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Standing at the Forefront and Daring to Pioneer; With Sails Hoisted Toward the Future: Post- print of the Oral Interview

Authors: Zeng Jie, Ma Yongxian, Chen Yang

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Abstract

To commemorate the 40-year development trajectory of Guangzhou Library, the Guangzhou Documentary Research and Exhibition Center of Guangzhou Library conducted an interview with the current director, Fang Jiazhong, in September 2021. Centering on topics including early career experiences, the legislative process of the “Regulations of Guangzhou Municipality on Public Libraries,” and the planning and development of Guangzhou’s public library undertaking, Director Fang Jiazhong reflected upon his three decades of service in Guangzhou’s public library sector, thereby illustrating the transformation of Guangzhou’s library development within the context of China’s reform and opening-up, as well as embodying the pioneering spirit of Guangzhou Library staff.

Full Text

Preamble

University Library Work [Oral History] 2023/1: Being Pioneering and Forging Ahead—An Oral History Interview with Fang Jiazhong, Director of Guangzhou Library

Guangzhou Library, Guangzhou, 510623

Abstract To review the 40-year development of Guangzhou Library, the Guangzhou Documentary Research and Exhibition Center conducted an interview with the current director, Fang Jiazhong, in September 2022. Focusing on his early career experiences, the legislation of the *Guangzhou Public Library Regulations*, and the planning and development of Guangzhou’s library undertakings, Director Fang reflected on his 30-year dedication to Guangzhou’s public library cause. These narratives reveal the evolution of Guangzhou’s

library services against China's reform and opening-up backdrop, showcasing the pioneering spirit of Guangzhou librarians.

[Keywords] library undertakings; public library; Guangzhou Library; library management; oral history

1. Significance of the Interview

Fang Jiazhong graduated from the Library Science Department of Sun Yat-sen University in 1992 and subsequently joined Guangzhou Library, serving in multiple departments before being appointed Deputy Director in December 2005 and Director in November 2011. He currently holds positions including Council Member of the Library Society of China and was named a “Library Role Model of China” in 2015. Under his leadership, Guangzhou Library has become a benchmark in China's library sector, making significant contributions to the development of the “Library City” initiative and the overall advancement of library services.

This oral history interview serves dual purposes: first, to preserve institutional history and provide historical documentation for research on Guangzhou Library and China's public library development; second, to inspire younger librarians through Director Fang's career journey, encouraging them to seize opportunities and shape the future of librarianship. The interview was conducted through video recording, with transcripts forming the basis for a documentary and written documentation.

2. Interview Methodology

The interview was conducted by the Guangzhou Documentary Research and Exhibition Center, a specialized department of Guangzhou Library. Over a year-long period, the project team interviewed Director Fang, political figures, social representatives, and library users, producing extensive oral history materials and completing post-production editing. The documentary was officially broadcast on Guangzhou Television on December 30, 2021.

Due to space limitations, this article presents edited excerpts from the interview. The editing process involved removing filler words, verifying details about institutions, individuals, and timelines, integrating fragmented statements, and organizing content by thematic sections. The final manuscript was confirmed by the interviewee.

3. Interview Transcript

Early Career and Foundational Experiences

Interviewer: Please briefly introduce your career journey at the library.

Fang Jiazhong: I joined Guangzhou Library immediately after graduating from Sun Yat-sen University in 1992. My first position was in the Acquisition and Cataloging Department as a Chinese-language book acquisition librarian. I later served as Youth League branch secretary, assistant director of Document Development, director of Reference and Reading Services, and director of the Office. In 2005, I was appointed Deputy Director, and became Director at the end of 2011. By 2022, I had served Guangzhou Library for 30 years.

Interviewer: What motivated you to choose library science, and what was the situation when you entered this profession?

Fang Jiazhong: The year 1992 was significant for China's public library sector, as it marked a period of professional activism advocating for public library principles. The field's philosophy was undergoing transformation. At that time, I simply had an interest in reading and books, without much other consideration. My understanding of the profession deepened over time, and I discovered a genuine passion for this work. Our graduating class was small—only 13 students entered the field, and our cohort had just 17.

Interviewer: What was the environment like at Guangzhou Library during your early years?

Fang Jiazhong: The workflow and patterns were similar to today, though professional theories were less developed. The institution felt like a cohesive community. I recall vividly that during Chinese book acquisition, when bookstores delivered shipments, staff would form a line from the first to second floor, passing books hand-to-hand in canvas bags—a common scene at the time. My first rotation through various departments gave me comprehensive exposure to library operations and laid the foundation for future system-wide planning.

Professional Development and the Advanced Training Initiative

Interviewer: How was the Advanced Training Course designed, and what outcomes did it achieve?

Fang Jiazhong: I drafted the initial proposal. We collaborated with Sun Yat-sen University, integrating our designs into a comprehensive curriculum. The course featured an exceptional faculty including Professors Cheng Huanwen, Pan Yantao, Zhao Yanqun, and Tan Xiangjin—leading scholars from Sun Yat-sen University at the time. The program combined academic discussions with field visits to exemplary libraries in Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macau, and the Yangtze River Delta region. This training introduced cutting-edge international trends and established an ideological foundation for developing Guangzhou's "Library

City” initiative. Participants gained consensus on new service concepts, system construction, and service delivery approaches.

