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Jia Zhou

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Leveraging Specialized Resources to Develop Innovative Library Services: Suzhou Second Library's Experiences with "A Library within a Library" Model

Jia Zhou, Suzhou Library, Jiangsu, China

ABSTRACT

Theme libraries have emerged as a new service model to meet the demand from the public for a diverse service with resources that are both inclusive and specialized. The "a library within a library" is currently the main practice model of theme libraries. Influenced by that concept, the recently constructed and opened Suzhou Second Library includes a number of theme libraries, such as "Suzhou Literature Library," "Music Library," and "Design Library." The establishment of these theme libraries within the Suzhou Second Library allows the library to build special community-focused collections that are culturally rich, to collaborate with local cultural organizations to create quality public programs that highlight the collections, and to actively engage the public with special events and exhibits surrounded by multimedia, digital special effects. These programmatic efforts have greatly improved public's awareness of the valuable resources held at the library and thus increased the effectiveness of this new service model.

Keywords: Theme Library, Library within a Library, Suzhou Second Library, Special Resource Development

INTRODUCTION

Faced with the challenge of budget constraints, and the rapid growth of digital materials in recent years, libraries across the globe are experiencing decline in readership of physical books and gate counts for library visits (Liang & Li, 2023; Chen, 2020). According to a national reading survey conducted by Chinese Academy of Press and Publication in 2023, the percentage of readers who have used some forms of digital materials has reached to 80.3%, and audio books and streaming video of book talks are increasingly popular (CAPP, 2023). To stay relevant and meet readers where they are, public libraries have been designing new collection development strategies to engage readers when they are onsite and to create a holistic experience with its special collection immersed in an environment that compliments to the particular theme. The model of theme libraries within a public library setting has proved to be effective in creating an environment that attracts users, expanding the reach of resources to more customers. We are seeing more and more libraries in China are implementing this model in their library design and collection building.

The so-called "a library within a library" refers to an independently established space within a library setting and user services striving to incorporate library specialized collections into the surrounding environment supported by the new technology, allowing users fully immerse in

the special subject areas that are of interest to them (Zhang & Chen, 2022, p. 179; Ke, 2020). In comparison to the traditional specialized subject reading rooms in the library, this service model can provide users with an experience that goes beyond just reading. Users can engage a subject or theme through audio-video enhanced multi-media display, virtual presentation and interactive communications. With an ever-increased demand for more specialized library services that are customized to fit the local community needs, the “a library within a library” model is quickly becoming a popular service model across China. Over the past decade, more and more libraries have adopted this new and innovative model to building its specialized collections relating to their local environments. A few successful cases include the "Ji Xiaolan Literature Library" at Cangzhou Library in Hebei and the "Comic Library," "Cantonese Opera Library," and "Dongguan Study" at Dongguan Library in Guangdong. As the new model develops, we have seen an increased number of researches conducted based on the experiences library gained by launching theme libraries with a library setting. Those researches mainly focused on the following three aspects:

1. The basic concept of theme libraries and "a library within a library”

Researches like Wang Shiwei (Wang, 2009), Ke Ping (Ke, 2020), Zhou Deming (Zhou, 2020), and Liu Honghui (Liu, 2020) defined the concept by analyzing and evaluating its practices in resource building, collection management and public service. Liu Hui (Liu et al., 2023) listed key elements for its organizational structures, service goals based on her research of related concepts such as theme libraries, specialized libraries, characteristic libraries, and subject libraries.

2. Case studies of the "a library within a library" models

While the acclaimed "Hangzhou Model” was built on the rich history of the region, Shanghai Library, a library system with central and branch libraries, was able to fully take advantage of its large collection resources and staff resource to provide unique innovative services through staff training, and resource sharing.

3. The trend in the future development of theme libraries

Researchers are exploring new innovative ways for future theme library building from the perspectives of “integration of culture and tourism”, “creation of immersive reading environment” and “reconfiguration of space”.

