

Research on Farmers' Reading Clubs Promoting High-Quality Development of Rural Reading: Exploration and Practice from Pinghu, Zhejiang (Postprint)

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Abstract

In the context of advancing nationwide reading and rural cultural revitalization, encouraging and guiding rural residents to participate in reading and promoting high-quality development of rural reading has attracted considerable industry attention. In recent years, government and society have continuously increased investment in and service efforts for rural reading facilities. However, it cannot be denied that the utilization rate of rural reading facilities is generally low, and the reading participation rate of rural residents remains insufficient. This article investigates the current status of public reading in rural China, analyzes the existing problems, introduces a case study of Pinghu City's Farmers' Book Club in Zhejiang Province promoting rural reading development, and elaborates on various aspects including the positioning of the Farmers' Book Club, organizational structure, specific practices, generated social benefits, and evaluation of development effectiveness, thereby providing experience and reference for promoting grassroots reading initiatives nationwide.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: Farmers' Reading Clubs Promoting High-Quality Rural Reading Development: Exploration and Practice from Pinghu, Zhejiang Province

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Abstract: As nationwide reading promotion and rural cultural revitalization gain momentum, encouraging and guiding rural residents to participate in reading and advancing high-quality rural reading development have become key concerns for the library community. In recent years, governments and society

have continuously increased investment in rural reading facility construction and services. However, it is undeniable that the utilization rate of rural reading facilities remains generally low, and rural residents' reading participation rates are still not high. This paper investigates the current state of rural public reading in China, analyzes existing problems, and introduces a case study of rural reading development promoted by farmers' reading clubs in Pinghu City, Zhejiang Province. The study elaborates on the clubs' positioning, organizational structure, specific practices, social benefits, and development effectiveness evaluation, providing experience and reference for promoting grassroots reading nationwide.

Keywords: High-quality development; Rural reading; Farmers' reading club; Public library

1. Problems in High-Quality Rural Reading Development

The Public Cultural Service Guarantee Law of the People's Republic of China and the Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China, while providing strong impetus for public library development, have also set higher requirements for reading services. The industry has been calling for increased government and societal investment in rural reading facility construction and services. Regarding the difficulties in farmers' reading, the academic community has formed several theoretical perspectives. The "resource determinism" view, supported by scholars such as Wang Zizhou and Guo Jia, attributes rural reading difficulties to resource scarcity that limits farmers' reading. The "management determinism" perspective, held by experts including Chen Ying, Gao Jin, Wei Chunling, and Wang Yingqi, attributes the problem to inadequate service management, such as irregular opening hours of rural book houses and administrators lacking reading promotion capabilities, who can only perform basic book collection and circulation tasks. The "lack of farmer agency" view, supported by Wang Chunmei, Wu Dezhi, and others, argues that insufficient reading willingness and ability among farmers leads to low participation. The "library necessity" perspective, advocated by Yang Yulin and Fu Xiulan, emphasizes that the insufficient fulfillment of library functions affects rural reading.

Under the combined influence of these theoretical studies and national policies, China has implemented numerous projects including the Village Library Project, Rural Book House Project, National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project, and library main-branch systems, weaving a vast reading network covering urban and rural areas. Despite increasingly complete infrastructure, the overall social benefits remain limited. Taking Zhejiang Province as an example, a complete five-level public library service network from province to village has been established, with rural cultural halls incorporated into library business management. However, a survey of 2,486 administrative villages shows that only 1-3% of village residents are book house administrators, and those who

have visited their village book house account for a similarly low proportion. Among these visitors, those who borrowed books are even fewer. The awareness and utilization rates of reading facilities among farmers remain relatively low.

After the construction of grassroots reading facilities, management systems remain inadequate. Using rural book houses as an example, some still operate on a “waiting for readers” passive model. Daily operations face issues such as unclear property rights, insufficient operating funds, and lack of supporting funds for digital resource construction. The most critical shortage is the lack of professional full-time management personnel. Most book house administrators are village officials or cultural coordinators with high mobility, weak reading promotion awareness, and limited capacity to mobilize farmers’ reading enthusiasm. Rural book houses still have a considerable distance to meet rural residents’ demands for high-quality public reading services. Farmers’ reading needs are urgent, yet actual participation rates remain low. Farmers lack reading leaders and need guidance to improve their reading awareness and activity capabilities, transforming passive reading into active reading.

2. Practice of Pinghu Farmers’ Reading Clubs

Pinghu City focuses its attention on the rural population, which accounts for over two-thirds of the city’s total. By establishing farmers’ reading clubs, the city optimizes public reading resource allocation, vigorously promotes integrated urban-rural reading services, strengthens farmers’ internal reading demands, and advances high-quality rural reading development.

