

## A Comparative Study of Public Library Services for Minors in China and the United States: A Website Content Analysis (Postprint)

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Public library services for minors in the United States are characterized by distinctive features and have achieved notable effectiveness; in recent years, services for minors in Chinese public libraries have also been gradually deepening. Through a China-U.S. comparison, this study aims to provide references for the further development of public library services for minors in China. [Method/Process] Using website content analysis, this study selects ten typical public libraries with effective service outcomes from both China and the United States, and compares the practices of minor services from aspects such as target audiences, resource promotion, activity programs, and service standards. [Results/Conclusions] The study summarizes existing problems and proposes recommendations for advancing the development of public library services for minors in China, including subdividing age groups, extending the scope of target audiences, focusing on strengthening services for young children and adolescents, enhancing resource guarantee capabilities, and improving the policy, institutional, and standardization systems.

### Full Text

## A Comparative Study of Public Library Services for Minors in China and the United States: Based on Website Content Analysis

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## Abstract

**[Purpose/Significance]** Public library services for minors in the United States are characterized by distinctive features and have achieved notable effectiveness, while China's public library services for minors have gradually deepened in recent years. Through a comparative analysis of China and the United States, this study aims to provide references for the further development of public library services for minors in China. **[Method/Process]** Using website content analysis, this study selected ten typical public libraries with good service performance from both countries to compare their service practices for minors from the aspects of service targets, resource promotion, activity programs, and service standards. **[Result/Conclusion]** The study summarizes existing problems and proposes recommendations to promote the development of public library services for minors in China, including subdividing age groups, extending the scope of service targets, strengthening services for young children and adolescents, enhancing resource guarantee capacity, and improving the policy and standard system.

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**Keywords:** public library; minors; service practice; China-US comparison

Services for minors constitute an important component of public library services, and their effective implementation is significant for encouraging minors to read more and read better, thereby better satisfying their spiritual and cultural needs. China's library services for minors began with the establishment of a children's reading room at the Beijing Popular Library in 1914. Although these services experienced stagnation and regression due to historical reasons, the overall development has shown a spiral upward trend. In recent years, Chinese libraries have achieved positive progress through continuous adjustment and innovation, as exemplified by the "National Children's Reading Year" series launched by the Library Society of China in 2009 and the "National Library Minor Services Enhancement Plan" lecture tour initiated in 2012, which have effectively promoted service development. Policy support from the state has also been continuously strengthened, with regulations such as the "Regulations on Promoting Nationwide Reading (Draft)" reviewed and approved in June 2017 and the "Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China" implemented in January 2018, both containing provisions for minor services. However, overall, compared with the growing spiritual and cultural needs of minors, China's library services for minors still lag behind, with service practices remaining in an exploratory stage, urgently requiring effective methods to promote sustainable development.

The United States is one of the earliest countries to develop public library services for minors, with a history dating back to the establishment of the Bingham Library for Youth in 1803, over 200 years ago. Today, its service content and forms have distinctive characteristics, providing a model for public libraries worldwide. In view of this, this study employs website investigation

methods, selecting typical public libraries with good service performance from both China and the United States to compare minor service practices from the perspectives of service targets, resource promotion, activity programs, and service standards, aiming to provide references for the further development of library services for minors in China.

## 1. Sample Selection of Public Libraries

According to the Fiscal Year 2015 data file from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) released in September 2017, there were 9,251 public library administrative entities in the United States, comprising 17,408 public library service points including central libraries, branch libraries, mobile libraries, and book mail service stations. Based on FY15 data, *Library Journal* published the LJ Index of Public Library Service in December 2017, in which 7,409 public libraries were eligible, with 259 rated as star libraries (including three-star, four-star, and five-star libraries). This study selected five U.S. public libraries as samples: Cuyahoga County Public Library, Seattle Public Library, San Francisco Public Library, Saint Louis County Library, and Madison Public Library, all of which are four-star or above with annual expenditures exceeding \$10 million.

