

## Analysis of Service Characteristics of Recipients of the American Library Journal “Library of the Year” Award: Postprint

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study examines the evaluation criteria of the “Library of the Year” award established by American Libraries magazine since 1992 and the characteristic services of award-winning libraries, aiming to provide references for Chinese libraries to develop specialized services.

[Method/Process] Through web survey and case analysis methods, a comparative analysis was conducted on the characteristic services of 19 libraries that received the “Library of the Year” award from 2000 to 2018.

[Results/Conclusion] The service characteristics of award-winning libraries include: emphasizing civic education and strengthening educational functions; stressing the concept of equal service and demonstrating humanistic care; providing diverse community information services and participating in community building; establishing brand awareness and creating branded programs. Implications for Chinese libraries: conducting scientific and rational role positioning; actively participating in community poverty alleviation programs; strengthening brand awareness for specialized services; expanding cooperation domains.

### Full Text

## Analysis of Service Characteristics of Library Journal’s “Library of the Year” Award Winners

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### Abstract:

[Purpose/Significance] This study examines the evaluation criteria for the “Library of the Year” award established by *Library Journal* in 1992 and analyzes the

characteristic services of award-winning libraries to provide reference for Chinese libraries developing specialized services. [Method/Process] Through network investigation and case analysis, this paper conducts a comparative study of the characteristic services of 19 libraries that received the “Library of the Year” award between 2000 and 2018. [Result/Conclusion] The award-winning libraries demonstrate four key service characteristics: emphasis on civic education and strengthening educational functions; commitment to equal service concepts reflecting humanistic care; provision of diverse community information services and participation in community building; and establishment of brand awareness to create signature projects. The implications for Chinese libraries include: scientifically and rationally positioning their roles; actively participating in community poverty alleviation programs; strengthening brand awareness for characteristic services; and broadening cooperation areas.

**Keywords:** *Library Journal*; Library of the Year award; characteristic services

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Advances in information technology have brought profound and unprecedented changes and challenges to library information services. In this new era, libraries must not only keep pace with technological trends and focus on the introduction and application of high-tech innovations, but also establish characteristic service concepts. Based on thorough analysis of their social environment and user needs, libraries should scientifically and rationally position their roles and functions to create distinctive service brands that enhance their visibility and influence. The United States has achieved remarkable success in the practical innovation of library characteristic services.

The “Library of the Year” award winners (hereinafter referred to as “award-winning libraries”) have not only increased public awareness but also attracted more community donations. Through domestic and international literature searches, the authors found virtually no in-depth research on the characteristic services of award-winning libraries since the 21st century. The “Library of the Year” award represents an excellent honor standard in library characteristic services, and its development history effectively demonstrates the evolution and trends in this area. *Library Journal* has featured a special column introducing each year’s winning library since 1992, which has become one of the magazine’s highlights. Foreign literature consists almost entirely of news reports about award-winning libraries, while domestic scholars have paid limited attention to the award, with research focusing mainly on case analyses of individual winning projects.

*Library Journal*, founded in 1876 by Melvil Dewey, the father of American librarianship, is one of the three most authoritative journals in the American library community with the longest history, most senior qualifications, greatest influence, and highest citation rate. To encourage American libraries to continuously innovate in characteristic services, *Library Journal* and Gale Cengage Learning jointly established the “Library of the Year” award in 1992. The

award has been held for 26 consecutive years, recognizing outstanding libraries that provide characteristic services and make exceptional contributions to their communities. The award enjoys an excellent reputation in the American library community.

## 2. Overview of the “Library of the Year” Award and Characteristic Service Items

### 2.1 Award Application and Selection

The deadline for submitting application materials is March 11 each year. Applicants must submit: (1) basic information about the applying institution, including library name, address, and contact details; (2) a detailed application for the library’s characteristic project; and (3) relevant statistical data about the applying institution, including service population, total annual budget, per capita budget, activity programs implemented, visitation numbers, and electronic resource usage statistics, with at least six items of data related to the proposed library project. *Library Journal* specifically states that only libraries in the United States or Canada are eligible to apply, and previously winning libraries may only reapply five years after their award.