2.1 Positioning and Organizational Structure

The farmers’ reading clubs are positioned as public welfare groups with rural residents as the main participants, conducting regular reading exchange activities at fixed locations. Through establishing these clubs, Pinghu City further improves the supply mechanism of grassroots public cultural services, enhances rural cultural facility functions, improves the rural reading environment, stimulates farmers’ reading enthusiasm, increases the usage efficiency of rural reading spaces, fosters civilized customs in rural areas, and further narrows the urban-rural cultural gap.

The organizational structure comprises a three-level city-town-village system. At the city level, the main library establishes a Farmers’ Reading Club General Council, with the library director serving as president to oversee all club work. At the town level, town comprehensive cultural stations establish town-level reading clubs, with station heads serving as presidents to coordinate local and village-level club operations and membership recruitment. At the village level, backbone members are primarily cultural coordinators and reading activists among villagers. The organizational structure of Pinghu Farmers’ Reading Clubs is shown in [Figure 1: see original paper].

2.2 Specific Practices

Pinghu City incorporates universal reading into its central municipal work and includes universal reading facility construction in urban planning. The cultural authorities take the lead, with the municipal library responsible for formulating the *Pinghu Farmers' Reading Club Charter* and *Star Rating Evaluation Measures*, while town comprehensive cultural stations and library branches assist in organizing activities. The city follows the principle of “adapting to local conditions and 量力而行” (acting within capacity), developing clubs where conditions are mature.

The development progressed through stages: pilot establishment in 2016, comprehensive coverage in 2017, expansion in 2018, exploration of long-term mechanisms and brand building in 2019, and from 2020-2023, efforts to cultivate self-sustaining club strength and promote successful experiences. Since the clubs aim to promote civilized rural customs, their establishment and operation must be based on rural realities and combined with local economic levels, central work priorities, and cultural and party-building characteristics. The clubs utilize existing facilities such as cultural and sports teams, learning experience bases, party member pioneer stations, village-level education bases, and educated youth memory halls.

Pinghu City actively explores long-term mechanism construction for the clubs. The municipal publicity department, civil affairs bureau, and other units work together to advance the initiative. Two city-wide club work conferences and multiple on-site meetings are held annually to commend clubs with effective activities, broad social impact, and excellent social benefits, guiding the healthy development of clubs at all levels.

2.3 Social Benefits Generated

The establishment and activities of farmers' reading clubs have stimulated farmers' reading enthusiasm. Since rural residents' public reading participation is group behavior, farmers' reading requires guidance. Through establishing the clubs, Pinghu City has organized the majority of farmers, built reading platforms, improved reading quantity and quality, and enriched rural residents' spiritual and cultural life. By 2018, the city had established 114 clubs with nearly 10,000 participating farmers annually. A “one town, one brand” network of reading clubs covering all villages was fully established and effectively operational, improving the efficiency of public cultural facilities.

Against the backdrop of rural revitalization and cultural-tourism integration, public reading is widely embedded in rural tourism facilities. By utilizing nearby rural cultural-tourism facilities for club activities, Pinghu has not only maximized the comprehensive benefits of these facilities but also enhanced rural residents' awareness of the library service system. In 2020, the club development and promotion innovation team was awarded “Zhejiang Provincial Culture and Tourism Innovation Team.” In 2021, the clubs were selected as a demonstration

project of Zhejiang's public cultural service system. In 2022, they were chosen as an outstanding case for high-quality public cultural service development in Zhejiang and a best practice case for culture and tourism promoting common prosperity.

3. Evaluation of Farmers' Reading Clubs' Effect on Rural Reading Development

To understand the development effectiveness of the clubs, optimize reading resource allocation, and prepare for future development, the Pinghu Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism commissioned an expert team to design a survey on reading's promotion of rural residents' spiritual life enrichment.

3.1 Survey Methodology

This study focused on Pinghu farmers' reading club members as the main research subjects, using questionnaires to investigate their spiritual life conditions. Some local villagers who had not joined clubs were also surveyed as a control group. The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, reading behavior, and spiritual life enrichment evaluation. A Likert Scale with 5 options measured spiritual life enrichment levels, with higher scores indicating greater enrichment. The survey was conducted online via Wenjuanxing and through paper questionnaires. A total of 934 valid questionnaires were collected, including 700 from club members (representing 75% of the sample) and 234 from non-members. The sample is representative and sufficient for effective comparison, with data processed using SPSS software.

