School Libraries Serving Rural Communities in China: The Evergreen Model

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of Evergreen school libraries in the northwestern region of China, with a focus on their innovative approaches to community services and strategies of reaching out to local town residents and villagers. This case study consists of patron/school librarian interviews, observation of brainstorming by school librarians and principals, and analysis of library usage data gathered from project schools. In view of known issues identified from existing literature, this study attempts to identify factors that potentially contribute to a school library's success/failure in serving its local community.

Keywords: school library, rural community information services, joint library, community outreaching

Introduction

The notion and practice of having a joint public-school library serving teachers, students, and residents of its local community altogether is not new. As early as in 1897, public libraries in North America were called upon to assume an educational role in supporting the needs of students and teachers, since school libraries were almost nonexistent at that time. School-housed public libraries (usually as branches of a public library) started to appear as one model of service in 1930s, and more joint public-school libraries were built in recent years in Australia, Canada, UK, and the United States (Bundy, 1998, 2002, 2003; Fitzgibbons, 2000; Goldberg, 1996; McNicol, 2003).

While such practice remains controversial and joint library facilities continue to appear and disappear in the North American continent (Bella, 2003; Blount & Gardow, 2002; Everhart, 2003; Glick, 2001; Harrington, 2002; Imhoff, 2001; Jan, 2002; Nichols, 2002; Plice, 2002; Tichauer, 2001), existing literature seems to suggest that combining school/public libraries into one may be an effective solution to the problem of providing public library services in large, sparsely populated rural areas where public libraries are either underdeveloped or nonexistent (Amey, 1987, 1989; Jaffe, 1985; Kinsey & Honig-Bear, 1994; Wells, 1994). This point seems to be well taken by some developing countries (Dunford, 1998), and joint public-school libraries have appeared in countries such as Israel (Karelitz, 1998), Thailand (Cheunwattana, 1999), and China (Huang & Zhang, 2003; The Epoch Times, 2005; B. Liu, 2003). Although Fitzgibbons' (2000) review includes a number of studies, these studies are

all about joint school-public libraries in Australia, Canada, and the United States, and little research has been done on joint libraries in developing countries.

In 2002, the Evergreen Education Foundation, a non-profit organization based in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, started automating school libraries in poverty regions of China and requiring its project schools to open their libraries to local communities (G. Liu, 2005). Unlike joint libraries in the western countries where school/public libraries share the same building and facility but with separate budgets and independent identities, an Evergreen library is primarily a school library that decided to use its own resources to serve the public. It receives neither funding nor administrative support from the Chinese government through its public library system. The Evergreen experience is unique, and it presents an alternative model of providing public information services in rural communities where public libraries are not functional or simply do not exist.

This paper presents a case study of Evergreen school libraries in the northwestern region of China, with a focus on their innovative approaches to community services and strategies of reaching out to local town residents and farmers. This case study consists of patron/school librarian interviews, observation of brainstorming by school librarians and administrators, and analysis of library usage data gathered from project schools. In view of known issues identified from existing literature, this study attempts to identify factors that potentially contribute to a school library's success/failure in serving its local community.

The content of this paper is organized as follows. First, an overview of the "combined" model of joint school-public libraries is conducted to provide a context for this study, followed by a general discussion of current situation of county-level public libraries and school libraries in rural China. A brief introduction of the Evergreen project and its scope is given to provide the reader with some background information. Data gathering methods and processes are described before presenting research findings from analyses of both qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, the paper concludes with observations and discussion of identified issues.

The "Combined" Model

Public library systems have long been well established in North America and Australia, especially in urban areas. Although a branch public library may not exist in some remote rural region, the public library system exists at least at the county level, with branch libraries in some more densely populated towns. Public library services have long been institutionalized into the state/county/city government system, in terms of administrative and budgetary procedures. A public library, joint or not, retains its independent conceptual/legal identity even when it cohabits with a school library in the same building.