During the construction of the Second library, the parent Suzhou Library administration made a decision to leverage current resources with new and bold spaces at the Second library through building and developing theme libraries. The creative decision was made following extensive researches into theme library models in the country and around the world. Suzhou is a city with thousands of years of civilization and has developed its own outstanding styles in multiple fields such as literature, science, music, architecture and design. And its residents have a long tradition of embracing scholars and literary and other noted figures. Over the years, Suzhou library has put a major effort in building collections that reflect the rich history of the city, its people and their achievements in fields of science, arts and humanities. With that in mind, Suzhou library administration embarked on a journey to build “Suzhou Literature Library”, “Music Library”, “Design Library” within the new Second Library in order to satisfy its residents’ growing desires in learning more about local historical events, famous figures and their achievements as well as gaining in-depth knowledge of certain subjects that are of interest to them.

Ever since its grand opening in late 2019, the Suzhou Second Library has been making continued efforts to make adjustments in the operations of the launched theme libraries based on the experiences gained and lessons learned. Today we can proudly declare that the Second Library has successfully fulfilled its mission of providing services that are specialized, inclusive and tailored to the needs of its community. The Suzhou Library model of theme libraries has gained national recognition and has been regarded a successful brand in the library world. Below we would like to share some of our experiences in developing the model of “a Library within a Library”.

SUZHOU LITERATURE LIBRARY: JIANGNAN CULTURE THEMED LIBRARY



Figure 1: Interior of Suzhou Literature Library

The Suzhou Literature Library, themed around Suzhou literature, is a "library within a library" located on the fourth floor of the Suzhou Second Library. It spans an area of 900 square meters and houses a collection of 30,000 autographed books. The space design replicates the ancient halls of Suzhou Library's predecessor, Zhengyi Academy, with its Xuegutang and Yuqingtang halls serving as areas for reading and for traditional cultural promotion activities. Additionally, the library features a literature exhibition area that highlights the works of writers and cultural figures that are from Suzhou, signed editions by contemporary literary figures, and hosts small literary salons.

Suzhou, a city that holds the most important place in Jiangnan culture, has made outstanding contributions to various literary forms such as poetry, prose, novels, and drama. With a long listing of famous authors and literary masterpieces from the city, Suzhou is often called the "cultural business card" of Jiangnan culture and beyond. Developing local literature collections and promoting local culture are key responsibilities of public libraries. However, with resources scattered among different local library reading rooms, it prevented us from providing our customers with holistic views and easy access of the rich literary history of the city and the achievements of the scholars. Therefore, with the establishment of "Suzhou Literature Library" inside the Second Library, we were able to build a collection that truly reflected the city's long

history in literature and celebrate the achievements of the scholars and literature figures from the city.

The Design Of "Suzhou Literature Library"

The design of the Literary Library follows traditional Suzhou characteristics. It uses bamboo, stone artifacts for interior decoration and adds traditional garden elements, such as corridors and moon gates to transport users' experience into the ancient time of the literature.

The Suzhou Literature Library consists of three functional areas: the reading area, the exhibition area, and the activity area. The reading area has a classic view, with collections of photocopies of over-sized classic works and replicas of ancient thread-bound books on display. The collections include works covering the classics, history, philosophy, and literature, with a focus on local documents and genealogies.

Equipped with computers connected to the Suzhou Library's ancient book database, the reading area makes it convenient for readers to search and utilize ancient resources. The exhibition area displays Suzhou traditional items of archival and special collections, including private book collections of noted writers and objects of ancient book printing. Displays include images, artifacts, and restoration tools, providing a comprehensive view of the ancient book culture. This area serves as a permanent exhibition to educate the public about ancient book knowledge and it has attracted many users since its opening. The activity area functions as a space to promote reading and cultural exchanges. It hosts regular activities highlighting traditional Chinese culture and is in essence a "second classroom" for residents to learn about ancient books and traditional culture.

In summary, the Suzhou Literature Library, through its specialized spatial design and well-planned functional areas, effectively integrates and showcases the rich literary heritage of Suzhou. This approach not only preserves and promotes Suzhou's unique cultural resources but also engages the community in a deeper appreciation and understanding of their cultural identity.