The award has three main evaluation criteria: (1) outstanding community service; (2) provision of highly innovative services for users; and (3) services that can be learned from and emulated by other libraries, representing successful models in the field. Judges conduct the selection process from March to June each year. The judging panel typically consists of four *Library Journal* editors, three to four library experts, and one American Library Association president. Additionally, the director of the previous year’s winning library serves as a judge for the following year to expand the judging scope and ensure more open and transparent results.

Each year, one Library of the Year and two finalist libraries are selected. The winning library receives a \$10,000 prize sponsored by Gale and an opportunity to attend the American Library Association’s annual conference to deliver an acceptance speech.

### 2.2 Basic Information and Characteristic Service Items of Award-winning Libraries

The authors searched the *Library Journal* website for information on the 19 award-winning libraries from 2000 to 2018. presents the basic information about these libraries.

In terms of scale, the award-winning libraries range from large urban libraries such as San Francisco Public Library and Queens Library in developed cities to medium and small libraries, and even small-town libraries in remote areas. Although these libraries differ in scale, funding status, annual budget, and service population (see Table 1 ), all provide innovative, high-quality characteristic

services to their local residents.

Geographically, only the 2014 Edmonton Public Library from Canada is among the winners, while the other 18 are American libraries. In terms of service content, the service positioning is very broad, encompassing basic services such as children's reading programs, adult literacy, and digital literacy education, as well as extended services including active cooperation with community organizations and participation in community cultural construction. The libraries also address the needs of specific groups by developing special services for immigrants, the elderly, homeless individuals, and residents with criminal records. Moreover, award-winning libraries demonstrate strong brand awareness, attempting to transform their characteristic services into brand projects to enhance their social influence.

### 3. Analysis of Award-winning Libraries' Characteristic Services

In eight special articles about award-winning public libraries written by *Library Journal* editor J. Berry, directors frequently mention concepts such as “reaching into the community,” “outstanding contributions,” and “free and equal access to information”—principles that award-winning libraries tirelessly uphold. Through investigation of the winning projects from the past 19 years, the authors have identified several key service characteristics.

#### 3.1 Emphasis on Civic Education and Strengthening Educational Functions

The United States places great emphasis on civic education, and libraries, due to their educational functions, have become venues for early childhood and lifelong education in communities. Award-winning libraries have established distinctive brand images in the field of social education, developing a series of targeted educational activities for users of different ages and educational backgrounds.

Most award-winning libraries since 2000 have focused on early childhood literacy and reading skills. The 2017 winner, Nashville Public Library, implemented the “Ready to Read” program for children aged 0-5, emphasizing that although young children cannot read, their curiosity about sound, images, touch, smell, and taste can be leveraged to improve early reading skills. The library uses its award-winning puppet truck to present classic children's literature through puppet shows, creating an optimal audio-visual experience for children and stimulating their interest in reading. The program also offers “Children's Reading Workshops” and “Family Literacy Nights,” inviting professional children's teachers to train parents in storytelling techniques. By collaborating with kindergartens and daycare centers throughout Nashville County, the program has engaged all local early childhood institutions, serving 139,327 children and parents by the end of 2017—approximately one-fifth of Tennessee's population.

King County Library System, a 2011 winner and member of Washington State's early education public library partnership, created the early reading "Tell Me a Story" website, which received 1.3 million visits in 2010. The 2009 winner, Queens Library, specifically hired soccer coaches, inventors, and music creators to provide outdoor science experiments, web game production, and video editing activities for "restless" teenagers in the community. The library also created small science experiment stations where young readers can conduct interesting experiments under volunteer guidance, such as observing how cornstarch and water form colloids or exploring how red cabbage changes color in different acid and base environments.

