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Library Service and Civil Information Literacy

Yan Xiangdong

Secretary General Library Society of China

33 Zhongguancun Nandajie

Beijing 100081, China

Tel : +86-10-88545283

Email: yanxd@nlc.gov.cn

Guo Wanli

Librarian Library Society of China

33 Zhongguancun Nandajie, Beijing 100081, China

Tel : +86-10-88545652

Email: yanxd@nlc.gov.cn

Summary

This paper discusses the exploration and efforts made to cultivate and improve civil information literacy in recent years by the library community (including the National

Library, public libraries and school libraries, etc.) in China. In particular, some services play a good role in different ways and at different levels, such as the construction of “Chinese Government Public Information Online”, the promotion of “National Reading” and information literacy education innovation. While summing up the successful experience, the paper pointed out that the Library is of great significance to enjoy the cultural life and protect cultural rights and interests for citizens and related services also has a lot of room for improvement and good prospects.

[Key Words] Library Service Information Literacy

With the fast development of the information society, the present world exerts higher and higher requirements over the information literacy of the public; information literacy has become a topic of social concern and the levels of such literacy on the part of the citizens are directly relevant to the comprehensive competitiveness and innovative capacities of the society. As social cultural institutions, libraries undertake a social educational function and cultivation and improvement of the information literacy of the public is the bound obligation of libraries. For many years, the Chinese library community has conducted active explorations in this regard, has put in a lot of work, and has played a positive role in guaranteeing the citizens’ right to information, guiding and encouraging citizens to engage in reading, and conducting specialized information literacy education through different methods. The results achieved have been encouraging.

I Opening channels and offering assistance to guarantee the citizens’ right and accessibility to information

Libraries serve to improve the information literacy of the society. Their paramount task is to deliver information, satisfy the needs of the citizens to avail of information in a free and equal manner in accordance with the law, and guarantee their rights to information; all of these are preconditions to the normal cultivation and enhancement of the information literacy of the citizens. The collection, integration, and storage of information is a unique professional advantage of libraries. Offering citizens information accessibility and assist them with inquiries, libraries serve to safeguard the cultural rights and benefits they are entitled to. The integrated service of the open information of the Chinese government is a good example.

At the junction of the formal enforcement of the Ordinance of the People’s Republic of China on Open Government Information ^[1] in 2008, the library community as a key window for the public to obtain information, initiated a wave of studying and practicing open government information and undertook its crucial responsibility to support the public’s inquiry of government information. Public libraries at all levels across the nation carried out open government information services at different degrees and started to plan the construction of local open government information platforms. In April 2009, pursuant to the needs of the social public, the National Library of China launched the first integrated government information platform of China - the “Chinese Government Public Information Online”, the very first of its kind in terms of the integration and utilization of government information resources by libraries as well as a significant measure for the National Library to serve the public and the government through innovative means. ^[2]

In order to further improve the levels of service for open information of the Chinese

government, to fully arrange and integrate mass open government information, to offer the public a uniform open information service platform and enable them to access to open government information in a convenient, swift and one-stop fashion, the National Library built the “Chinese Government Public Information Online” in conjunction with provincial and municipal libraries. Its formal rollout online in October 2011 signified a new step forward for the libraries in conducting open government information services. The Platform follows a pattern of layered construction and joint construction for mutual sharing to allow for distributive collection, co-storage and co-sharing. At present, open government information columns for Beijing, Heilongjiang and Zhejiang Provinces have been completed and support categorized review of the content; a more orderly and massive information system has been constructed and has currently issued nearly 400 thousand items of open government information. The Platform has included news bulletins of the State Council, of the ministries and commissions under the State Council and of some provinces and municipals; the news bulletins are offered in directories and full texts beside lists of issues for selective review. The number of government news bulletins recorded in the Platform has surpassed 7000. In addition, the Platform contains round 3000 ministries and commissions under the State Council, government agencies from the provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities across the country with categorized navigation by region.^[3]

Construction of the “Chinese Government Public Information Online” is a move on the part of the library community to collect, streamline, store, develop and utilize information resources of the different levels of government and serve such resources to the public through uniformly planned and coordinated consolidation and development of open government information. The library community has done so with an orientation on public needs for information, in accordance with its duties and responsibilities bestowed by the “Ordinance”, and through a joint construction approach. Statistics indicate that these services on government information open to the public have received extensive attention and welcome; users of the platform come from all across China and there have also been visitors from dozens of other countries like the USA, Korea, Japan, and Australia, etc., underscoring the wide usage and extensive influence of the Platform. The Platform has not only become a window for the public to avail of government information and a key channel for government departments to publicize information, it has also turned the libraries into a recorder, integrator and diffuser of open information resources of the Chinese government to effectively guarantee Chinese citizen’s right and accessibility to information.

