

Strategies for Chinese Public Libraries' Participation in Cultural Heritage Transmission: A Case Study of Ancient Book Preservation (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Public libraries play a pivotal role in the inheritance and development of cultural heritage. This article investigates the strategies for Chinese public libraries' participation in cultural heritage inheritance, aiming to provide reference and guidance for public libraries' involvement in cultural heritage work. [Method/Process] Through literature research and empirical case analysis, and by incorporating the work content of the National Library of China, Shanghai Library, and Suzhou Library in ancient book preservation, this paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of the methods and deficiencies in ancient book preservation. [Results/Conclusion] Based on issues such as the monotonous digital presentation of ancient book resources, the "niche" audience for ancient books, and insufficient strong momentum in ancient book promotion and exhibition, this paper proposes recommendations for current public library participation in cultural heritage work: providing resource services and constructing characteristic resource databases; collaborating to develop digital humanities platforms for cultural heritage; applying for cultural projects and cultivating professional talents; passing on traditional skills and protecting cultural heritage from points to surfaces; conducting series of activities to stimulate public interest; strengthening cultural heritage promotion and marketing and building cultural heritage brands, etc., with the aim of providing reference for public libraries and cultural heritage preservation.

Full Text

Preamble

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Research on Strategies for Chinese Public Libraries' Participation in Cultural Heritage Inheritance: A Case Study of Ancient Book

Preservation in Public Libraries

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] Public libraries play a pivotal role in the inheritance and development of cultural heritage. This article examines strategies for Chinese public libraries' participation in cultural heritage transmission, providing reference for their involvement in cultural heritage work. [Method/Process] Through literature research and empirical case analysis, this paper synthesizes the work of the National Library of China, Shanghai Library, and Suzhou Library in ancient book preservation to comprehensively analyze preservation methods and their limitations. [Results/Conclusions] The study identifies issues including monotonous digital presentation of ancient book resources, "niche" audiences for ancient books, and insufficient motivation for promotion and exhibition. Recommendations include: providing resource services and building specialized databases; collaborating to develop digital humanities platforms for cultural heritage; applying for cultural projects while cultivating professionals; teaching skills to expand heritage protection from points to surfaces; organizing 系列活动 to stimulate public interest; and strengthening promotion and marketing to build cultural heritage brands.

Keywords: public libraries; cultural heritage; strategy; ancient book preservation; public cultural services

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1 Introduction

Cultural heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible forms, including monuments, artifacts, and expressions of folk knowledge and spiritual culture that carry cultural values serving as the genes and bloodline of a nation, holding significant importance for human society. The concept initially referred to traditional cultural relics. In 2003, UNESCO adopted the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. China leads the world with 43 items inscribed on UNESCO's intangible heritage lists [1]. In 2011, China promulgated the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China*, which expanded the scope of cultural heritage beyond physical artifacts to include various non-physical forms and stipulated provisions for libraries' work in intangible cultural heritage. The law mandates that libraries should orga-

nize and conduct research, academic exchanges, and promotion or exhibition of representative intangible cultural heritage projects [2].

The *Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China*, implemented on January 1, 2018, requires government-established public libraries to systematically collect local literature and preserve and inherit local culture. The *Opinions on Promoting Ancient Book Work in the New Era*, issued on April 11, 2022, calls for expanding the workforce for ancient book preservation and repair, connecting practitioners in the field, and exploring innovative approaches to revitalize ancient books. As important cultural memory institutions, public libraries bear the responsibility of protecting human cultural heritage and inheriting civilization. Their active participation facilitates resource preservation and living presentation of cultural heritage, thereby promoting value reproduction.

