Chapter 9
The School Librarian in Rural China:
"A Stranger Among Her People"

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the school librarian (SL) in rural China in terms of his/her roles as the school information specialist and reading programme catalyst. The analysis is based on case study observations from site visits and interviews over a four-year period. The analysis surfaced key obstacles faced by the librarians, including: low knowledge base and expertise, limited material resources, and a lack of understanding of their roles by stakeholders within their communities. To alleviate these impediments, the importance of the SL's roles needs to be understood by the school's stakeholders, enabling the school librarian to be recognized as a skilled professional with an important and unique contribution to the educational process.

INTRODUCTION

School libraries in rural China are distinctly underdeveloped, relative to their counterparts in the cities, in terms of: recognition; financial support; collections; physical space; technology; policies; expertise; and just about any other resource or

library success factor that can be imagined. While Chinese schools are required by the government to have a library or reading room with a specified minimum collection size (Ma, 2005), this does not always translate into reality: official statistics indicating that 90% of counties met the certification standards in 2000 (Li, 2005) were inflated due to local governments and schools deceiving the inspectors (China CCP Institute 中央党校⊠

□□, 2006; Zhou, 2006). In anticipation of the certification visits, many rural schools established temporary book rooms with library signage. These rooms were subsequently locked up indefinitely or used for something else when the certification team was gone (Jin, 2006). As Liu (2008) noted:

It is difficult to get an accurate picture about the current situation of school/public library development in rural China. In spite of the central government's repeated efforts in improving school situation and library service to the general public, public libraries still remain inaccessible to China's most rural population. School library development in rural regions, especially in less developed western provinces, has been slow, difficult, unsustainable, and overlooked to some extent. (p. 5)

This lack of transparency is a problem not confined to China: it is likely that it occurs in most developing countries, even when they have dynamic urban communities. It is also one of the reasons why non-government agencies become involved in improving rural libraries:

Oversea foundations collect funds and help build rural libraries for the poor in middle and western of China; Chinese intellectual in big cities which paid close attention on rural education make the move of construction of rural and school libraries (sic). (Wang, 2006, p. 33)

In this chapter, the school librarian (SL) in rural China is examined in the contexts of his/her roles as the school information specialist and reading programme catalyst. The investigation surfaces a range of challenges that SLs confront in terms of: professional development; status within their school; obstacles to forming communities of practice; and structural impediments to achieving professional goals, specifically acting as change agents introducing free voluntary reading programs. The discussion highlights the

problems faced by information professionals in developing countries where they mostly begin from a low knowledge base, have very limited resources, and their roles and expertise are not fully understood within their communities. As a result of this lack of understanding of the role of the SL, even within their own schools they are strangers among their own people.

At the macro level, the school library in rural China is likely to be perceived by school stakeholders solely as a resource that is instrumental in supporting academic performance and character building. While these are important outcomes in any society, and often attach to libraries, other less tangible roles are often ignored. These include nurturing and sustaining adoption of the reading habit among children. Additionally, the library is seen as a relatively minor player in the educational process, basically as the provider of informational resources. This usually results in the library being at the bottom of the pecking order in the allocation of resources. This phenomenon is often characterized by a decision to locate the library on the top floor of multi-level buildings that are unlikely to offer lifts. From an access issue, from an engineering issue, and from a use issue this makes little sense.

At the micro level, these challenges often materialize in: unsuitable library location; restrictive opening hours; limited access; restrictive lending policies; labor intensive administrative practices; and poor collections. The relative lack of experience and low knowledge base of the SL can result in: low status within the school community; lack of confidence leading to low initiative; excessive micro-management of the library especially in activities such as collection security; differing perceptions of the role of reading; and uncertainty regarding the role of the library and librarian.

Possible methods for overcoming the challenges are also discussed. They reflect realities that are widespread among the visited sites and probably throughout rural China and other developing societies. Occasionally exceptions

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