

Performance Evaluation of Public Digital Cultural Services: Current Status, Problems, and Countermeasures (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates the existing problems in current assessment and evaluation practices of public digital cultural services to propose countermeasures and suggestions for constructing a scientific and standardized evaluation mechanism. [Method/Process] Through literature research and case analysis, it examines the assessment content and methods of various practices, including the National Cultural Information Resources Sharing Project, Public Digital Culture Project, sixth assessment and grading of public libraries, fourth assessment and grading of cultural centers, and the 2016 museum assessment. [Results/Conclusion] Current assessment and evaluation of public digital cultural services face major issues: lack of guiding regulations, singular implementation entities, absence of operational norms, and insufficient result feedback. Proposed countermeasures include strengthening regulation construction, building diversified entities, improving operation mechanisms, and optimizing feedback mechanisms.

Full Text

Preamble

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Abstract

[**Purpose/Significance**] This paper examines existing problems in current public digital culture service evaluation practices to propose countermeasures for constructing a scientific and standardized evaluation mechanism.

[Method/Process] Through literature review and case analysis, the paper analyzes evaluation content and methods in practices including the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project, Public Digital Culture Project, sixth national public library evaluation and grading, fourth national cultural center evaluation and grading, and 2016 museum evaluation. **[Result/Conclusion]** The study identifies four major issues: lack of guiding regulations, singular evaluation implementation subjects, absence of operational norms, and insufficient feedback on evaluation results. Corresponding countermeasures are proposed: strengthening evaluation legislation, constructing diversified evaluation subjects, improving evaluation operation mechanisms, and optimizing evaluation feedback mechanisms.

Keywords: public digital culture; National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project; public digital culture project; performance evaluation; service evaluation

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, continuous reform and innovation in government management systems have led to increasing emphasis on performance evaluation in China. Large-scale performance evaluation activities for local governments have been conducted, forming distinctive models such as the Qingdao Model (exemplar of target responsibility system), Fujian Model (comprehensive efficiency construction), Hangzhou Model (citizen-oriented practice), Gansu Model (pioneer of third-party government performance evaluation), and Shenzhen Model (government performance audit practice). As a crucial component of the government public service performance evaluation system, the construction of public cultural service performance evaluation systems has become an important task for national cultural reform and development, as well as for achieving national public cultural governance objectives.

The Decision on Deepening Cultural System Reform and Promoting the Great Development and Prosperity of Socialist Culture, adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee in October 2011, proposed establishing a public cultural service indicator system and performance evaluation methods. The Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform, passed at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2013, called for clarifying the functional positioning of different cultural institutions and improving performance evaluation mechanisms. The Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of a Modern Public Cultural Service System, issued in January 2015, explicitly stated that efficiency-oriented evaluation indicators for government public cultural services should be incorporated into the scientific development assessment system, and that public cultural institution performance evaluation systems should be established, with results serving as important bases for budget determination, income distribution, and

leadership rewards and penalties.

As an essential component of the public cultural service system, public digital culture services must align with these central policy requirements. In November 2011, the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Finance jointly issued the Guiding Opinions on Further Strengthening Public Digital Culture Construction, requiring cultural authorities at all levels to establish management and evaluation mechanisms for supervision and inspection. In June 2015, the Ministry of Culture formulated the Management Measures for Public Digital Culture Projects, proposing the establishment of a scientific evaluation mechanism combining self-assessment by project implementation units, management department evaluation, third-party assessment, and public supervision, with results linked to rewards and penalties. In July 2017, the Ministry of Culture issued the 13th Five-Year Plan for Public Digital Culture Construction, requiring strengthened performance evaluation and the establishment of an efficiency-oriented performance evaluation mechanism for public digital culture services, with citizen satisfaction as the orientation. As global information society develops rapidly, public digital culture services occupy an increasingly important position in the public cultural service system, making research on their performance evaluation theory and practice highly significant.