2 Theoretical Research and Practical Progress of Chinese Public Libraries' Participation in Cultural Heritage

2.1 Theoretical Research

Over the past decades, Chinese scholars have recognized public libraries' role as social and cultural institutions in cultural heritage development and utilization, establishing a theoretical foundation. Research in this field primarily uses 2008 as a watershed, with a surge in studies after a series of policies and conventions were introduced. The first relevant study in China's public library sector was Jin Xiaomei et al.'s 2003 exploration of the relationship between libraries and intangible cultural heritage protection, proposing recommendations for libraries' important role [7]. In recent years, with the rise of digital humanities and big data technologies, publication volume has increased again. For instance, Xu Tongyang and Ju Hanfei examined German libraries' participation in cultural heritage digital preservation projects, analyzing their characteristics such as diverse themes and multi-party collaboration [8].

Ma Fengyan argued that libraries possess unique functional advantages in inheriting intangible cultural heritage and should assume primary roles [9]. Sun Hui, from a cultural diversity perspective, affirmed libraries' significance in protecting intangible cultural heritage and explained their crucial documentation function in preserving human memory [10]. Wang Yi et al. emphasized libraries' pivotal role in inheriting and promoting intangible cultural heritage [12]. Tong Jie proposed that libraries can achieve digital protection of intangible cultural heritage through three technologies: audio-video digitization, digital pattern databases with computer-aided design systems, and 3D dynamic imaging [13]. Kong Fanmin analyzed practical problems in public libraries' intangible cultural heritage database construction, offering suggestions on metadata standardization, system construction, technology application, and professional training [14]. Liu Weihua et al. stressed libraries' responsibility to protect intangible cultural

heritage while advocating attention to disadvantaged cultures and groups [15]. Vrettakis et al. suggested libraries could develop mobile-based story editors to enable readers to narrate cultural stories, advancing heritage knowledge dissemination [16].

2.2 Practical Progress

In practice, many public libraries attach great importance to cultural heritage, with main participation forms summarized as follows. Shanghai Library leverages its collection advantages, adopting crowdsourcing to organize the Sheng Xuanhuai archives. Zigong Library collects rich literature resources, including over 100 types related to cultural heritage, and annually hosts Lantern Festival archery events, creating a cultural brand around ritual archery. Since 2008, local literature collection has increased significantly, with 1,300 types of local documents.

National Library undertakes the responsibility of promoting representative intangible cultural heritage projects, hosting folk paper-cutting art exhibitions. Suzhou Library and Shanghai Library have conducted ancient book restoration experience activities. Provincial libraries have applied for intangible cultural heritage status for their work. For example, Shandong Library's "Traditional Chinese Ritual Archery" and "Woodblock Printing Techniques" were selected for the fifth batch of provincial intangible cultural heritage representative projects [18]. National Library's "Traditional Book Binding Techniques" was selected for the fifth batch of national intangible cultural heritage representative projects.

An investigation of 55 provincial and capital city libraries revealed that 37 have established first or second-level local literature catalogs on their websites. Anhui Library sets "Work Updates," "Precious Ancient Books Catalog," "Anhui in Classics," and over 10 other second-level navigation bars under first-level navigation. Capital Library directly sets "Excellent Cultural Heritage" as a first-level navigation bar. Tianjin Library has "Tianjin Ancient Book Protection Center." Liaoning Library places ancient book-related content under "Catalogs."

These achievements demonstrate that public libraries' cultural heritage work has yielded results but still has shortcomings. Libraries have rich cultural heritage resources in their collections, including ancient manuscripts and local chronicles that serve as firsthand materials with irreplaceable importance in excavating typical heritage projects and promoting heritage applications. However, libraries have not sufficiently considered cultivating heritage inheritors and transmitting cultural skills. In the digital intelligence era, exploring integration with digital humanities is necessary beyond traditional library work models.

3 Necessity and Feasibility of Chinese Public Libraries' Participation in Cultural Heritage Inheritance

3.1 Necessity

Public libraries, as important members of cultural memory institutions, bear the responsibility of protecting human cultural heritage and inheriting social civilization. Their active participation promotes resource preservation and living presentation of cultural heritage, thereby driving value reproduction. The *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China* (2011) provides legal basis for heritage transmission and protection. Article 35 specifically requires public cultural institutions like public libraries and intangible cultural heritage academic institutions to organize and conduct research, academic exchanges, and other activities, emphasizing that they should integrate these tasks with their institutional operations.