Legislative Process for the *Guangzhou Public Library Regulations*

Interviewer: You were deeply involved in the legislation of the *Guangzhou Public Library Regulations*. Please discuss this process.

Fang Jiazhong: After working in Acquisition and Cataloging, my role as Youth League branch secretary involved coordination across departments. During the second public library evaluation, I was assigned to preparation work, which broadened my understanding of the entire institution’s operations. In 2006, Chen Jianhua, then Director of the Municipal Propaganda Department, commissioned Professor Cheng Huanwen from Sun Yat-sen University to research legislation for promoting public cultural services. The fundamental motivation was legally safeguarding citizens’ basic cultural rights and interests.

I participated in the legislative process from start to finish. A core issue was determining the standard of government-guaranteed services. We established a research group led by Professor Cheng Huanwen, with Director Liu Honghui and myself participating in the entire framework development. We actively sought input from library professionals nationwide, reaching broad consensus on fundamental legislative concepts.

The legislation introduced four breakthrough quantitative indicators: First, per capita floor area standards, as spatial conditions constitute the fundamental platform for all library services. Without adequate space, service functions cannot be fulfilled. Second, collection standards focusing on physical collections rather than digital resources—a pioneering approach at the time. Third, annual new acquisition standards, which are particularly important as fresh resources constitute the primary materials serving the public. Fourth, staffing standards based on international benchmarks for developed countries’ library systems.

These quantitative indicators played a foundational role throughout the legislative process. The workflow was systematic: the Municipal Culture Bureau drafted the text, the Municipal Government Legal Affairs Office conducted reviews, the Executive Meeting of the Municipal Government deliberated, and the Standing Committee of the Municipal People’s Congress ultimately passed the legislation. We compiled annual reports where all content corresponded to these indicators—a highly standardized process.

My crucial contribution was insisting on retaining these quantitative standards. Without librarians advocating for them at every stage, these concrete measures could have been removed, stripping the regulations of their most practical substance. After legislation, we developed supporting systems, with the most important being the service performance indicators that assigned responsibility for construction metrics primarily to governments and performance metrics primarily to libraries.

International Exchange and Comparative Study

Interviewer: You conducted a six-month study visit to the United States. What impact did this experience have on your strategic planning?

Fang Jiazhong: This experience was extremely important for both my personal development and Guangzhou Library's growth. Through comparative study, I found many commonalities between Chinese and American public library systems. First, user needs and corresponding services are similar—both address needs for knowledge and information dissemination and cultural heritage. Second, service objectives are universal: any country with adequate economic development should guarantee public libraries reaching appropriate standards. Third, service methods are comparable.

However, institutional structures differ significantly. Los Angeles has a single-level government system where one director can plan the entire branch network, whereas Guangzhou's three-tier government structure requires coordination across levels, increasing complexity. In human resource development, American public libraries have dedicated departments supporting career development—something we lacked. This insight led us to establish a Research and Development Department to support staff professional growth, primarily through the Guangzhou Library Society.

Building the “Library City” System

Interviewer: What role has the *Guangzhou Public Library Regulations* played in constructing the municipal library system?

Fang Jiazhong: The legislation's quantitative standards have driven the “Library City” construction. The initial design aimed to extend services to the village level, but we ultimately focused on establishing the backbone system first—targeting the township/street level to ensure basic public service coverage. This approach proved internationally advanced when viewed globally.

The regulations' core concept is promoting equal library services. The standards are based on permanent resident population, representing a profound conceptual shift that can be understood both as a technical measure and a philosophical change. The legislation clearly defined government responsibilities in quantified form—a pioneering approach nationally.

Service Performance and Professional Innovation

Interviewer: Please discuss Guangzhou Library's service performance and breakthroughs in professional research.

Fang Jiazhong: Guangzhou Library maintains excellent service performance, ranking third nationally among public libraries. Our collection exceeds 10 million volumes, and our resource and spatial openness ranks among the world's

highest. Anyone can enter and read without any documentation, enjoying our most basic services completely free of charge.

Our service logic has shifted from document-centered to people-centered, focusing on knowledge and information exchange needs. This broader service scope includes cultural activities that attract media attention and large audiences. Our open platform approach enables numerous social entities to provide services collaboratively, enhancing dissemination impact.

In professional research, we publish annual reports with increasing professional depth, beginning formal publication in 2018. We established China's first Documentary Research and Exhibition Center within a library and actively participate in international exchanges, hosting academic conferences that gain recognition from experts. Our vision is to serve as an industry platform, disseminating our concepts and practices domestically and internationally.

Future Vision

Interviewer: What are your hopes for Guangzhou Library's future? How will its core philosophy influence development?

Fang Jiazhong: Guangzhou Library's development can be summarized as "setting sail with favorable winds." We are fortunate to have grown during China's reform and opening-up era, which provided tremendous opportunities. Our core philosophy, "Enriching Reading Life, Connecting World Wisdom," reflects Lingnan cultural characteristics and the demands of our times.

Looking forward, libraries must continuously adapt their functions to societal evolution. We hope Guangzhou Library will not only serve the public but also function as a city builder. As long as librarians uphold the philosophy of serving society and the people while maintaining cutting-edge knowledge systems, we can provide optimal services despite changing internal systems and policies. Our professional capabilities will continue evolving, ensuring we meet emerging public needs in this transformative era.

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

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