

In China: Research on the Participation of Physical Bookstores in Public Cultural Services: Causes, Connotations and Paths

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How to cite this paper: Jiang, B. Y. (2023). In China: Research on the Participation of Physical Bookstores in Public Cultural Services: Causes, Connotations and Paths. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 212-223.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.1112016>

Received: November 19, 2023

Accepted: December 19, 2023

Published: December 22, 2023

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Abstract

To conduct a literature study on the participation of physical bookstores in public cultural services in China, to identify the problems of the existing studies, and to provide directions for the mode and methodology of physical bookstores' participation in public cultural services, relevant standards and evaluation mechanisms in the future. Facing the national strategic needs, according to the newly released national policies, taking the key issues in the research on the participation of brick-and-mortar bookstores in public cultural services as the guidance, we will establish the logical formula of “policy phenomenon—finding problems—analyzing problems—solving problems”, and explore the research progress of physical bookstores' participation in public cultural services from the perspectives of reasons, connotations and paths.

Keywords

Physical Bookshops, Public Cultural Services

1. Introduction

The report of the Twentieth Party Congress proposes that “Chinese-style modernization is a modernization that harmonizes material and spiritual civilization. Material abundance and spiritual wealth are the fundamental requirements of socialist modernization (CPD, 2023)”. The growing spiritual enrichment of the Chinese people requires a corresponding improvement in the effectiveness of public cultural services at the grassroots level. Public cultural services need to start at the grassroots level, firmly grasp the forward direction of advanced socialist culture, and disseminate socialist core values from the grassroots level

(Ma, 2014). On 27 April 2023, the General Office of China's Central Propaganda Department and the General Office of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism jointly issued the Notice on Promoting Participation of Entity Bookstores in Public Cultural Services (CPD, 2023). The policy added entity bookstores to the original subjects of public cultural services, supported entity bookstores as grassroots subjects to participate in the construction of public cultural service system, and clarified the importance of entity bookstores in public cultural services. Entity bookstores, an emerging public cultural service subject, play an important role in promoting the prosperity of the cultural market and the high-quality development of public cultural services as an important civilization facility and civilization carrier at the grassroots level. It is of great theoretical and practical significance to discuss how physical bookstores can effectively join in the construction of public cultural service system and enhance the level of public cultural services. In view of this, this paper focuses on the logical formula of "policy phenomenon—discovering problems—analyzing problems—solving problems", discusses the reasons, connotations and characteristics of the participation of physical bookstores in public cultural services under the existing policy environment, and puts forward a series of problems that will be triggered. In addition, it also puts forward a series of problems that will be triggered, and explores the realization path of entity bookstores' public cultural services. The research questions in this paper include: 1) What are the reasons for the participation of brick-and-mortar bookstores in public cultural services, which are originally profit-oriented, to be promoted by national policies? 2) What are the connotation, characteristics and principles of physical bookstores' participation in public cultural services? 3) What are the problems arising from the participation of brick-and-mortar bookstores in public cultural services? 4) Path analysis of physical bookstores' participation in public cultural services?

2. Literature Review

From 1949 to 1978, the Chinese government implemented a planned economy. Under the planned economy, government-run public libraries were the main supplying body of public cultural services. With the implementation of reform and opening up after 1978, the economy and society continued to develop and change, and the unitary pattern of the main body of the supply of public cultural services could no longer meet the needs of social development (Ma, 2014). While emphasizing the dominant position of public libraries in the supply of public cultural services, actively promoting the participation of brick-and-mortar bookstores in the supply of public cultural services has an important value in meeting the demand for public culture and making up for the lack of government supply. On the one hand, China's per capita GDP has exceeded 85,700 yuan, China is entering a period of rapid expansion of public cultural demand, the people's demand for libraries and other public cultural products and services will show a geometric progression trend. This situation makes the existing library public

services more and more unable to meet the needs of the public in the number of cultural needs and demand structure, physical bookstores to participate in the supply of public cultural services can effectively alleviate this outstanding contradiction. On the other hand, libraries in western China lag behind libraries in the east, and libraries in rural townships lag behind libraries in cities. In this state of unbalanced development, we need to eliminate the digital divide brought about by differences in the construction of public cultural infrastructure. Social organizations can absorb and integrate social resources to build physical bookstores to increase the supply of public cultural services in remote areas, and this kind of resource allocation guided by social organizations is an important supplement to government-led public cultural services.