3.2 Feasibility

Libraries' own information organization methodologies can provide theoretical guidance for collecting and organizing cultural heritage resources from different perspectives, such as ensuring the standardization, accuracy, and completeness of cultural heritage documentation, and providing standards for classifying and organizing diverse resources. Public libraries serve all sectors of society with massive reader communities, enabling them to excavate and cultivate heritage transmission talent while promoting heritage knowledge and awakening societal protection awareness. With digital technology development and popularization, digital humanities platforms have emerged in the cultural heritage field, using timelines, digital simulation, and human-computer interaction to virtually restore and reproduce historical scenes—an advanced presentation form for cultural heritage utilization.

4 Empirical Case Analysis

Ancient books are crucial carriers of historical culture. Under policy promotion, public libraries' ancient book preservation work is flourishing. The three selected cases—National Library of China, Shanghai Library, and Suzhou Library—are all leading units in national ancient book protection and restoration, demonstrating leadership and representativeness in collection organization, application, and innovative digital services.

4.1 National Library of China Ancient Book Preservation

Since the Jingshi Library period, the National Library has had staff dedicated to document restoration. In 1965, the library enabled rebirth of damaged national treasure-level documents. The establishment of the National Library Ancient Book Protection Center and the “Chinese Ancient Book Protection Plan” marked

comprehensive rollout of ancient book census work and construction of digital resource databases. The plan's main contents include three aspects: ancient book protection and restoration projects, development and utilization of ancient books, and innovative digital ancient book services.

The National Library uses virtual reality technology to create "VR Panorama Cultural Classics," providing macro panoramic displays of the gathering, dispersal, and changes of Chinese classics [19]. The "National Precious Ancient Book Catalog Knowledge Base" officially released, aiming to enable multi-dimensional querying and exploration of ancient books in the catalog through interactive visualization and linked semantic technologies. The library holds approximately 1.4 million ancient book items, forming a complete system of rich cultural resources that serve as indispensable original materials for historical and social research.

In June 2023, on the 15th anniversary of the "Chinese Ancient Book Protection Plan," the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Peking University, and ByteDance held a signing ceremony at the National Library to jointly build a national smart library system. By the end of 2025, the three parties plan to complete digital organization of 25,000 ancient books from the National Library and other collections, providing public welfare reading services.

4.2 Shanghai Library Ancient Book Preservation

Shanghai Library is a leading national unit in ancient book protection and restoration. In 2014, it was awarded "National Advanced Unit in Ancient Book Protection Work" by the Ministry of Culture. The library consistently adheres to the core concept of balancing preservation and transmission, insisting on bringing ancient books out of storage to become a source of cultural confidence.

Under guidance from the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture, Radio, Film and Television, Shanghai's ancient book protection work has been carried out systematically since March 2007. On October 9, 2008, the Shanghai Ancient Book Protection Center was inaugurated at Shanghai Library, establishing an ancient book census leadership group to conduct inventory and cataloging. By the end of January 2008, the library completed comprehensive cleaning of already-cataloged ancient books and un-cataloged ancient books temporarily stored in peripheral warehouses, with staff conducting on-site inventory to understand historical issues and prepare for subsequent cataloging work.

The library's ancient book census group catalogs approximately 4,000 types annually, completing over 42,000 types in total. This process has uncovered a series of valuable ancient books, including high-value editions such as *Shantang Xiansheng Qunshu Kaosuo* and *Liuyanzhaibiji*, improving and perfecting the collection. The Literature Restoration and Protection Department under Shanghai Library's Historical Documents Center undertakes ancient book restoration and talent cultivation, with cumulative restoration reaching 19,733 volumes and 1,095,543 pages over ten years.

