one-card-through’ and ‘interlibrary loan’ through the operational coordination and integration of resources in the libraries all-over the province. The new service system was under the original administrative and personnel relationship, with the same funding sources as before, in which the provincial library (Shanxi Library) acted as the main library, while the prefecture-level libraries and county libraries were the branch libraries and the central libraries of their own region. Shanxi Library played a central role in leading this new library service system and pushed the following efforts together with other branch libraries to promote the services:

First, established a unified management system, and strictly implemented the standardized construction. For example, the various types of auxiliary facilities used in the main-branch library system, such as the bar code, reader’s card, barcode reader, were procured by Shanxi Library through centralized purchasing, to ensure the quality and standards of the province-wide library construction and service.

Second, build a digital service platform, providing digital access to the resources in all libraries in the system. Shanxi Library was responsible for building a province-wide digital service platform, in which Shanxi Library functioned as the main platform, and other branch libraries were end-users. The branch libraries only need to connect to the internet and login the automation system of the main library, without installing any software and stand-alone server, while readers of all libraries in the system can use their reader’s card to log in the platform, to freely access to various types of digital resources. At the same time, Shanxi is also building a mobile library, and readers can use their mobile device anytime, anywhere to search the digital resources.

Third, organize unified staff training to improve their service effectiveness. By the end of March 2011, Shanxi Library had organized professional training on library management and literature cataloging for four times, in which 500 librarians from the branch libraries around the province had participated.

Since the establishment of the main-branch library system, Shanxi had achieved province-wide ‘one-card-through’ and ‘interlibrary loan’, together with the new library policy from the

central government(In January 2011, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance of the Chinese central government had released a new policy, requiring the public libraries in China to open to the public freely), public library services in Shanxi had taken on a new look, readers kept increasing and the libraries' service effectiveness had gradually improved.

Statistics on Book Circulation Using 'one-card-through' in part of Shanxi, 2011

Library	Library level (times)	Loan (times)	Return (times)	Renew (times)	Readers Increased (persons)
Shanxi Library	Province	355,678	350,447	34,650	14,328
Children's Library in Datong	Prefecture	53,604	49,154	111	5,901
Yangquan Library	Prefecture	48,452	48,214	632	2,878
Yuci Library	County	34,783	34,474	203	1,225
Qingxu Library	County	12,925	11,569	42	1,563
Xiaoyi Library	County	7,123	6,922	10	316
Yangcheng Library	County	4,570	4,122	4	323

Additionally, besides public libraries, the main-branch library system in Shanxi also gradually promoted the horizontal development, pulling in some research institutes, intelligence agencies, and other kind of libraries as its new members. By the end of October 2011, there had been five such libraries joining into the system.

2.2 Putting emphasis on the development and services to the primary-level libraries, giving greater support to the rural and township libraries.

Shanxi has a vast rural and poor area, and is one of the nation's largest concentrated poor areas. Thus, promoting the library services in such rural and poor districts seems much more urgent, comparing with other places in the province. Shanxi supported the library construction and services in these districts mainly through three culture projects.

2.2.1 Rural Library Project

Rural Library Project is a national cultural project launched in 2007 by the General Administration of Press and Publication together with other government departments, aiming at pushing cultural resources to the vast rural areas nationally, and promoting the development of rural areas. In accordance with the relevant policies, the collections of the rural libraries are distributed by the government uniformly, and generally each rural library has to get: no less than 1500 books (no less than 500 categories) , no less than 30 titles of newspapers , no less than 100 pieces of electronic and audio-visual products, and has to meet the basic needs of publications display, loan, and management. According to the

requirements of the policy, each province has to provide financial and professional support for this project.

Shanxi province put every effort to push forward this project and promoted the development of rural areas. By the middle of 2012, the financial departments at all levels in Shanxi province had invested a total amount of 596.78 million yuan, creating 28339 rural libraries, in which 7147 libraries were newly built in 2012, the goal of ‘each village has its own library’ had come true. At the same time, rural library achieved standardization. Special bookcases, desks and chairs were equipped by the government and library space was requested an area of 30 square meters or above. Libraries with proper conditions were equipped with a TV and DVD player. As for the management, they had got the register, and some were managed by certain library staffs.

