

Visit Report on German Public Libraries

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1. Preface

On invitation of Frankfurt City Library, I paid a visit to public libraries in Germany for five weeks from 15th September till 20th October. BI International offered me a financial support to my professional internship. In Frankfurt City Library, through attending department meetings, communicating with librarians, participating in activities as an observer and experiencing library services on site, I gained a thorough knowledge about its organizational structure of departments, branches, school libraries and bookmobiles. I got to know all facets of the library, as include the management system, operation patterns, special services and human resource management, etc. In Hamburg City Library and Humboldt-University Library of Berlin, I got to know the large-scale application of RFID (Radio Frequency Identification Devices) and auto-sorting technology. Besides, I paid casual visits to Cologne Mini-Library, Bavarian State Library in Munich and other small city libraries as well as university ones. The library architectures, furnishings and resources distribution impressed me strongly. Taking this opportunity, I made a brief introduction of Chinese libraries and Guangzhou public library to German counterparts, sharing with them the status quo of Guangzhou Library as well as its future. The information I have obtained from this journey will help me strongly with my job as a library manager. It also gives me an insight into the future development of Guangzhou library such as the establishment and management of the MAN (Metropolitan Area Network), the service adjustment of New Guangzhou Library, the adoption of new technologies and the management of human resources, etc.

2. Frankfurt City Library in My Eyes

2.1 System Framework

For public libraries in Germany, it is the director, being a government official and appointed by the mayor, which assumes overall responsibility. Human, finance and resources are under unified management in the main-branch system. Generally, a public library in Germany is composed of main library, children & youth library, branches (district libraries), music library, bookmobiles and special libraries.

Frankfurt City Library is made up of a central library, kids and teens library, music library, 18 branches, 2 bookmobiles, 30 service points as well as 85 school libraries. The main library covers an area of 4,000 square meters, while each branch occupies 1,000 square meters on average. As a specialty, Hamburg City Library sets up 14 branches in prisons. Munich City Library is featured by its branches for philately lovers and 7 hospital libraries.

In terms of organization structure, Frankfurt City Library is composed of 5 divisions, i.e., administration department (including personnel, finance, internal affairs, and IT), acquisition & cataloguing department, School Business Administration, the main library (including adults' library, kids and teens library, and music library) and branch management department (including bookmobiles). It has 180 employees falling into two groups, i.e. librarians and assistants. Its collection holds more than 700,000 items in the form of books, periodicals, CDs, DVDs, and music scores.

2.2 Characteristic Services and the Outcome

Apart from circulation, Internet, database retrieval and training prevalent in public libraries, Frankfurt

City Library acts as the operational guider of middle and primary school libraries. It is also the provider of cross-cultural services for immigrants.

Public libraries in Germany undertake the administrative and training responsibility for middle and primary school libraries. Early in 1974, Frankfurt City Library set up the School Business Administration (SBA in short), which has proved to be a success. SBA establishes standards of school libraries (space area and collection proportion, etc.), provides guidance on the layout and decoration as well as the acquisition of furniture and holdings. It also trains teachers and volunteers for better management and usage of school libraries. Semiannually, up to 1,800 items are prepared by SBA for school libraries. To assist the reading courses in schools, SBA provides students with reading-kits based on the age, and recommends relevant books to teachers for their courses. Additionally, SBA pays irregular visits to school libraries to learn users' needs. Professional librarians are also sent to take charge of the overall running of school libraries. By carrying out classroom reading activities and practical courses on library introduction and information retrieval among the freshmen, they act as the best promoters of youth-oriented reading programs tailored by public libraries.

Up to 2011, 85 standard school libraries have been founded by SBA, all running smoothly. During my visit, I viewed three different activities in three school libraries respectively. The professionalism and enthusiasm of SBA librarians moved me deeply. Teachers and students were all highly-involved. With the persistent effort of SBA, the school library is playing an indispensable role in middle and primary schools of Frankfurt, being a strong supporter of teaching and student cultivation. During the break, students flocked into the library, reading, doing homework, surfing the Internet, chatting, and entertaining. I think this is the best proof for the success of SBA.

Immigrants take up 20% of the population in Germany, and there is a steady uptrend. To facilitate the immigrants and their descendants, public libraries in Germany bear the responsibility to help them overcome cultural gap and integrate to local communities. German Library Association established Cross-cultural Library Service Committee to instruct libraries with their cross-cultural services. Frankfurt City Library serves as the Chairman of the Committee, and Hamburg City Library is the principal member of it. Library services for immigrants include multilingual literature, bilingual materials, language training and information about federal nationalization test.