1. Theoretical Research on Public Digital Culture Service Performance Evaluation

In foreign literature, there is no direct English equivalent for “public digital culture,” which represents a distinctive concept in China’s domestic public cultural service research and practice. Literature review reveals that foreign theoretical research on public digital culture performance evaluation primarily manifests in two areas: First, most literature falls within government performance evaluation research. Since major developed countries have enacted specialized legislation on government performance management (to be detailed later), public cultural services (including public digital culture services) as important components of government public services are studied within the broader government performance evaluation framework. Shang Huping and colleagues’ review of 317 foreign government performance evaluation articles found that existing literature focuses on four aspects: empirical examination of implemented performance evaluations, performance evaluation of specific public service fields, examination of performance information usage, and theoretical reflection on current performance evaluation trends.

Second, a small portion of literature appears in cultural institution performance evaluation research. For example, I. Gilhespy (1999) proposed a performance measurement system model for arts and cultural organizations; B.J. Soren (2000) introduced a case where staff at Michigan’s history and science museum developed a performance evaluation system based on visitor and community stakeholder feedback; O. Paulus (2003) presented a museum performance evaluation tool model based on 14 museums in France and the United States; J.

Turbide and C. Laurin (2009) explored performance evaluation issues in non-profit organizations within the performing arts sector; and F. Badia and F. Donato (2013) examined world heritage performance evaluation, proposing participatory management as a potential solution.

Currently, domestic academic literature examining public digital culture service performance evaluation from an integrated perspective is scarce. Using the keywords “public digital culture” plus “performance,” “evaluation,” or “assessment,” only a few academic articles were found. Lin Fang’s Review of Domestic Public Digital Culture Service Evaluation Research employs content analysis to examine evaluation subjects and objects, indicator systems, methods and tools, and empirical research from an integrated public digital culture service system perspective. Hu Tangming and colleagues’ Research on Constructing Public Digital Culture Evaluation Indicator Systems uses the Balanced Scorecard and Analytic Hierarchy Process to build evaluation indicator systems and conduct empirical evaluations of three major public digital culture construction projects. Qian Dan and colleagues construct a planned behavior theory model for user adoption of public digital culture services based on actual user needs and key influencing factors. Li Dai and colleagues explore evaluation methods for public digital culture service systems from a data envelopment analysis perspective, while Xie Jing analyzes evaluation trends in China’s public digital culture services.

While academic literature examining specific aspects of public digital culture construction and service performance evaluation is relatively abundant, most studies focus on individual projects. For instance, Wang Fenlin proposes a dual-evaluation perspective for the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project; Guo Yizheng uses factor analysis; Xie Lin approaches from social benefit perspectives; and Zhang Xinhe and colleagues apply Balanced Scorecard theory to propose evaluation systems. Wen Quan and colleagues establish an evaluation model using AHP and fuzzy comprehensive methods for the Digital Library Promotion Project. Other scholars have explored performance evaluation issues for public library website services, digital library services, library new media services, digital archives services, and digital museum services. Some have also addressed public digital culture service performance evaluation content when discussing public cultural service evaluation systems. This paper examines China’s current public digital culture service performance evaluation practices and problems from an integrated perspective, offering novel insights.

2. Practical Exploration of Public Digital Culture Service Performance Evaluation

Reports indicate that with the deepening development of public cultural service systems, most regions nationwide have incorporated public cultural services into government performance assessment indicators, forming various evaluation models such as Zhejiang’s “performance-linked reward mechanism,” Guangxi Laibin’s “cultural work target responsibility management system,”

Hunan Hengyang's "public cultural services into communities' accountability system," Guangdong Dongguan's "grassroots public cultural performance assessment," Jilin Changchun's "citizen social evaluation system," and Shanghai and Chengdu's "third-party evaluation mechanisms." The concept of public cultural service efficiency construction has become deeply rooted.

Regarding evaluation and assessment specifically for public digital culture construction and services, some national-level projects like the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project, Digital Library Promotion Project, and Public Electronic Reading Room Construction Plan have issued relevant evaluation documents specifying indicators and content. However, public digital culture services are more often included within broader public cultural service evaluations.

