

This is the author's pre-publication copy, which may differ from the final article. Please cite and quote from the published article, available in late 2014.

Wu, A. X. (Forthcoming). The shared pasts of solitary readers in China: Connecting web use and changing political understanding through reading histories. *Media, Culture & Society*.

<http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/08/07/0163443714545003> [MC&S OnlineFirst]

The Shared Pasts of Solitary Readers in China: Connecting Web Use and Changing Political Understanding through Reading Histories

Angela Xiao Wu, Northwestern University [<http://angelaxiaowu.com>]¹

Abstract

This paper complicates our understanding of the cultural and political impact of the internet in non-liberal societies by foregrounding people's socially constituted reading practices across print and cyberspace. It places internet use in the context of both social and personal reading histories, as well as in the evolving cultural field across media. I examine the reading practices of 26 Chinese individuals, who developed alternative political understandings through their internet use. Their alternative views, I found, emerged not just through their engagement with the web but as a result of a longer history. Their distinct web use patterns have roots in their pre-internet reading practices. A specific reading disposition for "self-development" may have led to their continuing divergence to niche reading materials as the domestic cultural field diversified. This reading disposition, I argue, prepares people to later engage with the internet in ways that facilitate changes in their political understandings.

Keywords

Reading history, politicization, political change, internet, China, prosopography, books, subject-formation

¹ I am grateful to Wendy Griswold, Janice Radway, and Elizabeth Lenaghan for providing valuable input during the drafting of this paper. The current version has also benefited from extensive discussion with Yige Dong. The study was supported by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, the Henry Luce Foundation/ACLS Program in China Studies, as well as various entities at Northwestern University, including the School of Communication, the Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies, and the Science in Human Culture Cluster. Lastly, I would like to thank all my interviewees for sharing with me their experiences and insights.

The books are asleep, but the verses awake.

--- Luofu, *Heavy Snow in Hunan*

We know that internet technologies strengthen dissidents' political capacities to self-organize (eg. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). What we do not know as much, is how internet use may contribute to the making of dissidents, or more broadly, how it may give rise to counter-hegemonic thinking among ordinary people. Particularly intriguing are the processes by which people, who are neither stricken by poverty nor by political despair, but nonetheless become more critical of the status quo via internet use (cf. Castells, 2012). In authoritarian China, for example, the relatively well-off social groups are expanding. How might internet use affect the political outlook of these individuals? If we are skeptical about a clean internet revolution and sweeping cultural change, the question becomes: under what circumstances and in what ways do changes in political beliefs take place?

To complicate our understanding of the political consequences of the internet in non-liberal societies, this paper explicates the connection between internet usage and changing political beliefs with a focus on people's reading practices. It places internet use in the context of both social and personal reading histories, as well as in the changing nature of the cultural field across print and cyberspace. I examined reading practices of 26 Chinese individuals, all of whom acquired nonconformist political views during their time online. Their alternative views, I found, emerged not just through their engagements with the web but as a result of a longer history. Indeed, the advent of the internet reconfigured the cultural field previously under tight state regulation. But to engage with the web in ways that facilitated changes in their political understandings, people had to be certain kind of readers by competence and motivation, which had been developed in the pre-internet age.

This paper proceeds as follows. I first review the literature on reading as a social practice and establish certain continuities between reading books and reading online. I then introduce the Chinese context and my interlocutors. These individuals, I demonstrate, qualify as a distinct cohort worthy of study because their political views became divergent from those of their far more numerous peers of the same social category. I also discuss how, during in-depth interviews, almost uniformly the theme of reading came forth throughout their personal media use histories. I begin my analysis by presenting the changing nature of the cultural field in China from the 1980s, with a concentration on book publishing and the internet. I then document what my interlocutors read prior to and on the web over time to locate their distinct preferences. This is followed by tracing their attitudes toward reading, which evolved consistently across the "old" and "new" media. Finally, I discuss how the findings help

us understand the formation of political subjects through media practices, and more broadly, how a focus on reading practices may inform our research of the interaction between internet technologies and non-liberal societies.

