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Research on the Annual Reporting System for Urban Libraries (Postprint)

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Full Text

Research on the Annual Report System of Urban Libraries

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Abstract

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data for “cultural planning.” [Method/Process] This study employs literature review, web-based investigation, and other methods to analyze the column placement, publication formats, timing, and content of annual reports from 23 selected urban libraries. [Result/Conclusion] The investigation reveals that the annual reports of Chinese urban libraries constrain further library development in terms of compilation standards, design, oversight, and outcome transformation. When compiling annual reports, urban libraries should adhere to principles of mandatory compliance, timeliness, authenticity, transparency, comprehensiveness, innovation, and readability/accessibility. They should also integrate standardized formulation with individualized approaches, emphasize design and promotional efforts, establish long-term supervision mechanisms, and prioritize the transformation of annual report outcomes.

Keywords: urban library; annual report; annual report system

1. Introduction

The annual report system, as a type of reporting mechanism, first emerged and became widely applied in corporate management as an essential component of modern enterprise systems. After achieving notable success in business administration, this practice gradually extended to libraries, museums, and other fields, becoming a management approach commonly adopted by libraries worldwide. Globally, British public libraries have compiled annual reports for 160 years. Although not legally mandated, the practice has become a well-established convention among most public libraries [1]. In the United States, public library boards explicitly require libraries to submit annual reports to the President and Congress, with state library regulatory commissions bearing the responsibility to “collaborate with library directors to develop and adopt mission statements, long-term plans, strategic reports, and annual reports” [2]. Subsequently, Japan, Germany, and other countries followed suit by establishing public library annual report systems.

In China, the library annual report system is not a novel concept. The Republican government explicitly stipulated annual reporting requirements in library regulations, and with vigorous promotion by the Chinese Library Association and active advocacy by library scientists, the institutionalization and publicization of annual reports developed rapidly and began to take shape [3]. In 2007, the implementation of corporate governance structures and boards in public libraries brought renewed attention to annual report compilation. On March 1, 2017, the Public Cultural Service Guarantee Law of the People’s Republic of China came into effect, with Article 21 stipulating that “public cultural facility management units shall establish sound management systems and service standards, and establish statistical reporting systems for public cultural facility assets and annual reporting systems for public cultural service delivery” [4]. The Public Library Law of the People’s Republic of China, promulgated on

January 1, 2018, further provided legal safeguards for establishing the annual report system.

A review of existing research literature reveals three main concentrations: (1) Theoretical discussions on establishing library annual report systems. Huang Jiahui argues that as annual report systems across various industries in China become increasingly standardized, the flourishing development of library services in the new century provides a foundation for advancing annual reports, making standardization and legalization of library annual reporting imperative [5]. Liu Guangdi contends that annual reports by academic libraries constitute an essential component of university information disclosure systems, promoting improvements in library management and service levels, and serving as important historical documentation that witnesses library growth [6]. (2) Introductions to experiences from public libraries in the United States, United Kingdom, and other countries. Li Yujia and Zhang Guangqin conducted in-depth analyses of the components, formats, publication channels, objectives, and characteristics of annual reports from eight U.S. public libraries [7]. Zhang Xin and Wang Rongkun surveyed annual reports from 56 research university libraries, finding they generally include letters from library directors, mission statements, major achievements, annual highlights, exhibitions and events, financial work, statistical data, gifts and donations [8]. Based on analysis of British public library annual reports, Hao Qinghe concludes that effective annual reporting requires adherence to principles of institutionalization, standardization, informatization, objectivity, and transparency [1]. (3) Summaries and reflections on practices of domestic academic library annual reports. Su Qiuxia, based on surveys of “211 Project” university libraries, proposed standardizing annual report systems to achieve optimal conditions for standardized objects and sustainable development [9]. Long Quan investigated 2016 annual reports from “985 Project” university libraries, recommending that annual report compilation should leverage information technology tools to enhance interactivity and reader engagement, and strengthen data correlation analysis to uncover deeper meanings [10].

