

## New-Type Public Reading Spaces in Beijing: Characteristics, Value, and Development Strategies (Postprint)

**Authors:** Si Xinli

**Date:** 2023-04-01T16:02:51+00:00

### Abstract

[目的/意义] Based on a systematic review of the emergence and development of new types of public reading spaces both domestically and internationally, this study interprets typical cases of new public reading spaces in Beijing since 2012, analyzing their theoretical and practical value from the perspective of public library science across multiple dimensions, thereby providing reference and guidance for future development of public reading spaces.

[方法/过程] Taking Beijing, a region with relatively mature development, as an example, this study employs research methods including ethnography, data analysis, comparative analysis, and case analysis to examine the typical characteristics and existing problems of new public reading spaces, and proposes targeted development strategies for the future.

[结果/结论] Research on new public reading spaces enriches and expands the connotation and extension of contemporary public library science, and holds significant value for strengthening public library governance, improving the coverage and accessibility of public libraries, and reconstructing print-based reading culture. Future development of new public reading spaces should be advanced through enhancing the enthusiasm of social institutions, establishing evaluation and assessment mechanisms, formulating standardized institutional systems, and strengthening supervision and performance evaluation.

### Full Text

## Beijing's New Public Reading Spaces: Characteristics, Values, and Development Strategies

**Si Xinli**

School of Culture and Communication, Capital University of Economics and

Business, Beijing 100070

**Abstract:** Based on a review of the rise and development of new public reading spaces both domestically and internationally, this paper examines typical cases of Beijing's new public reading spaces since 2012. Through multi-dimensional analysis from the perspective of public library theory and practice, it provides references for future development. Taking Beijing as a representative case with relatively mature regional development, this study employs ethnographic research, data analysis, comparative analysis, and case studies to analyze the distinctive features and existing problems of new public reading spaces, proposing targeted development strategies. The research enriches and expands the connotation and extension of contemporary public library science, offering significant value for strengthening public library governance, improving coverage and accessibility, and rebuilding paper-based reading culture. Development should be promoted by enhancing social institution participation, establishing evaluation mechanisms, formulating standardized systems, and strengthening supervision and assessment.

**Keywords:** public reading space; characteristics; value; development countermeasures

---

## 1. The Rise and Development of New Public Reading Spaces

The emergence of public reading spaces in the West primarily resulted from independent bookstores seeking to escape operational difficulties. In the late 20th century, with technological proliferation and the advent of new media—particularly the rapid development of digital technology and the internet at the end of the 1990s—people's consumption patterns fundamentally changed. Increasingly, consumers purchased both paper and electronic books from home, creating operational crises for independent bookstores. Simultaneously, influenced by Western society's "cultural and spatial turn" 思潮 and urban transformation processes involving demolition, renovation, renewal, and globalization, independent bookstores began exploring new development models. Renowned independent bookstores such as Foyles in the UK, Shakespeare and Company in France, and Kinokuniya Musashikosugi in Japan moved beyond single-mode book sales to create composite spaces for reading, leisure, and exchange, attracting more readers. New types of independent bookstores and popular public spaces continuously emerged, gradually forming new urban social and cultural spaces.

After entering the 21st century, domestic private bookstores also faced severe survival crises due to low-price dumping by online bookstores, rising rent and labor costs, outdated concepts or poor management, and rampant piracy. The first "winter period" occurred between 2000-2004, when over 70% of bookstores began transformation, suspended operations, or closed. By 2009, a new wave of

closures struck. Meanwhile, with the establishment of modern public cultural service systems, the rise of cultural and creative industries, and the deepening of nationwide reading initiatives, a batch of privately-operated bookstores creating integrated reading, leisure, and exchange spaces quietly emerged across China. Various public-benefit picture book libraries and private libraries also attempted to establish new public reading venues in grassroots communities. In Beijing's process of building a national cultural center and demonstrating modern public cultural service systems, these new public reading spaces were incorporated into the basic public cultural service system of public libraries. Private bookstores, private libraries, picture book libraries, and other industries gradually converged and evolved into a fundamental form of public cultural service, meeting citizens' growing diverse cultural needs.

Since 2012, Beijing has created various types of new public reading spaces as typical cases exploring comprehensive public cultural service coverage. These spaces, called libraries, book repositories, urban bookstores, or simply "reading spaces," differ in name and scale but share common characteristics: government-social cooperation in establishment, community-oriented services providing literature resources, reading promotion, and leisure entertainment. Compared with traditional public libraries, their main features include "cross-boundary" construction entities, "mixed-business" service content, combined public welfare and commercial operation methods, and spatial design emphasizing aesthetics, ecology, and experience.

