

## Serving Women in China: Practice and Projects in a Public Library

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### **Abstract:**

*Chinese women live in the complicate background of the era and area: a civilization of long standing in the East Asian region, and also the radical changes in China in terms of rapid industrialization, informatization and globalization. Women surveys show their state of life and their demand for libraries: lower economic and social status and more conservative living style than of men, lower educational level and larger information gap than average in society. What they need most is assistance in acquiring information, such as legal aid, and reading opportunities provided in libraries. A public library in China - Nanshan Library of Shenzhen City is taken as an example to share the practical experience of four service projects: "Spring Program", counselling to aid the spiritual growth of women and their children; "Sunshine Program" offers legal aid; health lectures urge women to take care of their bodies; reading salons encourage women to read books for themselves and read books with their children. There are also further plans for services for women in the library: to provide information technology training and the space for cultural entertainment; to launch career development and guidance for unemployed women; and special services for anti-domestic violence.*

**Keywords:** women services; legal information services; counselling services; library activities

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## **1 THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND**

The traditional culture of the East Asian area has a long and deep effect on the Chinese living in this complex regional and historical background, and with China at the great transitional period of industrialization, informatization and globalization, women have been impacted particularly. In the past, they challenged traditional concepts, such as the social division of women looking after the house while men go out to work, the gender perception that men are stronger than women, the life value that ignorance is women's virtue, and liberated themselves from the family. Today, they are facing knowledge poverty, information gaps, lack of parenting education and other greater cultural predicaments. Helping them to face these problems is the responsibility and mission of the library.

## **2 SURVEY ON THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF CHINESE WOMEN AND THEIR NEEDS FOR LIBRARIES**

Only by understanding Chinese women could we really serve them. What are the social roles of women in China? How are their living conditions? What do they need from library? Answers to the first two questions are summarized by quoting the data of “the 3rd Survey on the Status of Chinese Women” which was undertaken on November 26, 2010 by All-China Women’s Federation and National Bureau of Statistics of China; my colleagues and I conducted an independent survey, and came to a conclusion on the third question.

### **2.1 Social Roles and Living Conditions of Chinese Women**

The 3rd Survey on the Status of Chinese Women obtained statistical data<sup>[1]</sup> according to 125,978 questionnaires nationwide. We classified the data relevant to library services, and summarized it in the following four points:

First, Chinese women have a lower economic and social status than men. Supporting data: the employment rate of 18 to 64 year old women is 71.1%, 87.2% for men, and women’s labour income is only 61.65% of men’s; among them only 2.2% of women are heads of the teams which they belong to, this is only half of men; people who think that social status of men should be higher than women account for 33.7% and people who think otherwise account for 3.4%.

Second, the lifestyle of Chinese women is more conservative than that of men. Supporting data: 72.0% of women fulfill all the household duties in the family, and only 16.0% of men need to do so; religious women account for 12.6%, men 8.3%; 49.5% of over 65 years old widows are not remarried, while only 20.4% of men remain widowers.

Third, the education level of Chinese women is lower than that of men. Supporting data: 18 to 64 year old women’s average length of schooling is 8.8 years, 2.7 years longer than the same number in 2000, but still 0.3 years less than men of the same age.

Fourth, the percentage of Chinese women facing an information gap is larger than average in society. Supporting data: percentage of women surfing the internet is 29.1%, men is 34.1%; the 31st China Internet Development Statistics Report from China Internet Network Information Centre shows that at the end of 2012, national average internet penetration rate is 42.1%, but only 33.3% for women<sup>[2]</sup>. And also it is reported that women and men ratio of college graduates majoring in computer is 1:3.

These four characteristics are derived on the basis of comparison with men or the overall level of society. They show that women need more economic and legal information, and educational help. Therefore, we did the following investigation to see what libraries can do for women.

### **2.2 Women’s Needs for Libraries**

#### **2.2.1 Survey method and scope**

We adopted the questionnaire method. The questions in the questionnaire related to the needs for libraries and evaluation. The answers included multiple choice questions as well as free text for the women to freely add statements. The distribution channels included face to face

and online. The scope of the face to face questionnaire survey was Shenzhen, and the online survey was through QQ (the most frequently used IM software in China), without regional restrictions; the target was random selected people (not limited to women).