In summary, existing research lacks investigation into the current status of public library annual report system establishment and compilation, as well as practical considerations for implementation. This study focuses on urban libraries as research subjects. As cultural landmarks of cities, urban libraries should form an orderly, efficient library service system, with the library cluster becoming an organic component of the city [11]. Fang Jiazhong, Director of Guangzhou Library, posits that urban libraries play a leading role in the library profession, with “service efficiency” as the core and “information disclosure” as the starting point—on one hand identifying benchmark libraries and promoting exchange, and on the other hand exerting overall leadership while establishing positive interaction with society [12]. Therefore, investigating urban libraries can provide reference for establishing annual report systems across various libraries.

Urban library annual reports compile important events and various statistical data within a year, serving as a comprehensive and objective record of library

operations, reader services, and developmental progress, and constituting important archival materials. This study employs web-based investigation methods to examine the annual report systems and compilation practices of selected urban libraries, analyzing existing problems in system establishment and compilation processes, and proposing corresponding strategies.

2. Necessity Analysis of Establishing the Annual Report System

2.1 Implications Under the Public Library Law Implementation Environment The Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China, building upon existing policies and practical experiences, constructs a fundamental institutional framework for public library management, operation, and services [13]. Under this legal environment, library management and service work encounter many new situations and challenges regarding mechanism improvement, procedural standardization, service efficiency enhancement, and collaboration capacity building. Annual report system research represents an essential component of institutional development under the current legal framework—a new topic in library development that the state is vigorously promoting. Institutionalizing, standardizing, and legalizing annual report content and compilation procedures serves first as external constraint but can be transformed into internal self-regulation for libraries. Simultaneously, the annual report compilation process itself constitutes legal education and self-regulation for libraries, collectively improving management standards and playing a crucial role in the healthy development of library services.

2.2 Requirements for Library Standardization Management Standardization involves coordinating standardized objects to achieve optimal conditions and sustainable development [14]. Library standardization primarily refers to the process of formulating, implementing, and revising relevant standards—establishing benchmarks for scientific evaluation and management, providing criteria for service quality improvement, and ensuring protection for disseminating innovative achievements and promoting sustainable library development. Establishing an annual report system aligns with library standardization management requirements. Based on systematic review of existing achievements in collections, funding, personnel, and service content, libraries can construct standardized management systems grounded in process management according to established standards. Furthermore, comprehensive business review according to evaluation standards, through revised work plans and detailed scheduling, facilitates organization-wide effort allocation, responsibility distribution, assessment preparation, and improvement of rules and operational procedures.

2.3 Requirements for Promoting Transparency and Improving Management Systems Legislatively guaranteeing citizens' right to information represents a common practice in rule-of-law countries and the necessary path

to establishing modern library management systems under legal frameworks. Most public libraries in China are government-funded institutions. Although no formal laws explicitly require annual report submission, as public cultural service institutions, compiling and publishing annual reports to promote transparency and safeguard users' right to information not only improves service quality and standards but also serves as an important means for libraries to establish external image, strengthen social connections, and enhance social influence. Additionally, submitting annual reports to relevant higher authorities represents a form of proactive supervision acceptance. As a document providing decision-making references for higher authorities, the annual report possesses unique attributes regarding interests and content [15], creating favorable conditions for "tracking" and dynamic management of libraries by higher authorities and timely adjustment of management and service policies.

2.4 Important Statistical Data for National Cultural Planning "Cultural planning" refers to the national implementation of culture-oriented innovation strategies. Strategic cultural planning, in particular, has been widely introduced as independent planning into public cultural service systems [16], while cultural concern and vision in a strategic sense have early integrated into various levels of public cultural service planning. As an important component of the public cultural service system, library annual reports comprehensively summarize annual work conditions and documentation of various services. With detailed content and credible data, they concentrate and express library cultural values and internal developmental drivers, providing analytical and operational references for planning and guiding national public cultural service development. This helps establish, demonstrate, and experience the uniqueness and competitive advantages of public cultural services, restore vitality in public cultural spaces, shape fair and democratic cultural environments, and cultivate public cultural identity [17].

