

Practices of Reading in the People's Republic of China

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Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) firmly locates the everyday within its sphere of interests. Reading—a daily social practice that in equal measure fascinates social researchers and alarms powerholders due to its subversive potential—forms a central axis in the ongoing negotiations of the social-political life. The international conference shed new light on different aspects of these negotiations.¹ Eighteen presentations spanned more than seven decades while covering fictional, political, spoken, visual and digital texts, and probing the materiality, spatiality, visibility and temporality of reading practices.

This report summarizes the papers, all of which are at the forefront of research on social practices of reading. In addition, it promotes a novel symposium setup to use in future online events. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference turned into a series of nine online sessions held between November 2020 and January 2021. Each session consisted of two matching papers, followed by discussant's remarks and an open Q&A section. The format proved to be a great success: all sessions were creative and lively, with a total of over 200 individual participants and a regular and engaged audience averaging 60.

The following text arranges the social and political practices of reading in three distinctive periods of history, each impacting on practices of reading in its own ways: the PRC's early stage (1950s), the high-socialist era (1960s–1970s) and the post-socialist period (1980s–today). Summarizing the papers located in each period, I also highlight their common tropes.

Five papers dealt with reading as political

practice in the early stage of the new socialist state of the 1950s.

Three among them had newspapers and magazines as their source material.

ROBERT CULP (Annandale-on-Hudson) enlightened the audience about reading practices among the younger members of the adult Chinese population. Looking closer at youth league publications, Culp outlined a multi-vocality of readers-turned-producers: texts created for youth were also created by youth. Such erosion of the boundary between author and reader, in turn, authenticated the propaganda message of the young state arguing for a similar erosion of social boundaries between its collective subjects.

CHANG LIU (Shenzhen), on the other hand, discussed a case where the integration of readers largely failed. Her analysis of urban women readers as they appeared in *Modern Women*, a short-lived publication by Shanghai Women's Federation, showed that due to high illiteracy rates and discrepancies between lived experiences and the expectations of women at that time, the Federation's attempt to reach out to broad masses of women via the magazine was in vain.

HAIYAN ZHOU (Nanjing) also took up collective newspaper reading, but explored how readers translated ideological texts into performative practices. Recognizing the affective power of written and visual texts, Zhou laid out how common reading could result in the creation of a shared imaginary about the new China. Readers would locate themselves in relation to this vision, thus bringing forward a realization of the goals of the new state in a circular fashion.

Two other papers looking at the 1950s could be connected by their shared inquiry into larger networks of reading practices.

NICOLAI VOLLAND (University Park) expanded on the concept of a „literary universe“ as a counterpart to the traditional world literature framework that tends to overlook the agency of readers. He then described how translated and domestic novels formed Chi-

¹ The conference has been organized by a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 757365). For details, see the project's website <https://readchina.github.io/>.

nese constellations of reading through mutual literary gravitational pull throughout the Mao era. Stressing the importance of transnational relations in regard to the creation of meaning, Volland made visible the extent of intertextuality between the Soviet and PRC literature within world literature.

PUCK ENGMAN (Freiburg/Berkeley) discussed how top-secret CCP bulletins were circulated and consumed at the highest levels of the party-state. In order to decode the conspiracy-led language of the CCP, he argued, novel practices of reading emerged. Looking closely at the contexts in which such decoding occurred, Engman showed that understanding the processes of institutional dissemination of texts is a first step to grasp how political control worked.

Six papers explored new practices of reading which emerged in the period of activist state interventions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Two of them looked at official modes of reading in that period.

SISI DONG (Zhangzhou) analyzed rural practices of reading during an early campaign to study Mao's texts. Employing a range of previously unused local archival sources, Dong argued that, even though the participants were not very engaged in the reading campaign, their practices during the reading sessions created a political atmosphere that upheld the propaganda system. However, Dong pointed out, while local elites gained revolutionary know-how, the discrepancy between theory and practice created ideological problems that were hard to solve.

MATTHEW WILLS (San Diego) investigated state-owned bookstores and libraries to argue that, in their capacity as loaners and sellers of books within the state system of propaganda, they actively promoted reading in the mid-1970s. He also showed that public media not only spread information about what to read, but also encouraged the consumption of books. Despite such efforts to engage in direct communication with people via books, the results were elitism and growing social inequalities between the urban and rural areas.

Two more papers, on the other hand, looked at unofficial modes of reading practices of the 1960s and 1970s.