The Spatial Concept: Integrating Jiangnan Gardens With The New Media Technology

The designers have created the replica of Yiqingtang and Xuegutang of Ke Garden in the Suzhou Literature Library. The layout is inspired by Suzhou gardens, with emphasis on the historical narrative that traces Suzhou's literary evolution from the Pre-Qin period (221 B.C.-207 B.C.) to contemporary times. This journey includes the burgeoning literary culture of the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, the flourishing literary trends of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the modern literary expressions of today. This narrative is depicted through displays of authors, literary phenomena, related images, works, literary critiques, historical materials, and exhibits from various periods. "Suzhou Contemporary Writers' Works" occupies an entire wall of the Literary Library with an interactive "information waterfall" that offers a dynamic way for visitors to discover more about literary history. This high-tech feature displays information about famous literary figures and their works, blending digital innovation with literary exploration.

By integrating traditional Jiangnan garden aesthetics with modern media technology, the Suzhou Literature Library creates a unique and immersive experience. This approach not only honors the rich cultural and historical legacy of Suzhou but also engages users and visitors in a contemporary interactive manner, enhancing their appreciation and understanding of Suzhou's literary contributions through the ages.

The Service Model: “Exploration Through Immersive Experience”

The Suzhou Literature Library provides both online and in-person services to its customers. The in-person programs are designed to increase people’s curiosity and engagement with the resources in the library. For example, the traditional culture- promoting program series, "Wumen Piaoxiang", includes adult events, such as "Wen Zhengming Poetry and Prose Seminar" and "Reading 'Dream of the Red Chamber' & Exploring the Grand View Garden" ; family-friendly activities, such as “"Ink Printing and Ancient Book Knowledge," "Transcribing Lucky Characters to Celebrate the Lantern Festival," "Experiencing Ancient Bookbinding," and "Writing Jiangnan on Paper". These events strive to combine cultural appreciation with participant engagement, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the charm of Suzhou literature and connect with local traditional culture, ultimately fostering the continuity of Suzhou's literary heritage.

In addition to provide reading services of physical books, the Library also digitized its archival resources for readers to access it online. The database is searchable and includes images of the original books, full-text content, with many of the cool features that allow readers to seamless switch between simplified and traditional Chinese, as well as take notes, insert annotations, and make revisions. This online service allows readers to make extensive use of these resources, enhances the accessibility of the library's ancient book collection.

By combining immersive offline activities with advanced online services, the Suzhou Literature Library creates a comprehensive and engaging environment. This approach not only deepens readers' connection to Suzhou's rich literary heritage but also ensures that traditional culture remains relevant and accessible in the modern age. The integration of physical and digital resources enables a more dynamic interaction with literary content, encouraging a deeper appreciation and understanding of Suzhou's literary legacy.

MUSIC LIBRARY: SPECIALIZED COLLECTIONS AND AUDIO-VISUAL EXPERIENCE SPACE



Figure 2: Interior View of the Music Library

The Music Library is "a library within a library" created on the basis of the music collections accumulated by Suzhou Library over a long period of time. The resources are developed with

emphasis on the special Jiangnan music materials. The space is designed and constructed to highlight the audio-visual characteristics of music materials, and the facilities are arranged and configured with high professional standards. In terms of user services, equipped with music expertise and cutting-edge technologies, it utilizes both the physical space and the virtual space of the library, and offer services both online and offline, which integrate collection development, promotion and out-reaching. Through interacting closely with users and community, it has established a model of seamless collaboration of all stakeholders.

Jiangnan Music

Suzhou is the core area of highly developed Jiangnan culture, with enormously rich music materials centered on intangible cultural heritages, ranging from Kunqu Opera, Pingtan (storytelling and ballad singing in local dialect), Suzhou Opera, to Wu Song. Since its opening, the Suzhou Second Library has been proactively developing the collections of such special local music literature. Together with the long-term accumulation of local music literature in the Suzhou Library, the combined collections of music materials so far boast 1,399 titles of 1,906 vinyl records, 10,096 titles of 20,799 CD records, and 43,000 titles of music-themed books in 70,000 volumes.