North American and Australian joint school-public libraries spread across a wide spectrum of various combinational forms, with two libraries residing in opposite wings of the same building on school campus at one end, and a single library with a joint staff, collection, and budget at the other end. The specific form of a joint school-public library is determined by "combined/separate" choices on any of these factors: building space, facilities, collection,

staff, governing body, policy, operational procedure, and service points. Although a planning committee may decide to build a joint school-public library of a specific form by making deliberate choices on these factors, the rationales of building a joint library are always the same – to share resources, save budget, and promote collaboration.

An extensive review of important studies on joint school-public libraries can be found in Fitzgibbons (2000) and Auld (2002a, 2002b). These studies -- mostly surveys and case studies -- cover both joint libraries that were successful and those that had ceased to exist, and their findings are mixed of pros and cons (Christopherson, 2002; Delsemme & Stuart, 2003). Identified benefits of having a joint school-public library include: (1) cost savings in elimination of duplicate materials, staff, maintenance, utilities, and effort; (2) development of a community focal point for adults and children to learn and enrich themselves together; (3) easy physical access and good parking, expanded open hours; (4) availability of trained staff; (5) expanded spaces; (6) audiovisual equipment and materials; and (7) possible increased use and awareness of library services and resources in a community as schools are more visible to the community (Cassell, 1985).

However, Mercier (1991) argues that school libraries and public libraries have different reasons for their existence and that a joint library cannot give equal support to the goals of two different institutions. Woolard (1980) identified the following issues of governance and management as the most frequent problems in joint libraries: (1) failure of governing boards to define responsibilities; (2) failure to include all parties in the planning; (3) failure of school authorities to recognize authority of public library staff; (4) misunderstanding by citizens and the public library board of the professional librarian's role; (5) failure of governing boards to appoint a chief administrator; (6) interference by the school in public functions; and (7) dual administration (problems with both classified and certified personnel having different salary and work schedules).

The lack of access for adults during the school day has often been noted as a major problem. In addition, other negative aspects identified in existing literature (Amey, 1989; Cassell, 1985; Woolard, 1980) include: (1) inadequate physical facilities; (2) inadequate budget (staffing, materials, and equipments); (3) lack of adequate parking for public; (4) geographic location; and (5) censorship of materials (difficulty of maintaining intellectual freedom and confidentiality).

In spite of negative evidences reported in the literature, there have been successful joint school-public libraries. Fitzgibbons (2000) gave a summary of success factors drawn from a number of studies from 1960 to the 1990s and categorized the factors as follows: (1) careful planning, community involvement, and cooperation; (2) a community vision and attitude of commitment to shared services; (3) careful delineation and formalization of legal, governance, and management issues; (4) special attention to the uniqueness of the facility, staffing, and collections; and (5) recognition of benefits in terms of improved access, services, and communication.

Public/School Libraries in Rural China

Public libraries in China have been steadily developing since early 1990s. China had only 1,218 public libraries in 1978. In 1994, China had 2,596 public libraries, with 323 million books and 45,000 staff members altogether (Perkins, 1997). By the end of 2001, 86% of counties in China had public libraries, the total number of public libraries reached 2,696, and their collections combined reached over 418 million in volumes (S. Zhang, 2003; People's Daily Online, 2006). However, the growth in public libraries has been mostly limited to urban/suburb areas along the southeastern coastline (Nanhai District Library, 2005). Although county-level public libraries in rural regions are included in China's public library system, their situation has been generally less plausible and much worse in the northwestern region (Sichuan Provincial Statistics Bureau, 2005). In fact, more than 700 county public libraries (which accounts for 24% of the national total) didn't have a penny to purchase new books in the past ten years (S. Zhang, 2003; Big River Daily, 2005; J. Xu, 2001; Y. Xu, 2005). With a much outdated collection and manual management, their existence has been nothing but nominal (G. Liu, 2005).

The public library system in rural China does not go beyond county capital cities. The large rural population, which accounts for about 60% up to 85% of China's total population (Han, 2002), is to be served supposedly by reading rooms piggybacked with town/village cultural stations. These town/village cultural stations, which are not part of the public library system's extension and belong to a vertically different governing structure administratively, have been starved of funds for years and have become mostly non-operational, due to poor financial situation of county-level governments (Lou, 2006).

