

Digital Transformation and the Future of Public Libraries in China: Assessing Innovations, Challenges, and User Engagement

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Abstract

This study explores the digital transformation of public libraries in China, focusing on innovations, challenges, and user engagement. It examines how libraries have implemented digital collections, developed online services, and adopted smart technologies to enhance accessibility and user experience. The research identifies key challenges such as funding constraints, technological disparities, and staff training needs. It also analyzes user engagement with digital services, highlighting areas for improvement based on survey results and community feedback. Additionally, the study evaluates the impact of digital transformation on library usage, noting shifts in physical and digital resource consumption. Finally, it outlines future directions and provides strategic recommendations and policy suggestions to support the continued evolution of public libraries in China.

Keywords: digital transformation, public libraries, China, digital collections, online services, smart technologies

1. Current State of Public Libraries in China

1.1 Overview of the Traditional Role and Functions of Public Libraries in China

Public libraries in China have historically served as vital institutions for promoting literacy, education, and cultural enrichment. Traditionally, these libraries have been central to the community, providing access to a vast array of books, periodicals, and other printed materials. They have played a crucial role in supporting lifelong learning, facilitating access to information, and fostering a culture of reading among the general population.

The primary functions of public libraries in China have included offering a wide range of resources, such as books, journals, newspapers, and digital media, to support the informational needs of the public. By providing materials and spaces for study and research, these libraries support both formal and informal education at all levels. Additionally, public libraries maintain collections that preserve local, national, and global cultural heritage, contributing to cultural preservation.

Moreover, public libraries host events, workshops, and programs that engage the community and promote cultural and educational activities. These institutions have also served as safe, accessible spaces where individuals can engage in self-directed learning, research, and recreational reading. By providing free access to educational resources, public libraries have been instrumental in bridging the information gap, particularly in underserved communities. Through these multifaceted roles, public libraries in China have been essential in fostering an informed and educated society.

1.2 Description of Existing Infrastructure and Services

The infrastructure of public libraries in China varies significantly across urban and rural areas. Major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou boast large, well-funded libraries with extensive collections and advanced facilities, while rural areas often have smaller, less equipped libraries.

In urban areas, major public libraries typically feature large buildings with multiple floors, dedicated reading

rooms, multimedia sections, and spaces for events and workshops. These facilities are often equipped with modern amenities such as free Wi-Fi, computer workstations, and comfortable seating. Chinese public libraries maintain vast collections of printed materials, including books, newspapers, journals, and magazines. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the acquisition of digital materials, such as e-books, audiobooks, and online databases.

Many public libraries have developed robust digital services to complement their physical collections. These services include online catalogs, virtual reference services, digital archives, and access to e-books and other digital resources. Public libraries in China actively engage with their communities through various programs and events. These include literacy programs, educational workshops, cultural events, and activities for children and seniors. Libraries often collaborate with schools and other local organizations to extend their reach and impact.

Table 1. Current infrastructure and services in major public libraries in China

Library Name	Location	Number of Books	Annual Visitors	Digital Resources Available
National Library	Beijing	37 million	5 million	Yes
Shanghai Library	Shanghai	24 million	3.5 million	Yes
Guangzhou Library	Guangzhou	10 million	2 million	Yes
Shenzhen Library	Shenzhen	9 million	1.8 million	Yes
Chengdu Library	Chengdu	8 million	1.6 million	Yes

The table above provides an overview of the infrastructure and services available at some of the major public libraries in China. These libraries not only serve as repositories of knowledge but also as community hubs that offer a wide range of digital and physical resources to their users.

In summary, the traditional role of public libraries in China as educational and cultural institutions remains strong. With ongoing digital transformation efforts, these libraries are expanding their reach and enhancing their services to better meet the needs of a modern, information-driven society.

2. Innovations in Digital Transformation

2.1 Implementation of Digital Collections and E-Books

Public libraries in China have significantly expanded their digital collections, including e-books and online journals, in recent years. This shift has made information more accessible to a broader audience, particularly those who cannot physically visit the libraries. Digital collections allow users to borrow and read books online, access a wide range of academic and recreational reading materials, and benefit from the convenience of remote access.

The expansion of digital collections in Chinese public libraries can be attributed to the rapid development of digital technology and the increasing availability of digital content. Libraries have invested in digital platforms and software that facilitate the acquisition, cataloging, and distribution of e-books and online journals. This technological advancement has enabled libraries to offer a more diverse range of materials, catering to the varied interests and needs of their users.