In China, there is a wealth of literature on brick-and-mortar bookstores, with a total of 57 articles published between 2000 and 2009, but a sudden wave of brick-and-mortar bookstores closing down around 2010, and the issue of how to help brick-and-mortar bookstores get out of the predicament triggered widespread concern among scholars, resulting in a total of 1509 articles from 2010 to 2019, which is a multiplier of 1.5 percent (Song & Xie, 2021). In 2014, the Chinese government's work report for the first time appeared in the content of "advocating reading for all", as one of the popular reading space of the physical bookstore, plays an irreplaceable role in the national reading movement, so after 2014, the research heat of the academic community on the physical bookstore continues to rise. In 2016, the policy of "Guiding Opinions on Supporting the Development of Brick-and-Mortar Bookstores" was introduced, which further promoted the research process of scholars in the field of brick-and-mortar bookstores. Lian Xiaochuan, a professor in the Department of Publishing at Pace University in New York, believes that revitalizing brick-and-mortar bookstores can rely on three ways: relying on readers' patronage, relying on bookstores to change their business model, and relying on government policy support (Lian, 2011). Wei Yushan, a scholar at the China Press and Publication Research Institute, believes that private bookstores are paying more and more attention to social benefits in the process of accelerating the transformation, and have become an important force in promoting reading for all. Private bookstores should continue to strengthen content construction, help cultural revitalization, and assume more social responsibility (Wei, 2019). Zhou Zhengbing, a scholar from Central University of Finance and Economics, analyses how physical bookstores can meet the scene era by taking the activity of "Reading for All" as an example, and proposes that physical bookstores should emphasize design-driven to create an aesthetic space, change the traditional mode to improve the reading experience, and make reasonable use of big data to do a good job of accurate service for readers (Zhou, 2019).

In recent years, Beijing's physical bookstores have started the "bookstore +" mode, seeking diversified transformation and development under the impact of Internet online shopping. As one of Beijing's cultural landmarks, "PAGEONE" bookstore has outstanding achievements in the field of brick-and-mortar book-

stores, and has been awarded “the most beautiful bookstore” many times. Compared with online reading, the foundation of physical bookstores is to provide an immersive reading experience, which is built on specialized, high-quality reading content. Therefore, brick-and-mortar bookstores should continue to introduce excellent Chinese and foreign language books, and at the same time, combine the characteristics of the region where the bookstore is located and the reading background of the readers, adjust the direction of the book selection on a regular basis, and actively undertake a variety of reading and sharing activities, to create a distinctive all-around content wind direction.

3. Analysis of the Reasons for Physical Bookstores’ Participation in Public Cultural Services in China—Based on PEST Analysis

PEST analysis is an important strategic analysis tool, analyzing external environmental factors from the perspectives of political, economic, social and technological environments (Wang, 2022), which can help to analyse the reasons for physical bookstores’ participation in public cultural services. To this end, the PEST analysis of physical bookstores’ participation in public cultural services is carried out, with the political environment analysis mainly analyzing the policies of physical bookstores issued by the government, the economic environment analysis including the analysis of the level of the national economy and the situation of the industry, the social environment analysis mainly analyzing the social impacts brought about by the development of physical bookstores, and the technological analysis including the analysis of the technologies and platforms within the cultural industry.

3.1. Political Environment

The “Guiding Opinions on Supporting the Development of Entity Bookstores” clearly points out that it promotes the innovation and transformation and upgrading of entity bookstore business models, and focuses on the “bottleneck” problem that restricts the development of entity bookstores to carry out research. The Guiding Opinions on Further Supporting the Development of Physical Bookstores on College Campuses requires the basic formation of the development of physical bookstores on college campuses across the country and the overall layout of physical bookstores in the whole society, in order to better meet the growing diversified cultural needs of college campuses. Under the influence of relevant policies, entity bookstore business model continues to innovate and transform, and the number and sales maintain steady growth, laying a good foundation for the subsequent participation in public cultural services.