On the other hand, Jia, Du, Si, & Zhang (1996) state that school libraries have enjoyed steady development in China since 1993 and that those in economically better developed cities, towns, and villages have carried out a series of resources sharing activities such as joint cataloguing, interlibrary loan, and co-operative purchasing. From their survey of schools in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chengdu etc., they inferred that "by 1995, about 75% of secondary schools and 49% of primary schools in China have established libraries or reading rooms" (Jia, Du, Si & Zhang, 1996). However, a closer examination of their report reveals that all quoted statistics were from urban areas and that no evidence was given about school library development in rural regions, in spite of their suggestion of about 30% of schools "in the economically backward areas" having a library.

In 1991, China Education Ministry put into effect a policy document *Regulation on Libraries/Reading Rooms of School Libraries*. In 1995, China's provincial governments started implementing a school certification program as part of their campaign to reach the national goal of mandatory K-9 education. In addition to teacher qualification, enrollment ratio of school age children, and teaching facilities, schools also need to have a library or reading room with a specified collection size in order to meet the certification standard. The government's official statistics showed that by the year of 2000, 90% of counties had met the certification standards (Li, 2005), and 64.3% of high school libraries nationwide had met the certification requirement in collection size, with the ratio being much lower in less developed regions, e.g., 44.87% in Gansu Province (Shanghai Education Research Institute, 2001).

Nevertheless, the reported figures were recently found to be highly inflated due to local governments' fabrication of data and school administration's fraudulence during certification visits, mostly in rural China (China CPP Institute, 2006; Li, 2005; Zhou, 2006). Before the certification visits by provincial officials, many rural schools set up a temporary room with a few shelves of books (some purchased indiscriminately and others gathered from students and teachers) and a "school library" signage nailed to the doorframe, only to gain approval from the visiting certification team made of provincial government officials. Such "library" rooms were either locked up indefinitely or turned into other use as soon as the visiting team was gone (Jin, 2006).

The Chinese government announced that it had completed the initial phase of its "distance education project for primary and secondary schools in rural regions" by the end of 2004, with an investment of one billion in RMB, plus 980 million of matching funds from local governments, to equip rural schools in 20 selected provinces with CD playing devices, satellite receivers, and computer labs for teaching (Suzhou City Educational Bureau, 2005). School libraries were not included in this project.

It is difficult to get an accurate picture about the current situation of school/public library development in rural China. In spite of the central government's repeated efforts in improving school situation and library service to the general public, public libraries still remain inaccessible to China's most rural population. School library development in rural regions, especially in less developed western provinces, has been slow, difficult, unsustainable, and overlooked to some extent.

The Evergreen Case

To help with China's course of advancing education and information services for the rural population in underdeveloped regions, a number of non-profit organizations have been working diligently in implementing assistance programs with donation funds collected from oversea sources. The programs range from distributing scholarships to building schools, donating books and computers, and automating school libraries (Chiao, 2002; Duke University, 2004; X. Liu, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2005).

The Evergreen Education Foundation started donating books, computers, and library automation software to selected schools in northwestern provinces in 2002 (G. Liu, 2005). It was soon noticed that in each case the library of Evergreen's project school was the only modern library with a decent collection and computerized management in the whole county. To maximize the return of its investment as well as to fill in the vacuum in information services for the local community, the foundation started requiring its school libraries to open not only to nearby schools, but also to town residents and villagers. Similar practices by school libraries in other parts of China not affiliated to the Evergreen project have been reported recently (Li, 2005; Hu, 2002; X. Liu, 2001; Ma, 2007; Wei, 2004; L. Xu, 2007).

These libraries are primarily school libraries sitting on a closed school campus and inside a teaching building, with neither public library staff nor any funding support from the

government's public library system. They are run by one or two school librarians supervised by the school administration. Their ultimate mission is to serve students, teachers, and school staff, and they open to local residents and villagers only because they want to, on a second thought, when it is convenient and their resources allow. At least when these libraries were built, they were not planned or designed to serve the public. They are neither legally bound nor required by the government to do so.