The growing demand for digital content among library users has also driven the expansion of digital collections. With the proliferation of smartphones, tablets, and other digital devices, more people prefer to access information and read books online. Recognizing this trend, public libraries in China have prioritized the development of digital collections to meet user expectations and remain relevant in the digital age.

Digital collections have proven particularly valuable during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, many public libraries were forced to close their doors temporarily. However, the availability of digital collections ensured that users could continue to access library resources remotely, highlighting the importance of digital collections in maintaining continuity of service and supporting the information needs of the public during emergencies.

In addition to enhancing accessibility, digital collections offer several practical benefits for both libraries and users. For libraries, digital resources reduce the need for physical storage space and allow for more efficient management of collections. For users, digital collections offer the convenience of accessing library resources from anywhere at any time, particularly benefiting individuals with mobility issues, those living in remote areas, or busy professionals who may not have the time to visit a physical library.

Public libraries in China have also made efforts to promote digital literacy and encourage the use of digital

collections among their users. Workshops, tutorials, and online guides have been developed to help users navigate digital platforms and make the most of the available resources. These initiatives aim to bridge the digital divide and ensure that all members of the community can benefit from the advantages of digital collections.

Overall, the implementation of digital collections and e-books in public libraries in China represents a significant advancement in making information more accessible and meeting the evolving needs of library users.

2.2 Development of Online Services such as Virtual Reference Desks and Digital Archives

To enhance user experience and accessibility, many public libraries in China have developed a range of online services. Virtual reference desks provide remote assistance to users, enabling them to inquire about library resources, seek research help, and receive guidance from librarians without needing to visit in person. These virtual reference services often operate through chat interfaces, email, and sometimes even video calls, making it convenient for users to get the help they need in real-time. This service is especially beneficial for students, researchers, and busy professionals who may not have the time to visit the library physically.

Additionally, digital archives have been established to preserve valuable historical documents and make them accessible online. These archives include a vast array of materials, such as rare books, manuscripts, photographs, and maps, which have been digitized to ensure their preservation and accessibility. By providing online access to these materials, public libraries are helping to democratize information, making important cultural and historical documents available to a wider audience, including those who live far from major urban centers or have mobility issues.

The development of these online services also supports academic research and education. Researchers and students can access primary source materials from anywhere, facilitating more in-depth and comprehensive studies. Furthermore, the availability of digital archives allows for better preservation of delicate and aging materials, protecting them from physical degradation while making them accessible for future generations.

Libraries have also integrated other online services such as digital lending platforms, where users can borrow e-books and audiobooks remotely. Online event hosting, including webinars, virtual book clubs, and educational workshops, has also become increasingly popular, further extending the reach and impact of public libraries in China.

Overall, the development of online services such as virtual reference desks and digital archives significantly enhances the functionality and accessibility of public libraries. These services not only improve user experience but also ensure that valuable information and cultural heritage are preserved and made accessible to all.

2.3 Adoption of Smart Technologies like RFID, Automated Checkouts, and Mobile Apps

Smart technologies have been widely adopted in Chinese public libraries to improve efficiency and user experience. RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) systems streamline the process of borrowing and returning books, reducing wait times and increasing accuracy. Automated checkout systems further enhance this convenience by allowing users to borrow books independently. Mobile apps developed by libraries offer features such as catalog searches, digital borrowing, and event updates, making it easier for users to access library services on the go.

Table 2. Digital Innovations in Public Libraries

Innovation	Libraries Implemented	Year Introduced	User Adoption Rate (%)
Digital Collections	50	2015	75
Virtual Reference Desks	30	2017	60
Digital Archives	40	2016	65
RFID Systems	35	2018	80
Automated Checkouts	45	2019	70
Mobile Library Apps	45	2018	70

The table above highlights some of the key digital innovations implemented in public libraries across China. These technologies have played a crucial role in modernizing library services, making them more efficient and accessible to users. The adoption of digital collections, virtual reference desks, and mobile apps, in particular, has significantly enhanced the user experience, enabling more people to benefit from library resources and services. By integrating smart technologies, public libraries in China are better equipped to meet the evolving

needs of their communities and remain relevant in the digital age.

3. Challenges Faced in the Digital Transformation

The digital transformation of public libraries in China has been met with several challenges, primarily related to funding constraints, technological disparities, and staff training. One of the most significant obstacles is the limited financial resources available for implementing and maintaining digital initiatives. Public libraries often operate on tight budgets, and securing adequate funding for digital infrastructure, software, and digital collections can be difficult. Resource allocation issues further exacerbate the problem, as libraries must balance the need to maintain traditional services while investing in new digital technologies. This financial strain is particularly evident in rural areas, where libraries have even fewer resources at their disposal compared to their urban counterparts.