Concerning multicultural communication, Frankfurt City Library functions well as the link. Hosted by Germany, Frankfurt Book Fair is the largest book fair in the world. It enjoys high reputation and is dubbed as the "Olympics for Publishers in the World". Each year, the Fair would invite a country to play as the Guest of Honor and promote its culture and history over Germany and throughout the Fair. Taking such a platform, the image of the country will be enhanced in Germany and Europe. To ensure the success of the Fair, Frankfurt City Library would assist the Guest of Honor and exhibitors in the whole planning of cultural activities e.g., new book launching, TV interview of famous authors, lectures and special shelves on the culture of the Guest of Honor, etc. Iceland is the Guest of Honor in 2011. Frankfurt City Library set up special shelves in its main library to display the blank books from Iceland. The blank book is actually a communication media for users to script whatever they like freely. Having been displayed in several countries and areas, these books recorded various messages and creations from users of diversified cultural backgrounds.

During my visit, the music library got my immediate attention. Frankfurt Music Library holds not only rich audio-visual materials from different music genres (classics, jazz, opera, pop., etc.), but also research resources and music scores. An unsounded piano is laid in the library and users can play their own melody and check the sound effect from the headset. Furthermore, the library sets up an exchange platform for music

lovers, which also serves as a news release center of musical performances and instrument training courses, etc. There is a musical training school in the vicinity. Each year it organizes 6 concerts in the library. The music library houses a holding of more than 50,000 items, with 240,000 items circulated in 2010. As a result, citizens can appreciate and learn music with a low cost.

As far as I can see, Frankfurt City Library is a public library system that operates well with its effective services. In spite of the limited collection of 700,000 items, it is fully used by the citizens. Take the central library for example. 540,000 users visited the library in 2010 alone. The circulation quantity amounted to 950,000 items against 200,000 items held by the library and 80 activities were hosted. As for the kids and teens library, more than 200,000 users visited the library in 2010. Its holding was merely 38,000 items, while the circulation quantity was as high as 290,000 items. That is to say, the circulation frequency was 7 times per book. During the whole year, 270 reading promotion activities were launched by the kids and teens library. Overall, Frankfurt City Library has served a totality of 1.5 million clients in 2010, which indicates that a citizen in Frankfurt would visit the library more than twice a year (the population of Frankfurt was 670,000 then).

3. Application of RFID Technology and Auto-sorting System in German Public Libraries

Nearly all public libraries in Germany have adopted the technology of RFID and auto-sorting, while in university libraries things are different according to specific situations. Generally, RFID technology is widely accepted in newly-built libraries.

Frankfurt City Library and Hamburg City Library have both adopted RFID and auto-sorting technology. Frankfurt City Library have applied those technologies to its new central library opened in 2006. Limited by the space of merely 4,000 square meters, the auto-sorting system is small in scale, occupying an area of 10 square meters. It is connected with the self-service returning machine, with four channels for sorting items including books, periodicals, CD/DVD and other medias. The book-dropping window is set outwards, offering 24-hours returning service.

Remolded from a post office, Hamburg City Library enjoys adequate space to set a large-scale auto-sorting system. Being set on the first floor (300 square meters around), this system is a horizontal one, without vertical devices to transport sorted items across different floors. The system is connected with four book-drops, and a special sorting point is set up for sorting interlibrary books returned. It is composed of two tiers. The upper one is designed to sort non-book items, using plastic containers to convey through 35 sorting channels; the lower one is for books and periodicals, using small handcarts with tilt angle of 45 degree to convey through 58 sorting channels. After being sorted, books and periodicals will be loaded in handcarts and transported to different locations. By adjusting the handcart to horizontal level, the book can be easily shelved. This sorting system also serves as the sorting center of the public libraries in Hamburg. Every day, about 5,000 items including books and discs are sent to the city library for sorting, and the system handles 10,000 items or so per day. Books and discs are sorted in different plastic containers to be sent back to original branches. The maintaining and operation of the system and relevant jobs are outsourced to the supplier. As mentioned by the librarians in Hamburg City Library, the adoption of RFID and auto-sorting technology has relieved their workload and shortened the shelf cycle of the collections. Therefore, they are more concentrated on readers' activities as well as the development of new services.

The Library of Humboldt-University in Berlin adopted RFID and auto-sorting system from 2009, which is vertical. Books can be sorted to their original floors after returning, but after that, manual sorting is required.

4. Public Services in German University Libraries

In Germany, university libraries and public libraries belong to different system, but all of them serve the public to the extent decided on their resources. In principle, besides circulation service, the libraries of city universities provide citizens with the access to electronic resources. For example, in Library of Goethe University of Frankfurt, citizens enjoy the same services as students. The differences only lie in the volume limitation when they check out books and the access control when they visit electronic resources at home. Some university libraries provide circulation service but do not open electronic resources; some just provide services of reading and retrieval inside the libraries without lending service. Citizens need a library card to check out books from university libraries. In Library of Humboldt-University in Berlin, public users account for 17% of the totality. It is widely accepted that university libraries should be open to the public in Germany due to their tax-funded nature. Unfortunately, it is another story for university libraries in China, most of which are not accessed by the public.

5. Comparison between public libraries in China and Germany

5.1 Management System

Public libraries in Germany implement the system of main and branch. The government undertakes the overall financial responsibility, guaranteeing resource sharing and the unification of library management across libraries. The effectiveness of their services is therefore maximized. Comparatively, city libraries and district libraries in China are completely independent organization of different level. The city library functions as a guider rather than a supervisor to district libraries. Such an autonomous system is bound to block the resource sharing among libraries.