PEIDONG SUN (Paris) looked at the two reading-related rituals of „political side-taking“ (*zhengzhi zhan dui*) and „habitual following“ (*xiguanxing jingen*) popular during the Cultural Revolution. Exploring their larger social adoption, she sought traces of censorship-based norms. Despite the widespread censorship efforts of the party-state, Sun concluded, a literary underground network of book-sharing and -discussing formed during the same decade.

Taking the argument one step further, EDDY U (Davis) argued that barely legal or illegal practices of reading were foremost a form of self-preservation during the Cultural Revolution. He proposed three distinctive reasons for which people engaged in what he conceptualized as „stealthy reading“: to heal, to feel safe, and for love. Recognizing these as essential counterparts to the official reading rituals of the period, U stressed that a critical engagement with underground practices of reading is key to understanding the complexities the period.

Two papers dealing with the high-socialist era shared a common interest in visual depictions of various reading practices.

EMILY GRAF (Berlin) showcased comic book depictions of „barefoot doctors“ (*chijiao yisheng*)—urban medics dispatched to the Chinese countryside. She discovered a visual contradiction: while the revolution promoted learning-by-doing, the medics were at times and in key scenes shown studying texts rather than in active application of their gained knowledge. Yet, Graf concluded, via such depictions the barefoot doctors were located inside the larger world of knowledge about revolutionary health.

DAMIAN MANDZUNOWSKI (Freiburg) presented a case study of photographs and posters from a short-lived political campaign to collectively read Marxist-Leninist texts in 1975. Visual texts, he argued, were key to learn and remind about how collective reading activities were to be organized and performed. Mandzunowski thus proposed the term „pictorial integration“ to describe how visuals are employed by a propaganda system to include the targeted subjects into its messaging and, by doing so, evoke desired patterns of behavior.

Although the axis of struggle changed with the passing of Mao Zedong and the introduction of economic reforms in the late 1970s, reading remained a contentious social practice in the reform era too. Seven papers analyzed practices of reading in post-socialist PRC.

Two among them looked at the materiality of reading.

LENA HENNINGSSEN (Freiburg) described how two texts, when acting in relation to each other as interfaces, create a transtextual space. Focusing on transtextual reading acts—scenes in which protagonists of a narrative read other texts—in Chinese science-fiction of the 1980s, she showed that such scenes were spreading literary knowledge and its interpretations. Henningsen so assessed that the concept of transtextuality would allow for a deeper understanding of the textual networks at play in the Chinese and world literary cosmos.

LARA YUYU YANG (Freiburg) used dust as a metaphor to explore traces of readings found in used books. She argued that the cultural identities of collectors and readers of second-hand books changed when digital marketplaces replaced the ones on the streets. Dust-hunters, as coined by Yang, faced new challenges but also possibilities arising from digitalization: their cultural identity changed from relatively stable and publicly recognizable labels to hybrid on-offline multiple identities.

Two more papers dealt with reading practices related to one impactful writer, Lu Yao.

PAOLA IOVENE (Chicago) investigated how Lu Yao gained on popularity since the mid-2000s, two decades after his premature death. She argued that one major contributing factor were museums and radio broadcasts consciously merging the author with the literary narrator. This drive, Iovene laid out, was part of a larger rediscovery of the literary history of the 1980s in which Lu Yao, among others, became equated with realist writing forms that were pitched against the established avantgarde.

DYLAN SUHER (Hong Kong) looked at the trajectories of the internet phenomena of „YY fiction“ (*yiyin xiaoshuo*), a highly popular immersive fantasy genre often translated as es-

capist literature and revolving around human emotional and physical needs. Proposing to locate the origins of YY fiction in *Ordinary World*, a famous novel by Lu Yao, he went against the usual differentiations between earlier realist and later fantastical writing. Instead, Suher argued, the roots of online fiction are in the early reform era.

Three papers engaged with contemporary Chinese reading practices in relation to new media and accompanying shifts in genres.

BENJAMIN KINDLER (New York) analyzed the literary „short short story“ (*xiaoxiao shuo*) used as a device to write about radical social transformations. He argued that its (post)modern reemergence in the 1980s is related to shortened temporalities of this era. Kindler thus pointed out that the short short story can disconnect the practice of reading from the individual and move it into the collective—and, by doing so, it can provoke changes to the everyday lives of its readers.

EVE YI LIN (Freiburg) looked at the space of bookstores to discuss permutations of reading practices in post-Mao China. The bookstore, as taken up by Lin, is a site where cultural identities of readers are ongoingly constructed and re-constructed. Presenting a case study of *Librairie Avant-Garde* (*xianfeng shudian*), a highbrow bookstore well-visited by intellectuals and hipsters alike, Lin showed that in times of high consumerism the boundaries between modernist definitions of reading and commercialized practices become liquid.

