

The Political Economy of Public Library Development in post-1978 People's Republic of China

LIANGZHI YU

Department of Information Resource Management, The Business School, Nankai University, Tianjin,
People's Republic of China

JIANYE XU

Nanjing Library, People's Republic of China

The post-1978 economic reform in China created a new political economy, which, in turn, yielded sweeping effects on nearly all public institutions. While the transformation of the Chinese health care and education sectors has been fairly extensively explored and reported in the English literature, few studies have offered a thorough analysis of the change of public libraries. This paper attempts to fill the gap. After a brief introduction of the institutional framework of the Chinese public library system, the rest of the paper is devoted to examining the change of the system in the past quarter

century with reference to the broad political economy of the post-1978 era. This analysis shows that although the new political economy has brought about considerable improvement to library infrastructure and management, it has also adversely affected public library development through the central government's reduction of subsidies for local needs, local governments' pragmatic approach to economic growth, the absence of effective monitoring over local governments' commitment to public library provision and the erosion of the public service ethos by the market ideology.

Introduction

The contemporary public library system in China took its shape in the early 1950s following the founding of the New China under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This is a multiple tiered system consisting of provincial libraries, prefecture/city libraries, county/district libraries and township/neighbourhood libraries [1]. According to the latest statistics, there are currently 2736 public libraries at and above the county level (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2006). In addition, there are many more township/neighbourhood libraries that are normally not included in official public library statistics.

For decades prior to 1978, Chinese public libraries were regarded primarily as an institution of socialist cultural construction. Mandated by its mission to serve the socialist course and ensured by the state planned economy, public libraries obtained their funds almost entirely from centrally collected state revenue, and received guidance and policies primarily from the centrally administered government agency, the Ministry of Culture. This gave rise to a fairly standard level of public library service across the country, with the upper tiers of the system (provincial libraries and major city libraries) serving mainly the research needs of local research institutes, the governing needs of local political and government organizations and the

Dr. Liangzhi Yu currently teaches at the Department of Information Resource Management, Nankai University; she holds a doctoral degree from Loughborough University, UK.

Mr. Jianye Xu is the deputy director of Nanjing Library, Jiangsu Province; he holds a master's degree from East China Normal University.

Corresponding author: Dr. Liangzhi Yu. Department of Information Resource Management, The Business School, Nankai University, Tianjin, People's Republic of China, 300071. E-mail: lzhyu@nankai.edu.cn

educational needs of individuals; and the lower tiers (libraries at county level and below) serving mainly the recreational and educational needs of local residents. The theoretical guidance for the system's development was allegedly derived from Marxist theories which assert that the cultural institution as part of the superstructure is subordinate to the economic base.

In 1978, China inaugurated a program of economic reform. During the subsequent two and half decades, this reform brought about sweeping effects on nearly all aspects of Chinese society. The public library system consequently underwent dramatic change as the country unfolded one reform strategy after another, and as other public institutions undertook sectoral reforms to keep pace with the political and economic changes.

The transformation of the Chinese health care and education sectors has been fairly extensively explored and reported in English (Blumenthal and Hsiao 2005; Hsiao 1995; Law 2002; Mahmoudi 2006; Mok 2000; Rong and Shi 2001; Venter 2004; Wang Chengzhi 2002; Wang, Yip, Zhang, Wang and Hsiao 2005; Wong and Lee 2001). Few studies, however, have offered a thorough political economy analysis of public libraries. An early study by Ting (1983) was an exception, but at that time the new political economy had scarcely emerged. Consequently, current understanding of Chinese public libraries in the world's literature is inevitably diluted by the lack of contextual awareness; it is also very much overshadowed by the pre-1978 picture of a fairly uniform service provision across the country. Lin (1998) and Liu (1996), for example, both spoke of the post-1978 public library as an active player in national economic development; neither, however, gave adequate analysis of the adverse effect that economic development had on public libraries. Likewise, Gong and Gorman (2000) talked about major types of public library activity and function without noting the increasingly marked trend of geographical diversities. Such incomplete understanding pervades even the librarianship literature in Chinese (Feng 1996; Huang 2000; Kang 1997; Li 2004; Yang 2003; Yang and Wang 2005, Wang Xiangnan 2001; Wang Xueguang 2001; Zou *et al.* 1999a, 1999b).

This paper attempts to provide an analysis of the contemporary Chinese public library by situating it in the post-1978 political and economic context. It is hoped that such a discussion will not

only improve the knowledge about current Chinese public libraries of comparative librarianship students, but also provide relevant lessons for library professionals in other transforming economies like China.

Data sources

The analysis presented in this paper is based primarily on two strands of data source. The first strand consists of published statistics (mid-1980s to present), professional literature and published speeches of government officials relating to public libraries. The second is empirical data collected through a series of site visits to twelve localities of four provinces (including one municipality and one autonomous region), during which, library directors and local officials were interviewed. The four provinces (one in the East, one in the North, and two in the Northwest) were selected to reflect the varied development levels across China. Within each province, three different localities (respectively under the jurisdiction of the provincial government, the city government and county government) were visited. Thematic threads of how economic reform mandated the change of public libraries and how public libraries responded to economic reform were pulled from both of the above sources to inform the discussion in this paper.

Data collection and the discussion focused deliberately on the period between 1978 and 2001. The year 2002 was made special by the convening of the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and the transition of the party leadership, which was followed by the formation of the new government leadership in 2003. Whether this transition formed a watershed in the political and economic reform of China is open to dispute, but the past few years have seen the new leadership take strategic directions that were distinctly different from those of the preceding decades. Having laid out the strategic target of "building up well-off society in an all-round way" at the 16th National Party Congress in 2002, the CPC pledged to build up a harmonious society of socialism at the 4th Plenum of the 16th Party Congress Central Committee in 2004, and proposed to build "a new socialist countryside" at the 5th Plenum of the 16th Party Congress Central Committee in 2005. How these strategic directions (and the resulting politi-

cal economy) will impact public library development is yet to be seen.