## 2. Research Status of New Public Reading Spaces

In the West, the transformation of independent bookstores into public reading spaces can be traced to the late 20th century influence of "cultural and spatial turn" theories, with direct theoretical foundations in "third space" theory and IFLA's 2009 concept of "libraries as third spaces." In 1989, American sociologist R. Oldenburg defined "third space" as leisure venues beyond the "first space" (home) and "second space" (workplace). B. Simon's empirical research found that among public spaces like bookstores and coffee shops, bookstores are authentic, qualified "third spaces"—not purely commercial venues but cultural platforms for knowledge sharing that facilitate collisions between individuals and books and serve as open fields for urban cultural transmission. S. Heafield, Foyles' Marketing and Brand Development Director, noted that spatial redesign and service transformation increase customer loyalty and traffic, making bookstore visits part of daily life. Australian Booksellers Association CEO J. Becker emphasized that bookstore spatial design must center on experiential consumption, with cultural activities being crucial for sustained success.

In China, besides Beijing, similar reading spaces have emerged in other cities: Shanghai's "Wo Jia Study," Shenzhen's "Yo · Library," Wenzhou's "Urban Study," Yangzhou's "24-hour Urban Study," Zhangjiagang's "Sanwei Shuka," and Hefei's "Reading Space." Since 2015, domestic academia has begun examining these differently-named new public reading spaces. Xu Huan considers

public libraries establishment a key marker of modern public reading space formation, with libraries aiming to create public reading environments. Li Guoxin views these spaces as small libraries with complete functions, high-end design, novel forms, elegant environments, high social participation, and significant service effectiveness. Yang Song believes Beijing's Xicheng District pioneered PPP models in public cultural services through government service purchases. Wang Zizhou argues public reading spaces should adhere to rational directions including differentiation, combined public welfare and commercial services, grassroots and stratified services, venue and activity services, and public participation. Wang Yanlong and Guo Yu propose four urban public reading space development models: cultural sharing spaces based on public libraries, cultural convenience spaces based on community studies, cultural landmark spaces based on independent bookstores, and cultural innovation spaces based on smart bookstores.

In summary, both Chinese and Western public reading spaces originate from global transformations of private bookstores and remain in exploratory stages. Western practice focuses on spatial renovation and experience, while Chinese research emphasizes government and private bookstore participation, with more descriptions of individual spaces but less systematic categorization of regional types.

### 3. Overall Picture of Beijing's New Public Reading Spaces

This study investigated Beijing's new public reading spaces through literature review, data analysis, and regional statistics to understand their overall landscape, regional distribution, development patterns, and emergence background. As of end-2019, Beijing had 310 new public reading spaces distributed across all sixteen districts [Figure 1: see original paper]. Dongcheng, Xicheng, Haidian, and Chaoyang each have over 30 spaces; Fengtai, Shijingshan, Fangshan, Tongzhou, Shunyi, Daxing, and Changping have 10-20 each; while Mentougou, Pinggu, Huairou, Miyun, and Yanqing have fewer than 10. This distribution correlates closely with population density and cultural development levels, with influential brand spaces concentrated in the four culturally prominent and economically developed districts of Dongcheng, Xicheng, Chaoyang, and Haidian.

Four development patterns emerged [Figure 2: see original paper]: (1) Spaces transformed from public cultural venues, represented by Shuxiang Station and Oracle Reading Space, accounting for 20% of all spaces; (2) Spaces converted from protected historical buildings or idle state-owned properties, represented by Brick Reading Space and Xuanyang Station, about 27%; (3) Spaces transformed from private bookstores or picture book libraries, accounting for approximately 36%; (4) Spaces provided by private libraries, cultural communication companies, and enterprises, about 17%. This demonstrates Beijing's flexible approach in utilizing diverse resources to provide convenient public reading venues.

Key drivers of rapid development include increased financial support for phys-

ical bookstores (reaching 50 million RMB in 2019, supporting 150 stores) and leveraging pilot advantages in modern public cultural service system demonstration zones and socialized management of grassroots cultural facilities. Integrating these initiatives with non-capital function relocation, public utilization of vacated spaces, and enhanced urban cultural quality also contributed significantly.