2.2.2 Rural Book-flowing Library Project

In 2008, the Provincial Department of Culture and the Provincial Department of Finance of Shanxi jointly launched a cultural projects, Rural Book-flowing Library Project, aiming at distributing books and related facilities to rural areas (books were cater to the readers in rural areas, covering multiple areas of education, leisure, entertainment, agricultural science and so on), to solve the problem of reading difficulties of the public in rural areas and truly reflects the value of universal and equal of the public library services. The project uses a step-by-step implementation and the backward districts were given priority to receive the books first. In July 2008, the project distributed books and bookcases for 5500 villages in 59 counties with the total value of 27.5 million yuan, also donated 31 mobile library cars for the provincial library and the underdeveloped counties (valued 1.1 million yuan). In 2009, the project distributed books and bookcases for 4843 villages in the 59 counties and equipped each of the 59 counties with mobile library cars. In 2010, the project began to equip libraries in other district besides the 59 backward counties.

The ultimate goal of the project is to achieve the flow of books in the whole province, and the ideal state is to join the main-branch library service system to when the conditions are ripe, bringing about the province-wide interlibrary loan. Based on this, all the distributed books of this project have standard MARC data, affixed with a bar code and book mark. In addition, the project is also committed to organizing training for librarians, to ensure regulated and scientific library management and services.

2.2.3 National Cultural Information Resources Sharing Project

In 2001, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Finance jointly launched the National Cultural Information Resources Sharing Project (**NCIRSP**), aiming at using modern high-tech means to digitize various types of cultural heritage of the Chinese nation for thousands of years as well as the information resources close to the public life, to build a center of Chinese culture to quickly reverse the backwardness of China's vast central and western areas, especially the poor areas lack of information. Shanxi was the pilot practitioner of this project, and was strongly supported by both the central government and the Shanxi provincial government.

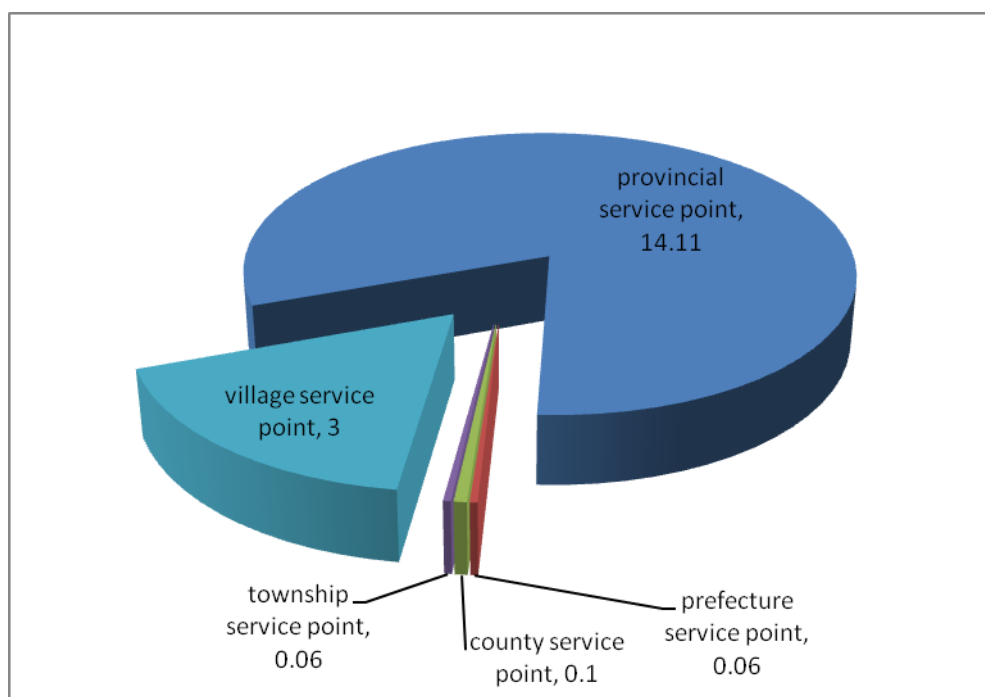
The Financial Allocation of NCIRSP, 2006-2010 (RMB million yuan)

