

## Research on the Evolutionary Path of Private Libraries in Yangjiang

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**Abstract:** Chinese libraries have undergone a functional transformation from book collection to utilization, and Yangjiang Library in Guangdong is no exception. Until the early years of the Republic of China, Xiaoze Liang, a cultural celebrity in Yangjiang, founded a private library named "Yangjiang Library" with his private collection. This paper mainly explores the transformation and development of Yangjiang's "Xiaoze Library". Originally named "Yangjiang Library", it was successively renamed as "Xiaoze Library", "Yangjiang County Library", and "Xiaoze Ancient Books Department", among others. Through a review of Yangjiang Library during the Republic of China period, it is hoped to provide rich reference materials for local library construction and better inherit local culture.

**Keywords:** Xiaoze Liang; Yangjiang Library; Xiaoze Library; Xiaoze Ancient Books Department

### 1. Introduction

The development of libraries in China has undergone an evolutionary process from ancient book repositories to modern smart libraries. In the Yangjiang region of Guangdong, tracing back to the Northern Song Dynasty, the rise of academy collections emerged, with scripture repositories established within Confucian schools built by county governments, and private collectors also began to appear. However, these collection institutions primarily focused on "collection" and were not open to the public. Until the Qing Dynasty, some regions in Guangdong started to establish public libraries, whose functions shifted from "emphasizing collection over utilization" to "integrating collection with utilization," opening to public borrowing—yet such libraries were few in

number. In the late years of the Guangxu reign of the Qing Dynasty, the imperial court urgently called for establishing schools and developing education, issuing an order to all provinces and counties nationwide to prepare for the establishment of libraries. However, due to various reasons such as local economic constraints and lack of manpower, Yangjiang County delayed in establishing a library. Until the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Yangjiang still had not established a county-level library. By the early years of the Republic of China, Yangjiang finally established a privately-operated but publicly accessible library. This shows that the development of public libraries in Yangjiang underwent a rather long process.

### 2. The Establishment of the Private "Yangjiang Library"

During the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, the number of public libraries established domestically was relatively small. According to historical records of libraries, a rough estimate indicates there were about 20 or so, most of which were provincial libraries. Due to financial constraints and insufficient attention, Yangjiang County failed to establish a library for a long time. It was not until the sixth year of the Republic of China (1917) that Liang Tingkai (courtesy name Xiaozé), a modern cultural celebrity of Yangjiang, generously took on the heavy responsibility of establishing Yangjiang County Library with his private financial and material resources. He assigned his eldest son, Liang Fangdu, to handle the preparatory work for the library, and asked his second son, Liang Shaotong, to vacate his own house to serve as the library premises. He spent money to purchase books from ancient and modern times, while also contributing over 4,000 volumes of books from his personal collection. He classified, catalogued, and neatly arranged the books, added various library facilities, established the

library, and named it "Yangjiang Library". Such naming highlighted its public function, indicating that the library was open to the public, thus pioneering the public use of private libraries in Yangjiang.

During the Republic of China period, the reason why Yangjiang County was able to have a private library was inseparable from Liang Xiaoze's emphasis on the development of local cultural undertakings. Mr. Xiaoze was born in the 27th year of the Daoguang reign of the Qing Dynasty (1847) and died in the 12th year of the Republic of China (1923). His personal name was Tingkai, courtesy name Guochang, and style names Zhisheng and Xiaoze. He was a renowned bibliophile and philanthropist in Yangjiang. Liang Xiaoze's life was greatly influenced by his father. His father, Liang Daqing, was a merchant in Yangjiang with a relatively wealthy family; he attached great importance to his children's education and set up a private school at home, so Liang Xiaoze received a good family education from childhood. Due to the educational situation at the time, he had to take the imperial examinations to enter officialdom. However, Xiaoze Liang did not fare well in the examinations and eventually abandoned scholarly pursuits, purchasing the position of Langzhong (a sixth-rank official) in the Ministry of Revenue. Later, he obtained a second-rank noble title, which was extended to three generations [1]. Liang Xiaoze did not complete his official career; later, after leaving Beijing and returning to his hometown, he devoted himself to local public welfare undertakings. The establishment of the "Yangjiang Library" was just one of his contributions to Yangjiang's public welfare, but later generations' evaluation of his role in founding the library was the most pertinent, praising him for "pioneering the ethos of Yangjiang" and highly commending his contributions to the development of local cultural undertakings.