Reading as a social practice

This study draws on the sociology of reading perspective that investigates “who reads what, how people read, and how their reading relates to their other activities” (Griswold, McDonnell, & Wright, 2005: 127). Reading practices are profoundly social. The common notion of “the solitary reader” “suppresses recognition of the infrastructure of literacy and the social or institutional determinants of what’s available to read, what is ‘worth reading,’ and how to read it” (Long, 1993: 193). First, we have to consider the material and institutional circumstances for texts to circulate. Roger Chartier (2002: 50), a principal contributor to book history, writes: “Readers, in fact, never confront abstract, idealized texts detached from any materiality.” Grand cultural changes are animated via the intricacy of the circulatory web, such as during the Enlightenment and on the eve of the French Revolution (eg., Darnton, 1984, 2010). After all, reading is all about dealing with an object obtained within the local cultural field that is firmly embedded in the political and economic establishment. The cultural field delimits reading practices through concrete operations of production houses, bookstores, libraries, and so forth.

Equally crucial is the mode of reading. People learn to read by participating in the literate community they live in. Not only is recognition of the written language involved, but also reading purposes that prescribe what to read and how to read; in fact, even one’s cognitive engagement with the text, as scholars argue, is nurtured through socialization (Hall, 2010). In one of the earliest discussions of situated literacies, Resnick and Resnick (1989) summarize several types of reading based on the expectations people have when coming to a text. For example, people may conduct a “sacred” reading of the Bible by adhering to the standard interpretation, which confers membership in a religious community. Or they may read the Bible as great literature to gain pleasure, making sense of all the intriguing characters, memorable episodes, and enchanting verses at will and ease. The same text can be treated as sacred or pleasure-giving; it is the context that determines how people read it. Notably, schooling may pattern reading dispositions differently depending on the broader cultural and historical junctures, making some modes “more dominant, visible and influential than others” (Barton & Hamilton, 2012: 7).

Reading and the internet

With regard to reading and the internet, there exist two strands of literature. The first looks at how the internet affects traditional leisure-time reading. This body of work revolves around the displacement hypothesis, which posits that people invest time in one activity at the expense of time spent in the other. Instead of displacement, evidence indicates that web use may enhance reading print, and that heavy web users tend to be avid readers (Cull, 2011; Griswold & Wright, 2004; Lee, Tan, & Hameed, 2005). Further, people may endow reading books and going online with disparate meanings, making the two activities not competitive (Griswold, McDonnell, & McDonnell, 2007). For example, Griswold and collaborators (2007) found that among early internet adopters in West Africa, internet use (mainly for social interaction), considered cosmopolitan and glamorous, did not encroach on book reading, which retained its sacred and honorable status. The second strand of literature examines online reading rather than web use in general terms, recognizing that the internet is largely text-saturated and reading takes up a substantial portion of time spent online. Scholars ask how online texts read differently from printed words. Existing evidence from North America suggests that individuals tend to read screen-based texts in a more cursory manner, consisting mostly of “browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, non-linear reading, and reading more selectively” (Liu, quoted in Cull, 2011). In comparison, book reading tends to be more concentrated and sustained.

Considering reading as a social practice puts these findings in a new perspective. That is, whether in-depth reading or textual scanning practice occurs depends not on the medium, but on the purpose and perceived importance of reading an individual holds, as well as on what she is able to find on that medium. How people make use of texts on the web is largely conditioned by their literary socialization grounded in their pre-internet pasts. Therefore, by focusing on the readers/users to trace their reading practices as socially constituted over a long time period spanning media, we may gain insights into how a given society engages with internet technologies.

Examining such extended reading trajectories is further justified because, although largely overlooked, how people choose books and surf the web share important similarities. On the web, individuals navigate through a plethora of sites, and based on information obtained during previous browsing episodes and life experience in general, they try out scattered content that they consider likely to interest them. Scholars always emphasize the newness of the internet distribution mechanism, addressing it as “nonlinear” in contrast to the “linear” traditional broadcasting media such as television, radio, and newspapers, all of which prearrange and deliver programs in bulk to a mass audience (Webster, 2009). I highlight, however, that nonlinear distribution governs not only internet

use, but also book reading, a much more ancient form of media practice. People actively seek out specific books that they deem intriguing; they may flip through pages before deciding whether to proceed. Compared to broadcasting media that homogenize mass consumption by imposing standardized content, both the universe of books and of websites provide better circumstances for people to follow their personal preferences and inhabit niches. What constrains their actual consumption is the pool of available (book/website) options and their information about plausible choices.