	Central Gov.	Provincial Gov.	Prefecture Gov.	County Gov.
Facility equipment	135.14	57.02	---	23.80
Resource Construction	4.00	7.51	---	---
Operation & Maintenance	---	1.00	---	---
Subtotal	139.14	65.53	---	23.80
Total	228.47			

With the support of the government, by the end of 2010, the Shanxi center of this project had got a total amount of 20TB digital resources, in which 3TB were built by themselves, including many databases with the Shanxi local characteristics, the readers simply go to the local sub-centers (generally set up in the local public library) to use these resources.

By the end of 2010, the project in Shanxi had served 17.33 million readers (person-times), of which the provincial sub-centers served 14.11 million readers (person-times).

The Service Situation of the Sharing Project in Shanxi by the end of 2010



2.3 The positive interactions between the librarians and the general public

Public Libraries are the main conductors of cultural services, while librarians, as direct service providers and participants, play an important role in the service process. The general public is both consumers of cultural services and important participants in the service process. Positive interactions between the librarians and the public, can enhance mutual understanding and communication, and improve the pertinence of library services, thus can meet the demand of the public, realizing the value of libraries in serving the society.

In Shanxi, to some extent, it was just the positive interaction between the librarians and the public, that had promoted the development of the public libraries. Librarians there as a whole showed a strong sense of responsibility and dedication, and even the chief librarians themselves, are personally involved in the various services and in direct contact with the readers. For example, on September 17th, 2011, the National Science Popularization Day, the chief librarian of Shanxi Library distributed propaganda materials to the public together with the staffs, enthusiastically answered readers' questions, and assisted the readers to borrow books. In contact with each other, the distance between the librarians and the public was much closer, which was conducive for the library to better carry out their future services.

At the same time, readers also express their love of learning and reading through a variety of ways, and some enthusiastic readers even set up their own family culture library. Tang Xiongfei, who was a farmer and in love with reading from his childhood, founded his own family library for the villagers, in order to help more people to read. After some days, he received the support from the local government and public libraries. Another person, Duan Baojin, a primary school teacher, founded a rural library which was open daily to the peasants and students. Afterwards, he sold all his house because of the sudden illness of his wife, but even so, he kept his library. Duan's story touched many people and his library had got lots of support, books growing from 50 to 5,000. It was just the persistence and dedication of the major public that made the librarians improve their services continuously with much more firm beliefs. We can see that the interaction between librarians and the general public had played an important role in promoting the development of libraries in Shanxi province.

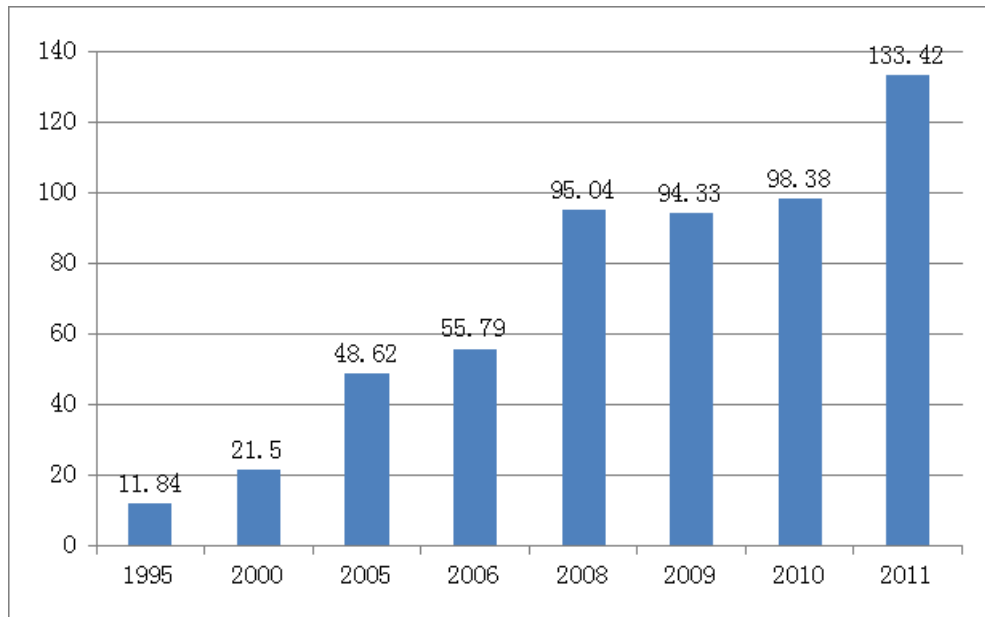
2.4 Government's support attaches great importance