Shanghai Library has built a complete ancient book restoration archive system. Since its new building opened in 1996, the library has launched historical document rescue work. It has organized the “Sheng Xuanhuai Archives Project Team,” participated in training courses organized by national and provincial ancient book protection centers, and laid a solid foundation for deepening preservation work. The library has created the “Ancient Book Content Creativity Season,” collaborating with enterprises to develop creative cultural products, continuously exploring the joy of ancient books.

In terms of innovative digital services, as early as 1996, Shanghai Library partnered with Changjiang Computer Group to create ancient book image CD production systems. It also collaborated with Shanghai Media Group to launch special TV programs that broadcast for ten consecutive days, popularizing ancient book knowledge and excellent traditional Chinese culture in an accessible format.

4.3 Suzhou Library Ancient Book Preservation

Suzhou Library’s ancient book collection originates from the late Qing Dynasty’s Zhengyi Academy and Xuegu Hall, with continuous additions since its establishment in 1914. The current collection totals nearly 200,000 volumes, including over 20,000 precious rare books, making it a renowned ancient book collection unit in China.

In 2011, the Suzhou Ancient Book Protection Center was officially inaugurated, focusing on several key areas: the Suzhou Ancient Book Protection Network, ancient book protection and restoration projects, and ancient book restoration studios. Suzhou Library leads the nation in ancient book storage conditions, equipped with professional restoration tools including book presses, drying cabinets, and CNC paper cutters. Since 2013, the library has implemented stricter standards and documentation for restoration processes.

Suzhou Library created the “Suzhou Library • Ancient Books” brand, entering campuses through on-site demonstrations to bridge the gap between ancient books and the public. Since 2007, the library has gradually advanced digitalization of its ancient book collection, completing 1,496 ancient books (829,640 pages) by November 2022. It has established databases for ancient local chronicles, genealogies, and collected works of Suzhou literati, enabling remote access and greatly facilitating readers.

5 Problems in Public Library Ancient Book Preservation

5.1 Monotonous Digital Presentation of Ancient Book Resources

Resource digitalization is an important preservation method. The National Digital Library of China has built diverse thematic open databases for cultural

heritage resources. However, most ancient book resources in Chinese public libraries are preserved digitally using only images and text, lacking multi-sensory and immersive experiences. Due to their rarity and irreproducibility, libraries strictly manage and protect original ancient materials. While using digital means for protection, the conversion often employs only simple image and text formats without further revitalizing these resources. Many materials have become inaccessible due to technological changes—for example, video resources in the National Library’s oral history collection requiring Flash plugins can no longer be accessed.

5.2 “Niche” Audience for Ancient Books

Limited by professional knowledge and cultural differences between ancient and modern times, ancient books inevitably have a narrow audience range concentrated in specific regions and groups. This factor also contributes to weak awareness of ancient book protection, restricting preservation work and limiting results to researchers in literature, history, and philosophy. Some readers are interested but lack opportunities to access professional knowledge and practical operations, while ordinary readers find ancient book content difficult to understand.

5.3 Insufficient Motivation for Ancient Book Promotion and Exhibition

The presentation forms of ancient book materials are overly monotonous. Some libraries’ 成果展示 are limited to online and offline exhibitions of original materials without exploring more display methods around ancient books. Readers find it difficult to immerse themselves and experience the charm of ancient books, limiting deeper interest. The “Chinese Ancient Book Resources Database” shows that China’s national digital library can build diverse thematic cultural heritage resource databases. Local libraries should reasonably utilize local cultural heritage advantages for digitalization of ancient books, not limited to specific forms—whether text, audio-visual, tangible or intangible, structured or unstructured.