3.2. Economic Environment

According to China’s National Bureau of Statistics, in 2022, the gross national income was 1197250.4 billion yuan, the per capita GDP was 8569.8 billion yuan, and the consumption level of the residents was 31,718 yuan, and the stable de-

velopment of the economic environment creates a good condition for the layout of the national cultural industry and the development of physical bookstores. In September 2022, China Book Publishing Association published the 2022 National Research Report on the Operation of Entity Bookstores”, in which more than 50% of entity bookstores had revenues of less than one million yuan in 2021, while in the first half of 2022, 56% of entity bookstores had revenues of less than half a million yuan. Some bookstores clearly proposed that government procurement should be increased and the government should support and subsidize physical bookstores. Although the national economic environment is developing steadily, the business situation of physical bookstores is not optimistic due to the impact of online shop marketing and short video marketing. This further promotes the participation of physical bookstores in public cultural services: that is, they participate in the selection of bookstores in the region by carrying out a large number of public welfare activities such as reading for all, book-sharing clubs and celebrity readings, in order to get on the support list of the local government and to obtain financial support and tax exemptions from the government.

3.3. Social Environment

With the introduction of policies related to brick-and-mortar bookstores in recent years, the three-level network of physical bookstores in urban and rural areas, namely “district-county-village”, has gradually been formed nationwide, and a group of brick-and-mortar bookstores with high visibility and strong innovation has emerged. Entity bookstores have revitalized the book market and played a positive role in building a book-scented society and improving the quality of all people. Supporting physical bookstores to participate in the construction of the public cultural service system has played a positive role in improving the infrastructure of public cultural services, enriching public cultural products and activities, and expanding the effective supply of public cultural services, which further promotes the high-quality development of public cultural services.

3.4. Technological Environment

While promoting innovation drive, the country is also strengthening the construction of digital information infrastructure. Many physical bookstores have taken “Internet+” as the core, and with the help of new technologies such as Internet of Things, cloud computing, big data, digital printing, etc., they have promoted the transformation of bookstores from the traditional operation mode to the new operation mode: they have digitally transformed the bookstores, and have evolved into the “intelligent book city”. We have also further expanded our online business and established a mobile bookstore. And further expand the network business, establish a mobile Internet service platform, improve the information push, data analysis, mobile payment, online interaction, personalized

customization and other functions, combine online marketing and offline experience organically, to achieve the purpose of win-win interaction between online and offline .

4. Connotation, Characteristics and Principles of the Participation of Entity Bookstores in Public Cultural Services

4.1. Connotation

The participation of entity bookstores in public cultural services is a comprehensive concept, which is currently under-defined by academics. Therefore, the author makes the following definition based on the core concept in the policy “Notice on Promoting the Participation of Entity Bookstores in Public Cultural Services”: the participation of entity bookstores in public cultural services refers to the operation of entity bookstores by citizens, legal persons or other social organizations, and their participation in the construction of the public cultural service system under the leadership of the government in the form of creation of cultural products of public interest and organization of cultural activities of public interest.

4.2. Characteristics

The characteristics of entity bookstores’ participation in public cultural services are mainly manifested in.

4.2.1. Extensive Layout of Participating Subjects

Entity bookstores, as the participating subject of public cultural services, are characterized by the extensive layout. Physical bookstores have been impacted by the network marketing market and are actively seeking transformation and development. Physical bookstores around the world actively combine with the human geographic environment of their location, and co-operate with business entities such as stationery shops, cafes and large shopping centers to build a multi-kind physical bookstore composite space. According to the “2022-2027 China Book Retail Chain Industry Market Depth Research and Investment Strategy Forecast Report” written by China Research Institute of Puhua Research: the number of physical bookstores in China is more than 70,000, and composite bookstores are gradually emerging, and bookstores are evolving into a cultural living space, which is gradually equipped with multi-faceted functions, such as culture, life, and socializing, etc.

4.2.2. Flexible and Diverse Forms of Participation

Physical bookstores’ participation in public cultural services is flexible and diverse. The government encourages physical bookstores to participate in public cultural service projects, and gives certain subsidies to physical bookstores in the form of government-purchased services; encourages qualified physical bookstores around the world to connect with the county library main branch system,

and promotes the reading resources of physical bookstores to achieve the main branch system of borrowing and returning; encourages the public libraries to work with physical bookstores to jointly promote the supply and demand of public reading resources construction through the research of user demand and the sharing of bibliographic information. Encourage physical bookstores to move into public cultural institutions, set up book lending and reading service areas, and cooperate to create public reading spaces, so as to achieve the common construction and sharing of venue resources and extend the scope of public cultural services.