DUNCAN PATERSON (Freiburg) first showcased some of the main findings of ReadAct², the Freiburg reading acts database which allows users to engage with large-scale data samples of reading in the PRC. He then argued that digital reading forms a distinct part of the contemporary Chinese reading ecology. As both the state and private reading apps conspire to determine who can read what, when, and how, he concluded that critical analysis of contemporary reading practices requires both traditional literary analysis as well as code studies.

As all papers exemplified, the study of practices of reading consists of many focal points: the creators and patterns of produc-

²<https://readchina.github.io/readact.html>.

tion, the spreaders and patterns of dissemination, the readers and patterns of reception, as well as questions of textuality and materiality. In this sense, this conference did more than advance our understanding of how reading is located within a triangle made up of texts, politics and the everyday life—it also showed that to engage with the history of reading in any political context inevitably politicizes the reading of history too.

Lecture series overview:

Panel 1: Target Audiences of Official Publications in Early PRC

Robert Culp (Bard College, Annondale-on-Hudson): „Patriotic young classmates...!“ Young Readers as Authors and the Politics of Self-Mobilization through Shanghai’s Youth League Publications

Chang Liu (Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen): Reaching All Women? One Local Magazine and the Work Among Women in Early 1950s Shanghai

Discussant: Emily Graf (Freie Universität Berlin)

Panel 2: Textuality and Materiality in Reading Practices

Lena Henningsen (University of Freiburg): From Intertext to Transtextuality: Reading Acts in 20th and 21st Century Chinese Literature

Lara Yang (University of Freiburg): Dust Hunters in the Confucius-dot-com Era: Identity Ecology in Second-hand Book Reading Culture in the Time of the Internet in China

Discussant: Michel Hockx (University of Notre Dame)

Panel 3: Readership in the Context of Heightened Political Controls

Peidong Sun (CERI, Sciences Po Paris): „Fragrant Flowers“ and „Poisonous Weeds“ – Censoring Personal Readings during the Cultural Revolution

Puck Engman (University of Freiburg / University of California, Berkeley): Reading Xuanjiao Dongtai: A Note on the General Significance of Conspiracy in the Chinese Commu-

nist Party

Discussant: Perry Link (University of California, Riverside)

Panel 4: Reading Practices, Social Practices, and the Everyday

Haiyan Zhou (Nanjing University): Image and Imagination in Newspaper Reading Groups in Shanxi Province, 1951-1956

Benjamin Kindler (Columbia University, New York): Reading on Speed: Collective Reading, Micro-stories and Socialist Readership in the Great Leap Forward

Discussant: Robert Culp (Bard College, Annondale-on-Hudson)

Panel 5: Rural Reading in Maoist China

Emily Graf (Freie Universität Berlin): Self-Teaching and Self-Affirmation: Reading Barefoot Doctors and Practices of Worldmaking in the PRC

Sisi Dong (Minnan Normal University, Zhangzhou): Learning Chairman Mao’s Works Movement in the Rural Society of Eastern Fujian in 1960s

Discussant: Damian Mandzunowski (University of Freiburg)

Panel 6: Digital Reading and Online Reading

Duncan Paterson (University of Freiburg): Glamour, Glare, and Gallantry: Reading Strategies of Contemporary Online Fiction

Dylan Suher (University of Hong Kong): Lust of the Machine: The Technologies and Traditions of YY Fiction

Discussant: Paola Iovene (University of Chicago)

Panel 7: Reading Media and Reading Places in Post-Mao China

Paola Iovene (University of Chicago): The Making of a „Literary Giant,“ or Reading Lu Yao across Media

Eve Yi Lin (University of Freiburg): Cultural Biography of „Avant-Garde“: Reading China’s High Culture from the Intellectual Bookstore

Discussant: Nicolai Volland (Pennsylvania

State University, University Park)

Panel 8: Stealthy Reading and Collective Reading in the Mao Era

Eddy U (University of California, Davis): Reading Literature, Reading People, and Reading Risk during the Cultural Revolution

Damian Mandzunowski (University of Freiburg): I've Seen That Reading Group Before: Late Mao-Era Collective Reading Acts in Posters and Photographs

Discussant: Jennifer Altehenger (Oxford University)

Panel 9: Reading Nationally and Transnationally in the PRC

Matthew Wills (University of California, San Diego): Revolution, Reading, Reward and Risk: Creating and Sustaining the Reading Nation

Nicolai Volland (Pennsylvania State University, University Park): Navigating the Chinese Literary Universe

Discussant: Lena Henningsen (University of Freiburg)

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