Not only are the collections of local music literature continuously strengthened, high-quality music playback equipment and other facilities unique to music libraries are also systematically included in the library's overall resource development plan. After years of hard work, the music library is currently equipped with HiFi systems and theater systems, including German ELAC Genesis loudspeakers, German acoustic solid LP turntables, British Cambridge pre- and post-amplifiers, French FOCAL speakers, Canadian Anthem Cinema digital amplifiers, Sony vinyl players, Japanese JVC 4K high-definition projectors, and Norwegian Stressless theater chairs, among others. It can accommodate 20-30 users simultaneously and provide high-quality audio and video effects.

User-Centered Services

Since the end of 2019, the online "Power of Music" special resource promotion column has been launched through the "Suzhou Library" WeChat public account and video account. The music library's representative vinyl, CD, book and other related collections are recommended to readers in online tweets, short videos, online live broadcasts, etc. Aided with the librarians' in-depth understanding and analysis of the featured resources, the "Power of Music" special column has been continuously upgraded and revised. Based on the historical periods of classical music development, each issue of the new version of the column recommends a representative classical musician and the associated repertoire of a historical period. Through VLOGs of vinyl playback, presentation of stories behind music, and the sharing of knowledge tips, etc., it conveys beautiful classical music to citizens and readers, and popularizes interesting classical music knowledge in an effective way. The column started the first issue entitled "Music, the Power of Healing" in 2019. Since then, the online "Power of Music" column has published 86 issues, with a total readership/visits of 63,780 times, and has popularly won the heart of music users.

While proactively promoting the contents of the collected resources, we also focus on collecting and analyzing user feedback, and apply the analysis results into acquisition activities. Take the acquisition of vinyl records for example, in the process of purchasing vinyl records, we fully consider the feedback from users, adopt the opinions and suggestions from experts and

professionals, and carefully select and finalize the purchase lists. Thus, it has been ensured that the purchased vinyl records can fully meet the high standards and more effectively support the music users' needs.

Community Outreaching And Engagement

Based on the desirable music resources and facilities and on the multifaceted interactive platform of "The Power of Music," the library collaborates with the School of Music of Suzhou University, the Suzhou Musicians Association, and local folk musicians to create a series of reading promotion and community engagement activities and events under the general title "Reading + Music + N". With shared goals and visions to serve and engage users and the community, the committed partners first enter into collaborative agreements, coordinate with and supplement each other in making best use of collections and resources. The partners co-organize face-to-face and popular music-themed reading promotion activities and community activities and events on a regular basis.

The offline in-person events and activities of the "Power of Music" has formed a popular brand of the Music Library of Suzhou Library, under which there are many regular special themes such as "Famous Songs Appreciation and Music Sharing Session", "Library Night", "Vinyl Time", and "100 Years of Red Songs". All the events and activities are initiated and coordinated by the Music Library, but are planned and implemented in collaboration with a great number of institutions in Suzhou such as the School of Music and the School of Foreign Languages of Suzhou University, Suzhou Musicians Association, Suzhou Philharmonic Orchestra, Poly WeDo Suzhou Youth Symphony Orchestra, Suzhou National Orchestra, and individual musicians, performing artists, special vinyl collectors, plus numerous music volunteers. The activities and events are also made in various and diverse popular forms, ranging from lectures, salons, concerts, interviews, information sharing sessions, and exhibitions among many others. Thus, the impacts of user participation and community engagement are maximized.