Public libraries in Germany are relatively small in size. However, they are well-distributed and widespread, making their services accessible to citizens fairly. Take Frankfurt as an example. With an area of 248 square kilometers and a population of 670,000, it has 20 public libraries and 30 service points. In other words, there is a library every 12 square kilometers shared by 30,000 people, a service point every 5 square kilometers shared by 10,000 citizens. In contrast, Guangzhou occupies an area of 7,434 square kilometers and a population of 12.7 million, with 15 libraries in total. The present Guangzhou Library covers an area of more than 10,000 square meters (the New Guangzhou Library occupies a construction area of 100,000 square meters), while the district libraries are over 3000 square meters on average. Each library has to serve the citizens living 500 square kilometers around.

5.2 Service Scope

Public libraries in Germany focus on the mass-oriented services such as traditional circulation, digital library, Internet and reading promotion activities. Besides those business above, Chinese public libraries undertake the acquisition, management and utilization of local collections, offer consulting services to government and enterprises, and hold free exhibitions and lectures throughout the year. Moreover, German libraries provide the youth with circulation of video games, while Chinese libraries launch the circulation of e-readers.

5.3 Application of New Technologies

In German public libraries, RFID is being in the phase of wide adoption, and the application of auto-sorting system is growing. Some implementing cases, with different scales, can be found. RFID is mainly used for security, self-service circulation and auto-sorting.

For public libraries in China, RFID is also in the phase of popularization, whereas its development and application is on a higher level. RFID is applied in the fields like collection auditing and locating. Based on RFID, 24-hour self-service library has been developed. As for auto-sorting system, at present there are no

implementing cases in China. However, many newly-built libraries and those under construction include this system in their plans, which is the case for New Guangzhou Library where a vertical sorting system covering 10 floors will be deployed.

6. Illuminations and Suggestions

6.1 To strengthen the cooperation on multicultural services between two libraries

Libraries on both sides put cross-cultural services as one of their priorities in the future. Frankfurt City Library has assumed this responsibility to meet the needs of immigrants flocking to German in recent years, while Guangzhou Library has acted as one important window for the communication between different cultures under the globalization of Guangzhou.

When I was visiting the kids and teens library, the librarian told me that there were many Chinese Germans, whereas the library had no Chinese books due to the difficulty of purchasing and cataloging. Guangzhou Library also needs to collect foreign books to equip its multi-culture section in the new library. So I suggested that both libraries should carry out the exchange of books and exhibitions regularly, besides traditional lecture-giving activities. By doing this, clients of both sides would understand the culture of each other in a better way. The communication obstacle caused by culture gaps would be eliminated significantly. As regards with the exchange of books, both libraries should provide each other with format-transferable catalogs that can be easily incorporated into the OPAC, facilitating the immediate access to users.

6.2 Business Management in German libraries provides references for the business management and adjustment in New Guangzhou Library

Concerning personnel management, staffs in German public libraries can be divided into two groups, i.e., librarians and assistants. Assistants are responsible for supplementary works such as book shelving, while librarians take charge of consulting services, activity organization, book purchasing and cataloging, homework guidance and the compilation of subject materials. The division of labor enables the librarians focus on users and offer user-oriented and individualized services. Meanwhile, it increases the sense of achievement and self-identification among the librarians.

In the management of resources, German public libraries adopt the subject-prior shelving method which makes it easier for readers to find books without the knowledge of classification. Each user can borrow a maximum of 30 volumes each time and they pick up books with baskets like in supermarket. All of these methods undoubtedly increase the circulation quantity in libraries.

As regards the relationship with school libraries, the successful story of SBA in Frankfurt City Library enlightens us that school libraries need direct guidance and support from public libraries in order to develop consistently and support teaching in schools. In this field Chinese public libraries have done nothing yet. We should learn from German public libraries by supporting the establishment and management of school libraries, so as to promote the awareness and usage of libraries among children. In this way, the role of public libraries in fostering life-long users and improving the quality of the people would come into full play.

6.3 24-hour Self-Service Library is a good choice of the business expansion for public libraries.

With the broadening of service scope, some common problems would arise in public libraries, such as the difficulty of site selection and human resources shortage. In Frankfurt, 4 libraries had to be closed due to these problems in 2003.

To tackle the problems, the “24-hour Self-Service Urban Community Library” has been researched and developed in China. With a small coverage of space, the 24-hour Self-Service Library is actually a set of

devices that can provide all basic services including library card application, borrowing/returning, OPAC search and digital resource access. The library is also featured by remote monitoring, automatic alarm in case of malfunction and security matters. Now 24-hour Self-Service Library has been put in use on a large scale, especially in big cities. Guangzhou Library is also equipped with the devices. I found that the librarians in Frankfurt City Library were strongly interested in it when I was giving lectures there. So I sincerely suggest the Director of Frankfurt City Library visit China for further investigation of it. And I hope such a visit would provide some references for our German counterparts.