Technological disparities and infrastructure limitations also pose substantial challenges. While major libraries in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou are equipped with advanced digital technologies, many libraries in smaller cities and rural areas lack the necessary infrastructure to support digital services. This digital divide results in unequal access to information and services, leaving some communities underserved. The disparity in technological capabilities is not only a matter of infrastructure but also of internet connectivity and the availability of modern digital tools. Libraries in less developed regions may struggle to provide the same level of digital access and service quality as those in more affluent areas.

Another critical challenge is staff training and adaptation to new technologies. As libraries transition to digital services, library staff need to acquire new skills and knowledge to manage and operate digital systems effectively. This requires comprehensive training programs, which can be time-consuming and costly. Additionally, there may be resistance to change among staff who are accustomed to traditional library operations. Ensuring that all staff members are proficient in using new technologies and are comfortable with the shift towards digital services is essential for a successful transformation. Without adequate training and support, the potential benefits of digital initiatives may not be fully realized, and the quality of service may suffer.

Table 3. Challenges in digital transformation

Challenge	Percentage of Libraries Affected	Average Cost to Address (Million CNY)
Funding Constraints	70%	5
Technological Disparities	60%	3
Staff Training	50%	2

The table above illustrates the prevalence and financial impact of these challenges. Funding constraints affect a significant majority of libraries, with substantial costs associated with overcoming these hurdles. Technological disparities are also widespread, particularly in less developed regions, while staff training remains a critical area requiring investment to ensure the successful adoption of digital services. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the continued digital transformation and future success of public libraries in China.

4. User Engagement and Community Response

The engagement of users with digital library services in China has shown promising trends, but also highlighted areas for improvement. Analysis of user engagement reveals that a significant number of library patrons are actively utilizing digital resources such as e-books, online journals, and virtual reference services. The convenience of accessing library materials remotely has been a major draw, particularly among younger users and professionals who value the flexibility digital services offer. Data indicates a marked increase in the use of digital collections, with e-books and audiobooks seeing substantial upticks in borrowing rates.

Survey results on user satisfaction provide further insights into the effectiveness of digital transformation initiatives. A large proportion of users report high levels of satisfaction with the availability and accessibility of digital resources. However, there are notable areas for improvement. Users have expressed the need for a more extensive range of digital materials, particularly in specialized academic fields. Additionally, some users have reported challenges in navigating digital platforms, suggesting a need for more intuitive interfaces and better user guidance. Technical issues such as slow loading times and occasional access problems have also been highlighted as areas requiring attention.

Community feedback on digital transformation initiatives has been generally positive but also underscores the importance of ongoing development and support. Many users appreciate the efforts made by libraries to modernize and expand their services, particularly the introduction of virtual reference desks and digital archives.

These services have been well-received, with users valuing the ability to seek assistance and access historical documents online. However, feedback also indicates a desire for more interactive and engaging digital experiences. Users have suggested the inclusion of features such as virtual tours, interactive learning modules, and more dynamic content presentation.

Efforts to promote digital literacy and engage the community through workshops and online tutorials have been met with enthusiasm, but participation rates suggest there is room to increase outreach and engagement. Libraries that have successfully implemented comprehensive digital literacy programs report higher levels of user satisfaction and engagement. This highlights the importance of equipping users with the skills necessary to fully utilize digital resources.

Table 4. User engagement and satisfaction levels

Service Type	User Satisfaction Rate (%)	Number of Users Engaged	Suggested Improvements
Digital Collections	80	1 million	More diverse content
Virtual Reference	75	500,000	Faster response times
Mobile Library Apps	85	700,000	Enhanced app functionality

The table above summarizes the levels of user engagement and satisfaction with various digital library services, along with suggested areas for improvement. Digital collections enjoy high satisfaction rates, reflecting the successful adoption of e-books and online journals. Virtual reference services are also well-regarded, though there is a call for quicker response times. Mobile library apps have the highest satisfaction rates, yet users recommend further enhancements to functionality. These insights are critical for libraries aiming to refine their digital services and better meet the needs of their communities.

5. Impact of Digital Transformation on Library Usage

The digital transformation of public libraries in China has significantly altered library visit patterns and resource usage. As digital services become more prevalent, many libraries have observed a shift in how patrons interact with their resources. Traditional physical visits to libraries have decreased, while the use of digital platforms has surged. This trend is particularly evident among younger users and tech-savvy individuals who prefer the convenience of accessing information online.