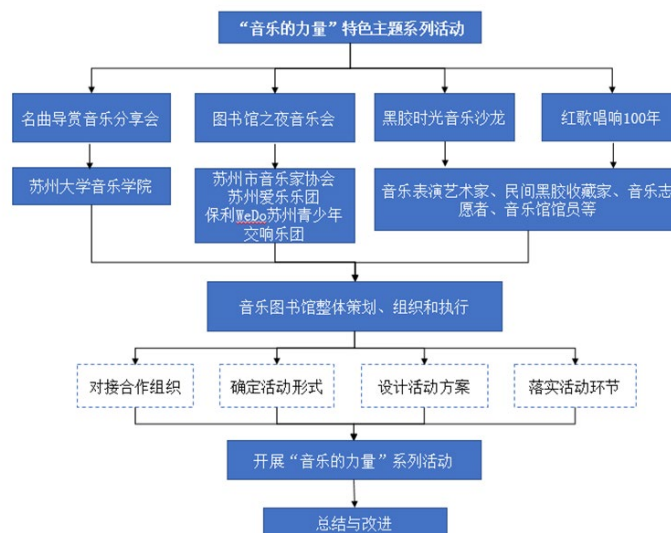


Figure 3: Offline In-person Activity Matrix of the Music Library

DESIGN LIBRARY: A SPACE OF URBAN CULTURE AND CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION



Figure 4: Interior View of Design Library

With "creation" and "design" as major entry points, the Design Library strives to integrate specialized collections and resources and build a service platform for cultivating innovative ideas and incubating curiosity and creation. In addition to regular general readers, the library also serves the users of creative industries, providing them with access and reading services for art and design literature, design databases searching and downloading, cutting-edge intelligence consulting services, outstanding product exhibition, case studies presentation, and other design-related services. The space has a floor area of about 700 square meters, consisting of Documents Area, Joint Office Area, Inspiration and Creation Space, Exploration and Production Area, and Conference Room. Two 140-square-meter multi-functional halls are symmetrically set up on the north and south sides of the main building, namely the Product Launch Hall and the Design Exhibition Hall.

Development Of Specialized Local Resources

In various formats of text, photo and video and in different languages of Chinese, English, Japanese and French, the Design Library has collected historical and contemporary physical materials such as maps of Suzhou, important architectural plans and drawings, old photos, advertising posters, old postcards, monthly calendars, art calendars, New Year woodcut prints, old stamps, the Pingjiang ancient streets and river plans, and major garden building drawings such as the Beisi Pagoda and the Tiger Hill Pagoda. These art and design resources have significant traditional and cultural characteristics of local Suzhou, representing the citizens' lives and social development of the region in both ancient and modern times. And they serve as very precious collections and resources for studying Suzhou's rural and urban society, economy and culture.

In the process of collection development and resources promotion, the characteristics of innovation are represented in the following aspects: First, the scope of materials selection and collection are expanded to include physical objects and specific design projects. Second, the promotion and presentation of collected resources closely match and directly support the immediate popular needs in architectural design, functional design, modeling design, service design, and technological innovation evidenced in the ongoing urban development. Third, with the rapid development of the times, and the significant expansion and diversification of design

concepts, theories, and scope of design, the collections and the classification and organization of resources are frequently reviewed, updated and renewed to reflect the dynamic changes and development. Fourth and lastly, design tools, programs and aids are updated and renewed timely too, librarians' professional development equip with in-depth understanding and updated knowledge and skills in effectively serving users and helping the users and design community as a whole.

At the same time, based on the selective digitization of rich specialized local resources, professional librarians and technology experts have collaboratively created a number of important digital resources such as Suzhou Memory, Suzhou Old Photos, Wenyun Suzhou, Cultural Suzhou, Local Literature Briefs, Suzhou Celebrities, and Folk Literature and Art, effectively supporting the use and research depending on the specialized local materials.

Spatial Representation Of "Creation" And "Design"

The spatial layout of the Design Library consists of five functional areas and two exhibition halls as mentioned above. Among them, the Documents Area is for service functions of the specialized resources of art and design. The Joint Office Area is open to innovative culture and design organizations and industries and higher educational and financial institutions. The Inspiration and Creation Space and Exploration and Production Area are equipped with workbenches, photocopying systems, 3D printers, raw material storage, and display stands/cases and other design tools for the design community members to facilitate the innovative transformation from concepts and ideas toward creation and production. The Product Launch Hall mainly serves local high-tech enterprises, and through regular product launch conferences, it effectively helps the city's "creation" to sprout, bloom and bear fruit. The Design Exhibition Hall is for local designers and college students to collectively showcase Suzhou's excellent creative concepts and unique ideas.