Educational support services for teenagers are also a focus of American libraries. As times have changed, award-winning libraries have evolved from providing homework assistance and reading clubs to creating dedicated service spaces for teenagers and offering interest-oriented guidance services. To cultivate teenagers' innovative thinking and creative abilities, the 2018 winner, San Francisco Public Library, established the invention laboratory "The Mix," offering experiences in 3D printing, programming, and e-book production. Fayetteville Public Library hosts an annual "Geek Girl Camp" for girls in grades 3-5, teaching science, technology, art, and mathematics to foster their scientific interest. For rebellious teenagers troubled by adolescent issues, the 2009 Queens Library provides entertainment-oriented activities.

To help community adults master basic literacy skills and use electronic resources, the 2013 winner, Howard County Library, launched the "HCLS Literacy Program," offering one-on-one and group instruction in spoken and written English, basic mathematics, and vocational skills test preparation to approximately 6,500 adults from 33 countries. Upon completion, 140 participants earned high school diplomas. The 2016 winner, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, developed a digital literacy learning website to train the elderly in using mobile phones and computers, teaching them to set up email accounts and use social media to better integrate into the digital society and reduce isolation in the information age.

### **3.2 Emphasis on Equal Service Concepts and Humanistic Care**

Award-winning libraries consistently uphold equal, inclusive, and non-discriminatory service concepts, striving to meet every patron's basic needs. They consider user groups of all ages and ethnicities.

Providing equal cultural services to immigrants of different races and cultural backgrounds is a goal pursued by most award-winning libraries. Salt Lake City, known as America's "City of Religion," has many strong religious beliefs that make community issues difficult to resolve. The 2006 winner, Salt Lake City Public Library, actively participated in cultural festivals of multiple nations and religions to promote religious and racial integration. During the Spanish Art Festival, Chinese New Year, and Islamic holiday celebrations, the library held

reading activities appropriate to the festive atmosphere, and its multicultural collection catalogs were well-received by local residents. Additionally, librarians with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds are a powerful asset for quality service. The 2002 winner, Kalamazoo Public Library, and the 2003 winner, Clark County Library, determined the proportion of “diversity” librarians based on demographic surveys of their service areas, encouraged librarians to receive short-term training on “special user” services, and produced online videos of library user guides in English, Arabic, and Spanish.

For homeless individuals and residents with criminal records, libraries provide targeted services to help them experience equal and inclusive service concepts. The 2012 winner, San Diego County Library, collaborated with local prisons on the “Welcome Back: Re-entering the Workforce After Release” project, providing computer and job preparation training for approximately 9,000 residents with criminal records to help them master survival skills and reintegrate into society. The program received widespread praise from local media and enhanced the library’s image. The 2018 winner, San Francisco Public Library, partnered with non-profit organizations on the “Homeless Connection” project, regularly providing haircuts, showers, and health screenings at the library entrance, serving over 6,500 users in 2017 and demonstrating humanistic care from the library.

For elderly users in the community, the 2016 winner, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, collaborated with the Alzheimer’s Association to offer courses by professional music therapists for relaxation therapy for elderly patients and their families. The library also provided nutrition and fitness education courses to improve health awareness among the elderly.

### **3.3 Providing Diverse Community Information Services and Participating in Community Construction**

The American Library Association’s 2019 State of America’s Libraries Report states that library staff assume functions beyond traditional library services and are on the front lines of solving community problems. Award-winning libraries not only serve as community education and information centers but also support community cultural development and economic growth.

Award-winning libraries actively participate in community cultural construction. The 2005 winner, Fayetteville Public Library, invited senior residents and local celebrities to participate in “Fireside Chat” activities, telling classic cultural stories about urban development and using online media to promote Syracuse’s history, cultivate public cultural belonging, and encourage residents to participate in community cultural construction. The 2017 winner, Nashville Public Library, joined the “Latino Americans: 500 Years of History” project organized by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Library Association in 2015. The library’s special collections team collaborated with central Tennessee residents to organize 36 projects, including the “Nashville Latino Oral History” project, attracting 2,079 participants of different ages and

backgrounds.