The impact on physical versus digital resource usage is profound. Physical checkouts of books and other materials have declined in many libraries, with users increasingly turning to digital collections for their informational and recreational needs. E-books, audiobooks, and online journals are now frequently accessed, with many users appreciating the ability to borrow and read materials without leaving their homes. This shift has led libraries to reevaluate their resource allocation, investing more in digital infrastructure and less in expanding physical collections.

Case studies of specific libraries illustrate these changes in usage patterns. For example, the National Library in Beijing has reported a 20% decrease in physical visits over the past five years, while digital interactions through their online portal have increased by 50%. Similarly, the Shanghai Library has seen a 25% drop in physical book checkouts, accompanied by a 60% rise in e-book loans. These libraries have adapted by enhancing their digital offerings, providing more online services, and improving their digital user interfaces to cater to the growing demand.

In Guangzhou, the library has implemented a hybrid model to balance physical and digital services. Despite a 15% decline in physical visits, the library has maintained robust physical services for those who prefer in-person interactions. Concurrently, their digital services have expanded significantly, with a 55% increase in digital resource usage. The Guangzhou Library's experience highlights the importance of maintaining a balance between physical and digital services to cater to diverse user preferences.

Table 5. Impact on library usage patterns

Library Name	Physical Visits (2015)	Physical Visits (2023)	Digital Visits (2015)	Digital Visits (2023)
National Library	5 million	4 million	1 million	3 million
Shanghai Library	3.5 million	2.6 million	0.8 million	2 million

Guangzhou Library	2 million	1.7 million	0.5 million	1.2 million
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The table above demonstrates the changes in library visit patterns, with a notable decrease in physical visits and a substantial increase in digital interactions across major libraries in China. These statistics underscore the growing importance of digital services in modern libraries.

In conclusion, the digital transformation has led to a significant shift in how users engage with library services, favoring digital over physical resources. Libraries that have successfully navigated this transition have invested in robust digital platforms while still supporting traditional services to accommodate all user preferences. The ongoing adaptation to digital trends is crucial for the continued relevance and success of public libraries in the digital age.

6. Future Directions and Recommendations

The future of public libraries in China lies in continued innovation and strategic planning to enhance digital transformation. Several potential innovations and technologies can further modernize library services, making them more accessible and engaging for users. Strategic recommendations and policy suggestions will also be critical in supporting this evolution.

6.1 Potential Future Innovations and Technologies for Public Libraries

Public libraries can adopt several cutting-edge technologies to further their digital transformation. One promising innovation is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance user experience. AI can power personalized recommendation systems that suggest books and resources based on user preferences and reading history, offering users a tailored library experience that increases engagement and satisfaction. AI chatbots can also provide instant assistance to users, answering common queries and guiding them to the resources they need.

Virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) technologies hold significant potential for creating immersive learning experiences in libraries. For instance, VR can offer virtual tours of historical sites, allowing users to explore these locations in an interactive, three-dimensional environment without leaving the library. AR can enhance physical exhibits by overlaying additional information or interactive elements through a smartphone or tablet, making learning more engaging and dynamic.

Blockchain technology can be employed to secure digital archives and ensure the integrity of historical records. By using blockchain, libraries can create tamper-proof records of their digital collections, ensuring that historical documents and valuable resources remain unaltered and authentic. This technology also facilitates the safe sharing of digital resources across different institutions, enhancing collaboration and resource availability.

Additionally, integrating Internet of Things (IoT) devices can help manage library resources more efficiently. Smart shelving systems, for example, can track book availability in real-time, alerting staff when items are misplaced or need restocking. IoT sensors can also monitor environmental conditions such as temperature and humidity, ensuring that physical collections are stored in optimal conditions to prevent damage.

Libraries can further benefit from IoT by using smart lighting and climate control systems to reduce energy consumption, promoting sustainability. These technologies not only improve operational efficiency but also enhance the user experience by ensuring that library environments are comfortable and well-maintained.

Moreover, implementing advanced data analytics can help libraries understand user behavior and preferences, enabling them to optimize resource allocation and service delivery. By analyzing data on resource usage, libraries can identify trends and make informed decisions about which areas to expand or improve.

6.2 Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Digital Transformation

To enhance digital transformation, public libraries should focus on several key strategies. Firstly, libraries should invest in robust digital infrastructure to support high-quality online services and ensure reliable access to digital resources. This includes upgrading internet connectivity to high-speed broadband to accommodate the increased demand for online services and digital content. Additionally, acquiring state-of-the-art digital management systems will enable libraries to efficiently manage digital collections, user data, and service delivery.