The library founded by Xiaoze Liang was initially named "Yangjiang Library." Its address was on Shuilei Street, Yangjiang County (now Shuilei Street, Jiangcheng District, Yangjiang City). The library premises used the rear building of his private ancestral hall, consisting of a two-story building from the Liang family compound and several auxiliary rooms, covering an area of about several hundred square meters. The main building of the library included a book

storage room, newspaper reading room, reading hall, and librarian's office, while the auxiliary rooms contained a reception room, small book storage room, and director's office. The library had a collection of approximately 5,000 volumes and invited Liang Guanxi, a cultural celebrity of Yangjiang, to serve as the director. Fangdu Liang, Xiaoze Liang's eldest son, once praised Liang Guanxi's moral integrity and literary talent, noting that he was the person Xiaoze Liang admired most, hence he trusted him fully to be competent for the directorship. At the library's founding, Guanxi Liang also composed an inscription titled *Record of Yangjiang Library* [2]. Initially, this stone tablet was placed in the reception room of the central hall of the library, framed with carved rosewood, but was later lost. In 1982, it was discovered by the Yangjiang County Cultural Relics Survey Team at the garrison in the eastern suburbs of Yangjiang County. Engraved with six characters reading "Record of Yangjiang Library" in clerical script (Han li) with intaglio carving, the inscription was authored by Guanxi Liang, dated the third month of the Dingsi year (1917), the sixth year of the Republic of China. The tablet is well-preserved and is now housed in the Yangjiang Museum. After the library was established, people came to read there in an endless stream every day. In an era of scarce books, the Liang family's initiative to open a library in this small county town of Yangjiang truly provided abundant spiritual nourishment for many poor students. Many famous figures in modern times, such as historian Yixuan Dai, master of traditional Chinese painting Shanyue Guan, and linguist Borong Huang, were enthusiastic early readers of the library. They benefited greatly from it and later became cultural celebrities of Yangjiang in various research fields, making contributions to national and local cultural development.

### **3. The Evolutionary Path of "Yangjiang Library"**

#### **3.1 Renaming the Library: Privately Operated but Publicly Accessible**

The name "Yangjiang Library" remained in use until the 13th year of the Republic of China (1924). Xiaoze Liang and the "Yangjiang Library" together endured years of hardship marked by continuous warfare, suffering severe losses. In February 1923 (the 12th year of the

Republic of China), he was forced to leave his hometown and seek refuge in Macau. Unexpectedly, his old illness relapsed, and Xiaoze Liang passed away at his residence in Macau in August of the same year. In 1925 (the 14th year of the Republic of China), when Yangjiang established a public library, his descendants, to commemorate him, renamed the originally planned "Yangjiang Library" to "Xiaoze Library" [3], under the initiative of his sons Liang Shaoju (courtesy name Fangdu) and Liang Shaotong (courtesy name Hulu), among others. However, the library continued to be maintained by private funds and remained open to the public for reading. Under financially constrained conditions, the Liang family expanded the library's collection by using all interest from shares invested in the Commercial Press in Shanghai to purchase new books published by that press, thereby increasing the collection size. By 1934 (the 23rd year of the Republic of China), the library already had over 10,000 volumes. By the eve of Liberation, the collection had grown to nearly 100,000 volumes—so large that it was comparable to the Jingtang Library in Xinhui and the Pingshan Library in Kaiping, earning the trio the reputation of being the three private libraries with the largest collections in Guangdong Province. However, due to warlord conflicts and two invasions of Yangjiang by Japanese invaders [4], the Xiaoze Library could not escape disaster and suffered severe damage. The atrocities of the Japanese invaders—arson, killing, looting, and wanton trampling that destroyed Chinese culture—were outrageous. According to historical records, on March 3, 1941 (the "March 3rd Incident"), Japanese troops set fire to part of the collection and looted some precious volumes; the number of burned books could not be counted. On July 14, 1945 (lunar calendar June 6, referred to by Yangjiang locals as the "June 6th Incident"), during their second invasion of Yangjiang, the Japanese wrecked a considerable number of books in the Xiaoze Library. Torn books were scattered everywhere, and the invaders relieved themselves indiscriminately in the library, making the place extremely filthy. Had the Xiaoze Library not been damaged, the collection of the Xiaoze Ancient Books Department today would be richer, and more valuable books would have been preserved. However, the wheel of history does not turn backward. Despite such

ravages, Xiaoze Liang's descendants still guarded these ancient books.

