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Considerations on Coordinating Public Reading Promotion in Grassland Pastoral Areas Based on Local Realities

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Abstract

In 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping' s reply letter to several senior experts at the National Library of China provided guidance for nationwide reading and library development in the new era, greatly inspiring grassroots communities' enthusiasm for library undertakings. Public reading promotion in pastoral areas constitutes a crucial task for grassroots public libraries in Inner Mongolia. This article employs Abaga Banner in Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia as a case study, presenting personal perspectives on how grassroots public libraries should effectively implement the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping' s reply letter and coordinate public reading promotion efforts in pastoral areas based on local conditions.

Full Text

Preamble

Reflections on Coordinating Public Reading Promotion in Pastoral Areas Based on Local Realities—A Case Study of Abag Banner, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia

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Abstract: In 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping' s reply to senior experts at the National Library pointed the way forward for nationwide reading and library development in the new era, greatly inspiring enthusiasm for library services at the grassroots level. Public reading promotion in pastoral areas is a crucial task for grassroots public libraries in Inner Mongolia. This paper, using Abag Banner in Xilingol League as an example, presents personal perspectives on how grassroots public libraries can implement the spirit of the General Secretary' s reply and coordinate public reading promotion work based on local realities.

Keywords: public reading promotion; pastoral areas; measures

Introduction

The 2006 initiative to “Launch Nationwide Reading Activities,” jointly proposed by 11 organizations including the Central Propaganda Department, Ministry of Culture, and Ministry of Education, has become a fundamental national policy through gradual and sustained promotion [1]. In 2018, the Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council published the “Draft Regulations on Promoting Nationwide Reading,” placing nationwide reading on a legalized track [2]. In September 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping’ s reply to several senior experts at the National Library [3] pointed the direction for nationwide reading and library development in the new era, greatly inspiring grassroots enthusiasm for library services. Public reading promotion in pastoral areas is an important task for public libraries in Inner Mongolia. Using Abag Banner in Xilingol League as an example, this paper presents personal perspectives on how grassroots public libraries in Inner Mongolia can implement the spirit of the General Secretary’ s reply and coordinate public reading promotion work in pastoral areas based on local realities. Any inadequacies are welcome to be pointed out and corrected by colleagues and readers.

1. Basic Situation of Library and Cultural Development in Abag Banner

Chinese library culture has a long and rich history, with distinctive characteristics and profound heritage across different regions. Abag Banner is located on the northern frontier of China and is a purely pastoral banner. It covers a total land area of 27,500 square kilometers, governing 3 towns, 4 sums, 71 pastoral gachas (villages), and 4 communities. It borders Mongolia to the north with a 175-kilometer borderline, neighbors East Ujimqin Banner and Xilinhot City to the east, connects with Zhenglan Banner to the south, and adjoins Sonid Left Banner to the west. By the end of 2022, the total registered population was 40,500, with Mongolian ethnicity comprising over 50%. Abag Banner evolved from an ancient tribe—the “Ulus” of King Belgutei, one of the eastern princes enfeoffed by Genghis Khan [4]. “Abag” is a Mongolian term meaning “uncle” in Chinese. Since the leader of the “Ulus,” Belgutei, was Genghis Khan’ s half-brother and treated Genghis Khan’ s children as an uncle would, Belgutei’ s descendants named their “Ulus” the “Abag (Abahanar) tribe” [5].

1.1 Historical Origins of the Abag Tribe and Library Culture

The ancestor of the Abag tribe, Belgutei, was a famous historical figure. According to the “History of Yuan,” he was “pure and honest by nature, intelligent and resourceful...once established as the state chancellor, also served as Jarghuchi, and was separately granted a seal...” [6]. The position of “Jarghuchi” (Chief Judge, also translated as “Public Affairs Officer”) was not merely a judicial

officer but rather “in charge of all government affairs,” a central executive official comprehensively responsible for household registration, taxation, litigation, and supervision [7]. Historical records indicate that the Uyghur-style Mongolian script was already in use at that time. Belgutei, holding such an important position, must have been proficient in Mongolian script to handle government affairs. The “History of Yuan: Biography of Belgutei” records that Belgutei’s great-grandson, Tachu, was “gentle and modest, eager to learn, and well-versed in classics and history” [8]. These records demonstrate that the ancestors of the Abag tribe were already using written language 800 years ago and gradually achieved proficiency in mastering classics and history.