These libraries are evidently different from the North American and Australian "combined model" of joint school-public libraries. In the latter case, the notions of "school library" and "public library" still exist separately in concept even though they have been combined into one joint facility and share the same building space. The joint library receives funding from both the public school and public library systems right from the start, and is legally bound to serve the school community and the general public equally. This dual functionality is mutually understood by both sides, though not always clearly spelt out in its mission statement. The literature (Fitzgibbons, 2000; Woolard, 1980) suggests that arrangements of responsibility and resource sharing are essential and that clear articulation about such arrangements in policy documents and operational guidelines, in combination with many other factors, offers the joint library a better chance to succeed. Nevertheless, the combined model may not be a positive model for either the public or the school.

In spite of all the differences outlined above, "community friendly" school libraries in China and joint school-public libraries in the West nevertheless have some common features, at least judging from the outset. Specifically, to name a few, (1) they all exit in rural regions where population is sparse; (2) they all need to accommodate the traffic of public users on a closed campus; and (3) in either case, the collection needs to support curricular teaching, students' learning, and local communities' information needs. They may be facing similar issues and challenges, and they may learn something from each other. It is on this ground that Evergreen school libraries are studied with reference to research findings about joint school-public libraries in the West.

Methodology

This research is a case study of selected school libraries of the Evergreen project. The Evergreen project was chosen for its leading role in experimenting with school libraries providing public service in China as well as for its internationally recognized success in serving local communities, as evidenced by its winning of the 2004 Bill-Melinda Gates Foundation's "Access to Learning" Award. As the foundation's library program chair, the author – an insider -- has ready access to program related information, which made the investigation easier and possible.

Data used for this case study are in three categories: audio recordings of a brainstorming workshop, patron/school librarian interviews, and annual statistics of library use. The data gathering process of each category is described below.

Brainstorming Workshop

To promote community services, a three-day brainstorming workshop was conducted in the county capital town of Tongwei in early January of 2005. Administrators and librarians from all project schools participated in the workshop to share experiences and exchange ideas of how to implement and promote community service programs using their school library resources.

All sessions of the workshop were recorded using a digital MP3 recorder, with the speakers' verbal consent. The resulting audio recordings were neither transcribed nor systematically encoded for quantitative analysis. But rather, each segment of presentation was turned into a digestive summary of listed points for identification of key issues.

Patron/Librarian Interviews

In early January of 2006, the author traveled to Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai to conduct onsite interview of school librarians and patrons of the three project schools there, namely, Danfeng High School in Shaanxi, Tongwei 1st High School in Gansu, and Lijiashan High School in Qinghai. In each case, the school librarian was asked to identify a small number of willing patrons for the interview and to make sure that different types of patrons were included in the group. Overall, 35 individuals were interviewed for this study, including 4 school librarians, 6 teachers, 10 students, 7 town residents (of which 2 were students' parents), and 8 villagers (of which 5 were students' parents). Arrangements were made prior to the author's arrival, with school administrators' assistance, to ensure their availability and timely appearance.

The interview was semistructured in nature, using a brief list of questions as guideline. It was conducted either inside the library room or in the school administrator's office, with no third party being present. Each session ran for approximately 40 minutes. After a brief description of the purpose of the study and explanation of promised confidentiality, verbal consent was secured from the interviewee for audio taping the conversation. At the conclusion of interview, the subject was thanked for his/her voluntary participation in the study, but no compensation of any form was given for his/her time and effort.

The audio recordings of interview sessions were not systematically encoded for quantitative analysis. Instead, each session segment was turned into a digestive summary, and the summary texts were then compiled into lists of bullet points for identification of common issues.