After the renaming of "Yangjiang Library" to "Xiaoze Library," his sons Liang Fangdu and Shaotong Liang had plans to renovate the library. Shaotong Liang personally designed the blueprints, proposing to build a new Xiaoze Library modeled after the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Guangzhou, with the site selected at the "Liang Family Cemetery" in Baishadong [5]. In 1933 (the 22nd year of the Republic of China), Shaotong Liang overexerted his mind while researching electricity, developed insomnia, and later suffered further setbacks due to other reasons, leading to a mental breakdown. He ultimately drowned himself in the household water tank and passed away. Due to changes in the political situation and family misfortunes, the renovation plan for the Xiaoze Library was not implemented. Nevertheless, the "Xiaoze Library" of the 1920s and 1930s made significant contributions to the cultural undertakings of Yangjiang. For example, when Liang Guanxi, a famous Yangjiang scholar, and others compiled the *Annals of Yangjiang County*, many of the reference materials needed were provided by this library. The "Xiaoze Library" also served as a hub for disseminating advanced ideas and culture. In its early days, it subscribed to progressive periodicals such as *New Youth*, *Eastern Miscellany*, and *Women's Magazine*, and purchased a large number of books by progressive writers like Lu Xun, Moruo Guo, and Mao Dun. Many progressive youths, including Tuizhi Ruan, Zuozhou Tan, and Yuanxi Lin, visited the library to read books and embrace advanced ideas. During the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, some revolutionaries were also inspired here [6]. The "Xiaoze Library" fully leveraged its function as a privately operated but publicly accessible institution, bringing numerous benefits to the general public.

### **3.2 Merger into Yangjiang County Public Library**

In the 25th year of the Republic of China (1936), Yangjiang began to establish a county library. The library was equipped with a book storage room and a reading room, housing a collection of over 1,000 volumes. In the 26th year of the Republic of China (1937), the Yangjiang County Library was reorganized into a People's Education Center, which started to offer on-site

reading and external lending services. At this time, the "Xiaoze Library" coexisted with the Yangjiang County Library, serving the same functions. Later, due to the Japanese invasion of Yangjiang, the "Xiaoze Library" suffered severe damage and incurred heavy losses of books. Coupled with insufficient funding, it was forced to close in the 34th year of the Republic of China (1945). Nevertheless, the "Xiaoze Library," though operated privately, served the public, benefiting many residents and promoting the development of local public libraries. In November 1949, the Yangjiang County Cultural Center was established, taking over the "Xiaoze Library" and the People's Education Center. The Cultural Center set up a book room staffed with part-time librarians. Adhering to opening to the public, the book room provided free services. In addition to external borrowing and on-site reading, it proactively sought and recommended various books for readers. Sometimes, staff were dispatched to carry book boxes to fields and farmlands, allowing people to read during rest breaks from labor. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Yangjiang County's public library remained under the administration of the County Cultural Center. In the 1960s, when Yangjiang came under the jurisdiction of Zhanjiang, many rare books from the Xiaoze Library were transferred to the Zhanjiang City Library. A small number of books lost from the "Xiaoze Library" were also collected by the Guangdong Provincial Library and the Xinhui Library. During the Cultural Revolution, some books were destroyed, and by this period, the collection of the Xiaoze Library had been significantly reduced.

In October 1978, the Yangjiang County Library was established, separating from the Cultural Center to independently form a county-level public library, staffed with 8 full-time cadres. The library was equipped with a Book Lending Room, Science and Technology Consultation Room, Periodical Reading Room, Children's Reading Room, Classification and Cataloguing Room, and Publicity and Guidance Room. From its establishment until 1987—over nine years—the county library, in addition to managing lending and reading services, organized guidance for township cultural stations and factory libraries [7]. Since then, the library has truly embarked on a development path dedicated to serving the public.

### **3.3 Integration into Yangjiang City Library**

Yangjiang abolished its county status and was established as a prefecture-level city in February 1988. In July of the same year, Yangjiang City Library was founded, with its initial location at Beixiu Road (old site). After several relocations, the current library is situated in the Cultural and Art Center Building on Xinjiang North Road, adjacent to the Yuanyang North Lake—a prime venue for citizens to access a wide range of books. In May 1990, to commemorate the great achievements of ancestors and further develop local cultural undertakings, the Yangjiang government held a symposium marking the establishment of the "Xiaoze Ancient Books Department" and the 73rd anniversary of the founding of Yangjiang Xiaoze Library [8]. At this symposium, prominent figures from various sectors fully affirmed Xiaoze Liang's illustrious contributions to local library development, emphasizing that his legacy would propel the growth of Yangjiang's library cause. Subsequently, the collections of the original "Xiaoze Library" and books donated by Xiaoze Liang's descendants were consolidated to establish the "Xiaoze Ancient Books Department," a department under the jurisdiction of Yangjiang City Library. In October 2011, this department was designated by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Culture as one of the first batch of provincial-level key protection units for ancient books. A total of 11,340 ancient books were transferred from the "Xiaoze Library" to the department, including three titles—*Guwen Yuanjian* (64 volumes), *Tongya* (52 volumes), and *Nashuying Qupu: Nanke Ji* (2 volumes)—which were listed in the Guangdong Provincial Catalogue of Precious Ancient Books [9]. After its establishment, the "Xiaoze Ancient Books Department" appointed dedicated staff for ancient book management. Initially, guardianship was entrusted to Xiaoze Liang's descendants. Xu Xiaoying, Xiaoze Liang's fifth-generation descendant and the fifth-generation guardian of the Xiaoze Library, inherited this role from her father, Peidong Xu. Peidong Xu was the child of Liang Fangdu's daughter (i.e., Xiaoze Liang's great-grandson). Having studied at the "Daqing Private School" established in the Liang family residence during childhood and later imbibed advanced cultural ideas at the "Xiaoze Library," Peidong Xu contributed significantly to the preservation of Yangjiang's ancient books and became a