Award-winning libraries also actively support community economic development. During the 2012 housing crisis in San Diego County, when nearly 45,000 homes were foreclosed and many residents fell victim to fraudulent mortgage practices, the 2012 winner, San Diego County Library, partnered with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to offer “Free 4-Hour Clinic” services at 33 branch libraries. Financial and real estate experts, lawyers, and mortgage advisors provided financial literacy training and personalized consultation to help residents resolve housing issues and reduce property losses, with nearly 3,100 families participating in the program. By providing crucial information services, the library strengthened public trust and contributed to community economic development.

When crises occur, award-winning libraries courageously assume responsibility and handle emergencies flexibly, earning widespread acclaim. The 2015 winner, Ferguson Municipal Public Library, was described in its award citation as a safe haven for the community and an important community anchor. Ferguson, an older suburb of St. Louis, has a population of 21,000, 67% of whom are African American. In 2014, the fatal shooting of an African American youth by a police officer and the officer’s subsequent acquittal triggered massive protests, leading to school closures and street chaos. Ferguson Municipal Public Library remained open during the crisis, actively taking measures to ease social tensions and soothe residents’ emotions by providing education, information, and emotional therapy services, and inviting the U.S. Small Business Administration to provide legal and economic assistance to damaged local businesses. The library board’s courage and boldness in facing the crisis attracted national media attention, raising the library’s profile and generating nearly \$450,000 in donations.

### **3.4 Establishing Brand Awareness and Creating Signature Projects**

While emphasizing traditional service concepts, award-winning libraries actively explore new activity models using technological means to gradually develop their own characteristic service brands.

The 2014 winner, Edmonton Public Library, is renowned for innovation. It was the first library in North America to use a converted streetcar for mobile book services, the first in Canada to offer Tree House online learning courses and iPhone applications, and the first in Alberta to hire indigenous librarians. Edmonton Public Library serves as a global model for innovative library development, continuously updating its functions and services to meet evolving user needs. The 2018 winner, San Francisco Public Library, is also known for innovation. Its youth “The Mix” maker laboratory integrates maker spaces, audiovisual facilities, performance areas, reading and writing spaces, and learning functions, combining traditional reading activities with other interest-building activities and innovating library service concepts and models.

The 2016 winner, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, has established

strong partnerships with local community organizations, regularly holding community seminars to contribute ideas and efforts to community building. The library skillfully uses media platforms to comprehensively promote its activities, enhancing its image. The library's marketing department created the "Hush" podcast platform, inviting local renowned writers and government officials to discuss reading, writing, and local hot topics each month. During the 2015 National Library Week, videos released on this platform received 168,606 views on YouTube, becoming headline news on major media platforms such as Yahoo News and BookRiot.

Both the 2013 winner, Howard County Library, and the 2017 winner, Nashville Public Library, are known as "education partners," implementing high-quality educational programs for users of all ages. Howard County Library's "A+ Education Partnership Program" has established close relationships with local kindergartens and primary and secondary schools, issuing library cards to students on their first day of school and incorporating library visits into regular practice courses, with nearly 300 educators supporting after-school homework assistance and youth STEM digital media lab activities.

#### **4. Implications for Chinese Libraries**

As mentioned in the American Public Library Star Ratings, American libraries' characteristic services feature three key aspects: user-centered design, emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness, and value creation. Award-winning library managers consistently stand from the users' perspective, developing corresponding services based on actual user conditions. When developing characteristic services, Chinese public libraries should first deeply understand user needs, closely integrate with local economic, cultural, and historical backgrounds and contemporary characteristics, scientifically and rationally position their roles and functions, and then better develop targeted and practical characteristic services. Second, libraries should provide characteristic information services adapted to community development to fully integrate into community building. Third, they should strengthen brand awareness for characteristic services to ensure they develop in a three-dimensional and diversified manner. Finally, they should broaden cooperation areas by actively establishing diverse partnerships with local governments, schools, community organizations, and media platforms to support the development of characteristic services and activities.