3. Current Status Survey of Urban Library Annual Report Systems

To comprehensively understand the current state of urban library annual report systems in China, this study selected annual reports published before August 2018 from 23 urban library websites as sample data, analyzing their column placement, publication formats, timing, and constituent elements.

3.1 Publication Timing Publication timing serves as an important cue for users to access needed information. The surveyed 23 urban libraries began publishing annual reports in 2013. By August 2018, most had released reports for 2013-2016. Possibly due to not reaching update cycles, only five libraries including the National Library, Guangzhou Library, and Shenzhen Library had published 2017 annual reports. Nearly half of the libraries did not indicate publication dates on their websites or within reports. However, Capital Library,

Pudong Library, and Suzhou Library began addressing this issue early, publishing reports at relatively fixed times—Capital Library and Pudong Library in February each year, Suzhou Library in January, and Dongguan Library around springtime. Although most libraries published four years of reports, many only began focusing on and prioritizing annual reporting systems recently. For instance, Nanjing Library only started publishing its 2013-2016 annual reports in August 2017.

3.2 Publication Formats The 23 libraries published annual reports in PDF documents, XLS, DOC, and web browsing formats. PDF, XLS, and DOC formats involve uploading completed documents, while HTML webpages present static annual reports that cannot be downloaded. The survey revealed that 18 libraries including Dongguan Library, Guangzhou Library, and Shanghai Library provide free download services. Although Shenzhen Library and Suzhou Library only offer web browsing without download services, users can still conveniently access relevant management and operational information. Most libraries achieved visually engaging presentations combining text with tables, bar charts, and other graphical formats. However, Capital Library and Liaoning Library present reports using only text and tables without supplementary images for essential content.

3.3 Website Column Design Library websites already bear partial responsibility for publicizing activities, releasing service updates, and providing consultation and communication. Therefore, annual reports involving work summaries, business data, academic achievements, and social impact must be published in appropriately designed columns. To enable users to quickly and clearly access annual reports, libraries must employ technical means to establish concise, intuitive, and clear annual report homepage columns providing convenient access pathways. Analysis of annual report navigation bars on library websites revealed that most libraries established two- or three-tier navigation. Only Shanghai Library directly set first-tier navigation for “Annual Plan and Report.” Sixteen libraries including Dongguan Library, Guangzhou Library, and Shenzhen Library established second-tier navigation such as “About Us/Overview/Information Disclosure - Annual Report” and “Work Plan and Annual Report.” Pudong Library, Capital Library, Suzhou Library, and Hangzhou Library established third-tier navigation, with some using “Library Affairs/Information Disclosure” as second-tier navigation.

3.4 Content Structure Analysis of constituent elements and table of contents from the 23 libraries’ annual reports revealed that, due to varying business emphases and service content, annual report components naturally differ (see Table 2), but generally fall into six categories:

1. **Report Directory:** Framework of annual report content facilitating quick reference.

2. **Chronicle of Major Events:** Brief description of significant events in the previous year, including time, location, and content, serving documentary and promotional functions.
3. **Work Summary:** Summary of important services and statistical data from the previous year, briefly outlining various indicators.
4. **Business Statistics:** Statistical data on library management, users, personnel, and other aspects from the previous year, such as collection size, user borrowing volume, and user visits.
5. **Organizational and Personnel Structure:** Analysis of institutional setup and personnel composition.
6. **Service Programs:** Summary of basic, important, and extended services implemented in the previous year.

Library websites themselves serve functions including publicizing activities, releasing service updates, and providing consultation. Therefore, annual reports must publish information related to work summaries, business data, academic achievements, and social impact. A prominent feature of annual reports is emphasis on financial information and statistics. Urban libraries' annual reports disclose financial information including income (government funding, service revenue, etc.), expenditures (activity costs, project expenses, facility upgrades, etc.), and assets (existing hardware, collection allocation, etc.), with detailed breakdowns of each category. The "business data" component occupies substantial space, covering building area and reading rooms, library card numbers, circulation visits, literature procurement volume, borrowing visits, and reader activities. Some libraries adjust annual report components based on actual conditions to achieve broader coverage. For example, Guangzhou Library's 2015 annual report removed "business statistics," added "statistics and analysis" incorporating "reader activities," and included "media coverage." Zhejiang Library listed "academic achievements statistics" and "branch services" under "business work conditions." Hangzhou Library and Dongguan Library added "service performance (evaluation)" to assess departmental work, service content, and resource conditions. Finally, while table of contents indexes facilitate quick user searches, only half of the libraries included them.