Next, let us examine several examples of the Abag tribe’s engagement with library culture in historical periods after the Yuan Dynasty. The mother of the famous historical figure Choktu Taiji was a princess of the Abag tribe. As Choktu Taiji’s father had passed away early, the responsibility of raising and educating her son fell upon this mother, who was titled “Blue Empress Khatun.” In 1618, this mother and her son Choktu Taiji together sent people to present-day Hohhot to commission the famous Chorji Guoshi to translate the “Milarepa Biography” into Mongolian [9]. Soviet Mongolian scholar B. Ya. Vladimirtsov praised Choktu Taiji’s mother, saying: “The biography of the famous 10th-century Tibetan poet Milarepa reminds people of the immense hardships and sufferings one must overcome to achieve goals and that psychological preparation is necessary to face impending storms. Choosing this work from the vast sea of Tibetan literature and commissioning its translation reveals to us the broad vision and lofty goals of Blue Empress Khatun (referring to Choktu Taiji’s mother—author’s note)” [10].

During the 17th to 19th centuries, 17 lama scholars from Abag Right Banner, including Mergen Chorji Losang Qoijing, participated in the translation of Buddhist classics—the “Kangyur” and “Tengyur” [11]. The modern famous Mongolian linguist Lamsureng (1852–1913), in 1903 had his work “Detailed Explanation of Mongolian Grammar Principles: Golden Mirror” (abbreviated as “Golden Mirror”) printed and published by the woodblock printing house of Changtu Temple in Abag Right Banner (present-day location of Chagan Nur Town in Abag Banner) [12]. Lamsureng’s work played a positive role in popularizing and standardizing the Mongolian script. After the founding of New China, the “Golden Mirror” became a precious ancient document for research institutions and universities studying Mongolian script. Many versions and manuscripts of the “Golden Mirror” are now housed in the library of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Inner Mongolia Library, Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Sciences Library, and the Archives Bureau of Sonid Left Banner. From the above introduction, we can clearly see the long-standing lineage and overview of library culture in Abag Banner.

1.2 Contemporary Herdsmen' s Library Sentiment in Abag Banner

After the founding of New China, Abag Banner ushered in a new era of library development along with other regions. Particularly after the reform and opening up, unprecedented changes in mass cultural life greatly promoted the development of library services. Over the past 20 years, the colorful library and cultural activities spontaneously organized by herdsmen in Abag Banner have demonstrated the favorable momentum of library culture inheritance and development in pastoral areas.

Here are several examples: First, the “Grassland Book Houses” founded by herdsmen have won national honors eight times. Herdsman D. Tumen Bayar from Abag Banner purchased some books with his own funds in 1996 and founded the first grassland book house in Inner Mongolia. Through nearly 30 years of unremitting efforts, his “Burentangsi Ga Book House” (named after the first characters of his son’s and daughter’s names) has now developed into a renowned grassland book house with a collection of over 12,000 books and more than 60 types of newspapers and magazines. In 2014, D. Tumen Bayar’s family received the “Scholarly Family” award from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. In 2015, he received the “National Most Beautiful Family” honor from national leaders at the Great Hall of the People. In 2016, he also received the “National Top Ten Readers” title. By then, D. Tumen Bayar had 27 years of experience in voluntarily carrying out reading promotion activities in pastoral areas, becoming a library culture celebrity on the Abag grasslands.

In Abag Banner, besides this famous grassland book house, there are several other quiet herdsmen’ s book houses spreading scholarly fragrance deep in the grasslands. For example, the book house of herdsman Saintegus from Bayanxili Gacha, Narenbaolage Sumu, and the herdsmen’ s book house of Unqibateer from Chagan Nur Town both have collections exceeding 2,000 volumes and provide free services to surrounding herdsmen. Herdsman Tegus rented a street-front shop in Bieligutai Town, the location of Abag Banner, in 2016 to open a personal book house. He has managed the “Mongolian Books House” with great success, achieving a win-win in both economic and social benefits. Tegus held “Herdsmen’ s Book Exhibitions” for three consecutive years from 2017 to 2019, with the scope gradually expanding to the entire autonomous region. In 2019, the exhibition had 80 participants and over 1,000 visitors.