The Institutional Framework for Public Library Development

As mentioned in the introductory section, the current Chinese public library system consists of multiple tiers, ranging from provincial libraries down to township libraries.

Ministry of Culture

The Ministry of Culture (MOC), a state government agency under the jurisdiction of the State Council, oversees the development of this system as a whole. Through its Mass Culture and Library division and in conjunction with the local government's cultural department, the MOC draws up national public library development policies and plans, provides guidance for library practices, advocates/coordinates national cooperative schemes and promotes standardization and modernization of library operation.

In the policy-making domain, the MOC has promulgated a number of national policies that are relevant to public library service provision since 1978. These include, among others, the 1982 *Regulations for Provincial (Autonomic Region, Municipal) Library Work*, the 1987 *Provisional Methods of Implementing Fee-based Services and Business Activities in Cultural Institutions*, the 1991 *Report on a Number of Economic Policies for Cultural Institutions* and the 2002 *Ministry of Culture Notification on Enriching Cultural Activities at the Grass-root Level*. Of these, the 1982 *Regulations for Provincial (Autonomic Region, Municipal) Library Work* provided the general policy framework for provincial and large city libraries during the 1980s; the *Provisional Methods of Implementing Fee-based Services and Business Activities in Cultural Institutions* authorized cultural organizations like public libraries to develop fee-based services; the *Report on a Number of Economic Policies for Cultural Institutions* urged local governments to ensure funds for cultural development and reiterated the legitimacy of fee-based services. Meanwhile, the MOC has also drawn up a series of five-year plans for national cultural development. In its *Outline of the 10th Five Year Plan for Public Sector Cultural Development*, for instance, the MOC laid out the target to have

80% of libraries at and above the prefecture level, and 30% of libraries at the county level connected to the Internet. These policies and development plans are illustrative of the directive role of the MOC in public library development.

In addition to this directive role, the Ministry of Culture also plays a leadership role in national schemes of service provision. In recent years, for example, the MOC has led a number of nationwide library initiatives, such as the "Public Library Performance Measurement Initiative" (a library assessment exercise on a quadrennial basis), the "Digital Library Initiative of China" (a project led by the National Library of China to build up the world's largest digital information repository of Chinese language materials), the "Knowledge Initiative" (a reading promotion scheme across the country) and the "Shared National Cultural Resources" (a national scheme to build up a distributed and shared digital cultural resource).

Local Government

Notwithstanding the strategic role of the MOC in library affairs, Chinese public library development in the post-1978 era has been essentially a local business. Individual libraries at each tier are primarily financed and administered by the corresponding tier of local government. With the Department (Bureau) of Culture as the primary agency for archives, museums, libraries and other cultural institutions, the local government plays a number of distinct roles in public library development. Firstly, it provides the dominant segment for both the capital expenditure and the operating expenditure of libraries, thereby functioning as the provider of local public library services. Secondly, through its department of culture, the local government also takes part in the administration and management of local public libraries. This role enables local governments to be involved in a wide range of professional practices, such as personnel management, continuing professional education, performance assessment, fund raising and public relations. Thirdly, the local government also functions as the governing authority for libraries, responsible for drawing up local library development policies and plans, and for making major decisions. During the latter half of the 1990s, when the 1982 *Regulations for Provincial (Autonomic Region, Municipal) Library Work* became increasingly

obsolete in the new political and economic context, a number of provincial governments issued regional public library regulations. The Culture Bureau of the Shanghai Municipal Government issued the *Measures for Public Library Management in Shanghai* in 1996; the Shenzhen Government issued the *Public Library Regulations of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone* in 1997; the Beijing Municipal Government issued the *Library Regulations of Beijing* in 2002. Like the national regulation of 1982, these regional regulations also cover areas like library expenditure, material acquisition, staffing and opening hours, etc.

The Communist Party of China

Apart from the MOC and local governments, the CPC (Communist Party of China) and the People's Congress at national and local levels also exert great influence on public library development (see Figure 1). The CPC sets out the national policies and frameworks that control the nation's social and economic development. Through the Central Propaganda Department and other party organizations, the CPC also issues decisions, instructions or opinions that have a direct policy effect for cultural institutions. In 1980, for example, the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee issued the *Outline for Library Work*, and in 1987, the Central Propaganda Department, together with three other governmental organizations, issued the *Report on Improving and Strengthening Library Work*. Both documents played an instrumental role in restoring and strengthening library work in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. During the past decade, the 6th Plenum of the 14th Party Congress Central Committee held in 1996 adopted the *Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on a Number of Issues Related to the Enhancement of Socialist Spiritual Construction*, which urged local governments to pay greater attention to the strategic role of culture in socio-economic development; the 15th CPC Congress held in 1997 proposed to build "socialist culture with Chinese characteristics", which aimed to bring the spiritual standard of Chinese people to the level of great ideals, high morality, and great sense of culture and discipline; the 16th CPC Congress held in 2002 adopted the *Three Represents* theory, with one of its elements dealing specially with the cultural dimension of the party line, stating that the CPC represents the progres-