4. Implementation Challenges and Recommendations for China's Urban Library Annual Report System

China's urban library annual report system remains in an exploratory and practical stage, facing various difficulties. The investigation shows that although most libraries began compiling and publishing annual reports in 2013, their compilation standards, content, publication formats, column design, length, and indexes lack unified standards and norms, resulting in divergent paradigms. Publication timing varies, and as of August 2018, only the National Library and others had released 2017 reports. Some provincial libraries, such as Hainan Library and Fujian Library in eastern regions, have not compiled or published

annual reports, not to mention libraries in remote central and western regions or economically underdeveloped areas. This indicates insufficient promotion and implementation of annual reporting systems nationwide, with reform remaining a formidable task. Given that annual reports constrain system development in compilation standards, design, oversight, and outcome transformation, libraries must adhere to established principles and propose specific strategies to overcome implementation obstacles.

4.1 Principles for Annual Report Compilation Based on the above analysis, to standardize and institutionalize annual reports and maximize their effectiveness, urban libraries should adhere to the following principles:

1. **Mandatory Compliance:** Libraries must strictly follow relevant standards and specific regulations (including formats and items) when completing reports, submit them to relevant departments, and publish them publicly.
2. **Timeliness:** Libraries must submit the previous year's annual report to higher authorities within stipulated timeframes [41], without delay.
3. **Authenticity:** Annual reports must be accurate and truthful, without falsification or perfunctory treatment. Violations will result in accountability and penalties per relevant regulations.
4. **Transparency:** Per regulations, libraries must submit the previous year's annual report annually and publish it through various channels.
5. **Comprehensiveness:** Business data in annual reports generally includes service benefits, literature and information resources, funding investment, facilities and equipment, staff, and other content.
6. **Innovation:** Annual report content should not rigidly follow frameworks of annual summaries, chronicles, business data, and work priorities. Libraries may elaborate on media coverage, awards, academic research, international exchanges, volunteer work, future development strategies, etc.
7. **Readability/Accessibility:** Numbers should use Arabic numerals with industry-standard measurement methods and units. Writing should employ third-person perspective with rigorous, concise style, precise semantics, and fluent modern Chinese. Reports should be visually engaging with statistical charts (bar charts, pie charts, etc.) and supplementary images of facilities, services, and activities to enhance readability.

4.2 Recommendations for Establishing the Annual Report System

4.2.1 Integrating Standardization with Individualization Given variations in annual report compilation standards and paradigms, several approaches are necessary:

1. **Establish Clear Specifications:** Provide explicit regulations on column design, main content, format, length, structure, compilation personnel, data sources, operational procedures, and completion timelines to system-

atize and promote annual reporting [42]. Content should fully disclose service benefits (service area and population, registered readers, literature circulation, digital resource usage, user activity frequency, participation numbers, information consultation volume, website/WeChat/Weibo service indicators), literature and information resources (physical collection size, annual additions, digital collection size, annual digital additions), funding investment (physical literature procurement costs, digital literature procurement costs), facilities and equipment (building area, branch/service point/self-service library numbers, computer configurations), staff (personnel numbers, professional technical staff, volunteer numbers and service hours), and other aspects (social partnership numbers, media coverage). This facilitates inter-library business comparison and supports research on compilation outcomes and service improvement.

2. **Establish Funding Guarantee Mechanisms:** Create special funding to subsidize departmental annual report compilation, incentivizing and supervising libraries. Successful experiences from corporate annual reports or exemplary libraries should be referenced.
3. **Allow Individualization:** To prevent uniform content, annual reports need not strictly follow prescribed frameworks. Based on unified compilation standards, libraries should elaborate on media coverage, awards, academic research, international exchanges, volunteer work, social donations, and future development strategies. For example, Nanjing Library could highlight its “ancient books” section, while Shenzhen Library could feature its main-branch library system construction in special formats.