2.1 Practice of Public Digital Culture Project Performance Evaluation

2.1.1 Evaluation of County-level Branches and Village-level Service Points in the National Cultural Sharing Project

In 2007, the Ministry of Culture issued the Notice on Conducting Supervision Work for the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project, requiring provincial cultural departments and sharing project management centers to comprehensively inspect pilot implementation and project construction to identify and solve problems. Supervision involved self-inspection by localities with reporting materials, followed by unified on-site inspection by Ministry-organized supervision teams. The inspection focused on implementation of relevant documents, particularly construction conditions, funding implementation, and staffing at grassroots branches and service points. The attached Pilot Acceptance Self-Inspection Form required self-examination of equipment standards, annual operating funds, full-time and part-time staff, weekly opening hours, monthly service visits, standardized signage, complete work records, and training completion for subordinate township personnel (required only for county-level branches).

In 2008, the Ministry issued another supervision notice with two important evaluation standards: the 2008 County-level Branch Evaluation Standard and the 2008 Village-level Service Point Evaluation Standard. County-level evaluation first-level indicators included: organization management (5 points), operating funds (10 points), resource construction (5 points), equipment and facilities (35 points), network access (5 points), service conditions (35 points), and team building (5 points). The village-level standard omitted "resource construction" and "network access" indicators but included the others.

2.1.2 Local Public Digital Culture Construction Project Evaluation Practices

According to available data, local governments rarely issue separate performance evaluation standards for public digital culture construction projects. One notable exception is Chongqing's Fuling District, which in October 2010 issued the District Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project Grassroots Service Point Evaluation Standard, incorporated into year-end tar-

get assessments. The evaluation covered leadership attention, standardized work procedures (35 points), venue work (30 points), activity organization (10 points), guidance and counseling (15 points), equipment alternative use and maintenance (10 points), and improvement indicators (maximum 20 points).

2.1.3 Latest Evaluation Practices for Three Major Public Digital Culture Projects In June 2015, the Ministry of Culture issued the Management Measures for Public Digital Culture Projects, requiring annual evaluation of public digital culture projects. Following the Notice on Organizing 2016 Public Digital Culture Project Assessment Work, the Ministry's Public Culture Department issued the Notice on Conducting 2016 On-site Assessment Work in February 2017, organizing assessment teams to conduct field assessments from March to April 2017. The notice's attachment, 2016 Public Digital Culture Project Annual Assessment Content, specified evaluation areas including: implementation of the Management Measures; completion of central government transfer payment projects by end of 2016 (platform construction, resource construction, service promotion); 2016 provincial-level local characteristic public digital culture projects (excluding central transfer payment projects); work effectiveness including service visits, social impact, awards, national activities hosted, service efficiency, and innovative service models; and citizen satisfaction. Assessment methods included listening, checking, observing, and visiting.

2.2 Practice Exploration of Public Cultural Institution Evaluation and Grading

2.2.1 Sixth National Public Library Evaluation and Grading Practice To implement the Opinions on Accelerating Construction of Modern Public Cultural Service System and following the four-year evaluation cycle convention, the Ministry of Culture conducted the sixth national evaluation and grading for county-level and above public libraries in 2017. This evaluation combined online data review, on-site assessment, and third-party evaluation. The Ministry coordinated the work, with the China Library Association responsible for specific implementation, forming evaluation teams for provincial and sub-provincial libraries while spot-checking some county-level libraries. Provincial cultural authorities managed evaluations within their jurisdictions. The Ministry commissioned third parties to conduct random citizen satisfaction surveys, with results incorporated into scoring systems.

The sixth evaluation featured diversified subjects, systematic objects, contemporary orientation, scientific standards, information-based methods, transparent mechanisms, and normalized results. Evaluation standards covered three areas: service efficiency, business construction, and support conditions, with detailed indicators tailored for provincial, sub-provincial, prefecture-level, county-level, and children's libraries.