This study substantiates the connections between book reading and web use by examining the reading histories of politically nonconformist web users in China. I illustrate the changing nature of the cultural field across books and the web, and the over time reading habits, preferences, and dispositions of this particular group. The empirical case also explores the specific reading practices that were associated with the emergence of counter-hegemonic political understanding under such an authoritarian regime.

Political nonconformists on the Chinese internet

I focus particularly on Chinese individuals born in the 1970s and 1980s, who constitute more than half of China's online population (Wu, 2012: 2224). In transitional China, age, rather than social and economic status, accounts more for the variances in cultural consumption, as generation gaps are more pronounced during rapid social and economic changes (Davis, 2000). The life experiences of the 1970s and 80s generations are uniquely useful for studying the impact of the Internet in China, because they did not “grow up digital.” Instead, they grew up during China's market reforms beginning in the 80s, and were exposed to the same national education and centralized landscape of mass mediation.

Alarmed by the 1989 Tiananmen student movement and obsessed with economic development, the Chinese state has been heavily invested in ideological education campaigns and in the reconstruction of history (Wang, 2012). This gave rise to well-educated young generations comprised of consumerist and nationalist subjects (Jiang, 2012; Kipnis, 2012). Although sarcasm about socialist ideology, distrust of government, or rights-based protests become increasingly prevalent (eg. Yang, 2009), in today's China nationalist sentiment remains robust. Most Chinese youth, normally preoccupied with entertainment, take part in online nationalist protests as their only form of “political participation”—defined as intention to influence government decisions, even merely to push for a tougher stance against foreign governments (Liu, 2010: 161-79; Zhou, 2005). Over the past 15 years, a long series of large-scale nationalist outbursts that involved mass demonstrations, physical

violence, and vandalism were mobilized and amplified through the web. The triggers varied from the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999) and the South China Sea territorial disputes (2012), to some Japanese exchange students' controversial stage performance at a provincial university (2003) and the knowledge of how China was misrepresented by foreign media (2008) (Jiang, 2012; Wu, 2007; Zhou, 2005).

However, my interlocutors, albeit belonging to the same social background with their peers in every way (Table 1), experienced over years of internet usage significant changes in political understandings, especially distancing from militarist nationalism. They recalled having little reservation, and in many cases much enthusiasm, during China's major nationalist outbursts at the end of 1990s. But around 2008, they were among the avid readers and supporters of Bullog.cn, then the most influential liberal-oriented blog portal. Bullog was launched in July 2006 as an alternative to commercial blog service providers that exercised heavy censorship. It immediately attracted dozens of talented bloggers (henceforth "Bulloggers") who shared a critical view of prevalent cultural norms, mainstream operations, and the current social and political system. Bullog sustained extensive conversations about a wide range of subjects from economic policies to sexuality. In its peak in 2008, it received above 2 million page views per day (Li, 2013). In April, Bullog remained highly critical when many Chinese took to the street after the torch relay of the Beijing Olympics was disturbed overseas (cf. Jiang, 2012; Kipnis, 2012). In the wake of the Sichuan Earthquake in May, Bullog again harshly criticized the government's failing performance and nationalist mobilization, and numerous fellow Chinese attacked it for being "heartless" and "unpatriotic." Yet its own readers demonstrated genuine support for its message and cause. They contributed up to 2.4 million RMB to Bullog's earthquake relief donation drive, an amount more than most national news and entertainment portals had gathered. Bullog was shut down for good in January 2009 due to some Bulloggers' involvement in Charter 08, a dissident petition styled after the Czechoslovakian Charter 77 (Figure 1). Its erstwhile readers have since drifted and inhabited portions of the Chinese internet.