4.2.2 Emphasizing Design and Promotion Library annual reports, through careful content and homepage design, clearly present library resources and services, becoming an important platform for social attention, understanding, and support. To avoid multi-level linking issues, annual reports should be placed in prominent, clear locations on websites—either under “Library Overview/About Us” navigation or as separate first-tier “Annual Report/Annual Report and Plan” navigation, with table of contents indexes on secondary pages for user convenience.

Beyond PDF, XLS, DOC, and web formats, libraries may produce electronic magazines integrating images, text, audio, and video for greater clarity and aesthetic appeal. Annual reports should list donors and contribution amounts to recognize and thank supporters while attracting additional investment from social groups, individuals, and enterprises [8]. Addressing the phenomenon of data-heavy but analysis-light reports, libraries should utilize tools for statistical analysis and data mining to explore correlations between library behaviors, collection utilization analysis, and interdisciplinary comparative research, uncovering valuable insights beneath surface data to guide library decision-making [5].

Promoting annual reports also constitutes a crucial factor in system development. Libraries must submit and publish annual reports on schedule, with qualified urban libraries printing and distributing paper versions. Libraries should employ novel, interesting, and accessible methods to flexibly introduce core annual report content to the public through various channels, such as mobile platforms with high user engagement (WeChat, Weibo) and media outlets. Regional library data exchange platforms should be established for business data sharing. Additionally, library science associations should create platforms for experience sharing and problem discussion, actively publicizing to win societal understanding and support while broadly attracting sponsorship.

4.2.3 Establishing Long-term Supervision Mechanisms As publicly funded cultural service institutions, urban libraries should provide free access to all citizens and accept supervision. The British Library stipulates that institutional operations must be transparent, with service policies, annual work reports, financial statements, and long-term development plans freely accessible to the public [43]. Therefore, annual report compilation procedures must be standardized, with establishment of annual report committees providing overall guidance. Offices should coordinate organization, outline development, content completion, and printing, with all departments cooperating in implementation. Offices should also evaluate annual report compilation work and personnel, using results as important references for individual and departmental performance evaluations, awards, and position appointments. Those failing to fulfill responsibilities and causing negative impacts will be held accountable.

A complete supervision system must be constructed to ensure orderly implementation across all stages, primarily through government oversight and social supervision. Government oversight involves inspection and guidance from higher authorities and appropriate review by regional cultural institutions. Social supervision should fully utilize reader associations, director mailboxes, and social networking platforms. Libraries should design supervision complaint procedures and implement compensation and reward measures to provide barrier-free feedback channels for readers, encouraging and guiding societal suggestions and identification of deficiencies [44].

4.2.4 Prioritizing Outcome Transformation The key to achieving intended annual report effects lies in outcome transformation. This should be addressed through three aspects:

1. **Follow-up and Review:** After submission, timely follow-up on leadership review and comments should be conducted, collecting feedback through multiple channels. Suggestions should be categorized, and practical implementation plans developed and reported to relevant leaders to secure support and improve execution.
2. **Implementation:** After reporting to higher authorities, annual report content and leadership directives should be publicly disclosed alongside

next year's prevention work plans and priorities. Leadership decisions and preventive measures proposed in annual reports should be broken down into specific tasks for member units [45], with strengthened supervision, regular progress reporting, and active coordination with relevant departments to ensure decisions translate into action.

3. **Effectiveness Evaluation:** After transformation into concrete work, evaluation of actual effectiveness should be emphasized. The evaluation system should combine government assessment, expert review, and public evaluation [46]. Government departments should establish evaluation teams conducting regular and ad-hoc qualitative and quantitative assessments of annual report content and compilation work, continuously optimizing processes and promptly publishing evaluation results. Regular national urban library annual report conferences should be held, inviting experts for scientific review and systematic summary. Public satisfaction should also be incorporated into evaluation processes, encouraging public evaluation of annual report effectiveness through digital or traditional media with reasonable suggestions.

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