II Specialized information literacy education

The significance of library services to public information literacy rests with the irreplaceable role libraries play in cultivating the information awareness, information knowledge, information capacity and information ethics of the citizens. Libraries conduct users training over information awareness targeted at their different needs and offer necessary information enquiry knowledge. Teaching people how to fish, libraries have served as the origin where lots of citizens have the very early sprouts of information literacy. School libraries in particular, with their unique role in the cultural and educational enterprises, exert an absolute advantage in specialized education and cultivation of the students’ information literacy.

Libraries in Chinese universities have developed multiple information literacy educational forms from general reading preparation, lectures and training to extensive formal courses. University libraries, besides undertaking the construction of literature and information resources

of their schools, also hold all types of featured educational lectures on information utilization, conduct short-term library orientation to new students or arrange library tours for them. University libraries also compile manuals on library resources, distribute information and data like Readers' Guide to new students, and upload lecture material and courseware to the library website for the convenience of students' self-study. Library teachers with professional skills serve as the main lecturers for information literacy education and the practice training venues of information index courses are often digital reading rooms of libraries. ^[4] With enhancement of educational levels in information literacy, the library community has come to realize that information literacy education should not be merely limited to cultivate the literature and information retrieval skills and PC application technology of the students but more importantly, to train the students to comprehend and adapt to a modern information environment as well as to equip them with abilities to conscientiously, independently, effectively and rationally use information. It is based on this new understanding that university libraries are gradually resetting their educational targets and innovating their educational content and approaches. What the Sun Yat-Sen University Library has done in educating its students to make rational use of resources is the very result of university libraries taking information literacy cultivation as the ultimate objective. Relevant rules of the Sun Yat-Sen University Library stipulate that once a reader fails to return a book he has borrowed at the specified time, that reader should review relevant administrative systems including Norms on the Rational Utilization of Library Literature and Resources, pass an online exam by answering a test paper and then get his check-out services renewed by the library. These measures have replaced the "penalty for all" approach and received apparent effects in training the students to rationally utilize information resources. ^[5]

Thanks to their specialized information and education capabilities, university libraries are gradually expanding their services to further depth and have made great efforts carrying out ordinary, trivial yet down-to-earth tasks.

III Leading and encouraging citizens to read to improve their information literacy

As one of the most important cultural organizations, libraries have the duty not only to guarantee the basic cultural rights of the citizens but also to lead and encourage them to enjoy diversified, free, and effective reading through innovative library services so that citizens may enhance their information literacy while enjoying happy reading to the fullest extent.

To advocate reading of the entire people is a crucial measure to improve the literacy of the citizens of this age. Since the UNESCO designated April 23 as the "World Reading Day" in 1995, a series of services have been launched each year in different parts of the world to promote reading and many organizations and groups have conducted sustained massive reading activities in different scopes to jointly nurture a favorable social reading ambiance. The impact of such activities is getting more widespread and the size of the people benefited is growing. The library community in particular, backed by its specialized, authoritative and unique mass data resources, has stood out as a key battle field and an advocator, organizer, and executor for the promotion of all-nation reading. Leveraging on their advantages, Chinese libraries of various levels and types conduct serial reading publicity each year to promote massive learning. It may very well be put that libraries have done a lot of work and contributed painstaking efforts to the promotion of all-nation reading.

Starting in 2003, the Library Society of China (LSC) has taken charge to undertake the annual "National Reading Month" activity. In 2006, the LSC set up a Science Dissemination and

Reading Guiding Committee to study the relation between libraries and reading culture and the role of libraries guiding national reading for the purpose of offering theoretic support for national reading. This marks that the LSC has under it a specialized agency to promote all-nation reading. Under the uniform planning and organization of the LSC, libraries evolved from conducting one-day national reading publicity on World Reading Day only at the early stage to one-month and to the present through-out the year serial reading publicity activities of rich and colorful content. Conducting all-nation reading publicity activities has been even listed in the annual work plan of libraries. In executing national reading publicity, libraries conduct large-scale propaganda activities pursuant to local conditions in the forms of lectures, seminars, exhibitions, essay solicitation, reading speech contests, as well book exchanges.