Tegus also joined with several reading-loving herdsmen to hold reading knowledge competitions annually, conducted in the form of monthly contests and annual finals, with increasingly broad participation and growing numbers of participants. Additionally, young herdsman Jimus holds monthly “Wisdom Rain” reading knowledge competitions for primary school students in Bieligutai Town to help his primary school daughter with her studies while also encouraging other herdsmen’ s children to read. On average, about 30 students participate in Jimus’ s “Wisdom Rain” reading competitions each month, with the

number reaching over 100 at its peak. Through the subtle influence of library culture, the civilized behavior of loving books and collecting books has quietly emerged on the Abag grasslands, becoming somewhat fashionable to a certain extent. Nowadays, many herdsmen who have built villas or modern houses have designed exquisite studies or placed bookshelves.

2. Existing Difficulties and Problems

In 2020, the “Opinions on Promoting Nationwide Reading Work” issued by the Central Propaganda Department established the main objectives for current nationwide reading activities: by 2025, basically form a nationwide reading promotion service system covering urban and rural areas, make the concept of nationwide reading more deeply rooted in people’ s hearts, enrich and diversify activities, create a stronger atmosphere, highlight more prominent achievements, significantly enhance the supply capacity of quality reading content, further improve infrastructure construction, improve the work system and mechanism, achieve important progress in legalization, and significantly increase the national comprehensive reading rate [13].

From the current situation, grassroots public reading promotion work in Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia has achieved good progress. However, due to various reasons such as relatively lagging economic and social development, there are still some gaps and deficiencies between the level of public reading promotion activities in pastoral areas and the relevant requirements and goals proposed by the state and autonomous region. These are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

First, the overall educational level of the reader group needs further improvement. Currently, phenomena such as “not being able to distinguish between libraries and Xinhua Bookstores” and “not knowing that libraries are places to borrow books for free” still exist in society [14]. Second, public library infrastructure is aging, the professional level of personnel is low, and service conditions cannot meet reader needs. The Abag Banner Library has a total area of 1,700 square meters and has been in its current location since 2010 for over 10 years. When the new comprehensive office building for culture, sports, tourism, radio and television was constructed, the national relevant construction standards for the new library were not considered. Although the total area meets the standard, the building layout cannot satisfy the library’ s usage requirements.

Third, there are insufficient personnel and funding. The Abag Banner Library has an establishment of 5 staff positions with 5 current employees. Due to insufficient personnel and funding, many inconveniences are faced in carrying out work. It is understood that among the 13 banners and counties in Xilingol League, except for a few places like East Ujimqin Banner and Xianghuang Banner, most other places have problems to varying degrees, including incomplete office facilities, insufficient personnel, and inadequate funding. Although grassroots public libraries in Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia face the above-

mentioned common difficulties and problems, with continuous economic and social development, various localities are finding ways to overcome difficulties and are strengthening public library construction, with some places already achieving remarkable results. For example, the library construction level in East Ujimqin Banner and Xianghuang Banner of Xilingol League has already advanced to the forefront of the autonomous region. The current main issue is that the gaps between various banners and counties are relatively large and development is unbalanced.

3. Work Measures and Methods

To achieve the established work objectives and do well in public reading promotion work in pastoral areas, we should “actively unite various educational institutions and groups, as well as civilian reading organizations, continuously gather greater synergy, accelerate the socialization process of nationwide reading work, and continuously gather the strength of the whole society to promote nationwide reading” [15]. Following this approach, grassroots public libraries in Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia should adopt the following measures to further promote reading promotion work.

3.1 Actively Utilize Social Resources

First, jointly carry out public reading promotion work with civilian reading organizations. Although civilian reading organizations have high enthusiasm and increasing participation, they face difficulties with venues and funding. In response to this situation, grassroots public libraries can proactively contact civilian reading organizations, use government public resources to provide them with some assistance, form a complementary working model, and jointly carry out large-scale reading promotion activities, which should yield better results.