When designing the spatial layout, given the strongly specialized and practical features of art and design, the traditional library features are made purposefully to be "hidden" and to mainly function as a "bridge" and "intermediary" to facilitate creation. Based on the rich design plans and drawings and other literature, through resource provision, intelligence and information services, space and venue utilization, the library connects multiple participating entities such as the government, design and innovation enterprises, designers, and makers, and effectively provides a one-stop service system centering around Suzhou's local cultural traditions, innovative production, and creative research and development.

Exhibition For Community Participation

The library exhibitions are designed and presented in a way to emphasize the interactive intimate relations of people, exhibits and space. For example, the architectural exhibition of Suzhou-born master architect I.M. Pei in the public area outside the library goes much beyond the traditional posters and exhibition boards. It creates a multi-angle, multi-form, and all-round special exhibition of Pei's work photos, creative manuscripts, architectural models and other objects along timeline and in a space inviting experience and participation.

On the other hand, the library emphasizes on the exhibition of original creative works from local community, even including the entry-level designers' works. The exhibitions represent the community members' innovative concepts and wonderful ideas, and their desires and methods to solve problems in production and social life, collectively showcasing the inspiring spirit and wisdom of Suzhou people. In particular, local college students in Suzhou have the great

opportunity of participation. In addition, in order to build a cooperative participatory platform for art and design institutions, the 3D Creative Design Competition is held annually for local designers, design students, and design enthusiasts to participate. Industry experts and senior engineers are invited to be the competition judges, and the winning designs will be transformed into real production in Suzhou.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Collections and resources development and promotion, user services and community engagement and collaboration of the Literature Library, Music Library and Design Library as the “library within a library” of the Suzhou Second Library have been introduced and examined as above. We have lots of learnings and reflections for creating and developing specialized theme libraries, the following are the major relevant points:

First, the desirable quantity and quality of specialized collections and resources form the essential basis of a specialized theme library. Several specific theme libraries of the Suzhou Second Library are developed around specialized themes supporting the library mission and visions. When deciding and choosing a theme, two most important factors are considered: The local representative characteristics and the community and social needs. In developing “a library within a library”, priorities should be clearly identified (Trujillo & Tallman, 2021). The development of collections and resources of local characteristics should be prioritized for public libraries like the Suzhou Second Library. Such collections and resources of local specialties showcasing the local heritages and pride can appeal to local users and meet the cultural and information needs of the community and the public. Once a well-chosen theme is decided for a specialized “library within a library,” which is also based on the general library’s traditional collections and resources and supported by the administration and expertise, the significant quantity and high quality of collections and resources of local specialties can be developed timely in a reasonable period of time. The goals of providing professional specialized services, user engagement and community collaboration can be developed and met accordingly at the same time.

Second, holistic and systematic collection development and professional and even expertly services of specialized collection and resources are critical to ensure the specialized theme libraries to succeed. The biggest difference of specialized theme libraries from traditional subject or specialized reading rooms lies in the integration of both specialized collections and resources and proactive professional services of the collections and services to users and the community. The specialized collections and resources as well as the physical and virtual space, are more frequently and effectively highlighted, promoted, used, maintained and updated than the collections and resources for traditional subject or specialized reading rooms. Therefore, the development of specialized collections and resource should have strategies to cover diverse types of representative relevant materials, appropriate equipment and facilities, useful digital tools and well-designed space; and user services and community engagement should develop and support a series of carefully planned in-person and virtual programs and projects through collaborative and interactive activities and events appealing to user and industry community.

Third and lastly, specialized theme libraries as the “library within a library” need integrated development of collections and resources, user services and community engagement at the same time, which should be adequately supported with cutting-edge equipment, facilities and information technologies. With the advent of the era of artificial intelligence, the additional VI and

AI technology tools and aids will surely help make the “library within a library” more effective and successful.

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About the author

Jia Zhou is the Director of Center for Reading of the Suzhou Library in Jiangsu, China. She oversees all library programs and events to promote reading and enhance public engagement. Ms. Zhou holds a BA from Suzhou University and is currently enrolled in MBA program at East China University of Science and Technology.