6 Recommendations for Public Library Participation in Cultural Heritage

6.1 Diversified Presentation of Digital Cultural Heritage

Digital resources are the foundation for building cultural heritage big data platforms and represent an important future form for public libraries’ participation in cultural heritage transmission. With digital technology development, digital humanities platforms have emerged in the cultural heritage field, using timelines, digital simulation, and human-computer interaction to virtually restore historical scenes. The U.S. Digital Public Library and Europeana provide open access

to digital cultural heritage resources worldwide. Chinese local public libraries should actively carry out project construction, cooperate with other institutions, and seek cross-sector collaboration.

Public libraries should provide resource services and build specialized databases. Taking the National Library as an example, as of August 2023, the “Chinese Ancient Book Resources Database” module on the official platform of the National Digital Library of China covers 46 sub-modules. The “National Precious Ancient Book Catalog” includes over 20,000 existing items, with nearly 15,000 treasured in the National Library and the rest in the First Historical Archives of China. Libraries should actively explore new possibilities for ancient book revitalization through innovative methods, conveying the cultural, historical, and contemporary value of ancient books.

6.2 Excavating Cultural Heritage: From “Niche” to “Mass”

Public libraries should actively excavate local cultural heritage resources, discover local cultural highlights, and amplify them through cultural heritage project applications. This transforms heritage resources from being oriented only toward researchers to being publicly displayed, achieving a transition from niche to mass. For example, in 2007, UNESCO inscribed the “Yangshi Lei Architectural Archives” applied for by the National Library into the World Memory Register. These archives, the architectural drawings of the Lei family who designed royal buildings for over 200 years across seven generations, include five structures listed as World Cultural Heritage sites. This approach not only protects brilliant treasures of ancient Chinese architectural design and technology but also demonstrates and proves the superb standards of ancient Chinese architecture to the world.

Cultural and Natural Heritage Day is set on the second Saturday of June each year. Public libraries can regularly organize large-scale intangible cultural heritage promotion activities, responding to national calls while creating a strong heritage atmosphere. For instance, the National Library combines “Ancient Books in Traditional Culture” with folk culture, bringing ancient papermaking and thread binding techniques to primary and secondary school students, achieving good results. Through project applications, professional talent teams can be cultivated. The National Library’s Traditional Book Binding Technique Inheritance Center uses master-apprentice teaching, having trained over 20,000 participants in more than 500 training sessions, creating a skilled, comprehensively knowledgeable, and reasonably age-structured book binding inheritance team.

6.3 Innovative Development of Outcomes to Enhance Cultural Heritage Protection

The ultimate purpose of protecting cultural heritage is comprehensive development and utilization. Public libraries should organize various ancient book

cultural activities, including exhibitions, stage presentations, and other forms to promote ancient books. By developing cultural and creative products and flexibly applying innovative information technology, libraries can build and gradually expand online reading spaces, reducing service experience gaps between online and offline services to provide personalized services with emotional connection.

China's economic and social development has created favorable conditions for the cultural and creative industry. The *Public Library Law* encourages libraries to protect and inherit traditional Chinese culture through cultural creative products. Libraries should develop different forms of intangible cultural heritage culture, including local ancient book literature, to meet public cultural needs and enhance influence. For example, Suzhou Library combines interactive experiences with Suzhou literature exhibitions, using ancient book artifacts and other documentary resources to bring ancient books closer to the public through on-site demonstrations and other forms entering campuses.

7 Conclusion

Public libraries have a naturally close relationship with cultural heritage. Through their unique advantages, libraries can closely connect cultural heritage, especially local ancient book literature, with modern life. The living nature of cultural heritage, particularly intangible cultural heritage, makes it easy for the public to develop interest through its life-like characteristics. Public libraries' social education and digital cultural heritage protection can effectively activate heritage through direct or indirect participation, making cultural heritage more vivid and concrete rather than distant legends, passing down historical culture and traditional skills accumulated over generations.

Future research should focus on key directions including cultural heritage revitalization based on literature excavation, development systems for cultural heritage based on literature mining, and intangible cultural heritage display based on cultural-tourism integration. This paper's limitation lies in its insufficiently comprehensive case studies, and future research should conduct more in-depth analysis.

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