Library Use Statistics

To monitor library operation, the Evergreen Education Foundation requires all the project schools to submit annual library statistics reports in a variety of specified forms and breakdown categories. It is further stipulated in the foundation's policy that the statistics reports have to be in the original form as generated by the Hua Xia 2000 school library automation system. The Hua Xia 2000 system, a Chinese software donated by the foundation and in operation on all project sites, is capable of generating a good variety of pre-programmed summary reports of patron/collection/circulation statistics. The

requirement of annual statistics reports being in the system-generated original form helps to ensure the accuracy and reliability of reported data by making it more difficult to attempt data cooking and data manipulation.

The foundation's requirement of annual statistics reports has been in effect since early 2002, and project schools have submitted their annual reports in print copy dutifully in the following years. All user population and circulation data included in this study (except that of 2001) were compiled from their 2002-2005 annual library reports archived in the foundation's headquarter office located in Richmond, CA. The 2001 data were extracted from documents submitted by these schools as part of their application to join the Evergreen project.

Demographics

As of the end of 2004, the Evergreen project included eight site schools, and most of them are in the northwestern provinces of China, located in county capital towns and surrounded by residential communities with a population ranging from 17 thousands to 60 thousands. Their location gives these school libraries a strategic advantage in reaching out to the local communities as well as to rural population in the surrounding regions. Table 1 presents school and local community demographic data of the eight project schools as of 2004, compiled from school reports and official publications by the census departments of local county governments.

Table 1. **2004 Evergreen Rural School Demographics**

Location	School	Students	Staff	Local Town Residents	Total District Residents	County Population
Qinghai	Datong 6th High School	2,101	136	66,000	98,000	483,000
	Lijiashan High School	1,710	99	472	27,400	450,400
	Gonghe Minority School	298	38	N/A	20,000	125,000
Gansu	Tianzhu 1st High School	3,100	174	23,698	45,754	212,117
	Tongwei 1st High School	**3,300**	**205**	**22,315**	**38,400**	**463,400**
	Huining 4th High School	3,130	141	17,959	42,700	583,300
Shaanxi	**Danfeng High School**	**3,035**	**234**	**45,000**	**76,000**	**302,000**
Jiangsu	Taidong High School	1,600	123	52,000	275,000	1170,000

Unlike North American schools where enrollments are limited by geographic boundaries of school districts, schools in rural China draw students from all over the county. Consequently, the student population is mixed. A small percentage of students are from the local town and walk to school daily, and most students come from remote villages and live in student dorms. These students get to return home during weekends to bring life necessities and food supplies.

Student Library Use

Given their large student population, these school libraries would be stretched really thin if all students were to make regular and heavy use of library services. However, library use

has not been institutionalized into curricular teaching as of the time this article is written. In spite of China's recent reform of K-12 education pushing for diversification of instructional methods and development of students' problem solving and information literacy skills, to a large extent, classroom teaching still follows the traditional approach of rote learning and teaching to the test.

School administrators, governing agencies, and the society at large continue to judge teachers' performance and school reputation based on test scores and college admission rates. Such emphasis has driven many schools (teachers) to go after higher admission rates and test scores at the expense of broadening students' knowledge scope and development of comprehensive skills. Students are often required to devote all their time to text books and homework, leaving them little time for library use and ultra-curricular learning. Out-of-class reading is considered a total waste of time by some teachers, and library a trendy decoration by some school administrators.

As a result, student library use remains rather low.

Public Use

The Evergreen Education Foundation requires that all project school libraries open to the local public in addition to serving their school communities, as a condition of its investment. This requirement forced school administrators and librarians to explore all possible avenues of implementing, supporting, and promoting service programs for town residents and villagers.

They all started by taking the obvious step of issuing library cards to local town residents. Workshops were conducted to train residents on general information literacy skills and how to use the library's computerized system. However, in spite of their active outreaching effort, these school libraries only achieved limited success.