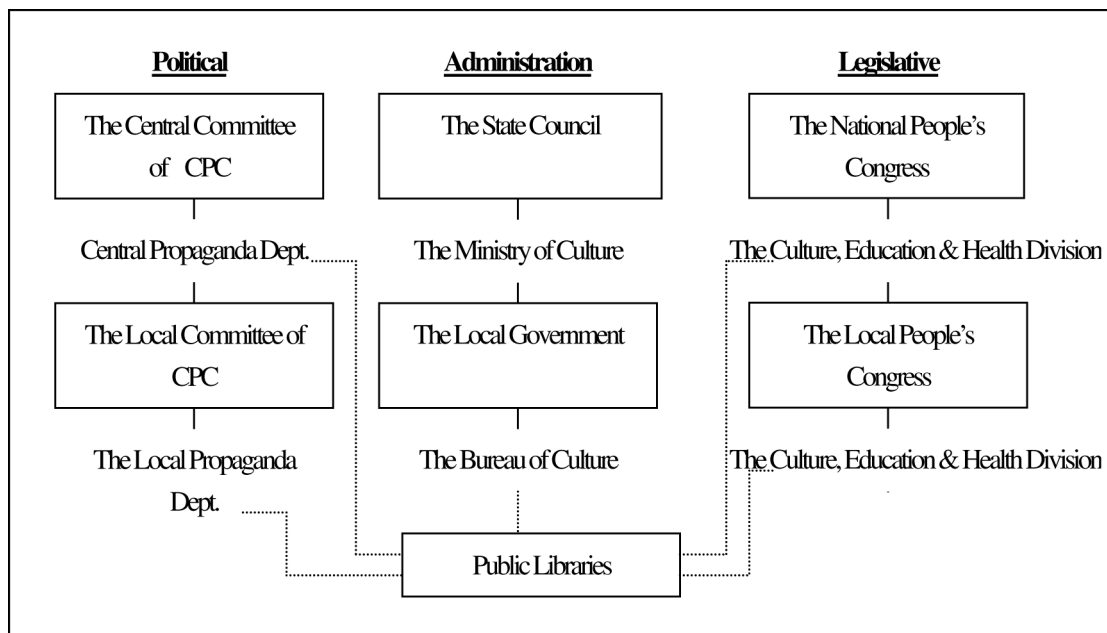
sive direction of advanced Chinese culture. It is party resolutions, decisions and theories such as these that have guided the formation of government cultural policies at both the national and local levels.

In addition to policy-making, the CPC can also exert influence on public libraries through its authority in personnel appointment. In accordance with regulations governing the Chinese cadre system, key personnel in public libraries, as in other public institutes, are either appointed or approved by the party organization at corresponding levels. For example, the appointment of key personnel in provincial libraries is controlled either by the Organization Department of the Provincial Party Committee or the Party Committee within the local Department of Culture. Personnel thus appointed can often play an important role in ensuring that libraries develop in the ideological and functional directions intended by the party and the government.

The People's congresses are the lawmaking body enshrined by the Constitution. Of them, the National People's Congress (NPC) is the highest and comprises representatives elected from the nation's provinces, autonomous regions, directly administered municipalities and the army. NPC has the power to make national laws. When the plenary session is in recess, the NPC Standing Committee has the power to enact, amend and interpret laws. Regional and local congresses are the next level of legislature. Provincial level congresses can make their own regional laws and send them to the NPC Standing Committee for the record, whereas local congresses can make local laws, but need approval from their respective regional congresses before promulgation. The NPC can also delegate to the government a certain degree of legislative power. Therefore the State Council and ministries under its aegis (including the MOC) all have designated legislative power to make regulations and rules within their own administrative areas (Law 2002, 583). At the moment, a national public library act does not yet exist, but there are already a number of provincial regulations which provide the policy basis for public library development in regions.

At the local level, the People's Congress is also enshrined with the power to approve local government's budgetary plans and can thus have determinant influence on the outcome of proposed library projects. During the past two decades,

Figure 1: The institutional framework for public library development in China



many People's Congresses endorsed the construction of new libraries in their constituencies. In Suzhou city of Jiangsu Province, for example, a proposal for the city's new library was submitted to the local People's Congress in 1997-1998, and was approved unanimously at the first meeting discussing it. According to the local officials interviewed by this study, no other social utilities or business outlets had such unanimous support.

The National Political Economy for Public Library Development in Post-1978 Era

The history of the People's Republic of China is divided into two distinct eras in political and economic terms. The first era was from 1949 to 1978. It was characterized by a state-planned economy, radical socialism, economic self-sufficiency and a fair degree of egalitarianism. It is also an era in which stable economic development was periodically interrupted by political movements, the longest and the most destructive of which was the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The second era was from 1978 to the present. This is an era characterized by determined economic reform, steady movement from a planned economy to a market

economy, rapid economic growth and greater division of society.

It is the second era that provides the major context for current Chinese public library development. The era was heralded by the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Party Congress Central Committee in December 1978, which ruled that the long held emphasis of the CPC on political and ideological campaigns was to be abandoned; and future work of the party was to be centred on economic development. The decision to focus on economic development was officially interpreted as a shift of the party's central concern from political and ideological campaigns to economic construction, but in reality, it was also implemented to prioritise economic development over social development. These resolutions institutionalised a breaking away from the focus of the first era and paved the way for economic reform.

Globalization

The subsequent economic reforms centred on three main themes: globalisation, marketization and decentralization (Wei 2002, 114). Globalisation was a process in which China became increasingly

involved in the world economy through her open-door policies, culminating in her entrance into the WTO in 2001. In 1979, shortly after the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Party Congress Central Committee, a legislative framework to encourage foreign investment, namely the Joint Venture Law, was enacted and a decision to establish a production base for export in Shenzhen was made. In 1980, the Shenzhen Production Base for Export was changed to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, along with the establishment of Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen special economic zones (SEZs). A new economy based on a great intake of foreign investment and a large degree of market mechanism was thus set running within these SEZs. Beginning in 1984, many more coastal and inland cities were opened up for foreign investment and trade, and in the meantime, new policies for attracting foreign capital were instigated. These policies soon transformed the country into one of the largest recipients for foreign investment in the world. The official admission of China into the WTO in 2001 heralded a new era of her participation in the global economy. Since then, China has further opened many of her previously withheld sectors to foreign capital, including, to the great concern of library and information professionals: the telecommunication sector; the wholesale market of books, newspapers and periodicals; and the advertising market.