According to the evaluation standards and grading requirements for public libraries from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2,230 libraries reached level three or above after review and public announcement in October 2013, with 859 libraries including the Capital Library awarded the title of "First-level Library." This study selected five Chinese public libraries as samples: Capital Library, Shanghai Children's Library, Xiamen Children's Library, Guangzhou Children's Library, and Wuhan Children's Library, all of which are first-level municipal-level or above libraries.

## 2. Comparison of Service Targets for Minors in Public Libraries

Public library service targets for minors include not only minors aged 0-18 but also other groups closely related to their growth.

### 2.1 Comparison of Age Segmentation

U.S. public libraries typically divide minors into children (0-12 years old) and teens (12-18 years old), providing targeted resources and services for each group. Building on this foundation, the five surveyed libraries further subdivide age groups based on developmental stages. Specifically, Cuyahoga County Public Library, Seattle Public Library, San Francisco Public Library, and Madison Public Library divide children into four stages for their "story time" activities: babies (0-18 or 0-15 months), toddlers (19-35 or 16-35 months), preschoolers (3-5 years old), and school-age children (K-6th grade). Seattle Public Library

further segments minors by grade level in book recommendations, offering distinct categories for preschoolers, K-1st grade readers, 2nd-3rd grade readers, and 4th-5th grade readers.

In contrast, Chinese public libraries typically limit minor services to ages 2 and above. Among the five surveyed libraries, only Guangzhou Children's Library offers early reading activities for infants aged 6 months to 2 years. Although these libraries design activity programs according to children's age characteristics and mark target age ranges for specific services, they generally have not systematically differentiated resource development priorities, service content, and methodologies across different age groups.

## 2.2 Comparison of Extended Service Targets

Parents, caregivers, early childhood educators, and teachers play indispensable roles in minors' development. U.S. public library websites typically feature dedicated categories for parents and teachers in their navigation pages, offering abundant online resources and in-library activities tailored to minors' ages and characteristics. For parents, Cuyahoga County Public Library provides programs such as "Kindergarten Club," "Reading Boost Camp," and research databases to help with childcare, reading promotion, and homework assistance. Saint Louis County Library offers free backpacks, books, and school supplies through its "Born to Read" program, facilitating communication between children and caregivers on specific topics to help children adapt to school life. Madison Public Library promotes gaming culture and provides practical lists of children's apps for parents. For teachers, libraries typically offer institutional cards with higher privileges for daycare centers, kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools, facilitate group card registration, organize class visits to central and branch libraries, conduct reading promotion and activity planning in schools, provide free homework help, and recommend online educational resources.

In China, the surveyed libraries' websites also cover service targets related to minors, but the information is relatively scattered, generally without dedicated parent or teacher categories. For parents, services mainly take the form of public lectures promoting educational concepts regarding minors' physical and mental health, such as Shanghai Children's Library's "Parent Salon," Xiamen Children's Library's "Psychological Counseling Room," Guangzhou Children's Library's "Parent Academy," and Wuhan Children's Library's "Family Education Guidance Service Center." For educators, the surveyed libraries generally cooperate with primary and secondary schools to conduct activities, with Guangzhou and Wuhan children's libraries actively entering campuses to co-establish branch libraries or reading promotion initiatives, and providing teacher library cards and group borrowing services.

### 3. Comparison of Resource Promotion for Minors in Public Libraries

Both Chinese and U.S. public library websites provide online borrowing and recommendation services for paper books, e-books, audiobooks, movies/TV, music, games/animation, newspapers/magazines, and other resources. However, due to differences in national history, educational philosophy, and cultural background, each has its own emphasis. For instance, under the multicultural background of the U.S., resources by race and language are relatively abundant. Both Seattle Public Library and San Francisco Public Library offer extensive multilingual resources in English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Somali, and other languages, as well as comprehensive collections on Asian, Latino, African American, and Native American cultures. In China, history-related resources are relatively rich, with Xiamen Children's Library and Guangzhou Children's Library offering special electronic resources such as comic strips and historical and idiom stories in comic format.

