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# First law on public libraries enacted

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China's first law on public libraries took effect on Jan 1.

It requires governments at the county level or higher to set up public libraries that provide reading services and spaces, and are open to the public for free.

Libraries must also organize public lectures, activities to promote reading, training and exhibitions, and other public cultural service programs.

The law was enacted through a vote of the National People's Congress Standing Committee on Nov 4. A draft of the law was reviewed by an executive meeting of the State Council in April.

The public library law follows last year's enactment of the public cultural service guarantee law.

The new library law details the legal framework of the guarantee law and is intended to realize the function of public libraries to deliver cultural services.

Highlights include the construction and enhancement of the main-branch library systems at the county level.

China had nearly 3,200 public libraries which received more than 647 million visitors by the end of 2016, the National Bureau of Statistics reports.

"Our country has built a library service network that covers urban and rural areas," says Zhang Yongxin, director of the Ministry of Culture's public culture office.

"However, the problems of uneven and insufficient development are still notable. And low efficiency is still widespread at the grassroots level."

The law will integrate public reading resources and extend them to rural areas.

Cloud computing, big data and other digital technology will be integrated into the library system to improve digital services, interlending and self-service options.

The government is responsible for constructing the public library service network.

It encourages such forms of social participation as fundraising, donating and volunteering.

The law also calls for enhanced cooperation between public libraries and those belonging to universities and research organizations. It also supports opening the latter to the public.

Supporting legislation related to book disposal is also being developed, while local rules are being improved, Zhang says.

The law also defines the National Library of China's functions, which include supporting and guiding public library systems' development.

The national library is improving archives of documents, the library's director Han Yongjin says.

Public libraries' collections are being made more accessible. And systems to collect and preserve literature from ancient China and the Republic of China period are being improved, Han says.

The National Library of China is preparing to build an international library alliance for countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative to provide resources and services for the construction of Chinese libraries overseas.

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