Marketization

Marketization in the aforementioned triple transition was a process in which the state-planned economy was gradually transformed to a market-based economy. In the early 1980s, the market mechanism was first introduced to the pricing system. A two-track price system was created to replace the previously state controlled pricing system where all goods were fixed with prices from the centre. In the mean time, the ownership structure underwent gradual reform to allow non-public investment. The course of marketization was dramatically furthered in 1987 when the "theory of the early stage of socialism" was adopted at the 13th Party Congress, and in 1992 when the "theory of the market socialism" was adopted at the 14th Party Congress, and again in 1997 when the private economy was upgraded from a complementary part of the national economy to the

status of an integrated part. As a result of the above process of reform, the number of private enterprises and small businesses increased rapidly. By the end of the 1990s, there were already over 1.76 million private enterprises in China, over 48 thousand (or 2.7%) of which were information consultant companies (Trade and Foreign Economy Division of National Bureau of Statistics of China 2002). Incomplete statistics provided respectively by the Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Culture and Relics (2001) and the Ministry of Culture (Wang Xuan 2002) showed that, in 2000, there were nearly 30,000 audio-video rental outlets in regions excluding Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin; and in 2002, there were nearly 120,000 registered Internet Bars across the country.

Various forms and degrees of marketization have also been extended to the educational and cultural sectors since the mid-1980s. In the education sector, a series of CPC resolutions and Ministry of Education policies were instigated to attract non-government funds. These include the 1985 CPC document *Decision of the Central Committee of Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure* and *The Outline of Education Reform and Development in China* (promulgated by the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council). In the cultural sector where the public library is located, there were even more dramatic reforms to introduce market forces. These included the transformation of a large section of the sector from publicly funded institutes to self-sustaining enterprises, the introduction of private capital and the legitimating of income generation in previously purely publicly funded organizations such as libraries. Instrumental to these changes were such government regulations as the 1987 *Provisional Method of Implementing Fee-based Services and Business Activities in Cultural Institutions*, which authorized charges for services in organizations like libraries; the 1991 *Report on a Number of Economic Policies for Cultural Organizations*, which further called for publicly funded cultural organizations to generate income so as to reduce their reliance on the government; the 1994 *Decisions on Continued Preferential Fiscal Policies for Cultural Propaganda Organizations*, which stipulated that cultural propaganda organizations should speed up their reform to adjust themselves to the socialist market system.

Decentralization

Decentralization of the aforementioned triple transition was a process in which the state gradually loosened its central control through devolution of administrative and economic power to local governments. Details of this process and its impact on the local political economy will be elaborated in the next section; it suffices here to note that the process led to a dramatic shift of the central-local relationship, with a great degree of power and responsibility being transferred from the centre to local governments. This brought public library services, together with education, health care, social security and other public sector services, out of central aegis and into local control. Under the influence of local political economies, the Chinese public library system began to show less uniformity and more local colours.

The Local Political Economy for Public Library Development in Post-1978 Era

Prior to 1978, the Chinese local economy constituted part of the national planned economy tightly controlled by the central government. Under this system, virtually every aspect of the country's social and economic development, from resource allocation to price setting of commodities and to public service provision, was determined by central government plans. Local governments played an agent role in organizing the implementation of these plans. To facilitate the central government's control, a network of hierarchically organized institutions was established which carried out central plans in different fields through a "vertical system". Long and Ng (2001, 217) likened this central-local relationship to the relationship between father and sons in a traditional family, where the father controlled all the family's resources and shouldered the responsibilities for the livelihood of the whole family, whereas the sons implemented all the family's rules and regulations and worked hard for the property of the family.

Devolution of power

Starting from 1978, in an attempt to improve the efficiency of the economy and to offer incentives for local participation in economic reform, the Cen-

tral government began to delegate powers and responsibilities to local governments. The devolution of power took place on many fronts of the central-local relationship, but was particularly notable in administration, investment and the fiscal system. In the area of administration, for example, local governments were empowered to make broad regional economic regulations, to take charge of some previously centrally controlled enterprises and to approve investment projects. Local governments also became independent entities to make investments and establish new firms. In the area of fiscal authority, the 1985 fiscal reform established a system which allowed lower-level governments to submit a fixed amount or a fixed proportion of their fiscal revenues to its superior government, while retaining what remained for themselves. Under the new fiscal system, the central government's control of state revenues inevitably declined in favor of local government's fiscal power. During the first half of the 1990s, local governments contributed only 60% of state revenues and accounted for 70% of expenditure, in contrast with 85% of contribution and 46% of expenditure during the first half of the 1970s (Yabuki and Harner 1999, 160). As more administrative and economic powers were delegated to local governments, the central government also began to reduce its involvement in financing public services. In education, for instance, the central government not only shifted the responsibility for primary and secondary education to local governments, but also reduced its financial support for post-secondary education. In such waves of dual delegation of powers and responsibilities, local autonomy steadily grew.