Take the “Wenjin Book Award” project for example, it is a national reading promotion activity sponsored by the National Library of China with participation from all Chinese library community and has now been held for seven rounds. “Wenjin Book Award” is an award designed to attract extensive reader participation and features such readers as the main players. Over 200 publishers across the country recommended a large number of outstanding books, 37 libraries in succession became joint recommendation and approval units for evaluation of the award, not to mention the many experts, readers, and writers who actively participated in such evaluation. The total number of books entered for evaluation in the past rounds came to over 4000 out of which 69 books were awarded the prize and 251 books went on the nomination list. In addition, 260 reading events were held under the “Wenjin Reading Salon”, part of the award evaluation, and over 70,000 people participated. Throughout this all, there is the “Wenjin Book Award” website to serve as a platform for exchange of viewpoints between the readers as it comes to recommending and reading books, participating in the evaluation and voting. Complete or partial texts of the books were uploaded to the website in E-forms for the benefit of the readers based on specific authorization circumstances. By April 2012, the “Wenjin Book Award” website has had over 5 million visits in total and close to 70,000 registrations. Widespread cooperation between the readers, the library community and the media immensely expanded the level of participation and impact of the Wenjin Book Award which in turn exerted a huge role on enhancing the cultural literacy and scientific literacy of the general public as they participated in excellent book recommendation and evaluation.^[6]

The extensive participation and vigorous promotion of the “All-nation Reading” activity is a valuable experience and effective measure on the part of the Chinese library community through all the years to strengthen the social public’s awareness of libraries and information, to arouse public reading interests, and to advocate all-nation reading, all-nation learning and life-time studying for the purpose of giving a better play to the role of libraries to give information literacy education and of overall citizen literacy enhancement.

IV Summary and enlightenments

Libraries are highly relevant to citizens in enjoying their cultural life and safeguarding their cultural rights. As a social cultural facility of the highest significance, libraries offer rich information resources in their non-negligible proactive role; relatively professional librarians provide the public all-dimension services as an aid, a guide and a teacher to meet the citizens’ demand for information, guarantee their right to information, cultivate their information literacy and facilitate sustained development. While recognizing the overwhelming advantage of library

services to the cultivation and enhancement of the information literacy of the citizens and finding ourselves some enlightenment and encouragement through summarizing successful typical activities and service cases, we need to be mindful that relevant services still have large room for improvement and promise rosy growth prospects.

4.1 To expand services required of the time and adapt to information literacy cultivation demands.

In delivering services, libraries need to continuously improve its educational objectives, content, and methods at the appropriate time to keep up with the pace of the time. As the society continues to evolve its knowledge over the content of information literacy, libraries keep expanding information literacy services from the simplest provision of information inquiry and skill training to education to improve information and further to concern over information ethics. For instance, the ability to make rational use of information has posed a new topic for the library community. New topics of services also include social, economic, and legal issues with respect to surging intellectual property right infringements and academic misconducts, such as the publication of regulations and dissertations of copyright and patent laws, quotation of relevant academic ethical standards and limitation over the download and usage of network resources, etc.

4.2 To give full play to the advantage of libraries to develop specialized information literacy services.

Libraries should count on their rich inventory resources and service advantages to conduct cultivation and education of the public information literacy. Various specialized libraries and hospital libraries are highly authoritative in certain fields and specialties beyond comparison with public and university libraries and are therefore particularly advantageous in helping citizens to enhance their specific information literacy in an innovative way. Take the American Medical Library Association (MLA) from example. In 2003, MLA was the first to bring up the concept of Health Information Literacy, which inspired hospital libraries and medical school libraries to offer health information services to the public. Clearing up and recommending to the public general knowledge of routine life health and literature relevant to common diseases, libraries can conduct knowledge dissemination and prevention publicity services regarding health information literacy and health prevention to make up for areas where government efforts are insufficient with health popularization. These measures are highly necessary to improve the physical and psychological health of the public.

4.3 To cooperate within the library community and to work with external assistance along the path of sustainable services.

Cultivation and education of information literacy is a complicated systematic project that requires continuous cooperation. Its growth and perfection is limited if only one or two libraries take part. Libraries should rely on their own strength and lead the different departments, organizations and personnel of the society to get a full understanding of the importance of information literacy for joint explorations and efforts. In terms of the library system itself, libraries of all levels and categories need to work together to formulate a uniform action plan and brand services the way “All-nation Reading” is promoted as mutual cooperation within the library community helps to generate huge momentum and impact. Likewise, a service federation needs to be set up to ensure the integral and sustained development of information literacy services.

4.4 To combine activity and service planning with routine reader-related work.

Whereas dynamic and vigorous large-scale activities and projects reap apparent effects in

drawing public attention and creating social influence, it needs to be driven home that cultivation and enhancement of public information literacy is a long process of cumulative work that may not be achieved in one step. Therefore, relevant library activities and services with such objectives must be conducted more in conjunction with the routine reader work of the libraries as only such practices could produce real solid efficacies and drive services to where they are practically needed to exert in-depth and lasting results.

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Contact of Author

Yan Xiangdong
Secretary General
Library Society of China
Address: 33 Zhongguancun Nandajie, Beijing 100081, China
Tel : +86-10-88545283
Email: yanxd@nlc.gov.cn

Guo Wanli
Librarian
Library Society of China, National Library of China
Address: 33 Zhongguancun Nandajie, Beijing 100081, China
Tel : +86-10-88545653
Email: guowl@nlc.gov.cn