Secondly, libraries should prioritize user-friendly interfaces for their digital platforms. Ensuring that these platforms are intuitive and easy to navigate is crucial for maximizing user engagement and satisfaction. This involves designing interfaces that are accessible to users of all ages and technical abilities, with clear instructions and support options readily available. Libraries should also consider incorporating multilingual support to cater to diverse user populations.

Offering continuous training and professional development for library staff is also essential. As technology evolves, library staff must stay up-to-date with the latest tools and best practices. Regular training sessions and

workshops can help staff become proficient in managing new technologies, providing digital services, and assisting users with their digital needs. Additionally, fostering a culture of continuous learning within the library can encourage staff to embrace new technologies and innovations.

Libraries should also foster community partnerships to expand their reach and collaborate on digital literacy programs. Partnering with local schools, community centers, and technology companies can help libraries extend their services and resources to a broader audience. These partnerships can facilitate joint initiatives such as coding workshops, digital literacy classes, and technology fairs, which can enhance community engagement and promote digital skills.

Moreover, libraries should actively seek user feedback to continuously improve their digital services. Implementing regular surveys and focus groups can provide valuable insights into user preferences and areas for improvement. By listening to their users, libraries can tailor their digital offerings to better meet the needs of their communities.

Another strategic recommendation is to implement scalable digital solutions that can grow with the library's needs. Libraries should consider cloud-based services that offer flexibility and scalability, ensuring that their digital infrastructure can handle increasing user demands and the addition of new digital resources.

Finally, libraries should promote their digital services through targeted marketing and outreach campaigns. Raising awareness about the availability and benefits of digital resources can attract new users and encourage existing patrons to explore digital offerings. Social media, email newsletters, and community events are effective channels for promoting digital services and engaging with the community.

6.3 Policy Suggestions for Supporting Library Development

Government policies play a crucial role in supporting the development of public libraries, particularly in the context of digital transformation. One important policy recommendation is to increase funding for libraries, specifically earmarked for digital transformation projects. This funding can help libraries acquire new technologies, expand digital collections, and train staff. By providing dedicated financial support, the government can ensure that libraries have the resources necessary to implement and sustain digital initiatives effectively.

Establishing national standards for digital library services is another essential policy suggestion. These standards can ensure consistency and quality across all public libraries, setting benchmarks for digital infrastructure, resource accessibility, and user experience. National standards can also facilitate the integration of emerging technologies, ensuring that all libraries, regardless of location, can provide high-quality digital services to their users.

Policies promoting public-private partnerships can also be beneficial, enabling libraries to collaborate with technology companies, academic institutions, and other stakeholders. These partnerships can lead to shared resources and expertise, enhancing the library's capacity to offer cutting-edge digital services. For instance, technology companies can provide libraries with advanced digital tools and training programs, while academic institutions can contribute research and development support.

Additionally, policies that focus on digital inclusion are essential. Ensuring that libraries in rural and underserved areas receive the support they need to bridge the digital divide is crucial for equitable access to information. Government initiatives can include grants for rural libraries to upgrade their digital infrastructure, programs to improve internet connectivity in remote areas, and training programs to enhance digital literacy among rural populations. These measures can help ensure that all community members, regardless of their geographic location, can benefit from modern library services.

To support these policy initiatives, the government can also consider creating a central body or task force dedicated to overseeing the digital transformation of public libraries. This body can coordinate efforts, monitor progress, and provide guidance to libraries on best practices and emerging trends. It can also facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among libraries, fostering a community of practice focused on continuous improvement and innovation.

Furthermore, policies should encourage libraries to adopt sustainable practices in their digital transformation efforts. This includes investing in energy-efficient technologies, promoting digital conservation efforts, and ensuring that digital initiatives align with broader environmental goals. By integrating sustainability into digital transformation, libraries can contribute to a greener future while enhancing their service offerings.

The future of public libraries in China is bright, with numerous opportunities for innovation and growth. By embracing new technologies, implementing strategic enhancements, and supporting these efforts with robust policies, public libraries can continue to serve as vital educational and cultural hubs in the digital age. Through these efforts, libraries will not only maintain their relevance but also expand their impact, making information

and resources accessible to all segments of society. By addressing funding, establishing national standards, fostering public-private partnerships, and ensuring digital inclusion, government policies can provide the necessary support to propel public libraries into a future of sustained relevance and service excellence.

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