Economic growth

For those who want to situate Chinese public library services in the context of the new local political economy, it must be further noted that as provinces and sub-provincial units assumed an autonomous economic role, the political interests of local governments and their officials became increasingly tied up with their economic performance. Good economic performance would first of all give local governments enhanced bargaining power when they negotiated with the centre on local affairs. From the early days of economic reform, the devolution of power was

never evenly distributed across the country. The degree of autonomy granted to local governments was, at least in part, the result of central and local negotiation. During such negotiation, three areas of local governments – economic performance, reliance on central subsidies and the degree of autonomy attained, were almost always interrelated (Hendrischke 1998). Provinces with stronger local economic standing were normally less dependent on central support and subsidies, and in return, they were often given greater power to control local affairs. Moreover, as this type of central-local interaction developed, provinces with better economic performance tended to enjoy greater political influence both within their own region and in the national arena. Secondly, economic performance would also produce personal political gains for local government officials. Provincial and sub-provincial leaders tended to have a high political stake in the successful development of local economies. They were likely to be promoted after their region or localities had demonstrated a steady and fast economic growth. Tan (2002, 739) contends that Zhao Ziyang's promotion to Premier in 1980 was the result of his economic success in Sichuan and the ascendance of Li Ruihuan to the standing Committee of the Politburo in 1990 was due to his mayoral performance in developing Tianjin's economy.

During the 1980s and 1990s, such economic and political interests fueled local governments' pursuit for economic growth. Through mobilization of local resources and bargaining for central support, many provinces started to pursue development strategies that could maximize local economic growth. Jiangsu (a coastal province north to Shanghai), for example, first pursued a development strategy underpinned by the strength of township and village enterprises (TVEs) and then moved on to a development strategy based mainly on science, technology and culture. Fujian (a province facing China's Taiwan Island) adopted in 1984 a development strategy that focused on transforming its agriculture-based economy into an industrial one, taking advantage of relatively easy access to overseas Chinese investors. Guizhou (a Southwestern province with many impoverished areas), on the other hand, took up a development strategy that capitalized on its rich indigenous culture. By and large, these strategies were mainly economy driven, focusing on the tar-

get of GDP growth and deploying whatever resources were deemed conducive to the growth.

Public services

Under this context, it is not surprising that local governments would carefully weigh local resources and expenditures for their economic potential, and prioritize local enterprises and institutions according to their possible contribution to GDP. Areas that had foreseeable or at least promising economic returns were more likely to attract governments' support, while most public services, including public libraries, dropped in priority on the local political agenda. Local governments' pragmatic, if not short-sighted view towards socio-economic development manifested nowhere so markedly as in the cultural sector. Here it became almost customary for cultural outlets that had potential to boost the local tourism and that fit well into the local cultural industry to enjoy greater political visibility than those without obvious economic value. This tendency was well reflected in local governments' generous investment in building infrastructure for local historical sites and applying for world heritage membership for them. It is reported that, at the end of 1990s, in applying for the world heritage membership for Longmen Grottoes and Dujiang Weir, local governments invested respectively 150 million and 220 million [2] Yuan to demolish nearby buildings (Huang 2002; Quan 2004). As some of the commentators observed, in many places, the drive behind such commitment had been mainly economic (Song 2001).

As local governments directed their attention and resources towards more profitable sectors at a time when the central subsidies diminished, public institutions in many regions began to face severe financial difficulties. During the 1980s and 1990s, in an attempt to revive this declining sector while mitigating local budgetary pressure, local governments, with endorsement from national regulations and policies, started to introduce non-government funds and market mechanisms into public institutions. Sponsorship and private capital was sought in the education sector, user fees were levied in the public health sector and income generation was encouraged in the cultural sector. In education, for example, the proportion of non-government funds rose from 25.7% to 38.4% be-

tween 1990 and 2000 (Zhou 2002). In public health, the health care system was almost entirely operated in line with market principles. In this process of transformation, both local governments and the professions associated with public institutions became very much market minded.

It is against this backdrop of increasing local autonomy, growing emphasis on economic development and active embracing of market forces that local governments began to take on a new outlook towards public library development.

Public Library Development in the Post-1978 Political and Economic Context

Before 1978, public library service, like education and health care, was centrally provided by the state through a vertically managed system. The system consisted of provincial libraries, prefecture/municipal libraries, county libraries and township libraries and was managed by the Ministry of Culture through its local agents, i.e., the culture department of local governments.

The 1978 reform shifted the responsibility for providing public library services to local governments. With this shift, however, did not come any clear national guidance as to how well local governments should provide these services. The 1982 MOC *Regulations for Provincial (Autonomic Region, Municipal) Library Work* stipulated that "the necessary funds for provincial libraries should be guaranteed", but exactly what it meant by "necessary" was not clearly defined. The regulation also had a bylaw stating that the regulation was, in principle, also applicable to other types of large libraries. There were neither bylaws nor articles pertaining to small and medium-sized libraries. In the absence of clear national guidance, the standard of "necessary funding" for provincial and large libraries and the level of support for small and medium-sized libraries was left entirely to local governments. Public library development became, therefore, very much contingent on local economic performance and the importance that local governments attached to library services in the scheme of general socio-economic development.

Construction of new libraries

Across the country, economic growth, to a varying degree, enabled the number of public libraries

to grow and the working condition of libraries to improve. In the interval between 1980 and 1999, the number of public libraries at and above the county level increased from 1732 to 2769; floor space for public use increased from 0.92 million square meters to 5.06 million square meters (Xiao 1999, 482–485; Xiao 2001, 354–357; Editing Board of Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Libraries 1997, 480). As of the end of 2000, 20 out of 30 existing provincial libraries had moved into new premises; another six were waiting for the construction of new buildings to be completed (Wu 2001, 9). Although official statistics do not exist for rural libraries (township and village libraries), sporadic evidence suggests that this group of libraries expanded at an even greater rate. In Hunan Province, for example, the number of township and village libraries grew from 1800 in 1985 to 14000 in 1997 (Zou *et al.* 1999b: 3); in Guangxi Autonomous Region, the corresponding number increased from 50 in 1994 to 1342 in 2000 (Wang Xueguang 2001, 45).