4.2.3. Partial Public Welfare of User Services

Some of the user services of physical bookstores are of public welfare. Physical bookstores are profit-oriented, but the public lectures, public reading activities and public reading space construction are all of public interest.

4.3. Principles

4.3.1. Conformity with Socialist Core Values

The public cultural activities carried out by physical bookstores need to be in line with socialist core values. As an important cultural carrier, physical bookstores play an important role in booming urban and rural cultural markets, building a bookish society and improving the quality of the whole nation. When participating in public cultural services, physical bookstores should implement the Party's theories, routes and policies, promote socialist core values and spread positive social energy.

4.3.2. Government-Led

Entity bookstores should take the government as the leading role in carrying out public cultural services. Physical bookstores should carry out public cultural services under the leadership of the government, actively participate in the construction of the public cultural service system, adhere to the people-centred development ideology, and enhance the country's cultural self-confidence.

5. The Series of Problems Arising from the Participation of Entity Bookstores in Public Cultural Services

5.1. Coordination between the Market and Public Welfare of Physical Bookstores

The traditional concepts of public libraries and public reading spaces are often described as places that naturally provide public cultural services because of their "public" attributes, and they have a natural public interest. The core value of the bookstore is the for-profit reading service, which is to promote book sales for the purpose of providing a series of reading guidance activities through the scientific combination and matching of book products (Li, 2014). It can be said that marketability is the most fundamental difference between physical bookstores and other public reading spaces (Dong, 2022). The prerequisite for physical

bookstores to participate in public cultural services is to survive, and to survive they need to make a profit. Therefore, it is necessary to explore policy refinement programmers to ensure that while promoting the participation of physical bookstores in public cultural services, physical bookstores can maintain their operations, and do a good job of coordinating the marketability of physical bookstores with the public interest.

5.2. Diversity and Consistency of Public Cultural Services of Physical Bookstores

In modern society, cultural diversity has become a trend, how to balance the diversity and consistency of public culture disseminated by physical bookstores is a very important issue. Cultural consistency is manifested in the participation of physical bookstores in the public cultural services need to be led by the government to undertake the dissemination of socialist core values of public cultural activities, the creation of public cultural products, and the promotion of outstanding traditional Chinese culture. Cultural diversity manifests itself in the fact that physical bookstores can attract more readers to participate by organizing special cultural activities to help readers enhance their interest in reading and achieve the purpose of profitability. Characteristic cultural activities can also enhance the bookstore's brand image and reputation, so that readers can feel the value of the bookstore's characteristics, and then increase the bookstore's brand loyalty. In the process of physical bookstores' participation in public cultural services, it is worth discussing how to make public cultural activities meet government requirements and highlight brand characteristics.

5.3. Functional Utility Conflict between Physical Bookstores and Libraries

When the physical bookstore downstairs can borrow the books you want, will you still choose to go to the library in the central district? This is a highly relevant question. In the "Notice on Promoting the Participation of Entity Bookstores in Public Cultural Services", the policy mentions that "support localities to connect qualified entity bookstores with the county library branch system, and promote the reading resources of entity bookstores and the branch system to achieve the borrowing and returning of books. Provide library allocation services for public libraries at all levels", "Encourage brick-and-mortar bookstores to set up book lending service areas to extend the scope of public cultural services". Public libraries need to enhance the utilization of library resources by lending out their collections and providing free reading services, while brick-and-mortar bookstores sell books through book promotional activities. There is a conflict between the two in the way book resources are provided, with the former being free and the latter being for profit. When the book resources available in libraries and the resources in the lending service areas of physical bookstores in the community converge, it may lead to a significant reduction in the chances of readers going to public libraries, thus weakening the functional utility of libraries.

