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On the Practice and Influence of the Public Opening of the Southern Three Pavilions of the Siku Quanshu: Postprint Edition

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Abstract

During the preparatory phase of the Siku Nansan Ge, Emperor Qianlong had already explicitly defined them as national library institutions oriented toward public access, issuing three successive imperial edicts to expound upon their significance. From the day of their completion, all operational aspects of the Nansan Ge—including personnel management, financial planning, spatial layout, catalog compilation, and scheduling of opening hours—were closely organized around the central mission of public access. Furthermore, by systematically examining borrowing activity records from diverse groups encompassing superior leadership, officials at various levels, scholars, and students, it becomes evident that these firsthand borrowing cases experienced by literati and scholars constitute compelling historical evidence of the public access policies implemented at the Nansan Ge. At the level of historical development, the spirit of public access and its concrete practices embodied by the Nansan Ge not only signified that China's library undertaking had entered an entirely new developmental stage but also established a solid foundation for the construction model of public access in subsequent libraries. The development of public access in libraries during the late Qing and early Republican periods, while actively assimilating Western public library construction concepts, can nevertheless trace its origins and inspiration back to the pioneering practices of the Siku Nansan Ge.

Full Text

The Practice and Impact of Public Access at the Southern Three Pavilions of the Siku Quanshu

Abstract

During the planning and construction of the Southern Three Pavilions (南三閣) for the Siku Quanshu, Emperor Qianlong explicitly designated them as national-level libraries open to the public, issuing three successive imperial edicts to elaborate their significance. From their completion, all aspects of their operation—including personnel management, financial planning, spatial layout, catalog compilation, and scheduling of opening hours—were closely centered around the principle of public access. Furthermore, examination of borrowing records from senior leaders, local officials, scholars, and students reveals that these firsthand experiences constitute compelling historical evidence of the Southern Three Pavilions' implementation of public access policies. Historically, the commitment to public access upheld by the Southern Three Pavilions, along with its practical implementation, marked a new stage in the evolution of Chinese librarianship and laid a solid foundation for future development models of publicly accessible libraries. While the development of public access libraries during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China actively incorporated Western public library concepts, its roots and inspiration can still be traced to the pioneering practices of the Southern Three Pavilions.

Keywords: Southern Three Pavilions; Siku Quanshu; Public Access; Library History

1. Preparations and Strategies for Public Access at the Southern Three Pavilions

1.1 Ideological Preparation

The Southern Three Pavilions, established during the Qing Dynasty, particularly the Wenlan Pavilion in Hangzhou, became important cultural and educational institutions in southern China, attracting numerous scholars. However, systematic research on their public access policies has been insufficient, making it necessary to organize and analyze relevant historical materials.

Emperor Qianlong's vision for the Southern Three Pavilions was clearly articulated from the outset. He explicitly positioned them as national institutions providing borrowing services to the public, as evidenced in three imperial edicts. The first edict, issued in 1782, stated: "If scholars wish to read the imperial collection, they may apply to borrow the books. Officials should not overly protect the books at the expense of readers' access rights." This established the foundational principle of public access. A second edict reinforced this commitment,

and a third edict in 1790 further clarified procedures: “After the complete collection is arranged on the shelves, provincial governors should instruct their subordinates to permit scholars to enter the pavilions for copying and reading, though private removal of books is prohibited.”

These edicts demonstrated Qianlong’s comprehensive thinking about the importance and impact of public access, reflecting his vision of “promoting culture and learning for endless transmission.”

1.2 Architectural and Spatial Preparation

The architectural design of the Southern Three Pavilions drew inspiration from the Tianyi Pavilion in Ningbo but incorporated innovations to meet public access needs. The internal layout was carefully planned with designated areas for book storage, management, and reading.

Historical materials on the Wenlan Pavilion provide detailed insights. After its reconstruction during the Guangxu era, the pavilion featured expanded internal spaces including independent book repositories, reading areas, waiting rooms, and logistical support facilities. The design included thoughtful amenities such as the “Taiyi Fenqing Studio” for early arrivals to rest, demonstrating human-centered planning.

The “太乙分青室” (Taiyi Fenqing Studio) served as a waiting area for readers, while the overall spatial organization reflected a clear functional division. The management area was separate from the reading area, with controlled access to ensure both convenience and security. The reconstruction efforts, supported by government funding and merchant contributions, created a physical environment capable of accommodating substantial borrowing activities.

1.3 Operational Strategies

Personnel Management: The pavilions maintained specialized staff including directors, librarians, and support personnel. Records from the Daoguang era show that the Wenlan Pavilion employed a director, a librarian, a trainer, and service staff, with monthly salaries specified in detail. The personnel structure was designed to handle daily operations and serve readers effectively.

Financial Planning: Operational funds were primarily managed by the salt administration authorities of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. The financial arrangements ensured stable support for the pavilions’ public access functions, with specific budgets allocated for salaries, maintenance, and book conservation.

Catalog Compilation: To facilitate efficient retrieval, the pavilions developed comprehensive cataloging systems. The Wenlan Pavilion maintained both detailed and simplified catalogs, with multiple copies available to accommodate simultaneous use by several readers. The catalog system represented a significant improvement in accessibility compared to traditional private collections.

Scheduling and Access Control: The pavilions implemented systematic opening schedules. Wenlan Pavilion, for instance, was open for exhibitions from the 21st day of the first lunar month to late May, and again from the first day of the seventh month to the 20th day of the twelfth month. Daily hours were from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM during warmer months and 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM during colder months, with Sundays as rest days. Books were aired out for maintenance during the sixth month, and staff received holidays around the Spring Festival.