A number of factors may have encouraged local governments' input into library construction. Rapid economic development enabled local governments to invest more generously than before in urban construction. Public libraries, as one of the major cultural edifices of urban life and one which was rather neglected during the Cultural Revolution, naturally came to the fore in urban construction. The Sixth Five-Year Plan (1981–1985) proposed to eliminate library-less counties. This further prompted library construction all over the country. And in 1994, the Ministry of Culture started a national public library assessment initiative, in which libraries down to the county level were all assessed for their condition and services. Floor space and other input measures were given notable priority in the assessment with a view to urging local governments to improve library construction.

Since 1994, there have been three rounds of assessment; each produced three grades of comparatively good libraries. This fuelled the local governments' interest in library construction even further. Wanting to have more graded libraries in the list, local governments made great efforts to increase the floor space and facilities of their libraries. In Hunan Province, for example, the 1998 assessment prompted local governments to provide 10 million in ex-budgetary funds for libraries (amounting to 41% of the budgetary library

fund for the year 1999), all earmarked for building maintenance, material acquisition and equipment purchase (Jin 2003).

Focus on efficiency

The fact that library services had to be financed out of the local purse made local governments much more conscious of efficiency and output than they used to be. Local public organizations were encouraged to adopt managerial methods to improve efficiency. Into public libraries, a variety of efficiency- or effectiveness-oriented management techniques were thus introduced. One of such techniques was to set working quotas for jobs whose production could be measured quantitatively (a technique explicitly derived from the scientific approach of modern management theories) (Li 1989; Ye 1986). Classification, cataloguing and other materials processing activities were often subject to such management. In one of the libraries visited in this study, for instance, the quota for a cataloguing librarian of Chinese materials was 50 books per day, and that for her counterpart of foreign language materials was 10 books per day. The second example of widely adopted management techniques was management by objectives, which was applied in many libraries to ensure maximum library effectiveness and to provide individual departments and staff members a framework to define their responsibilities. In Hunan Province, for example, management by objectives became established during the 1980s, whereby libraries were required to define their annual objectives and sign a formal agreement of accountability with their governing authorities (Zou *et al.* 1999b).

The third example of widely adopted management techniques was performance appraisal at both the staff and the organizational levels. At the organizational level, many local governments had in place an appraisal system for local cultural institutions which often led to the rewarding of charter marks or medals to the best institutions. In Hunan Province, organizational performance appraisal had been carried out biannually since 1984; the winning libraries were entitled "Civilized Libraries" (Zou *et al.* 1999b). The fourth example of management techniques adopted in many large libraries during the 1990s was downsizing: to reduce staff positions and to substitute casual workers for permanent staff positions so as to reduce

cost and increase efficiency. As a result of such staffing, casual workers have become a significant part of the library workforce since the 1990s. In a large city library that was visited by this study, the proportion of permanent staff members to casual workers was close to 1:1 as of 2001; in another, it was just below 4:1.

In addition to these management practices, an array of modern management techniques, e.g., customer relationship management, service level agreement, total quality management and knowledge management were also enthusiastically discussed in the public library literature (Chen Chao 2002; Chen Li 2002; Li 1989; Li 2000; Wang Bing 2002; Yang 2001). In many places, the adoption of management techniques has reportedly raised libraries' profiles and improved service provision (Yang 2001; Li 2000; Wang Bing 2002; Zou *et al.* 1999b). In the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, for example, improvement of library management was believed to have raised the library's political visibility in the region (Wang Bing 2002).

Marginalization

In tandem with the introduction of managerial theories and techniques, local governments also began to see public libraries' role increasingly in economic terms. Prior to 1978, the role of public libraries in Chinese society was primarily defined in line with Lenin's views of former Soviet Union libraries, which saw libraries as an important organization in spreading socialist ideology and in fostering socialist construction. Such definition, hence the established role of Chinese public libraries, appeared somewhat out of place in local governments' heightened pursuit of economic growth. Attempts were made to transform the public libraries in keeping with the new priority of economic development. As early as in 1979, a provincial meeting in Hunan was specially convened to address the issue of shifting the libraries' mission to serving economic construction (Zou *et al.* 1999b, 5). The regional regulations of the late 1990s put even greater emphasis on public libraries' economic role. The Henan Public Library Management Method, for example, explicitly defined public libraries as part of the local cultural industry (Song Xueqing 2002, 10).

With local governments' vision being distinctively focused on the economic value of local insti-

tutions, public library development inevitably declined, to a varying degree across the country, on local political agendas. This was evidenced first of all in local governments' reluctant provision for library operational costs. In many places, apart from staff salaries and limited materials funding, provision for maintenance, electricity and the like was meagre. In 1991, 217 (or 10.7%) libraries at and above the county level did not get their share of materials funds (Liu 1995, 5); in 1997, this figure reached 592 (or 22%) (Huang 2000, 39). In the face of rapidly rising prices of books and journals, local governments' reluctance to increase the library's operating expenditure inevitably resulted in a drastic decline in materials acquisition. Annual book additions of all public libraries declined from 13.6 million in 1986 to 6.9 million in 2000 (Editing Board of Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Libraries 1997, 480; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2001). In recent years, it also greatly hampered the development of library automation and network access. Although initiatives such as national public library performance assessment prompted some local governments to invest in computers and networks, these efforts remained piecemeal in most cases.