3.2 Basic Information of Surveyed Rural Residents

The demographic analysis shows that respondents aged 19-35 accounted for the highest proportion, and those with undergraduate education also represented the largest share—likely related to the online survey method. Urban household registration accounted for 38.6%, which may seem inconsistent with the research subjects. However, considering Pinghu's small geographical area, integrated urban-rural development, convenient transportation, and beautiful rural construction, many urban-registered residents choose to live in rural areas. Jiaxing City, where Pinghu is located, removed the agricultural/non-agricultural distinction from household registers in 2008, gradually blurring the concept of household registration among young people. This is also reflected in respondents' occupations. Income analysis shows that the 5,001-10,000 RMB range accounted for the highest proportion, consistent with the *2021 Jiaxing National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletin* reporting rural residents' per capita disposable income at 43,976 RMB, making the results acceptable.

3.3 Analysis of Spiritual Life Enrichment

The overall analysis of reading's promotion of spiritual life enrichment is shown in Table 2. The overall spiritual enrichment index reached 87.30, indicating that reading significantly enhances rural residents' spiritual life quality. Among the dimensions, belief, emotion, and altruism scored above the overall level, with indices reaching 88.00-89.00. Dimensions scoring below the overall level include confidence, aesthetics, and cognition.

3.4 Impact of Club Membership on Spiritual Enrichment Levels

Comparative analysis between club members and non-members shows that members' spiritual enrichment index is 89.00, while non-members' index is 82.30—a gap of 6.70 points. Among the dimensions, the largest gaps appear in belief and emotion (8.00 and 7.50 points respectively), with the smallest gap in aesthetics (5.50 points). T-test analysis indicates that the difference in spiritual enrichment levels between members and non-members is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This demonstrates that the establishment and activities of farmers' reading clubs have significantly enhanced Pinghu rural residents' spiritual life enrichment levels.

4. Lessons and Implications

4.1 Fully Manifesting Farmers' Principal Role in Rural Reading

Materialist dialectics holds that 事物发展是内外因共同起作用的结果 (the development of things results from the combined action of internal and external factors), with internal factors being primary and determining the basic direction of development, while external factors are secondary and serve to accelerate or delay development. Farmers are the main subjects of rural reading, and their internal reading demands originate from themselves. Insufficient internal demand leads to low reading participation rates. Therefore, promoting rural public reading requires stimulating and strengthening farmers' internal reading demands.

Pinghu's farmers' reading clubs have achieved this by improving policies, organizing characteristic activities, and forming a rural reading supply system with enthusiastic farmer participation and distinctive features. By providing platforms for farmers to showcase their reading achievements, the clubs enhance farmers' reading interest and transform passive reading into active reading.

4.2 Fully Utilizing the Support Role of the Grassroots Public Reading System

Article 3 of the Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China clearly states that public libraries are important components of the socialist public cultural service system and should regard promoting universal reading as a key

task. The main-branch library system rooted in rural grassroots continuously promotes various knowledge and popularizes scientific and cultural knowledge to cultivate a learning atmosphere and build a reading culture.

In Pinghu, the reading club president concurrently serves as the library director, effectively utilizing the existing integrated urban-rural public library service system to drive club development. The clubs rely on library main branches and town/village-level library branches, using rural book houses and other reading venues to regularly gather farmers' reading achievements. This process improves farmers' reading abilities and deepens their understanding of reading's importance, changing their reading consciousness and developing self-reading habits through public reading experiences.

4.3 Giving Full Play to the Key Role of Rural Reading Leaders

The transition from participating in public reading to autonomous reading is a long-term process, and selecting excellent rural reading leaders is crucial. The presidents and backbone members of city, town, and village-level reading clubs play a core role in club establishment, activity planning, and brand formation. Through coordination among various departments and broad social cooperation, they ultimately form long-term mechanisms for club development.

Modern communication theory suggests that combining mass media communication and interpersonal communication is the optimal approach for promoting new things. The development of farmers' reading clubs relies on the combined influence of personal factors and social environment on farmers' reading behavior. By holding annual city-wide club work conferences and on-site meetings, and conducting competitions among clubs, Pinghu promotes characteristic activities at all levels, facilitates positive interaction, and creates a virtuous cycle for rural reading development.

5. Conclusion

Farmers' reading clubs are small-scale reading activity organizations targeting rural residents, aiming to improve farmers' cultural quality and knowledge level. Compared with traditional libraries and other reading venues, these clubs emphasize greater participation and interaction, better suiting rural residents' reading needs and emotional communication requirements. The exploration and practice of farmers' reading clubs in Pinghu, Zhejiang, have played a positive role in giving full play to rural residents' principal role, improving participation rates, enhancing the utilization of grassroots public cultural facilities, and narrowing the urban-rural service gap of grassroots public libraries.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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