Surveys were carried out three times: in December 2007, August 2008 and February 2013, respectively, with a total number of 3930 questionnaires issued, 3760 questionnaires returned, among them 1641 answered by women. The options selected by more than 500 people were classified, and got the following conclusions.

### 2.2.2 Survey conclusions

First, there is a need for basic information services: most in need is information that will benefit spiritual growth (953 people), and legal information (513 people).

Second, there is a need for information skills training: including training in the use of computers and networks (786 people); and help to improve information retrieval ability (858 people).

Third, reading and learning needs: reading salons (1146 people); parent-child reading (537 people).

Fourth, need for community space: libraries to provide more public community learning and entertainment space (1002 people).

## 3 TODAY, OUR IDEA AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SERVING WOMEN

### 3.1 Action Begins with an Idea

The concept of serving women has four aspects:

First, change of mindset: our readers are not only those who borrow or read books in the library, but also the ones who need to borrow books, read books and request information but cannot come to the library. Most of those are women.

Second, lobby the government to influence decision-making: explain the significance of caring about women's cultural needs to government; try to get more financial support from the government and the inclination towards services for women and to provide funds for practice.

Third, unite all potential partners to form social forces which care about women: including commonweal organizations, professional institutes, colleges and universities, businesses and mass media. As long as there is a common goal, they can be united. Union is strength.

Fourth, take action: action is the premise of all progress in practice.

### 3.2 Practice Sharing - Nanshan Library of Shenzhen City Case Study

It shall be noted that all cited data in this section is from the 2005-2012 annual report of Nanshan Library.

### 3.2.1 Sunshine project - helping women to maintain legal rights

The project began in November 2006 with the publicity name of "Sunday Legal Service Day", co-sponsored by our library and the Law School of Shenzhen University. The library provided the venue and was responsible for the project planning, publicity and promotion services and reception of clients, while teachers and college students with law qualifications dispatched by the Law School served the people. The service was free of charge, conducted every Sunday from 10:00 to 17:00 (special note: men were not rejected).

The project expanded due to increased demand. In March 2011 the library added a new partner and established a culture volunteer team associated with Nanshan Volunteer Association, opening the application to volunteer registration. People who applied to be legal volunteers on the culture volunteer team held a practicing lawyer qualification certificate. Currently there are 18 practicing lawyers and 35 students majoring in law as volunteers.

This service never stops, except on public holidays. Up until 2012, 801 lawyers (person's time) have served for 287 terms with 5,607 hours and received 5,911 users. During the service process, if the case involves domestic violence, sex infringement and the litigant is vulnerable, lawyers voluntarily provide free legal help or assistance to apply for judicial relief to the government legal aid agencies.

We hope that this project can bring legal fairness to the public, especially to women, and let them feel the warmth.

### 3.2.2 Spring project - to help the spiritual growth of women and their children

The project began in June 2007, co-sponsored by the library and a psychology counselling company, with the publicity name of "Friday Mental Health Day". It provides services every Friday from 15:00 to 21:00 (special note: the project does not reject men). The library supplies professional equipment and special counselling rooms and are responsible for publicity and the service of reception and project contact. The company appoints employees with practicing psychology counselling certificates to provide professional counselling services.

In May 2009 the library lobbied the Shenzhen Association of Psychological Counselling to cooperate, and the scale of services expanded. The library welcomed practicing psychological counsellors of the Association to volunteer on the service project, and currently has 29 registered psychological counsellors participating (from March 2011, they can also volunteer to be members of the cultural volunteer team).

Except because of public holidays, the service has no interruption. Until 2012, 379 psychological counsellors (person's time) have been serving 2,322 hours in 263 terms and handled a total of 3,555 clients' visits. The effectiveness of this service is very significant, with a lot of cases of women alone or with children and their families. Many of them had been subjected to years of psychological distress, but cannot afford to pay counselling fees and therefore so endured. There is an extremely serious case: the client was a suicide group member, and mutually agreed to commit suicide at a time due to unsatisfactory living conditions. She happened to come to our library and the counsellor used his professional skills to help her, agreeing to further counselling for several weeks (over the agreed suicide day). After the end of the counselling, she gave up the suicide, and she later also influenced the entire group to give up the idea of committing suicide.