For provincial (sub-provincial) libraries, public digital culture service-related indicators included: (1) Service efficiency: reading promotion and social edu-

cation (annual digital reading proportion), network resource services (library website, annual per capita website visits, digital resource release proportion), new media services (WeChat and Weibo platforms, mobile libraries, touch media services), and service management and innovation (service data visibility, brand building, innovation promotion). (2) Business construction: cataloging and collection organization (linking digital and traditional resources), digital resource construction (local digital resource storage, self-built digital resource totals), local literature work (local literature database construction), and key cultural projects (coordinating regional cultural information resource sharing and public electronic reading room projects, coordinating digital library promotion projects). (3) Support conditions: information infrastructure (computer terminals for users, wireless coverage in user areas, network bandwidth, storage capacity, information management systems, intelligent management).

2.2.2 Fourth National Cultural Center Evaluation and Grading Practice To standardize cultural center construction, management, and services, and promote scientific development, the Ministry of Culture conducted the fourth national evaluation and grading for county-level and above cultural centers in 2015. Based on evaluation standards and public satisfaction questionnaires, the evaluation included public digital culture service indicators such as: information infrastructure, resource processing equipment, digital service equipment, proportion of digitized intangible cultural heritage, website functions, monthly original website information updates, digital resource storage capacity (TB), and number of digital service activities.

2.2.3 Museum Evaluation and Grading Practice To implement the State Council's Guiding Opinions on Further Strengthening Cultural Heritage Work, standardize museum industry management, improve service standards and quality, and establish quality evaluation systems centered on exhibition education and open services, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage revised evaluation documents in 2016. The China Museums Association conducted the third batch of national first-grade museum evaluations from October to December 2016. The scoring 细则 allocated 1,000 total points, with public digital culture service-related indicators including: collection database (10 points), website content (5 points), language support (2 points), website design (3 points), content update timeliness (2 points), multimedia services (Weibo, WeChat, APP) (3 points), and film/television system services (3 points).

2.3 Brief Evaluation

These cases demonstrate that China has explored public digital culture service performance evaluation, but significant improvement is needed in legislation, subjects, processes, and feedback, constrained by lagging government performance evaluation legislation and practice. For instance, evaluation subjects remain singular, dominated by higher-level governments with insufficient participation from third-party institutions and the public. In public cultural in-

stitution evaluations, public digital culture service indicators are relatively few and scattered, particularly in cultural center and museum assessments. The Ministry of Culture's 2016 Public Digital Culture Project Assessment Content lacks detailed performance evaluation indicator systems. However, notable progress includes adding "visiting" (citizen satisfaction) to the traditional "listening, checking, observing" approach in 2016 assessments, and incorporating third-party evaluation in the sixth public library evaluation. Overall, while a unified national public digital culture service performance evaluation mechanism remains incomplete, development is moving toward scientific mechanisms, efficiency orientation, quantitative indicators, and normalized implementation.

3. Problems in Public Digital Culture Service Performance Evaluation

Performance management issues in public digital culture services align with broader public cultural service performance management problems, which reflect general issues in government performance management. Comprehensive analysis of these problems helps construct improved evaluation mechanisms. Four major problems currently exist:

3.1 Lack of Evaluation Guidance Regulations

Current practices show no shortage of guidance documents, such as the Management Measures for Public Digital Culture Projects, but legal safeguards are lacking. First, at the overall government level, China has not enacted independent government performance evaluation laws or policies, resulting in fragmented, singular evaluation lacking systematic theoretical guidance and legal protection, often existing in semi-spontaneous states as short-term behaviors prone to opportunism and formalism. Second, at the public culture level, although the National Cultural Development Outline for the 11th Five-Year Period proposed establishing performance evaluation mechanisms for public cultural investment, policies remain scattered across various cultural development documents without unified public cultural performance evaluation regulations, yielding limited overall progress. Third, at the public digital culture level, while specific evaluation indicators exist for the cultural sharing project and some standards for libraries, cultural centers, and museums, coverage is narrow, focusing on supervisory inspection rather than service efficiency, and lacking standards for digital libraries, public electronic reading rooms, digital cultural centers, and digital museums. Most critically, unified guidance regulations or standards for overall public cultural or public digital culture services are absent.