Figure 1. Tongwei User Population

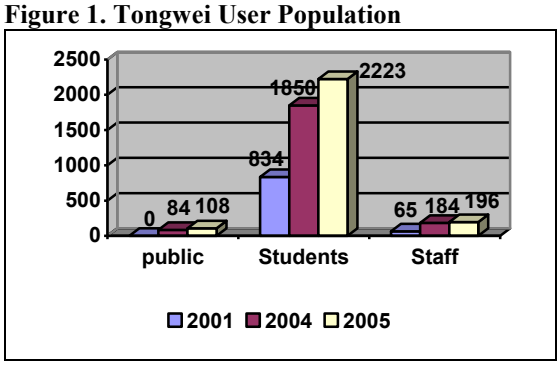
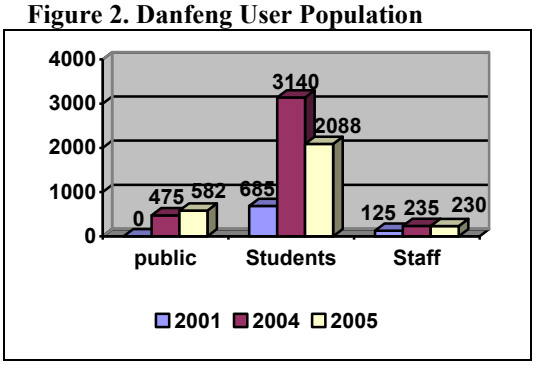


Figure 2. Danfeng User Population



Figures 1 and 2 show the annual tallies of public, student, and staff patrons from 2001 to 2005 at two exemplary schools, Tongwei 1st High School in Gansu and Danfeng High School in Shaanxi. Although the number of student users increased phenomenally, the number of local residents registered for library use remained low five years after the school libraries launched their community service program. In the case of Danfeng High School

which has a greater number of registered public patrons, they account for less than 1.3% of town residents and 0.8% of the municipal district population.

Interference of Teaching

When identifying obstacles to combined school-public libraries, White (1963) and Woolard (1980) noted inconvenience for public patrons, noise and confusion of school, and "interference by the school" of the library's public functions as an issue, which is from the "public library" point of view. In fact, the appearance of local residents on campus can be equally obtrusive and interfering as viewed by teachers and school administrators. Disruptions from the public have often been cited as a main reason for the failing of some joint libraries (Johns, 1999; Fitzgibbons, 2000).

In the case of Evergreen project schools, complaints about noisy public traffic on closed school campuses were voiced soon after the libraries started receiving public patrons in mid 2004. Teachers frequently reported that students became distracted by strangers peering into the classroom. Students complained about people wandering around the campus but having no business with either the school or its library.

All school libraries attempted to address the problem by opening to the general public only during weekends and/or after-school hours. While this appeared to be a feasible solution at start, it quickly became clear that such practice was not sustainable. Staffed by only one single librarian (with some help from student volunteers) and with virtually no money to hire any help, the librarian had to work extremely long hours and often with no pay for overtime. Additionally, even if the library opens to the public during after-school hours and weekends, it still raises a campus security issue. Opening a separate entrance for the public – a possible solution suggested in the western literature – was never considered a feasible option, since the library is typically inside a teaching building far from the campus border.

Besides the problems of interference of teaching and campus security, this strategy of serving public patrons onsite is too limited in scale for these school libraries to truly fulfill the mission of serving local communities, especially the large rural population of villages from a distance. A more effective and scalable approach is needed for outreaching town residents and villagers.

The "Book Agents" Program

Tongwei 1st High School came up with an innovative solution of turning students into "book agents" and started implementing it toward the end of 2004. The idea was to create double library accounts for each student, one for him/herself and the other for family members jointly. Students were instructed to spread the words about free use of the school library and were encouraged to check out books for their family members using the joint family account. Those from the local town may check out books for their family members and take them home on any school day. Students from remote villages do their "book agents" business when they get to go home during weekends, carrying needed books on their way home and bringing returned items to school on their way back.

