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## Libraries as cultural centers in large new communities in Guangzhou, China

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### **Abstract**

*Guangzhou, the capital city of South China's Guangdong province, achieved a GDP growth by a rate of 12% and the Engel's Coefficient dropped under 39% in 2002. With the increasing income and life level, residents have invested more money in cars and new houses. Many large new housing estates have been building in rural areas with beautiful natural scenery, constituting many large new communities. According to our investigation, we find out that libraries have been set up in many operation ways, becoming the essential facilities for residents' cultural life. However, they are still in starting stage with poor area, resource, staff and service, facing a difficult situation, we consider that housing estates companies should invest more further to develop libraries in their large new communities.*

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### **1. Introduction**

Guangzhou, the capital city of South China's Guangdong province, with a population of some 10 million, has been developing rapidly in recent years. Its growth in GDP in 2002 is 12%. At the same time, residents' income and life level have been raised by a big margin, with the Engel's Coefficient having dropped under 39%. More and more people here invest their money to cars or new houses, while the market of housing estates shows a good prospect. Many large new housing estates called Satellite Cities have been built up in rural areas with beautiful natural scenery, which constitute large new communities with large quantities of residents.

In order to attract more residents to buy houses, most estate developers provide free regular bus service between the downtown and their housing estates. Therefore, visiting new houses

and sightseeing have become a popular weekend activity for many citizens. As common citizens, we enjoyed this activity as well, but as librarians, we had an additional purpose to investigate the cultural activities and libraries in these new communities. According to our investigation to the large housing estates, we found that libraries have been set up in many different operation ways, becoming the essential facilities for residents' great cultural needs here. They are playing quite a role and taking great responsibilities to build cultural environments and bridge cultural gaps between center and rural areas of the city. However, most of them are still in starting stages with poor area, resource, staff and service, far not enough for the great need of residents' cultural life. How to develop these libraries further?

## 2. Libraries in different operation ways

According to our investigation of ten large new estates, the situation is that, all of them have set up libraries in different operation ways:

<i>Housing Estates</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Library area</i>	<i>Location on the map</i>	<i>Operation way</i>
Country Garden	30,000 (Settled)	685 m <sup>2</sup>	□	A
Star River	80□000 (in plan)	100 m <sup>2</sup> (each building group)	□	A
Ragile Guangzhou	100,000 (in plan)	200 m <sup>2</sup>	□	A
Guangda Garden	10,000 (Settled)	300 m <sup>2</sup>	□	B
Jinye Garden	3,000 (Settled)	150 m <sup>2</sup>	□	B
Fangcun Garden	10,000(Settled)	100 m <sup>2</sup>	□	B
Riverside Garden	43,000 (Settled)	100 m <sup>2</sup>	□	B, D
Clifford Estates	70,000 (Settled)	200 m <sup>2</sup> (a new building in plan)	□	B, E
Guangdi Garden	20,000 (Settled)	100 m <sup>2</sup>	□	C
Huanan NewCity	80□000 (in plan)	A building of three floors	□	F



This is the clubhouse of Guangzhou Country Garden,  
The whole area is 40,000□, of which 685□ is for the library

We notice that these libraries have introduced cultural partnership, electronic library and participation of residents in their operation:

- A. Opened independently by the estates companies, which provide all the place, equipment, staff and books. Take the library of Guangzhou Country Garden as an example, which was set up on the top floor of their clubhouse in 1999. The Estate Company invested some 10,000 RMB to buy 12,000 books, 90 magazines and 40 newspapers, its follow-up fund to replenish books and the salary of the librarians are from the realty management fee of the residents, The library is free only for residents in this community.
- B. Opened jointly by the estates companies and the provincial or municipal libraries in center of the city. Take the library of Riverside Garden for example, Guangzhou Library provides 10,000 books to start, 2,000 books every year later, professional training and guide regularly, the Estate Company is responsible for place, staff, management, replenishment of 60 magazines and 30 newspapers. The library is free not only for the residents within this community, but also for farmers and other persons nearby.
- C. Opened as bookshops where residents could read, or buy the books. Take the library in Guangdi Garden for example, where many comfortable reading desks and chairs are set, you could read or buy any books or magazines as long as you register a one year valid reading card with 50 CNY. The bookshop is run on contract to meet the reading need of the residents, as a cultural facility, the manager would get a free use of the place, but he must ensure quite a amount of books displaying in the reading rooms.
- D. Opened as an online library to meet the trend of residents' e-life, as many estates companies promote an e-concept in their *Internet housing estates* where each room of the apartments has joints for computers to connect local network or Internet. Take the Riverside Garden as an example, a local network called "e-living" had been built up in 1999 as the base of the virtual community, the developer set up an online library, residents could read news, magazines or books on their computer screen at home.
- E. Opened as a DIY library, residents donate and manage the books by themselves. For example, in the library of Clifford Estate, an area is specifically reserved for the children, who contribute their own books to share with others. Their names are marked on the shelves, so that the library has become a center for children to communicate each other, they like gathering here on weekends, exchange their favorite books, talk about what they have learned and help the librarian to put the books in order.
- F. Open a school library to residents. Many famous estates have cooperated with famous schools to build branches in their housing estates, in which libraries have been set up on quite a large scale. These libraries could open to residents by negotiation. For example, the school library in Huanan New City is free to residents on weekends.