3.2 Singular Evaluation Implementation Subjects

Many evaluations remain government-dominated, top-down assessments by higher administrative authorities, lacking bottom-up evaluation by the public or internal government self-assessment. This singular subject structure, where

government acts as both player and referee, cannot yield objective, fair, and reliable results. Evaluations become tools for political achievement assessment and budget acquisition, deviating from original purposes. While some regions have attempted third-party evaluation, the system remains underdeveloped, with unclear legal roles, insufficient professionalism and independence, limited information collection channels, and excessive dependence on government departments, compromising objectivity. Experts are often invited merely to “sing praises” rather than provide critical feedback, leading third-party institutions to conduct evaluations according to assessed entities’ requirements, lacking neutrality and objectivity.

3.3 Absence of Evaluation Operation Norms

This manifests in three aspects: First, insufficient process standardization. Locally developed evaluation methods lack unified guidance, resulting in arbitrary procedures, closed and mysterious processes, limited media supervision and public participation, and inadequate statistical data openness, richness, and availability. Obtaining nationwide standardized public digital culture service data (e.g., funding, resource scale, participation numbers) remains extremely difficult, affecting result objectivity and fairness. Second, incomplete indicator systems. China lacks scientifically unified public digital culture evaluation indicator systems; existing indicators are limited to specific projects (e.g., sharing project) or scattered across different cultural institution evaluations (e.g., libraries, cultural centers), with some major projects lacking evaluation indicators entirely (e.g., digital library promotion, public electronic reading rooms). Most indicators use qualitative rather than quantitative analysis, emphasizing “hard indicators” like resource totals and facilities while neglecting “soft indicators” like service quality and effectiveness, with insufficient citizen satisfaction and social participation metrics. Third, frequent duplicate evaluations. Due to China’s segmented cultural administration system, evaluations are conducted independently by region or industry, lacking unified planning, with non-shareable information and results, causing resource waste.

3.4 Insufficient Evaluation Result Feedback

First, effective feedback and application mechanisms for public digital culture performance evaluation are underdeveloped, lacking comprehensive application of results. Current applications focus on annual performance ranking, political achievement assessment, and next-year budget allocation, with inadequate use for self-examination of construction problems, risk detection, future trend prediction, and service efficiency improvement. Second, lacking unified standards for indicator systems and evaluation methods, fragmented evaluations by different regions and industries cannot reflect overall performance levels or common and specific problems, providing limited valuable information for policy decision-making and overall investment planning.

4. Countermeasures for Improving Public Digital Culture Service Performance Evaluation

4.1 Strengthen Evaluation Legislation Construction

Establishing legal authority and institutional independence for performance evaluation is fundamental for healthy government performance management development. Western developed countries have relatively complete laws and regulations. For example, the UK's 1999 Local Government Act specified cultural performance indicators, while its Department for Culture, Media and Sport published Efficiency and Effectiveness of Government-Sponsored Museums and Galleries. The US Library Association's 1982 Public Library Performance Assessment became a guideline, and the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act legally mandated federal agencies to develop performance evaluation techniques and report to citizens, with amendments in 2010. Japan enacted the Government Policy Evaluation Act in 2002, and South Korea issued the Government Performance Evaluation Framework Act in 2006.

Although local legislation has emerged in China (e.g., Harbin's 2009 Government Performance Management Regulations), no national-level laws exist, let alone for public culture administration. This results in evaluation based on government documents lacking procedural safeguards, supervision mechanisms, and remedial systems, prone to opportunism and formalism. China should learn from Western experiences, strengthen top-level design, incorporate performance evaluation into national legal systems, resolve evaluation authority issues, establish legal responsibilities for results, regulate evaluator behavior, and build a comprehensive public cultural service (including public digital culture) performance evaluation legal system under overarching government performance evaluation laws.

