

Shanghai phone booths get new literary lease of life

Imagine you're waiting for a bus, or walking home from work, or just wasting some time between appointments, and you really fancy something to read.

No problem if you're in Shanghai, just look out for a red phone booth.

263 public telephone booths in Shanghai Xuhui district are to be turned into mini-libraries, according to the city government.

Before the popularity of smart phones, public telephone booths were the handiest way to make a call when away from home or the office, but the meteoric rise of mobile devices has largely made them redundant. Also, most phone booths still need IC top-up cards which are increasingly hard to find in Shanghai.

It had been thought mobile technology would spell the end of books too, with more and more people choosing to read on smart devices. However the appetite for printed books seems undiminished, with a recent revival of traditional bookshops in China.

So using phone booths as mini-libraries seems like the perfect solution, not just to use the increasingly unloved booths, but also to satisfy the demands of readers and to encourage book reading in the area.

There will be six different types of booth, including "Library Booths" offering 60 books for people to read or borrow; "Celebrity Exhibition Halls" with old photos and information about celebrities who once lived in Xuhui district; and "Electronic Booths" allowing users to listen to audio and even record their own voices.

The booths will still keep their familiar red color, and will still contain phones to allow the public to make free emergency calls.