Compared with Chinese public libraries, U.S. public library websites demonstrate several distinctive characteristics in resources provided and promoted for minors:

First, resources for adolescent learning support are abundant. Cuyahoga County Public Library's teen homework assistance database covers numerous fields including arts, biography, business, careers, culture, education, history, languages, law, literature, politics, science, and technology. For elementary students (K-5th grade), it provides materials for classroom projects or homework, such as biographies, photos, and video tutorials. For middle and high school students (6th-12th grade), it offers research paper support materials like newspaper/magazine articles and encyclopedias. San Francisco Public Library provides databases categorized by research topics (arts, history and social sciences, language learning, mathematics, science) and research tools (e-classrooms, encyclopedias and dictionaries, journals and news, writing tools). While Chinese public libraries generally provide digital libraries such as Wanfang, Superstar, and Founder for primary and secondary schools, the resource forms are relatively single, and materials closely aligned with adolescent learning support are insufficient.

Second, recommendations for relevant social resources are detailed. In addition to providing educational and teaching online resource lists for parents and teachers, U.S. libraries also recommend social resource websites for adolescents. For example, Seattle Public Library provides award-winning websites on sex education and resources on diet, exercise, and nutrition for adolescent health and safety, as well as accessible help resources for LGBTQ and at-risk youth. San Francisco Public Library provides free activity resource lists for children, teens, and parents covering animals, arts, history, music, science, storytelling, hiking venues, and schedules. Cuyahoga County Public Library offers free resources related to Ohio driver's license tests for teens. Among the surveyed Chinese libraries, only Guangzhou Children's Library has built its own "Adoles-

cent Health Database,” while other libraries mainly provide information in the form of news entries, lacking breadth and depth in social resource provision.

#### 4. Comparison of Activity Programs for Minors in Public Libraries

In addition to daily activities related to minors, all ten surveyed libraries commonly plan and implement targeted thematic service programs for minors, their parents, and teachers (see Table 1 ).

##### 4.1 Comparison of Daily Activities

In terms of daily activities, public libraries in both countries commonly offer basic service programs for minors, including children’s story time, reading sharing, science exploration/science popularization, handicraft making, and sports entertainment. The differences lie in that U.S. public libraries more commonly provide support and guidance on homework, college preparation, and employment, while Chinese public libraries tend to organize thematic lecture series for minors, their parents, and educators.

Homework help is a major service program for minors in U.S. public libraries. For instance, Cuyahoga County Public Library has established ten homework centers and offers a Homework Mentor program at fourteen branch libraries, providing free after-school tutoring and homework assistance for students in grades K-8. Seattle Public Library provides laptops, stationery, and various online resources, with trained tutors and volunteers offering help for students in grades K-12 through instant dialogue, email, and telephone 24/7. Madison Public Library provides a list of local tutoring resources, including after-school homework clubs at local schools or other peer tutoring and paid adult tutoring options.

College preparation and employment are common service activities for older adolescents in U.S. public libraries. Among the surveyed libraries, both Cuyahoga County Public Library and Saint Louis County Library offer free college preparatory courses to strengthen teens’ SAT and ACT test-taking abilities and writing skills. Seattle Public Library provides one-on-one financial aid application assistance, conducts SAT or ACT mock tests, and assists with college applications and essay writing. San Francisco Public Library and Madison Public Library also provide career guidance and internship opportunities for teens, including job training, interview experience, academic support, and personal development assistance.

Additionally, U.S. public libraries commonly participate in government-sponsored summer meal programs, actively cooperating with relevant non-profit organizations to operate coffee houses or after-school meal activities, providing free nutritious meals year-round for children under 18, thereby increasing opportunities for these children and their parents to access and utilize library

resources while helping impoverished children avoid hunger.

In China, thematic lectures commonly organized by public libraries are typically established as long-term brands, focusing on series of lectures planned around minors' learning, life, social interaction, personality development, and physical and mental health issues. For example, Guangzhou Children's Library's "Guangzhou Youth Academy" regularly invites experts to give lectures monthly and conducts on-site consultation activities for children's education experts during large-scale reader events. Wuhan Children's Library's "Childhood Window Forum" holds monthly public lectures covering writing skills, science popularization, and family education.