4.2 Construct Diversified Evaluation Subjects

Public cultural service evaluation subjects should include higher administrative authorities, professional evaluation institutions, academic organizations, non-profits, mass media, and the public. Diversification and citizen satisfaction orientation have become international trends. For instance, Hong Kong's Leisure and Cultural Services Department commissions independent cultural survey companies every three years for large-scale public opinion surveys. France uses mixed evaluation models with social subjects and third parties, while the UK's Behavioural Insights Team conducts public service performance evaluations. The US Museum Performance Assessment Program is implemented by RMC Research Corporation, with diversified subjects including associations and agencies.

Mainland China should diversify evaluation by introducing third-party intermediaries, utilizing mass media, public intellectuals, and experts, leveraging public and opinion supervision to avoid unilateral higher-level government determination, ensuring objectivity and fairness, and forming a scientific and ef-

efficient evaluation system with government, society, cultural institutions, and service users. Considering China's nascent third-party evaluation stage, the government should deepen reforms by: clarifying third-party legal status and authority; improving government information disclosure and cooperation systems to overcome information asymmetry; establishing third-party institution and industry management systems to strengthen qualification management and commission systems.

4.3 Improve Evaluation Operation Mechanisms

Western countries emphasize process standardization, systematic indicator design, and unified data management. The US National Performance Review established special research groups, and the UK set up specialized evaluation agencies to promote standardized, systematic government performance evaluation. Many countries have issued specific technical standards for public cultural institutions, such as the UK's 2001 Comprehensive, Efficient and Modern Public Libraries—Standards and Assessment, the American Alliance of Museums' 2008 National Standards & Best Practices for U.S. Museums, and the Australian Library and Information Association's 2011 Beyond Quality Service: Standards and Guidelines for Australian Public Libraries. For digital resource utilization, projects like EQUINOX (library performance and quality management), COUNTER (online usage statistics), and Digiqua have developed statistical standards and indicator systems. Western audit departments provide substantial statistical data, such as the UK's quarterly/annual cultural statistics and library user data, enabling objective evaluation.

China's 13th Five-Year Plan for Public Digital Culture Construction explicitly proposes improving performance evaluation indicator systems. To achieve this: (1) At the process level, establish specialized government performance management agencies to standardize evaluation processes, unify operational methods, clarify evaluation subjects and responsibilities at all levels, specify public participation procedures, and issue third-party evaluation norms to ensure transparency. (2) At the indicator level, prioritize public digital culture service efficiency, follow economic, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity principles, use comprehensive evaluation, AHP, Balanced Scorecard theories, develop citizen satisfaction indicators, and build a "public-oriented," scientific, reasonable, and comprehensive evaluation system covering different cultural institutions. (3) At the data level, emphasize original data collection, build unified data management platforms for public cultural services (including digital services), deeply mine statistics related to public evaluation, provide decision-making references for policy formulation and adjustment, improve comprehensive benefits, and avoid resource waste and low-level duplication.

4.4 Optimize Evaluation Feedback Mechanisms

Evaluation is the means; feedback is the purpose. Optimizing result application feedback mechanisms is key to ensuring normal evaluation system operation.

Western countries emphasize feedback application, such as the US Institute of Museum and Library Services' annual performance reports (Performance and Accountability Report, Supporting Museums: Serving Communities evaluation, Grants to State Library Administrative Agencies Five-Year Evaluation, Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Evaluation).

Optimizing feedback mechanisms includes: (1) Publicizing evaluation results through diverse methods (press conferences, news reports, new media, television, websites) in forms like web reports, statistical yearbooks, annual evaluation reports, and print texts, proactively accepting public scrutiny and supervision, strengthening government-public interaction, and broadly absorbing public opinions. (2) Establishing reward and punishment systems linked to evaluation results, rewarding advanced performers while holding laggards accountable, avoiding simplistic "last-place elimination" or "veto" approaches. Use results to identify problems, propose improvements, build dynamic feedback systems, enhance sensitivity and responsiveness to public demand, adjust policies dynamically, improve government responsiveness, and form a service-promoting evaluation normalization mechanism.

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Author Contributions

Wu Gao: Responsible for drafting and revising the manuscript;
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