Beginning in January, 2012, I examined the comment section of Bullog online donation drive posts, as readers including both lurkers and active commentators left comments to signal their just-made donations via online transaction. This choice ensures recruitment of long-term readers and supporters of Bullog's political messages, as IDs registered at Bullog may also belong to one-time visitors or trolls who gathered to attack Bulloggers. It also avoids the recruitment bias of excluding lurkers who made up a large part of the Bullog audience. I conducted online search for Bullog IDs of these comments, as people oftentimes use the same IDs in a variety of online platforms. In this way, I

discerned the presence of 29 former Bullog readers at newer social media platforms and contacted them via the web. Out of the 23 who responded, 22 were willing to participate. I recruited another four qualified informants who were introduced by existing participants. Between early September and late December, 2012, I travelled across China to interview these 26 participants. The interviews ranged from 100 to 200 minutes (on average 136 minutes). I did archival research on- and offline to triangulate and complement the interviews. My continuous observation of Bullog during its two-and-half years' life also informed the analyses.

I examined the media practices and evolving political understandings of these individuals through a contemporary prosopography. Prosopography is the “investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives.” Employed by social historians, collective biography research as such helps reveal deeper roots of political action and cultural change (Stone, 1971: 46-7). Although the interviews intended to involve all forms of media, 25 out of the 26 interlocutors explicitly claimed sole reliance on books and the web as their everyday media intake. With online access, they largely abandoned newspapers, magazines, and television. Reading, both books and online texts, emerged to be the main thread of their personal histories of media practices. I was further struck by the degree of resemblance among these individuals in terms of reading habits and preferences that date back to the pre-internet era. Hence the data revealed, bottom-up, the crucial role of socially constituted reading practices in establishing continuities between the print and digital world.

The cultural field: From the “book famine” to the Chinese internet

In China, market-based book production and distribution has a very short history, beginning as late as in the 1980s, when the country started feverishly reviving itself from a cultural wasteland resulted from the Cultural Revolution. Since the late 1960s, the national book publishing sector had seen a decade of extremely limited operation. During this time, more than half of all books focused on Maoist thought (*China Publishers' Yearbook*, 1980). The remaining titles, nonfictional and fictional alike, were produced to justify political purging. Historical essays aimed to fuel the present political movement, and novels kept to the formula of revolutionary heroes defeating class enemies (Link, 2000: 296-8). The mere 23 titles of foreign literature China had translated and published within the decade were strictly socialist and proletarian works. On a large scale, the ordinary Chinese people endured a long-lasting “book famine,” alongside an equal deprivation of visual and audio media (also see Kong, 2005; Shufanlaoren, 2013).

When Deng Xiaoping replaced Mao in the late 70s, state control over the publishing sector began to “thaw.” Pre-Cultural Revolution books were reprinted; thousands of translated foreign titles were introduced (Kong, 2005: 124); domestically produced popular fictions, a genre not seen by the Chinese people since the early 50s (Link, 2000), also flooded the market. The economic reform and deregulation transformed all stages of book publishing and distribution into business operations, answering more to the consumer demand and less to political imperatives.

Even though the adult literacy rate is about 95% (for both genders), among the highest in developing countries (UNESCO, 2012), reading is not generally strong in China. In the past decade, the percent of adult population who report to read book “at least once a month” fluctuates between 48% and 60%. Currently the Chinese annually read only 4.39 books on average, including books for school and work, (“The 10th National Reading Survey,” 2013). Nonetheless, the gigantic population base and booming economy soon nurtured a vast book market.