5.4. Evaluation Mechanism for the Participation of Physical Bookstores in Public Cultural Services

The establishment of an evaluation mechanism is of great significance to the participation of physical bookstores in public cultural services: it can objectively evaluate the services and activities of physical bookstores and promote the improvement of the service quality of physical bookstores; improve the transparency and credibility of physical bookstores' participation in public cultural services, and the openness and transparency of the evaluation results can enable readers to understand the contribution of the bookstores, so as to build up the trust and reliance of the readers; optimize the allocation of the resources and development planning for physical bookstores, providing targeted evaluation guidance for physical bookstores; promoting the development of the physical bookstore industry and upgrading standards, identifying industry models through the evaluation mechanism, and promoting healthy competition within the industry. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on how to achieve dynamic monitoring and performance evaluation of entity bookstores' participation in public cultural services, and to explore the construction of a credit management system for entity bookstores' participation in public cultural services.

6. Path Analysis of Physical Bookstores' Participation in Public Cultural Services

Taking Beijing as an example, this paper analyses the physical bookstores within the geographical scope, summarizes the types of physical bookstore operations, and analyses the paths of various types of physical bookstores to participate in public cultural services.

6.1. Publicly-Run and Privately-Assisted Physical Bookstores

Publicly-run and privately-assisted physical bookstore refers to the physical bookstore's main department in charge of the nature of the public, led by the national government departments to operate, the social forces involved in the co-operation of part of the operation of a class of bookstores. Xinhua Bookstore is the main representative of the publicly-run and privately-assisted bookstores. Xinhua Bookstore is a state-owned book distribution enterprise of the People's Republic of China, subordinate to the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which is the official bookstore of the state, and one of the publicity and sales offices of national publications. According to the data statistics of the "China Xinhua Bookstore Social Responsibility Report 2022" released on 27 July 2023, the total number of Xinhua bookstore outlets is 13,531, of which 8091 are owned outlets and 5433 are cooperative outlets (Fan, 2022). Opening co-operative outlets is a new way of development explored by Xinhua Bookstore, and Xinhua Bookstore Social Franchise was born in this environment, which has consistent internal brand management, system management, management of business indicators and management of develop-

ment goals, and formulated unified regulations for franchise operation and management. Zhongshan Street Xinhua Bookstore in Beijing's Shunyi District is a typical publicly-run and privately-assisted entity bookstore. In 2019, this Xinhua Bookstore, in order to better meet the readers' demand for cultural supplies, joined hands with the private enterprise Chenguang Stationery to create the first Chenguang 2.0+ Xinhua Bookstore Franchise in the Shunyi District. The entire shop is finely crafted, with a smooth and harmonious division of areas between cabinets, and more than 3000 varieties of goods to fully meet readers' reading and writing needs. The diversified operation of the franchise takes into account both economic and social benefits, aims at corporate interests, forms a diversified industrial structure, and promotes the development of bookstores with a business model in which multiple pillar industries are given equal importance and multiple points of economic growth coexist.

6.2. Civilian-Assisted Physical Bookstores

A privately-run and publicly-assisted physical bookstore refers to the fact that the main body of the investment is the private force, and the government gives the corresponding funds, goods and other support to mobilize more private forces to invest in the opening of the physical bookstore. Since 2015, Beijing has continued to carry out support and guidance for physical bookstores. According to *People's Daily*, by the end of 2021, Beijing had 2076 physical bookstores, ranking first in the country in terms of the number of physical bookstores (Lu, 2022). By the end of 2022, the Beijing Municipal Government had subsidized the rent of 192 bookstores in the city, given incentives for 160 bookstores to be model bookstores, rewarded 17 bookstores for transformation and upgrading, and given subsidies to 192 bookstores for organizing reading and cultural activities. In the operation of privately-run and publicly-assisted physical bookstores, the government's supportive subsidies do not change the nature of the bookstore's ownership, but to a certain extent they can subconsciously integrate the government's intentions, the public's demand for reading, and the correct direction that needs to be adhered to for the development of public cultural services into the bookstore's operation. Since the General Office of China's Central Propaganda Department released the National Reading Activity Programme, physical bookstores have responded positively to the call to organize national reading activities. The activities take various forms, including reading sharing sessions, meetings with celebrity authors, and book talks. These activities are conducive to guiding the public to enhance their interest in reading and develop a reading habit. And the government gives corresponding subsidies to bookstores that run reading activities, which enhances the motivation of bookstores to run activities and further promotes the implementation of the policy, forming a virtuous circle. A typical privately-run bookstore in Shunyi District, Beijing, called "Red Space Today", has been on the government's bookstore support list for two consecutive years. Encouraged by the Shunyi government, the bookstore

carries out a number of cultural activities during traditional festivals in the form of celebrity lectures and themed poetry concerts, increasing residents' sense of well-being and accessibility.