The family service program was quickly extended to neighbors and unrelated villagers. Most of interviewed students openly admitted that they had checked out school library books for residents in neighborhood and unrelated villagers. It is interesting to note that although the school administration initially intended to limit the program to family members only, for worries about possible book loss, they were "forced" to relax the library policy and accept such practices of "service extension". The library policy now states that students may check out books for neighbors and unrelated villagers under their family accounts, but stipulating that they are responsible for all items checked out under their name. According to the school librarian of Tongwei, the "student-family-neighbor" trust bond worked well in enforcing responsibility for checked-out books, and there had been few cases of reported loss of items borrowed through joint family accounts.

Tongwei's "book agents" program was presented at the three-day brainstorming workshop in early 2005 to other school librarians and administrators, and the idea was immediately adopted by other Evergreen project schools.

The success of the "book agents" program has been phenomenal. Figures 3 and 4 present Tongwei and Danfeng's circulation data from 2001 to 2005, by patron type. While the numbers of registered public patrons increased little from 2004 to 2005 in both cases (as shown in Figures 1 and 2), circulation by public patrons (and student patrons as well) increased a great deal. In Tongwei, the total of items checked out for community use jumped from 83 in 2004 to 7,797 in 2005, and similarly in Danfeng, from 1,733 to 9,350. Other schools reported comparable success.

Figure 3. Tongwei Circulation by Patron Types

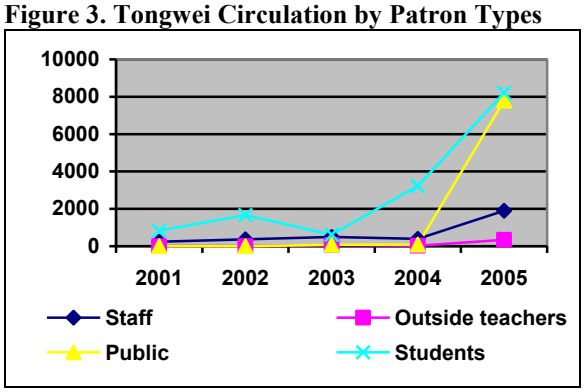
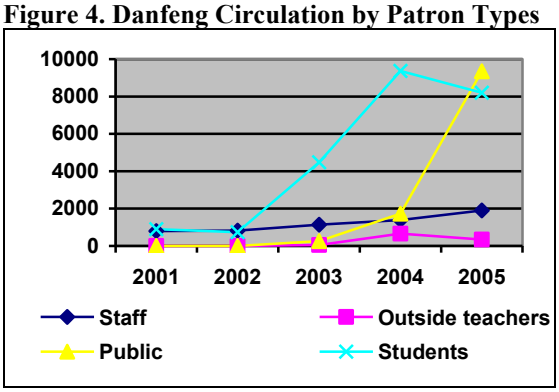


Figure 4. Danfeng Circulation by Patron Types



It is difficult to determine the actual coverage of rural population by Evergreen school libraries' public service programs. Nevertheless, an estimate can be made based on reasonable assumptions. Take Tongwei's "book agents" program for example. Assume that each student served for ten individuals (two being their parents and eight being town residents/villagers in the neighborhood), and further assume that 20% of the school's student population were from the county capital town. Using the 2004 demographic data from Table 1 as a reference, the "book agents" program would have served 6,600 town residents and 26,400 villagers in the surrounding rural areas. The rates of population

coverage would be 29.58% of town residents, 5.99% of villagers, and 7.12% of the total population of the Tongwei County.

Bottlenecks

School librarians and public patrons identified three key factors that might have held the libraries back from reaching their full potential in serving the rural population. These three key factors are highlighted below.

Collection Development

All school libraries participating in the Evergreen project depend almost exclusively on the foundation's donation for collection establishment and growth. After the initial investment in automation and acquisition of new books to kick start the library, the foundation continues to allocate additional funds annually to each school for purchasing new materials. The amount of funds varies from RMB ¥10,000 to ¥30,000, depending on the size of student population and the library's existing collection. Currently, the collection size is about 20,000 items (15,000 titles) on average.

The Evergreen Education Foundation requires that at least 10% of new acquisitions should be for the local community's interests. Purchase lists prepared by school librarians are reviewed for approval to enforce this requirement as well as to ensure the quality of book selection. Although the required distribution ratio does put these libraries in a better position in serving local communities, it is a rather arbitrary decision.