#### **4. Typical Characteristics of Beijing’s New Public Reading Spaces**

This study selected nine reputable, influential, and highly-utilized public reading spaces in Dongcheng, Xicheng, Haidian, and Chaoyang for six months of ethnographic fieldwork . Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of site information, valuable data on construction, operation, and services were obtained.

##### **4.1 Construction Entities: Leveraging District Government and Social Resources**

Since 2012, Xicheng District began building characteristic reading spaces, with the concept of “reading space” formally proposed in 2014. Two main models emerged: (1) “Government-operated, socially-assisted” model, where district governments provide facilities and introduce social institutions for management. In 2012, Xicheng transformed the historic Wansong Elder Pagoda Temple into Brick Reading Space, the city’s first non-profit public reading space, managed by Zhengyang Bookstore. (2) “Socially-operated, government-assisted” model, where social institutions provide space while governments offer resource support. District libraries provide specialized paper books, e-reading facilities, and digital resources with regular updates, while social institutions supply infrastructure and daily management, as seen in Shuxiang Hotel and Shuxiang Theater.

##### **4.2 Operation Methods: Government Purchase, Socialized Management, and PPP Models**

In 2013, the General Office of the State Council forwarded guidelines on government purchase of public cultural services, extending this practice to public libraries in Beijing and cultivating professional social organizations like YoBaby Parent-Child Library and Pika Bookstore. In 2015, central government guidelines on modern public cultural service systems encouraged innovative management models and socialized operation pilots. Xicheng District successfully implemented this model for characteristic reading spaces, while Haidian District, as a national demonstration zone, piloted comprehensive socialized management of its entire northern cultural center through competitive bidding. In 2018, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Ministry of Finance jointly issued guidelines promoting PPP models in the cultural sector. Chaoyang District piloted this approach in library-plus-hotel, -station, -bank, and -mall projects, estab-

lishing cooperative relationships with social capital through franchising, equity partnerships, and service outsourcing.

### **4.3 Service Functions: Free Book Lending and Cultural Services with Ancillary Sales**

Traditional libraries are book-centered, while new reading spaces are reader-centered, offering three-dimensional services including reading guidance. Some spaces also serve as venues for neighborhood meetings, community liaison, document processing, health diagnostics, package collection, senior dining, and child care, stimulating cultural industries and community vitality. For example, “Reading Cave” in southeast Beijing functions as a community showcase for visitors, a workplace for freelancers, a refuge for household chores, a childcare site during meals, and a respectable social venue—extending beyond cultural functions into public dialogue and community governance.

## **5. Theoretical and Practical Value of New Public Reading Spaces**

Case analysis of Beijing’s spaces reveals theoretical innovation and practical value in basic public cultural services.

### **5.1 Enriching Library Science Connotation and Extension**

China’s Public Library Law defines public libraries as free facilities collecting, organizing, and preserving literature for public query, borrowing, and social education. Beijing’s new public reading spaces expand founder types and operation methods, incorporate cultural products and coffee services, create cultural leisure areas, and offer 24-hour access, developing into multi-functional public living spaces for cultural transmission, leisure, and social interaction. They enrich social education pathways and service content while utilizing internet and smart technologies for online reading clubs and WeChat groups, providing fresh grassroots practice for public library research.

### **5.2 Diversifying Public Library Supply Entities and Methods**

Since the 18th Party Congress, China has advanced governance modernization from “management” to “co-governance.” New public reading spaces reflect modern public cultural service system requirements, meeting people’s cultural needs for better lives and providing diversified supply entities and methods through structural reform. Government-specialized funds attract social institutions as partners in cultural services, representing a new co-construction model with innovations in organizational management and governance mechanisms. Integration into regional branch systems breaks traditional single-type models, forming diversified new branch patterns.

### 5.3 Improving Public Library Service Coverage and Accessibility

Under policies ensuring cultural rights and equal basic public services, continued structural reform has achieved full administrative coverage of public libraries. However, grassroots services face uneven resource allocation, remote locations, single service content, and mismatched resident needs. District libraries, as system cornerstones, establish resident-centered spaces to maximize matching between services and needs, effectively improving availability, accessibility, suitability, acceptability, and participation, thereby enhancing reading convenience and acquisition.