Public libraries' declining importance on local political agendas was also reflected in the interviews undertaken by this study during a site visit to 12 public libraries. In one of the county level libraries visited, for example, the library director lamented that her library was below in almost everything that merited local government's support. "Government officials here don't value public libraries very much... They don't think any work unit is a good one if it is unable to bring immediate economic returns. They actually think they can do without it. So it is very difficult for us to apply for funds, including materials funds" (interview data). This lament was echoed in a number of other libraries visited.

Marginalization of public libraries was more acute in less developed western (inland) areas than in eastern (coastal) areas. Unlike their eastern counterparts, which enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy and preferential treatment from the central government, provinces in the west relied very much on central subsidies even after the inception of economic reform. As central subsidies diminished, these provinces increasingly lagged behind in public service provision. From 1995–

1999, local government's funding for public libraries increased by just 48% in Ningxia, 52% in Heilongjiang, 53% in Qinghai, 56% in Gansu and 58% in Xinjiang, in contrast with the increasing rate of 222% in Beijing, 209% in Zhejiang, 200% in Shanghai, 123% in Shandong, 109% in Guangdong and 103% in Fujian [3] (Editing Board of Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Libraries 1997, 478; Xiao 1999, 357). Recent statistics showed that of all the county libraries which failed to get materials funding in the past few years, 80% were in the western regions (Zhou and Li 2006, 16). Site visits conducted by this study also revealed a dire lack of funds in libraries of the western regions, particularly in libraries at the county level. According to the interviewed county library directors, it was not unusual for a county library in these regions to go without materials funds for a number of consecutive years.

Demand for income generation

Economic reform and development also instilled in local governments a fairly strong faith in the market forces to push public library development. The rise of various private and self-sustaining information providers, such as consultant companies, database developers and vendors, digital library providers, audio-visual rental services and Internet Bars, convinced local governments that if public libraries were competitive enough, there was space in the market for them to share. In local government officials' speeches, libraries were constantly reminded that they should discard their tradition of "waiting, depending and asking" (that is, the tradition of relying on the government for financial support) (Gao 1988; Xu 1997; Yan 1995; Zhang 1995). The following comments from a government official's speech is illustrative of local governments' stance towards this tradition:

[Public libraries] need to exploit two different sources [to ensure annual increase of funding]. The Department of Finance will squeeze its resources to provide some, but libraries need to find their own means to get the rest. Libraries must change their old way of thinking, i.e., to wait, depend and ask [for support] solely from the government. They must broaden their sources of income. While fulfilling their [social] responsibilities, they also need to exploit their literature resources for fee-based services, that is, to sustain culture with culture; and to conduct tertiary sector activities of some sort so as to enhance their self-development potentials. (Zhang 1995, 5)

Table 1: Public Library Income Generation: 1986–1999

Year	Generated income (10 thousands Yuan)	Percentage of total library income
1986	821	4.13
1987	1030	4.76
1988	1991	7.69
1989	2943	9.75
1990	3032	9.38
1991	4174	11.34
1992	6344	13.99
1993	7960	15.63
1994	13947	18.7
1995	13856	13.39
1996	10023	11.37
1997	14022	12.87
1998	13745	11.2
1999	13309	10.19

Data Source: 1) Data for 1986–1995 is from: Editing Board of Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Libraries. *Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Libraries 1996*. Beijing: Beijing Library Publishing House, 1997: 478; 2) Data for 1996–1999 is from: Xiao Dongfa. *Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Libraries 2001*. Beijing: Beijing Library Publishing House, 2001: 357.

Note: Due to the varied statistical units in the original sources, generated income for the years 1986–1995 was the “total [generated] income” in the original source; that for the years 1996–1999 was the summed amount of “income from fee-based services, income from business activities and income from affiliated work units” in the original source.

With this rhetoric, local governments persistently encouraged libraries to seek various means of income generation, including fee-based services and business activities. They also encouraged libraries’ efforts to seek private capital for library development, e.g., in the form of cooperative provision of certain services.

This local government perspective soon spurred a fairly large-scale implementation of fee-based services and business activities in public libraries. This study’s site visits to 12 public libraries revealed a wide range of fee-based services and business activities. These included: rental of library space to local businesses, rental of meeting rooms and exhibition areas, lectures and training, reproduction of rare books and special materials, value-added information services, Internet access, rental of audio-visual materials and access to “special collections” – these can be anything from fashion magazines and best sellers to a publisher-commissioned book store. The majority of libraries also charged membership fees in the form of annually renewed library cards. In some libraries,

which fortunately do not seem to be numerous, even the use of seats in reading rooms required payment. As a result of this expansion of fee-based services, the proportion of self-generated income in total library income rose from 4% in 1986 to 10% in 1999; it peaked at 19% in 1994 (see Table 1).

Erosion of the public service ethos

Evidence showed that the expansion of fee-based services and the influence of market forces have, at least to a certain degree, eroded the library profession’s public service ethos. This was first evidenced in the profession’s interest in developing specialized public libraries or special collections within existing public libraries. Special collections is a separately managed section of the library holdings, which consists of materials on a particular subject discipline, a particular document type or of a particular genre. Such collections usually target a very specialized user group and often, if not always, require specially designated access rights. When a library has a predominate proportion of specialized collections in its stock, this library is also called a specialized public library. During late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a surge of interest in developing specialized collections/libraries. There were economic incentives in establishing such services from the onset: access rights to special collections can be charged for and the growth of specialized collections can naturally lead to value-added services. Evaluation of this endeavour is a complex issue and this brief discussion may not do it justice, but one thing is certain: specialized collections require a considerable proportion of library resources (funds, staff and space) but serve only the specialized need of a minority user group. However, as Professor Huang (2000, 39) of Wuhan University observed, the extent to which these services were offered at the cost of services to the general public was seldom questioned.