6.3. Path Analysis of Physical Bookstores' Participation in Public Cultural Services

Physical bookstores can seek to participate in the supply of public cultural services and branch links of the chain, and play their social functions according to their own positioning. From the current situation of Beijing's physical bookstores' participation in public cultural services, the following participation paths are summarized. As shown in **Figure 1**, publicly-run and privately-assisted physical bookstores can rely on the China Xinhua Bookstore Association to participate in the construction of public cultural services, co-operate with the Learning Power platform to organize cultural activities on the theme of Learning Power, and carry out reading promotion activities such as celebrity reading. Privately-run and publicly-assisted physical bookstores can rely on the Beijing Physical Bookstore Association to participate in the construction of public cultural services, participate in the physical bookstore support policies issued by the municipal government, receive financial support through the selection of the most beautiful bookstores, etc., and strengthen the integration of public cultural service resources and carry out specific cultural communication through the government's entrusted purchase of services. All types of physical bookstores can participate in the research of public cultural services, and through the results of

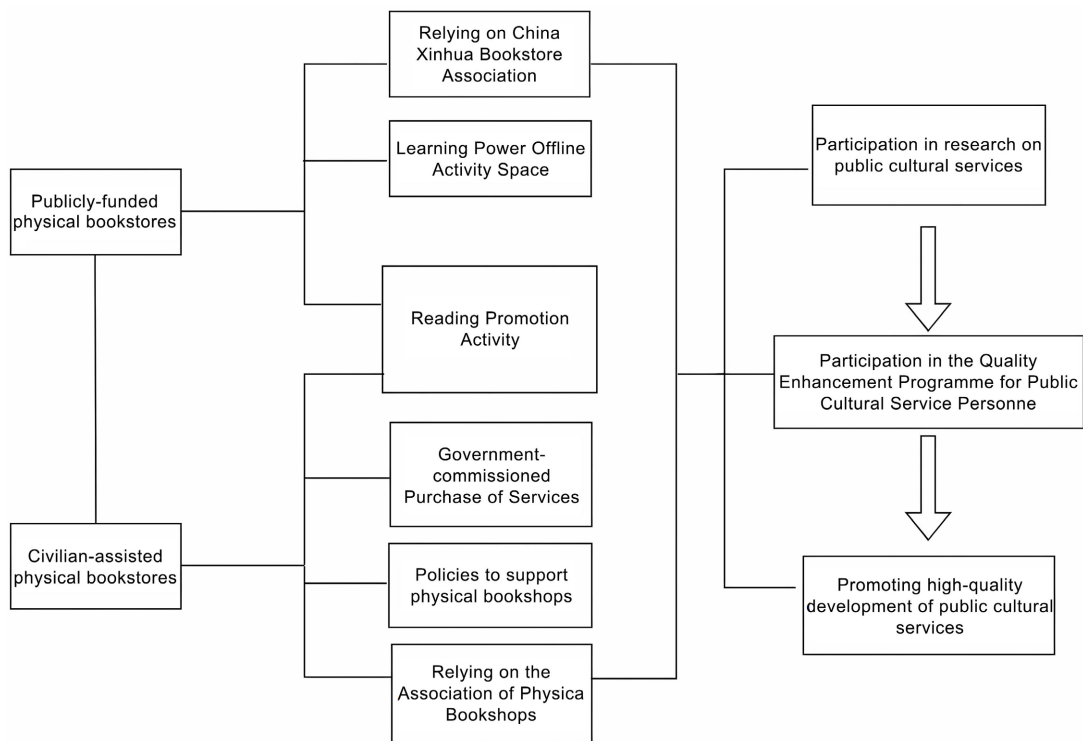


Figure 1. Path.

this research, they can “check the gaps” and improve the quality of public cultural service personnel, in order to promote the high-quality development of public cultural services.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the financial support provided by the project of Cultivation for Young Top-notch Talents of Beijing Municipal Institutions (ID: BPHR202203216).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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