Second, leverage the leading role of celebrities. Abag Banner has nationally renowned figures such as D. Tumen Bayar and Ting Bater, as well as outstanding individuals from various industries. We can annually plan to invite some celebrities to participate in public reading promotion activities to use their exemplary leadership to drive reading promotion activities throughout the banner.

Third, hold selection activities such as “Book Collectors.” According to the characteristics of grassland pastoral areas, we can hold activities like “Herdsmen (Farmers) Book Collectors” every few years, commend the selected individuals, and encourage and guide herdsmen and farmers to gradually develop civilized habits of collecting books and subscribing to newspapers and periodicals.

3.2 Continue Strengthening Branch Library Work

Abag Banner currently has 4 branch libraries established in 2 towns and 2 sums. We can further promote public reading promotion work through the radiating effect of these branch libraries. A new issue that needs to be mentioned

here is the business guidance problem of free-service herdsmen' s book houses (or grassland book houses). It is understood that the established herdsmen' s book houses (or grassland book houses) play a very good role in promoting reading among surrounding herders. However, their operations require unified and standardized management. The author believes that gradually establishing a work system (or mechanism) could incorporate herdsmen' s book houses (or grassland book houses) into the public library management system for unified management and business guidance in the form of branch libraries.

3.3 Continue Promoting the “Seven Entries” Activity for Nationwide Reading

Banner and county public libraries can take the lead in organizing relevant departments to jointly carry out public reading activities entering rural and pastoral areas, communities, campuses, military barracks, enterprises, government agencies, and families. Abag Banner implemented the “Digital Culture Entering the Yurt” project between 2014 and 2017, installing “Mobile Digital Gas Stations” in all 71 gachas (villages) throughout the banner. Herdsmen within a 1.5-kilometer radius of each “Mobile Digital Gas Station” can enjoy specially provided network resources anytime and anywhere through an APP. From the current situation, if this platform is maintained and updated in a timely manner, it can continue to play its due role.

3.4 Continue Strengthening the Construction of Local Literature Rooms

Article 24 of the “Public Library Law of the People' s Republic of China” stipulates: “Public libraries established by the government shall also systematically collect local literature and information, and preserve and inherit local culture.” Article 9 of the newly revised “Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Public Library Regulations” in 2022 stipulates: “Public libraries established by the government shall also systematically collect and protect local literature and information, establish special collections and special shelves for management, equip corresponding professional personnel as needed, and preserve and inherit local culture.” In 2023, the Abag Banner Library partitioned a room within the library to establish a local literature room. From nothing to something is a significant change and progress. However, further investment is needed in aspects such as the number of collected documents and work equipment.

3.5 Carry Forward Library Spirit and Cultivate Library Culture

Libraries have formed their own culture during their emergence and development process. Libraries should “according to their own functions and tasks, combine with the cultural mission of the new era, select models suitable for their functional positioning, and focus on promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese culture” [16]. Under the

circumstances where the overall goals have been clearly defined in national policies and regulations, carrying forward the library spirit of dedication, love for the profession, and benefit for the people, and cultivating library culture mainly relies on the unremitting efforts of library professionals themselves.

Krupskaya, a pioneer of the Soviet library cause, once said: “Librarians are the soul of the cause, and many things depend on them to accomplish. They must be lovers of their own cause, skilled at working with reader masses, mastering library work methods, and adept at using these methods to organize all library work” [17]. As library professionals in the new era, we need to organically combine the excellent traditional Chinese culture with advanced socialist culture, embody a humanistic spirit of dedication and love for the profession in every field of library work and every aspect of library services, strive to create an industry-specific cultural atmosphere, and let more and more people feel the cultural charm of libraries.

In general, implementing the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping’ s reply and coordinating public reading promotion work in vast pastoral areas is a long-term systematic task. As a less-developed border region with ethnic minorities, although there are some difficulties and problems, if we make good use of local advantageous resources and think of all possible ways to jointly promote various tasks, we can elevate public reading promotion work in pastoral areas to a new level and make due contributions to cultural development in the new era of socialism.

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