### **3. Libraries are essential as cultural centers**

With the income rising, family cars have become popular, and modern people thirst for a new life in an open space, where they could reconsider not only an interior of the house, but also the surrounding environment, education for children, or recreational and cultural life for their spare time. Many citizens take fancy to large new housing estates in suburb with perfect public facilities, which could be listed as follows:

- a. For environment: lawn, trees, flowers, fountain, waterfall or rockery or garden;
- b. For daily life: supermarket, restaurant, barroom, shopping street, beauty shop, hospital, post office, bank, park or security;
- c. For recreation: swimming pool, badminton, table tennis, basketball, shooting, billiards room, game room, children's playground, bowling, squash court, keep fit room, rocket-climbing or golf court;
- d. For education: kindergarten or school;
- e. For cultural life: cultural square, library, museum, cinema, net bar, drawing room, art room, music room, science room, pottery room or conference hall.



*Environment Restaurant Table tennis Bowling Keep fit*

Obviously, recreational and cultural life here is not less than that living in downtown. Actually, we can also infer a great cultural need of the residents in these large new communities from the following aspects:

- a. Residents here are usually modern citizens with a good income and high cultural literacy. Take the Clifford Estates as an example, of all the residents, 68% has a higher education background, 60% is from Guangzhou city, 30% is from Hong Kong, and 2% is from other 38 countries.
- b. These large new communities have been built up on rural farmland, and it takes at least 30 minutes by bus to the downtown. It is not convenient for residents to use the cultural facilities located in the center of the city in their spare time.
- c. Residents have more spare time than before. From May 1995, citizens began to have a two-day weekend, and it makes it easy to finish the housework by varied convenient life service such as supermarket, laundry or home service.
- d. Modern families attach more importance to children's education and future. They need a healthy cultural environment for children's growing up. Further more, many adults like to *recharge* knowledge by reading, and old people would enjoy a quiet place.

New residents may pay more attention to other recreational facilities, such as bowling or gymnasium at the beginning, especially for the youngsters. But there are a large number of residents, and the recreational facilities are limited and charged for use, so that only part of residents would spend part of their spare time on recreational facilities. They would find that library is another nice free place for their pastime.

Practical small libraries with tasteful environment decentralized in clubhouses would be convenient for residents' leisure, information and learning. Take the one in Fangcun Garden as an example, it is a joint library of which the estates company provides only the place, and Guangzhou Library provides resource, staff and service. Librarians collect the residents' reading tendencies, seek literature information for them, and recommend nice books by promotion activities like wall newspaper, poster or reading gathering. This professional practice has got a notable results, attracting more than 2,000 readers per month. Although this library occupies only 100 m<sup>2</sup>, it plays a great role in residents' pastime, information and lifelong learning, which are regarded as three main cultural functions of a library.

A library of unique style is an icon of cultural intellect, totem to the totality of knowledge. Comparing to other cultural facilities such as museum, cinema or theater, a library is the most essential for residents. It is a wise foresight for a developer to invest a library above all, to raise both cultural and commercial value of his housing estates, and the most important, to embody his sincerity for residents' interest in this free facility.

#### **4. Difficult situation and solutions**

In the initial stage, developers of housing estates may take libraries only as cultural selling spots, so they invested in place, staff, equipment and quite a lot of books, magazines or newspapers to set up reading rooms in the clubhouses. However, when their house commodities were nearly sold out, the clubhouses would get into commercial operation by

realty companies, and the follow-up fund would become poor for the replenishment of new books or other resource. According to a statistics, 80% of clubhouses in housing estates in Guangzhou run at a heavy loss, for the clubhouses had been decorated in a luxurious level and the charge is too high for most residents. Library is a public good, not a commercial business, so it seems hard for an estate developer or a realty company to run it alone in long term. Many reading rooms in clubhouses come to this common difficult situation.

Among the libraries in different operation ways we mentioned above, the real examples of joint libraries show us bright prospects of libraries in these large housing estates. For provincial or municipal public libraries, they have obligations to serve all citizens in the city. To establish cooperation with housing estates, it could not only develop more potential readers, but also promote their reputation among the citizens. However, budgets of these large public libraries are limited, it is impossible for them to open a joint library in very housing estates. Further more, the financial resource of large housing estates is quite strong to build libraries by themselves, and the large public libraries would rather provide timely help to more old street communities.

Then how to develop the libraries in these large new communities further? We consider that the most effective solution is through the house estates developers in the current situation, and the key to the question is that whether the developers attach importance to libraries. Comparing with the large investment of some billions to other facilities, they invest little in library now. For example, the Clifford Estates has invested 3.16 billion totally in road, environment, school, clubhouse and playground in the past decade, but the library is still in an area of 200 m<sup>2</sup>. Another housing estates introduced 8 trees from abroad with 80,000 USA \$, which would support a library in quite a scale instead. Further more, residents pay a realty management fee each month, in which a cultural expenditure should be included, and they should have free cultural service like a library. Many residents have recognized that the housing estates should invest more in library and other cultural facilities.

During our survey, we are happy to find out that many large housing estates have already planned a big library building in their second stage of development, especially those located in south of the city, which called *a big house garden of Guangzhou citizens*.

To build *a Big Cultural Province* is a great policy of Guangdong province these years, it is a chance for the development of library. A voice is becoming louder for that the budgets of libraries in communities should be included in a local system of laws. With the improvement of the laws, libraries in large new communities should get budgets support from government in the future.



This is a map of Guangzhou city. We can see that three of the largest libraries are all located in the old districts of the city. Many large new housing estates have been developing in suburb, especially in the south of the city, which called a *big house garden of Guangzhou citizens*.

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