Identity Verification: A major challenge was verifying readers' identities to protect the collection. The system required official documentation or guarantees from government officials. For example, readers needed to submit written applications stating their purpose and residence, accompanied by recommendation letters from reliable sponsors. This verification process, while restrictive by modern standards, represented a practical solution for ensuring accountability in an era without modern identification systems.

2. Historical Evidence of Public Access at the Southern Three Pavilions

Evaluating whether the Southern Three Pavilions truly implemented public access policies requires examining actual borrowing records. Historical documents reveal three main categories of borrowers: senior administrative officials, other officials and scholars, and students.

2.1 Borrowing by Senior Administrative Officials

Senior officials who managed the pavilions enjoyed privileged access. Ruan Yuan, during his tenure as Zhejiang Governor, extensively utilized Wenlan Pavilion's collection, borrowing large quantities of books for compilation projects. His ability to transport books to his official residence demonstrated the highest level of access.

Similarly, Yan Yuan, who served as Governor-General of Liangjiang, recorded his visit to the Wenhui Pavilion in Yangzhou, where he was warmly received and allowed to view the collection. These cases show that pavilion managers and senior officials could borrow substantial numbers of books, reflecting Qianlong's vision of comprehensive access for qualified users.

2.2 Borrowing by Other Officials and Scholars

Numerous scholars documented their experiences accessing the pavilions. Liu Fenglu, a scholar from Zhejiang, recorded multiple visits to Wenlan Pavilion for research and collation work. Li Zhaoluo, while teaching at a Jiangyin academy, borrowed extensively from the pavilion for his scholarly projects.

Some scholars traveled specifically to access the collections. Zhen Shanmin, a native of Fujian, journeyed to Hangzhou to borrow and copy rare books from

Wenlan Pavilion. Xu Shiluan, former prefect of Taizhou, recorded borrowing and copying large medical texts.

Group visits were also common. Zhang Wenhu documented multiple trips to Wenlan Pavilion with colleagues, revealing that they could borrow books outside the pavilion—a rare exception to the general rule of onsite reading. These collective expeditions facilitated collaborative scholarship and demonstrated the pavilions' role in supporting academic communities.

2.3 Borrowing by Students

Student access was more limited and typically required special permission. The only well-documented case involves students from the Gujing Jingshe academy in Hangzhou, who were granted access to Wenlan Pavilion through Ruan Yuan's special arrangement. This connection between the academy and the pavilion created a pathway for student access, though it remained restricted compared to official channels.

The verification process posed significant barriers for students without official connections. One scholar, Wang Weisheng, poignantly described his frustration as a young student unable to access Wenlan Pavilion due to lack of official credentials, highlighting the challenges faced by those outside bureaucratic networks.

3. The Impact of Public Access at the Southern Three Pavilions

The public access policy of the Southern Three Pavilions generated significant social impact and influenced subsequent library development in China. Their pioneering practices established a model that later institutions would emulate, even as Western library concepts were introduced.

3.1 Comparative Consciousness with Western Institutions

After the Opium War, as Chinese scholars encountered Western public library concepts, the Southern Three Pavilions provided a native reference point for comparison. Xue Fucheng, after investigating European libraries, noted striking similarities between the Southern Three Pavilions and Western public institutions. He observed that France had 500 libraries with 4.6 million volumes, Britain had 200 libraries with 2.9 million volumes, and Russia had 145 libraries with 950,000 volumes—comparable to the Southern Three Pavilions' function as public book repositories.

Xue's analysis placed the Southern Three Pavilions on equal footing with Western public libraries, recognizing their shared commitment to public access. His comparative perspective, informed by direct observation of European institutions, represented a groundbreaking acknowledgment that Chinese library traditions had independently developed public access principles.

3.2 Influence on Late Qing and Early Republican Library Development

The Southern Three Pavilions frequently served as a reference point in proposals for modern libraries. Li Duanfen, in his memorial on promoting schools, explicitly cited Qianlong's establishment of the Southern Three Pavilions as precedent for building public libraries, noting that "Qianlong understood the principle of open access."

The 1903 regulations for the Imperial University of Beijing incorporated this view, stating that "the Southern Three Pavilions, as public book repositories, should serve as models." Similarly, proposals for provincial libraries by governors in Shanxi and Guangxi consistently referenced the Southern Three Pavilions as exemplary institutions.

Private collectors also drew inspiration from the pavilions. When advocating for opening his own collection to the public, one scholar specifically mentioned the influence of Qianlong's Southern Three Pavilions, demonstrating how the imperial model shaped private initiatives.

3.3 Lasting Significance

The Southern Three Pavilions' public access practices represented an unprecedented innovation in Chinese library history, comparable to early European library development. Their influence extended across architectural design, institutional frameworks, cataloging systems, personnel configuration, and financial management—all centered on public access principles.

While subsequent library development in late Qing and early Republican China incorporated Western concepts, the Southern Three Pavilions provided an indigenous foundation that shaped how these foreign ideas were adapted to Chinese contexts. Qianlong's initiative objectively fostered the emergence of a Chinese model for public library access, creating a legacy that continued to influence library construction well into the twentieth century.

The pavilions' commitment to public access, though implemented within the constraints of their era, established principles of openness and service that transcended their immediate historical context, making them a pivotal development in the evolution of Chinese libraries.

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

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