In a similar vein, there was a growing interest among public libraries to serve the local business sector as a profitable clientele. A variety of approaches were attempted to tap into this source of income. The first and most common approach was through value-added information services. In Henan Province, for example, public libraries provided advanced services for 156 R&D projects within a period of two years (Yang 1995); in Guang-

dong Province, value-added services for local companies were widely offered by libraries of all levels and sizes (Fang 1998; Xiao, Pan and Chen 2004). The second approach was through cooperative provision of library services. A case in point is the cooperation between Jinzhou City Library and Jinzhou Mountain Machinery Factory. The former is a prefecture level library in Liaoning Province, northeast China; the latter is a state owned factory. In 1995, they formed a cooperative scheme in which the City Library opened up all its technological resources to the factory to meet its R&D needs, and set up a book-lending outlet inside the factory to meet the workers' reading needs. The factory, in return, provided part of the materials funding to the library (Liu and Wang 1997).

Apart from this kind of cooperation, there were also instances of cooperative schemes where the public library serves as certain manufacturer's sales agent (Shi, Wang and Yang 1995). The third common approach to exploiting the business sector support was to look for benefactors. However, such benefactors were rare, and donations, if there were any, were often attached with strings of commercial interests.

Serving the local business sector presented a great challenge for public libraries, not least because it often required the devotion of professional librarians and highly specialized information resources. Although business users were usually willing to pay at a relatively high rate for a successful service, this did not change the fact that strategic services to the business sector required constant input of trained staff and the most costly information, which may turn out to be quite a strain on public library resources. However, as with the case of developing specialized collections for small market niches, the potential impact of strategically serving the business sector on services to the general public was seldom critiqued.

The erosion of the public service ethos became even more evident in 1990s, when a faction of the library profession, albeit small, persistently called for the public library service or part of it to be commercialised (*chǎn yè huà*), which means that the whole library or at least part of it should provide full-fledged paid services. These paid services, it was argued, should be managed as consultant companies and should be targeted at profitable market niches (Wang and Chen 1994; Wang and Xue 1994). Services that were recommended

for commercialisation included library based adult education, audio-visual services and value-added information services; some librarians even proposed community services as a candidate for commercialisation (Tao 2000). Added to this list were marketing services, real estate agency services, exhibition services, and other services that had little to do with knowledge-based library practices.

Conclusion

China's economic reform since 1978 brought public libraries into a very different political economy from what they faced previously. In this new political economy, local governments were made an independent provider for public services while the central government reduced its involvement in local affairs and diminished its subsidies to local needs. As there did not exist a macro-level regulatory framework for public library service provision, which meant that local governments could not be held responsible for even the most basic public library services, the degree of support for public libraries was determined entirely by local policies. The level of service provision therefore became dependent on both the local economic strength and on the significance that local governments attach to these services. Across the country, level and pattern of service provision were often the result of a trade-off between long-term social interests and the short-term economic growth, and they tended to vary greatly from region to region, and even county to county.

As this study shows, this political economy, although it has brought about considerable improvement to library infrastructure (building, service floor area) and management, has adversely affected public library development in many other ways. In many places, public library development was shoved down the local political agenda as local governments manoeuvred resources and prioritised sectors to maximize economic growth. The decline of public library services was particularly dramatic in western regions where local fiscal revenue could not even guarantee adequate government support for more pressing issues such as poverty alleviation and health care.

Market forces appear to have eroded service provision, and, perhaps more damagingly, the public service ethos of the library profession in

this context. Fee-based services were expanded, resources were manoeuvred to favour the specialized need of small market niches, and full-fledged profit-making companies were established within libraries. The term “one library, two systems” (yì guǎn liǎng zhì) was coined to justify the establishment of such companies. Some of these erosions, e.g., the advancement of specialised libraries and specialised collections led some scholars to rightly question where the interests of the 1.2 billion people were (Huang 2000, 39).

The 21st century will undoubtedly unfold yet another political economy for Chinese public libraries. As a matter of fact, the 16th Party Congress held in 2002 and the 4th and 5th Plenums of the 16th Party Congress Central Committee have already ushered in a fresh breeze of reform which, in contrast with those hitherto implemented, put much greater emphasis on social cohesion and inclusiveness. Under such a national development context, some aspects of local political economy (e.g., strategies for development) will inevitably change, some (e.g., local governments’ wish to spend less and obtain more, hence their enthusiasm for income generation) will perhaps continue. It is important that the library profession sharpen its political economy awareness to ensure that local governments’ attitudes and policies for public library development will not run counter to the nation’s strategic target to build up a “well-off society in an all-round way”.

Notes

1. This dual nomenclature of libraries at the same administrative level reflects primarily rural and urban demarcation. For example, while libraries at the lowest level in rural areas are called township libraries, their urban counterparts are called neighbourhood libraries.
2. To put these figures in context, in 1999, government funds for all public libraries in Sichuan Province (where Dujiang Weir is located) was 25.6 million Yuan; government funds for all public libraries in Henan Province (where Longmen Grottoes is located) was 30 million Yuan (Xiao 2001, 356).
3. Apart from Heilongjiang, which is one of the three northeast provinces, all other provinces or regions with the lowest rate of increase of library funding are located in the west, while all provinces with the highest rate of increase are located along the coast.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the following organizations and individuals: National Office for Philosophy and Social Science Research of China and the Business School of Nankai University for funding this research; Mr. Hao Yufeng and Mr. Yan Hui, postgraduate students at the Department of Information Resource Management of Nankai University, for assistance in data collection; and Mr. James Adams, guest lecturer at the English Department Nankai University for English proofreading.

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Editorial history:

paper received 6 June 2005;

final version received 10 April 2006;

accepted 12 April 2006.