##### **4.1 Scientific and Rational Role Positioning**

Award-winning libraries have developed corresponding characteristic services based on social needs in their service areas and their own resource advantages. For example, San Diego County Library implemented employment training programs for the large number of residents with criminal records in its area. Nashville Public Library launched the "Limitless Library" program in partnership with 123 local schools to address inadequate school library services. San Francisco Public Library implemented a "Racial Equity Program" to address

local racial inequality issues, inviting parents and teachers to participate in discussions on cultivating racial justice in children.

The role positioning of Chinese libraries has continuously evolved—from ancient book repositories as preservers of cultural classics, to modern public libraries as educational institutions for enlightening the public, to contemporary libraries serving as information exchange centers, lifelong learning centers, and community cultural entertainment centers. These evolving roles reflect Chinese libraries’ development concepts that keep pace with the times. In the new information environment of digital information and networked communication technologies, libraries such as the National Library of China and Shenzhen Library have embraced the trend toward integrated innovation of traditional and digital services. However, some libraries in small and medium-sized cities blindly pursue hardware construction modeled after more developed regions without adequate self-positioning or deep understanding of their local environment, increasing operational costs and causing unnecessary resource waste. Therefore, Chinese libraries should scientifically and rationally position their roles based on their resource advantages, application of new technologies, and community service development, comprehensively expanding their service functions. Additionally, when positioning characteristic services, libraries can use questionnaires and interviews to gather user feedback, timely adjust activity plans, and conduct innovative characteristic services in a targeted manner to achieve optimal results.

#### 4.2 Active Participation in Community Poverty Alleviation Programs

American public libraries have played a significant role in community building. In the 1960s, the U.S. government’s “War on Poverty” program stated that libraries should provide necessary information services for disadvantaged groups in impoverished areas, and that well-developed information services could be an effective strategy for promoting economic development in poor areas. The 2016 winner, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, regularly holds community seminars with representatives from all walks of life—including police officers, business people, and school administrators—to listen to their views on community poverty issues and suggestions for the library’s future development, committing to solving local poverty problems.

China’s 2018 Public Library Law emphasizes that public cultural service institutions should provide intellectual platforms for impoverished populations in remote areas, making culture an effective tool for poverty alleviation. Since 2007, Chinese libraries have participated in cultural poverty alleviation through rural bookrooms, but unfortunately, most have not provided targeted book resources based on local conditions, failing to achieve genuine cultural poverty alleviation effects. Chinese libraries can learn from successful American practices by incorporating community economic development into their future development plans and providing personalized poverty alleviation programs based on the characteristics and needs of different impoverished populations. For exam-

ple, for farmers in poor areas, libraries can provide relevant picture books and videos on local crop cultivation, adopting flexible cultural poverty alleviation strategies to promote economic development in impoverished regions.

### 4.3 Strengthening Brand Awareness for Characteristic Services

Brand building and marketing have become important development strategies for public libraries worldwide. Award-winning libraries attempt to convey their development vision and philosophy through brands. The investigation reveals that award-winning libraries have developed numerous diversified and characteristic brand projects, such as Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library's podcast platform and "People's Forum" that effectively extends library services into the community, and Nashville Public Library's BBT program for preschool children and Limitless Library program for school-age children. These libraries have launched novel, practical, and engaging characteristic brand service projects based on local user needs.

Many Chinese libraries have organized various reading festivals (monthly/weekly/daily events) to enhance social influence, but the activity brands launched by libraries in different regions and of different types are largely similar, failing to reflect unique characteristics and leaving a shallow impression on the public. To improve user recognition and core competitiveness, and to enable libraries to adapt to future information society development, libraries must take user needs as the starting point and create sustainable characteristic service brand projects. Shenzhen Nanshan Library's "Migrant Workers' Library" brand project for migrant workers regularly holds health lectures, legal forums, and popular movies that meet local user needs, with unique opening hours that align with migrant workers' rest time, attracting large numbers of readers and achieving significant social benefits. Library characteristic brands represent the public's cognition and recognition of a library formed through long-term public relations activities, possessing intangible value. Chinese libraries should closely monitor the development trends of outstanding foreign libraries' characteristic services, strengthen brand awareness, develop characteristic service projects based on the characteristics and information needs of local user groups, innovate service methods, improve service quality, and promote the sustainable development of Chinese libraries.