### 5.4 Reconstructing Paper-Based Reading Culture in the Network Environment

Jacob Nielsen's research shows paper reading is linear, author-guided, narrative, and complete, while online reading is jump-based, reader-controlled, answer-seeking, and fragmented. Amid rapid online media expansion, reconstructing paper reading culture is crucial for countering hedonistic politics of visual culture and consumerism. New public reading spaces design services according to residents' needs and cultural habits, offering diverse, quality services. Through lectures, book signings, competitions, and exchanges, they moderately control online media's occupation of leisure time, cultivating "immersive" reading behaviors and improving reading deficiencies caused by network culture.

## 6. Main Problems in Beijing's Public Reading Space Development

As socialized operation of cultural service facilities deepens, deficiencies have emerged in social participation, project evaluation, management systems, and supervision.

### 6.1 Insufficient Social Institution Participation

As "third sector" entities, cultural social institutions play unique roles in resource integration, implementation, and management. Beijing's practice shows government leadership in planning, policy guidance, funding, and demonstration, but cultural institutions remain scarce with high participation barriers. Beyond subsidies for private bookstores, few preferential policies exist for other social institutions. Public reading spaces are not formally listed in government procurement or cultural PPP catalogs, lacking clear norms on which institutions can participate and how, constraining social participation.

### 6.2 Lack of Scientific Evaluation Mechanisms

Government purchase and socialized operation models are operationally straightforward and fast-acting, while PPP models can leverage market resource allocation. Long-term, PPP represents the main development direction. Value

for Money (VFM) assessment is the international standard for determining PPP adoption. However, public reading spaces' diverse functions and strong spillover effects make their intangible value and social benefits difficult to evaluate through traditional cost, income, or input-output methods, creating project assessment risks. Beijing faces problems including arbitrary investment, inconsistent subsidy standards, and unclear responsibility allocation, making feasibility and VFM assessment critical for risk mitigation.

### **6.3 Incomplete Standardized Management Systems**

Initial issues regarding nature, function, and service content have been gradually resolved, but macro-level management lacks long-term stable institutional norms, with key processes yet to be established. National-level PPP and infrastructure franchising laws remain under development, while existing laws like the Tendering and Bidding Law are uncoordinated with departmental regulations. Current rules for government purchase and cultural PPP mainly target infrastructure, with few operable provisions for cultural projects. Grassroots cultural facility socialization pilots are expanding, but lack institutional arrangements for project planning, review panel composition, and franchising authorization.

### **6.4 Supervision and Assessment Loopholes**

In Beijing, 70% of public reading spaces use government purchase or bookstore subsidy models. Some cultural institutions believe these models suffer from unscientific standards, collusion, free-riding, and government rent-seeking, causing welfare and efficiency losses. Although third-party assessment mechanisms exist, they primarily focus on fiscal subsidies rather than whole-process supervision, lacking strict, transparent procedures. Ensuring appropriate government funding while preventing loss and guaranteeing sustainable development remains a weak link.

## **7. Development Strategies for Beijing's New Public Reading Spaces**

### **7.1 Enhancing Social Institution Participation**

Beijing's experience proves that promoting public reading space construction effectively mobilizes social forces. Compared with large infrastructure projects, these spaces require less investment, offer flexible forms, and deliver obvious benefits. Future efforts should focus on cultivating and regulating cultural social institutions through increased publicity, lower entry barriers, preferential tax policies, and innovative technological value-added reading products to improve government cultural governance and social participation enthusiasm. Local governments should promptly include public reading space projects in annual government procurement and cultural PPP catalogs, timely publishing project scope, categories, quantities, and funding, with clear qualification condi-

tions and bidding procedures to expand grassroots cultural facility socialization pilots and stabilize return expectations.

## **7.2 Establishing Government-Society Co-construction Evaluation Mechanisms**

Public reading space construction involves public library resource allocation and cultural rights protection. All proposed projects should conduct VFM assessment from perspectives of resident needs, technical-economic feasibility, investment-financing plans, and cultural quality improvement potential, as well as government investment necessity, method selection, life-cycle costs, operational efficiency, risk management, and social capital attraction. Only VFM-approved projects should proceed to fiscal affordability assessment. When selecting partners, consider institutional credibility, responsibility, nature, and type, plus service radius for rational spatial layout. Equity investment constraints and risk-differentiated mechanisms like Valuation Adjustment Mechanism (VAM) can bind capital pricing to operational performance, effectively advancing resource aggregation and intangible asset valuation.