However, albeit undergoing significant diversification, the book market remains very much bestseller-driven. Despite steady title growth for years, the top fifth of best-selling titles gain more than four fifths of market share (Kong, 2005; Meng, 2012). In terms of genre, most profits come from textbooks, which make up only 20% of all titles but almost 70% of the trade (*China Publishers’ Yearbook*, 2012; Chang, 2012). As the well-documented history of Chinese best-sellers over a decade shows, what dominates the book market are popular health guidebooks and “success manuals” that consist of celebrity biographies, workplace politics and promotion stories, and financial tips (Chang, 2012; Farquhar, 2010; Kong, 2005). Although fierce market competition animates the publishing industry, state authority remains powerful beneath the surface through the indirect disciplining and technical regulation of market processes. The contemporary Chinese best-selling biographies, for example, embody a reworked national “socialist self-narrative” that affirms economic sovereignty and government legitimacy (Chua, 2009). In sum, although over time people have access to an increasing variety of books, they still end up with a small set of titles that embody state hegemony (also see Stockmann, 2012).

Such popular book choices put aggregated web usage in China in perspective. Over time, major online activities, such as using online forums, blogs and microblogs (weibo), checking news, as well as reading “online literature,” all involve online reading (Figure 1). These venues make up an evolving cultural field, an ecology in which users migrate and reside. Beginning around 2001, state regulations targeted user-generated content on forums and personal homepages in an increasingly vigorous fashion. As a result, China’s online landscape revolved around a few commercial and

censorship-heavy web portals such as Sina, Sohu, and 163; the major vibrant forums were online nationalist strongholds (Zhou, 2005). In 2005, commonly known as China's "Blog Year Zero," the new and more "unruly" technological platform of blogs disrupted the centralizing tendency. Demonstrated by examples like Bullog, Chinese blogs indeed make more diverse political information and discourses available to wider audiences (Wu, 2012: 2235-6). However, such political content is merely marginal. Overall the Sinophone blogosphere disappoints Western observers for producing "the same shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world" (Leibold, 2011: 1023). In recent years, "online literature" became quite popular. In China, this category refers to highly formulaic fantasy pieces pumped up by cultural industries, which are consumed by a gigantic and passionate reader-base for merely pennies (Shao, 2012).

In sum, although people indeed pursue their preferences more freely in nonlinear media environments—and from the "book famine" to the web, their options have increased tremendously—but these preferences tend to be constituted within the hegemonic culture. In this light, from the print era to the internet age, the popular reading patterns in China continued rather than transformed. Against this backdrop, my interlocutors make up a distinct group of readers. They read heavily in leisure times, and they tend to inhabit always the marginal niches of the cultural field.

Alternative reading habits and preferences

My interlocutors' reminiscences about their pre-internet experience are punctuated by the key themes of "reading" and "loneliness" [*gudu*]. They almost uniformly described themselves as erstwhile "literary and art youth" [*wenyi qingnian; wenqing*], a present label with a slight derisive overtone, which refers to individuals who have taken an interest in reading, writing, movies, or music, and implicitly, who tend to be sentimental and thoughtful when enduring growing pains. "Alternative" [*linglei*] was also used for self-description.

They were always highly aware of their difference from their peers in terms of reading habits. Usually, after listening to them speak eloquently about books they had devoured in their teens and early 20s, I asked about whether they had discussed these reflections and feelings with others. They made efforts to consider, and then denied it resolutely. U, 29, working for the woman's page of a large commercial web portal, described a typical scene back in school:¹

[Exercise and text-]books lay in heaps on our desks, and during class I (*laugh*) hid behind them to read [my own books]. Just like that, [there was] no way to share my secret reading with others. They were all buried in their homework. I had a sense of loneliness actually.

Yet this frequently stressed “loneliness” was, remarkably, spoken about with pride. As J, 41, working at an audio-visual teaching center at a middle school, explained to me: “The difference between loneliness and lonesomeness [*jimo*] is that, [the former means] you’d rather be all by yourself your whole life, were there no kindred spirits to talk to.” My interlocutors had not had regular discussions about reading until some joined literary associations in college, and others found the internet.

