When it comes to rural readers, you can not judge a book by its cover

Yao Minji and Tian Shengjie

Ploughing's done,
the ground is sown.
Time to sit and read my book.
— Tao Yuanming
(c. AD 365-427), poet

Ancient Chinese authors often espoused an idyllic vision of rural life, far from the maddening crowds of cities.

In today's Shanghai, the affinity between books and the countryside isn't quite lost. Many rural towns host book fairs and take pride in their local "farmers' libraries."

"I returned to my hometown Miaozhen for a book fair event," said prominent writer and poet Zhao Lihong, a native of Chongming Island. "Reading isn't restricted to being inside a cloistered study, but rather, should be a lifestyle out there in the world."

Zhao was among many writers hosting book events in rural Shanghai during the recent Shanghai Book Fair.

"I was surprised to find a library in the village, since I mainly think that rural life means fishing, picking mushroom and observing birds," said 9-year-old Chen Liran, who spent a few weeks of summer vacation with his grandparents in suburban Fengxian District.

"It's fun to read or do summer homework in such an environment."

The lad was referring to a library in the farm village, where his grandfather goes almost every day to meet old friends.

There are more than 1,500 so-called "farmers' libraries" in Shanghai's villages — the result of a decades-long project to bring books and reading facilities to rural residents.

Qingyang Study, a "farmers' library" in suburban Songjiang District, was renovated from a historical house. There are more than 1,500 farmers' libraries in Shanghai's villages. — Ti Gong

A farmers' library established in 2008 was a life-changer for writer Xie Qing, who suffers from cerebral palsy.
— Tian Shengjie

For some, like writer Xie Qing, who suffers from cerebral palsy, such a library can be a life-changer.

"The books in the library spiritually liberated me from my wheelchair and showed me the splendid sights of the world," he explained while in the small farmers' library in his home village in Songjiang District.

"There's a Chinese saying," he added, "that goes: 'It is better to travel ten thousand miles than to read ten thousand books.' But for me, due to my physical disability, reading books helped me to catch up where I lagged behind in traveling."

Surrounded by crop fields, the library filled with more than 3,500 books was established in 2008, not far from Xie's home. Then 27 years old, he went there every week to read.

Xie never got beyond middle school, but he reckons he has read hundreds of books in the library, and he also started writing articles on a computer with three movable fingers.

"Reading cleanses my soul and helps me reconcile with my disabilities," he said.

Xie has been widely published, and his positive attitude has also attracted more than a million followers on Weibo. But he still is a frequent visitor to the library, which he considers the source of his inspiration.

A catalog of recommended books for farmers' libraries is published annually. The 2022 list included 73 book titles, 11 journals and two e-books published in Shanghai. The selection spans ancient classics, currently best-sellers, science books and books of practical information for farmers.

The last category includes titles such as "Mushrooms and Health," "Observation of Frogs," "Eliminating Poverty as Told by a Village Chief" and "Short Videos and Livestreaming for Everyone."

Songjiang farmer Cao Linkun, nearly 60, said he improved his rice-planting skills by reading books in the local library.

"Farmers rely on practical experience, but books are also important for me, especially data on rice planting from various regions," he said. "By comparing such data, I can better position myself and improve my planting."

Cao became a national model worker in agriculture and rural affairs in 2018. His rice — a soft, glutinous variety — has been dubbed Songjiang Rice.

He still visits the library regularly, hoping that new data in more recent books will help him further.