#### 4.2 Comparison of Thematic Service Programs

Regarding thematic service programs, the surveyed libraries from both countries show significant differences in theme selection. Unlike Chinese public libraries that focus on thematic reading activities for school-age children through competitions such as speech, essay writing, and recitation, U.S. public libraries' thematic programs for children emphasize not only guiding and helping minors participate in reading but also cultivating their ability to engage in social practice.

For example, Seattle Public Library's "Buddy Program" has older students guide younger students in learning mathematics and reading skills. Saint Louis County Library's "Teen Advisory Group Program" is spontaneously organized and planned by adolescents who suggest projects, share ideas, and organize activities for the library. Similarly, Madison Public Library's "Teen Bubbler Program" involves adolescents and volunteers from various community professions jointly planning and implementing diverse practical activities.

Furthermore, U.S. public libraries attach importance to providing services to parents of infants and young children, a philosophy clearly reflected in the planning of thematic service programs. For instance, Cuyahoga County Public Library implements the "Born to Read" program, where volunteers meet weekly with parents of newborns at local medical centers to distribute free infant literacy kits and share literacy solutions, including various useful resources, tips, and activity schedules. Saint Louis County Library's "Born to Read" program cooperates with 17 regional hospitals and clinics to ensure that every baby born locally receives a library card. Additionally, Madison Public Library collaborates with local public health departments to implement the "Parent-Teacher Initiative," providing early literacy materials and training to the public.

### 5. Comparison of Service Standards for Minors in Public Libraries

Significant differences exist between China and the United States in the standardization and normalization of minor services in public libraries. The U.S.

library community began standardization work relatively early, with industry organizations such as the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), formulating a series of standards and guidelines for library services to minors. These include the *Guidelines for Library Services to Teens, Ages 12-18* (2008), *National Teen Space Guidelines* (2012), *Teen Programming Guidelines* (2015), and *Teen Services Competencies for Library Staff* (2017), which provide guidance on overall planning, service spaces, activity implementation, and staff competencies, along with successful examples for reference. State libraries or library consortia have also issued or revised relevant public library standards containing specific provisions for minor services.

In China, the earliest normative requirements for public library minor services were the series of standards used in the national evaluation and grading work for county-level and above public libraries implemented since 1994. These standards propose requirements for the construction, management, and services of children's libraries at provincial, municipal, and county levels from aspects such as facilities and equipment, literature resource development, user services, management and recognition, and key cultural projects. Subsequently, national and industry standards such as the *Code for Design of Library Buildings* (1999), *Construction Standards for Public Libraries* (2008), and *Public Library Service Standards* (2011) have also provided recommendations for children's library building area, service space design, and equipment settings. The *National Library Standardization Work "Twelfth Five-Year" Plan Outline* (2012) and *National Library Standardization Work "Thirteenth Five-Year" Plan Outline* (2016) issued by the National Library Standardization Technical Committee specifically identified minor service standards as a key area in China's current library industry standard system construction. However, overall, China's public library standards still lack sufficient specificity for minor services, with no specialized library service standards for minors. Existing standards contain mostly macro principles and concepts, with some quantitative requirements for building area, reading seats, and collection size, but practical guidance for public library minor services remains relatively scarce.

In terms of specific practices, both Chinese and U.S. public library websites have similar categories for library usage regulations and reader guidelines. However, U.S. public library standards are more detailed and pragmatic. For example, regarding minors' online safety and privacy protection, Cuyahoga County Public Library provides instructions and guidance for children's positive and safe internet use, requiring parental signature permission when using children's photos or video images for activity promotion or when collecting survey information from teens. Seattle Public Library's privacy statement indicates that children only need to provide necessary and limited information when using library websites and participating in activities, and that parental or guardian consent is required when collecting personal information from children under 13. Additionally, San Francisco Public Library provides safe websites identified and recommended by the ALA Children's Division Committee, clearly stating online safety rules and