## **7.3 Formulating Coordinated and Scientific Management Systems**

Marketized infrastructure and public service franchises require effective government regulation. National-level legislation on PPP and infrastructure franchising should be accelerated, with detailed implementation rules for government procurement, tendering, and land management to ensure coordination. Specific implementation measures for cultural PPP and grassroots cultural facility socialization should clarify direction, basic principles, nature, legal responsibilities, operations, personnel, equipment, support policies, rewards, and assessment standards for social participation in public cultural services. Operable provisions should be made for feasibility demonstration, decision-making procedures, social institution selection, disciplinary measures for violations, and procurement responsibilities to guide rational operational models and improve public resource efficiency.

## **7.4 Strengthening Whole-Process Supervision**

Comprehensive supervision and evaluation systems effectively mitigate construction and operation risks. Government regulatory responsibilities should supervise construction quality and select suitable social institutions. Governments and public libraries must fulfill commitments according to laws and agreements, avoiding arbitrary changes that create risks for social institutions. Incentive and constraint mechanisms should be perfected with strict accountability to prevent speculative behavior and excessive investment. Agent mechanisms should leverage specialized supervisory bodies like inspection and audit to strictly control corruption and minimize risks.

## References

- [1] Wang Zizhou. The Rise and Development of Public Reading Spaces in China[J]. Library and Information Science Knowledge, 2017(2): 4-12.
- [2] Lian Xiaochuan. How to Save Physical Bookstores? (Part 2)[J]. Publishing Reference, 2011(24): 04-25(8).
- [3] Zhu Xi, Feng Dan, Wang Bin. New Trends in Urban Cultural Geography Research Under Globalization[J]. Human Geography, 2008(2): 6-10.
- [4] Zi Xuan. Survival Strategies of Overseas Physical Bookstores[N]. China Culture Daily, 2012-12-01(4).
- [5] Xu Yanfeng. Inspirations from the World's 20 Most Beautiful Bookstores[J]. Publishing Research, 2013(12): 9-11.
- [6] Wu Qiong, Shi Chen. Research on Japanese Physical Bookstores' Path Out of Difficulties[J]. Editors' Friend, 2015(11): 109-112.
- [7] Chen Hanzhang. Current Situation, Problems and Suggestions for Transforming Physical Bookstores[J]. Publishing Research, 2016(3): 44-47.
- [8] Liu Suli. Survival and Solutions for Independent Bookstores[J]. China Private Book Industry, 2012(1): 2-3.
- [9] Soja. Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 2005.
- [10] Niu Hongyan. Practical Exploration of Libraries Creating "Third Space"[J]. Library and Information Work, 2012, 56(3): 92-95.
- [11] Oldenburg R. The Great Good Place[M]. Boston: DaCapo Press, 1999.
- [12] Simon B. Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks[M]. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- [13] Chengdu International Bookstore Forum Opens, Discussing How Bookstores Become Urban "Third Space"[EB/OL]. [2020-09-10]. [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_{{forward}}\\_{{1}}](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_{{forward}}_{{1}})
- [14] Yang Song, Meng Lan. Beijing Xicheng District: Innovative Practice in Creating Urban Public Reading Spaces[J]. Journal of the National Library of China, 2015(4): 3-8.
- [15] Xu Huan. Research on the Establishment of Public Reading Spaces and Modern Library Development in China[J]. Library Construction, 2010(1): 109-112.
- [16] Li Guoxin. New Trends in Urban Public Reading Space Development[J]. Public Library, 2016(3): 2.
- [17] Wang Yanlong, Guo Yu. Multi-dimensional Layout of Urban Public Reading Spaces from Cultural Planning Perspective[J]. China Publishing, 2018(18): 3-8.

- [18] Ni Wei. Introducing Social Institutions Makes “Reading Spaces” Bloom Everywhere[N]. Beijing News, 2018-04-25(8).
- [19] Qiu Xiaoshi. Amateur Bookstore[M]. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2011.
- [20] Si Xinli. Construction of Public Cultural Communication Spaces: Case Study of Private Physical Bookstore Transformation[J]. International Press, 2018(5): 145-159.
- [21] Lian Xiaochuan. Reading in the Digital Age[J]. Publishing Science, 2009, 11(2): 16-20.
- [22] Zhou Xian. Reconstructing Reading Culture[J]. Academic Monthly, 2007(5): 5-9.
- [23] Li Peisen. How to Improve the Cultural PPP Evaluation System[N]. China Culture Daily, 2016-08-06(4).

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

*Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.*