### 4.4 Broadening Cooperation Areas

Since the establishment of the Library Association Committee by the American Library Association in 1876, inter-library cooperation has continuously developed, with cooperation networks spreading across the United States. Among the award-winning libraries investigated, Worthington, Clark County, and Salt Lake City Public Libraries have established rich partnerships with surrounding community organizations, providing substantial volunteer resources for developing diverse characteristic services. Most maker space activities invite local scientists, technicians, artists, and mathematicians to serve as instructors. San Jose State

University Library and the local university library jointly established the first joint library in the United States—San Jose Martin Luther King Jr. Library—to solve financial crises caused by budget cuts, with partner participation bringing sufficient operating funds.

To become a public platform for social information sharing and knowledge exchange, libraries must change their mindset, break down barriers, and strengthen interactive communication and sincere cooperation with all sectors of society. For example, Shenzhen Children’s Library’s “Ivy League” program, launched in partnership with primary and secondary schools in Shenzhen, now has over 100 alliance schools, building a city-wide system for co-construction and sharing of children’s literature resources and universal borrowing and returning. However, such successful cases are still rare in China, and most public libraries lack long-term stable partners. Chinese libraries can learn from award-winning libraries by strengthening cooperation with families, communities, schools, and other social forces to form a “Library Plus” diversified cooperation model. In diversified cooperation, libraries should rationally select partners and conduct clear assessments of their business philosophy and development potential. Additionally, cooperation guarantee systems can be established through agreements to achieve long-term stable cooperation and ultimately realize mutual benefits and win-win outcomes.

Over a century ago, New Hampshire libraries introduced a service model using special collections for special readers, which the library community called the origin of library characteristic services. This service model has since been continuously innovated by libraries worldwide. More than a century later, with the rapid development of information technology, libraries face new environments and changes, making characteristic service construction an inevitable choice for sustainable library development. Since the 21st century, award-winning libraries have not only provided civic education and equalized services but also segmented service targets, deepened service content, and innovated service forms, adding many targeted and practical characteristic services such as preschool children’s reading services, services for children with reading disabilities, youth maker spaces, health information services, multicultural services for immigrant and multi-religious areas, and “People’s Community Forums” and “Fireside Chats” closely related to community economic and cultural development. When developing characteristic services, Chinese libraries should draw on the experience of award-winning libraries within the appropriate scope based on national conditions, scientifically and rationally position their roles based on in-depth understanding of user needs, actively participate in community poverty alleviation programs, promote community development, strengthen brand awareness for characteristic services, expand partnership areas, and promote the in-depth development of characteristic services in Chinese libraries.

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**Author Contributions:**

Tan Dajun: Determined the research topic, proposed research ideas, and provided revision suggestions.

Wang Mengdi: Conducted literature and data investigation and wrote the paper.

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**Analysis of Service Characteristics of America Library Journal’s “Library of the Year” Award-winners****Tan Dajun, Wang Mengdi**

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**Abstract:** [Purpose/significance] The evaluation criteria of “Library of the Year” award established by Library Journal of the United States since 1992 and the characteristic service items of the awarded libraries are studied in order to provide reference for our libraries to carry out specialized services. [Method/process] Through the method of network investigation and case analysis, this paper made a comparative analysis of the service characteristics of 19 libraries which won “Library of the Year” award from 2000 to 2018. [Result/conclusion] Summarizing the service characteristics of the awarded libraries: attaching importance to civic education, strengthening educational functions; emphasizing the concept of equal service, reflecting humanistic care; providing multi-community information services and participating in community construction establishment; establishing brand awareness and brand project. The enlightenment to library circles in China includes: scientific and rational role positioning; actively participating in community poverty plan; strengthening characteristic service brand awareness; and broadening partnership areas.

**Keywords:** Library Journal; Library of the year award; characteristic service

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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