renowned local historical and cultural figure before passing away. Influenced by her father, Xiaoying Xu cherished the ancient books deeply, protected them conscientiously, and ensured their transmission. She worked in the Ancient Books Department until retirement [10]. In 2015, Jinsong Zhong took over the management of the department. As the current head and the only ancient books manager with professional training, he has restored and organized a large number of ancient books in the library, achieving outstanding results in local ancient book collation and preservation.

### **3.4 Listed in the Yangjiang Historical Buildings Register**

In recent years, the country has attached great importance to the protection and revitalization of historical and cultural districts and buildings, and has successively announced several batches of national historical and cultural cities, villages, and streets. In December 2025, the official website of the Yangjiang Municipal People's Government released the list of the third batch of designated historical buildings, which included the Xiaoze Library [11]. The principal edifice of the library continues to possess historical significance, while certain precious ancient texts housed within also exhibit considerable documentary value. Public records show that the Xiaoze Library was originally built in 1871, during the Qing Dynasty's Tongzhi era. It was originally the private residence and library of Liang Tingkai (known by his pseudonym Xiaoze), a senior official in the Ministry of Revenue. Later, part of the house was vacated to establish the Yangjiang Library. Xiaoze Liang and his descendants were enthusiastic about public welfare and cultural undertakings, donating funds to establish a library and opening it to the public, at its peak, the library housed a collection exceeding over 100,000 volumes, thereby making outstanding contributions to the propagation of local culture and the enlightenment of the public's intellect. Yangjiang mainstream media has repeatedly reported on Xiaoze Library, believing that the library has played a positive role in preserving cultural heritage, conducting social education, and promoting social civilization [12]. Yuping Zeng (2025) once articulated, "The Liang family has always attached great importance to cultural education. During the tumultuous period of the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China,

Tingkai Liang also realized the importance of enlightening the public. He established the Yangjiang Library, donated all 5,000 volumes of books collected in his family, and entrusted someone to invest in the Shanghai Commercial Press, using all the annual interest to purchase new books." [13] The Xiaoze Library subsequently emerged as one of the "Four Major Privately-Established Libraries in Guangdong Province. In January 2026, the original site of the Xiaoze Library was officially inscribed in the "Third Batch List of Historical Buildings in Yangjiang City", thereby acquiring legal protection status. The historical architecture and cultural significance of the Xiaoze Library have garnered increasing attention and appreciation from the local government, which fully demonstrates the significance of protecting historical buildings and disseminating culture.

### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, in that era when wars were frequent and people's lives were not prosperous, the Xiaoze Library was established and has been safeguarding Chinese ancient books for generations, which is a commitment and confidence in Chinese traditional culture. The Xiaoze Library evolved from being a private residence and library to becoming a private "library", later renamed as the "Xiaoze Ancient Books Department", and eventually became the Ancient Books Preservation Center of Yangjiang City Library. After more than a century of dedication, several generations of the Liang family have taken it as their duty to preserve books and pass down cultural heritage. They have not only preserved a large number of local documents and precious ancient books, but also protected them during wars, ensuring that rare books are preserved. This perseverance has transcended mere personal interest and elevated to a level of cultural consciousness and historical responsibility. Yangjiang City Library has evolved into a modern public cultural venue that integrates document collection, information services, academic discussions, and cultural exchanges. The development and changes of Yangjiang Public Library are inseparable from the contributions made by the ancestors of the Xiaoze Liang family and their descendants to the local library. In particular, Xiaoze's eldest son Fangdu Liang and second son Shaotong Liang did a lot of work for the establishment and subsequent development of the library. In his

writings, Fangdu Liang highly praised his father's achievements in local public welfare undertakings, especially the library he founded, which was hailed as a benevolent act by contemporaries. Today, it seems that the purpose of the Liang family in establishing the library was not just to collect books, but also to facilitate public access, and it has played a positive role in promoting the inheritance and protection of Yangjiang culture. The Ancient Books Department of Xiaoze is an important department of Yangjiang City Library. It is a hard-won cultural construction achievement, and everyone attaches great importance to the books in the Ancient Books Department. With the development of artificial intelligence, Yangjiang Library is actively embracing new technologies, exploring actively in the collation and preservation of local literature, and continuously promoting the development of local public welfare cultural undertakings in Yangjiang.

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