With limited acquisition budget, the school libraries all went with a collection development policy that maximizes addition of new titles at the expense of copies per title. Consequently, there is only one single copy for most titles in the collection, especially for those not directly useful for classroom teaching of the standard curriculum. Still taking Tongwei and Danfeng as an example, as of 2006, their collection sizes were 21,574 items (14,651 titles) and 26,778 items (15,871 titles) respectively, which yields 1.473 copies per title for Tongwei and 1.687 copies per title for Danfeng.

With such a low copies per title rate, community users are forced to compete not only with teachers and students, but also among themselves for access to books.

Library Staff

The competition between school and community users is by no means limited to collection share and access to books, but extends to library facilities and librarians' service time as well. As part of the condition for its investment, the Evergreen Education Foundation requires each project school to secure financial support from the local county government to fund at least one fulltime librarian position. One fulltime librarian is what these school libraries get, with only two exceptional cases where the school administration managed to find money to hire one additional library staff. Student volunteers have been heavily used to help with book shelving and circulation under the librarian's supervision.

Except for one individual in Danfeng, all others were teachers turned into school librarians, with college degree but no formal education in library science. Their professional knowledge and skills came almost exclusively from on-the-job training and some week-long crash course workshops arranged through the Hua Xia library automation software company by the foundation. While these training workshops were focused on system operation, cataloging, and library management, they had little guidance on community outreaching and how to serve a rural population. Only recently has the Evergreen Education Foundation started organizing training workshops specifically focused on community services.

Literacy Barrier

While getting literate residents and villagers to use the library is already difficult, helping functionally illiterate populace with access to information is even a greater challenge. According to the official census data released by the Tongwei county government, as of 2004, the average schooling of its rural population was only 4.9 years. 46.8% attended middle school, 36% finished only elementary school, and 17.2% were functionally illiterate (J. Zhang & X. He, 2006; G. Zhang, 2003). The situation in other rural regions then and now has been pretty much the same, with literate populaces mostly concentrating in towns.

The good news is that the school libraries' community service programs seem to have reached some residents and villagers with limited literacy. One public patron interviewed in Lijiashan, Qinghai turned out to be a villager who finished only the 4th grade. When asked to share his experience of library use, he commented that he found most knowledge-intensive books incomprehensible and thus limited his library use to leisure reading. He added that reading Chinese classics allowed him to follow the story plot better when watching performances of Qin Qiang, a local form of Chinese opera popular in the northwestern region of China. It is not clear how many of the school library's public patrons fall into this category.

Ultimately, the school libraries will need to find a way to help undereducated people to overcome the literacy barrier before they can make meaningful use of library resources for advancing their quality of life. Currently, there is no adult education of any nature for China's large rural population, and literacy education for local town residents and villagers may be a niche for these school libraries to expand their services.

Conclusion

In all, our findings from this case study of the Evergreen project confirmed the general observation by other researchers that joint school-public libraries can be a good solution for sparsely populated rural areas.

More accurately, school libraries can serve dual (but not necessarily equal) functions of providing information access to both teachers, students, and the general public of their

local communities where public libraries do not exist. With an innovative approach to the circulation process such as the "book agents" program, school libraries can sidestep the problem of interference of teaching by "unwelcome" public traffic on campus.

While the libraries of Evergreen project schools have so far only provided the local communities with the basic service of book circulation, the problem of how to accommodate their needs of other information services such as reference and access to online resources remains unsolved.

Resource competition between school and public patrons, especially when one single collection is used to serve both the school and public communities and the library is staffed by a single librarian, appears inevitable. Such competition will only get tougher as the library picks up more and more public patrons. Adding a "community service" librarian to library staff and increasing the proportion of acquisition for community use may help alleviate the problem.

Nevertheless, with serving the school community being the library's primary mission, somewhere a line has to be drawn before the library's resources are spread too thin and its services to students and teachers become seriously compromised.

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