reminding children how to protect personal privacy and identify inappropriate content such as unsuitable information, harassment, data theft, and false advertising. Chinese public library websites are relatively deficient in these aspects.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The comparative analysis reveals that, relative to U.S. public libraries, China's public libraries exhibit a "weak at both ends, strong in the middle" status, generally lacking proactive awareness in resource development and activity planning based on different age stages of minors. Although services claim to target all minors, actual activities tend to focus on children from kindergarten to junior high school, with noticeably insufficient service capacity for younger children and senior adolescents. Additionally, there remains a certain gap in service professionalism and standardization compared with U.S. public libraries. To address these issues, the following development recommendations are proposed:

First, subdivide reader age groups and extend the scope of service targets. Minors at different ages have significantly different information needs, knowledge systems, and comprehension abilities. Therefore, when developing minor services, libraries should reasonably subdivide age groups based on minors' reading needs, interests, and abilities, combined with libraries' own positioning and objective conditions such as space, collections, and staffing. They should plan and design graded, multi-level service practices for different age stages. Simultaneously, public libraries at all levels should extend their service target scope and deepen corresponding service content. They should strengthen services for minors' parents and educators, helping parents with childcare, reading promotion, homework assistance, and internet usage guidance. They should broaden early education channels, support early childhood educators and teachers in improving educational methods and techniques through research and learning, and enhance children's education quality. Furthermore, according to the requirements of the *Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China*, libraries should support schools in conducting extracurricular activities and strengthen exchanges and cooperation with school libraries to develop joint services.

Second, strengthen services for infants and senior adolescents. While continuing to advance services for middle-aged minors, libraries should focus on strengthening support for both ends of the age spectrum to achieve service equalization across all ages. For younger children, libraries should actively implement the concept of "reading from infancy," gradually incorporating some preschool education into the public service system and providing strong support for early childhood education. This includes developing infant service plans, intensifying reading promotion among parents of infants and toddlers, creating dedicated library spaces, and providing diverse parent-child early education activities to help infants develop good listening and speaking habits and promote their social and personality development. For adolescent services, in addition to providing basic content such as age-segmented book recommendations, reading programs, and recreational activities, libraries can also provide homework tutoring, college

entrance and employment guidance based on adolescents' physical and psychological characteristics and their needs for learning, employment, and growth development. Through innovative service design and effective service marketing, libraries can stimulate adolescents' autonomous participation enthusiasm and help them achieve academic improvement, school selection, scholarship applications, and future planning.

Third, improve the resource guarantee system and enhance specialized service levels. Based on subdivided age groups, libraries should strengthen collection development according to minors' age characteristics and reading needs. On one hand, library catalog search and recommendation services on websites can add classified browsing and book recommendation functions for different age groups to facilitate minors at various stages to quickly find booklists that meet their needs and improve user experience. On the other hand, public libraries at all levels need to develop database products that meet minors', especially adolescents', needs based on their service positioning, regional characteristics, user composition, and resource advantages, particularly material databases related to homework assistance services, to enhance online resource guarantee capacity. Additionally, libraries should adhere to open sharing principles, strengthen cooperation with other information service institutions and online service platforms, give full play to professional advantages, and screen, organize, and integrate network resources to achieve integrated information resource services for minors through joint construction and classified navigation.

Fourth, accelerate the development and application of specialized standards to promote standardized development. Systematic and comprehensive standard construction is key to promoting the healthy and sustainable development of public library services for minors. Given the insufficient specificity of existing Chinese public library standards for minor services, it is imperative to accelerate the development of specialized standards and guidelines focusing on key issues in business construction, service provision, and management guarantee, based on existing national and industry standards for public libraries and combined with the special requirements of minor services. Concurrently, to adapt to the requirement of subdividing service targets by age, research on user needs and service characteristics for different age groups should be strengthened, and practical experience should be summarized and transformed into industry-guiding standards in a timely manner.

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#### **Author Contributions:**

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Li Dan: Paper revision.

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