Public libraries in China are supervised by the government, and the establishment of public libraries, financial support, staffing and other key issues are all led by the government. Therefore, there's no sustainable and healthy development without the support of the government. Even when they were facing economic challenges, Shanxi provincial government has spared no effort to support public libraries.

First of all, updating concept. With China's strategy of 'powerful country in culture' was proposed, Shanxi provincial government accordingly proposed 'powerful province in culture', in an attempt to promote the economic and social development in the province through the construction of cultural undertakings. Based on this, the government proposed the idea of 'mining culture resources just like mining underground resources', 'grasp the culture construction just like the economic construction'. At the same time, some government officials also paid great attention to the librarianship. Jia Tianshan, the head of Gu county(magistrate), is just such a person. He said 'A magistrate who cannot build the library well is not a good magistrate', he's good at reading and has published many articles, one of which titling 'Reading is blessing', emphasizes that reading can increase happiness that has attracted widespread attention.

Secondly, continuing financial investment. There's relatively a small investment to Shanxi public libraries, comparing with the eastern coastal areas, however, this input has kept increasing in recent years, especially in 2011, there's a larger increase.

Financial Allocation to the Public Libraries in Shanxi 1995-2011 (RMB million yuan)



Third, legislative support. The legislation of public library is an important guarantee to ensure the scientific and standardized development of the public libraries. In recent years, Shanxi province made considerable efforts to push the process of local public library legislation. Starting writing from 2006, the draft Regulation of Public Library Management in Shanxi, which carried out detailed specifications on public library building, personnel, funding, management and other issues, made a breakthrough in the end of 2011, that means it would not be too long for the public to see it.

In addition, the government actively takes the lead in the introduction of advanced technology to promote the province's digital library service platform.

3. Conclusion: What we can see from ‘Shanxi Model’?

According to the current situation, the public library service system in Shanxi seems to be a successful mode. The key point of this mode is to concentrate superior resources to achieve the province-wide resource sharing, paying much more attention to the vast rural areas and improve the library service efficiency. Meanwhile, government, library practitioners and the general public have to jointly participate in the construction and development of librarianship.

First, the establishment of the main-branch library service system is conducive to put together the distributed resources, improve resource utilization, reduce duplication of resources construction, thus saving the costs, which is especially suitable for underdeveloped regions. Now, many other provinces are also actively carrying out similar main-branch library service system, such as Shaanxi province, the west neighbour of Shanxi. According to the reports, Shaanxi province had also started building a province-wide main-branch library service system, now there are 16 branch libraries, in which one of them is at the village level, built in early 2013. We can see that in China, this mode is spreading, especially in the areas lack of resources.

Secondly, the underdeveloped areas, particularly rural areas, often face multiple difficulties in economy, education, culture. People here need to be better educated than anywhere else, they are more thirsty for knowledge to change their backwardness. Based on this, pushing the limited library resources to these grass-root places can make more practical significance. Furthermore, the rural areas are the blind points of public library services, but also a new growth point of library service, which will be conducive to the development of the libraries.

Finally, the development of the libraries depends on the joint forces of government, library practitioners and the general public, in which governments have to create a good external environment for the development, and provide a wide range of support, including the necessary legislation, policy-making, and financial support; librarians need to nurture the professional spirit, be brave and willing to sacrifice; the general public should be actively and enthusiastically participate in the development of libraries, run a good interaction with librarians, offer advices and suggestions for the development of the librarianship.

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