We hope that this project can bring spring to the world and the hope of the soul to the Chinese women and their children, so that they can live in strongly and bravely in pursue of happiness in life. In November 2011, the project was awarded by The Third Public Welfare Project Contest in Shenzhen.

It should be noted that, in the two projects above, services files are strictly processed according to clients' privacy secrecy regulations. In volunteer assessment, people involved in the cases were randomly selected to fill in feedback forms, or - through telephone or QQ interviews - to assess the impact of the service, and the work of the volunteers was evaluated based on these.

### 3.2.3 Health lectures: promote women to care for their physical and mental health

The project began in January 2005, with the full name of "lecture on people health", jointly organized by our library and the Sanitary Board of Nanshan District. The library provides the lecture hall and professional equipment, and is responsible for activity promotion, and for organizing the audience as well as lecture recording and uploading into the Internet, and other follow-up processing technology. The Sanitary Bureau is responsible for the formation of a team of medical and health expert instructors and bears the costs of the lecturer.

Lectures are held on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon. The theme is mainly health care knowledge, especially knowledge of women's health from psychology to body health care, to educate people (especially women but it does not reject men's participation). The lectures are very popular; so far 154 they have been held, with 19,772 recorded attendances.

### 3.2.4 Reading salons: encourage self-reading and parent-child reading for women

The salon started in March 2011, divided into general reading, parent-child reading and English reading series and other series including spiritual exchange, women's reading, etc. Librarians act as salon masters (sometimes well-known experts are employed), and encourage everyone to participate in the exchange, and share the experience and methods of self-reading and parent-child reading around the topic to be discussed. By the end of 2012 reading salon sessions have been held 130 times on Saturday or Sundays, with 10,698 participants.

Salon exchange is very popular; requests to continue the exchange have been received from lots people after the end of each salon, so a network reading QQ chat groups and official micro-blog has been established - people willing to join (not excluding men) can be added, and they can maintain 24 hours interaction. Currently there are nine such groups, joined members amount to more than 2,700 people, and number are growing daily. The method of combining reality and online communication has had a good effect on promoting the reading of women and their families!

## **4 FUTURE PLANS FOR SERVING WOMEN**

### **4.1 Provide information skills training for women**

Because of their gender identity, women may be slow to adapt the new information technologies. We plan to take advantage of the library's existing resources - 142 internet-connected computers - to carry out IT skills training for the elderly and women on Mondays,

when the electronic reading room is not opened to the public. The basics of computer use, network and mobile terminals, universal access to commonly used information search engines, internet communication and the use of software in daily life are taught by professional librarians. There are also plans to develop a graphic version of the tutorial, distributed free of charge, which would also benefit people that cannot attend the classes.

#### **4.2 Provide richer culture and entertainment space for women**

The relatively conservative lifestyle of Chinese women means that many of them have quite narrow social relationships, and there is a lack of participation in public networking opportunities. The library is under an obligation to provide more space, so that women can find a common interest in culture and entertainment and broaden their social life. The “Popular Film” Project – which shows a movie every Friday (with copyright fees paid by the Ministry of Culture), is one of such services. In fact, the library has become the centre of activity of the surrounding communities, and many women spontaneously form interest groups. The library role now is to provide more supporting services and to play the role of organizer.

#### **4.3 Provide career development of women and unemployment counselling**

This is part of the library information service - launched as early as 2000 by way of thematic information, but did not focus exclusively on women. A women’s album is planned for the future.

#### **4.4 Provide special services for anti-domestic violence**

Shenzhen is a city of immigrants created after China's reform and opening up, with the vast majority of citizens coming across the country (entrepreneurs and pioneers). Due to China's household registration system and other economic reasons, many couples and children have experienced long separations before reunion. Due to the fast pace of life, people endure a lot of pressure, and various levels of domestic violence and cold violence. The library is planning to lobby the Women's Federation of Nanshan District and the mass media to establish an anti-domestic violence special service centre to provide help to victims of domestic violence (usually women and children), including anti-domestic violence information campaigns, anti-domestic violence measures to education, judicial assistance and psychological care, using the power of the media to promote regional and national anti-domestic violence legislation and social asylum. It is hoped this service can start as soon as possible.

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