However, the kinds of books that made an impression on these individuals over time appear to have a common pattern. In their earlier years during elementary and junior high school, they shared a passion in reading. They enjoyed whatever limited books they had access to, and thus had somewhat serendipitous reading records. J told me that as a schoolchild he studied earnestly children’s encyclopedias like *Five Thousand Years of the World* and *A Hundred Thousand Whys*, which his “rich and capable” chauffeur father bought him in complete sets. Some other interlocutors, city dwellers mostly, started with family libraries, usually comprised of ancient Chinese classics and translated foreign literature—titles grabbed from the publishing feasts after the Cultural Revolution. Individuals raised in rural areas made best use of the meager offerings. H, 41, a former horticulturist and present civil servant, told me that unable to locate much print to savor, he borrowed from senior kids higher-level language textbooks as extracurricular reading material. The story of W, a 33 year-old retail stock trader and recent housewife, is particularly amusing. Desperately seeking print, she ended up reading many dated copies of *Southern Weekly*, China’s most influential liberal newspaper, which happened to serve as wrappers for goods delivered to her uncle’s grocery store.

In their teenage years, most interlocutors favored fiction, literary essays, and general history books. Books mentioned by my interlocutors began to overlap a great deal. During this time, their tastes shifted from big titles printed and distributed in the millions—a characteristic of socialist publishing—to somewhat more niche works afforded by the increasingly diversified book market. These niche books usually address concrete societal and public affairs, clearly more relevant to Chinese reality and zeitgeist than foreign literature and children’s encyclopedias. Top mentions include works by Wang Xiaobo, an innovative writer of satirical portrayals of contemporary China and its recent past, who died of a heart attack in 1997; Li Ao, a Taiwan-based essayist and social commentator famous for his biting sarcasm, unapologetic narcissism, and unique life experience; Han Han, a post-1980s school dropout who published a series of novels and essays, and who later became an extremely influential blogger also connected with Bullog; Shi Kang, a *Catcher-in-the-Rye*-kind of writer in China who emerged in the late 90s; and popular in earlier times, Yu Qiuyu, an academic-writer who has promoted critical engagement with ancient and imperial Chinese history and cultural

heritage. Many interlocutors first learned of these books through recommendations of their language teachers, and some through conversations with keepers of the local book stores they frequented. But soon they followed advice on books from the books they were reading, rather than relying on their social circles for book recommendations. In the words of U, they have since entered “chains of recommendations”—a phrase people also used to describe how they discovered new blogs to follow in the internet era. Notably, they always emphasized prior readings as temporary obsessions, because oftentimes they later found the words that once enlightened them to be extreme, silly, or merely commonplace.

My interlocutors acquired regular online access in the beginning years of this century, but initially they used mainly chat rooms, instant messaging, emails, and games. Substantial reading took place when they got involved in forums—an aspect overshadowed by the predominant focus on interaction in studies of online forums. In most cases, such reading was still not oriented toward contemporary politics. As seems to have occurred in developed countries, my interlocutors used online sources to learn about book reading (Griswold & Wright, 2004). H (then still a horticulturist in a remote province) had an exciting time at the Reading Salon Forum, during which he read more about writers like Wang Xiaobo and Milan Kundera, as well as essays and novels authored by other forum participants. F, 36, a small business owner struggling in a metropolis, read posts on modern Chinese and peer-produced literary works at one of the earliest Chinese sites for online literature; those interlocutors who once read online literature (usually before 2005) stopped before the enterprise became commercialized and standardized. I should note that although such online content was certainly more plural than the conventionally published content, it was not on a par with that of a handful of China’s earliest radical and intellectual forums such as the Cultural Vanguard [*wenbua xianfeng*] and the Centennial Salon [*sbiji shalong*] (cf. Ji, 2012). It seems to me that many of the participants in these radical forums were dissident-leaning even before the internet. In fact, quite a number of them later became celebrity Bulloggers.

Blog reading represented my interlocutors’ most intense online reading experience. It commonly occurred between 2006 and 2009, and centered on Bullog. Notably, their affinity for Bullog was established in advance. Most of them arrived at the website via an encounter with “Quotations from Luo,” satirical remarks on contemporary China made by Luo Yonghao, the founding figure of Bullog, and then an English teacher in a private training center. His students recorded these remarks in class and spread them online. Whereas their peers, as my interlocutors clearly recalled, treated the “Quotations” as a comedian’s monologues [*xiangsheng*] for laughs, they

identified in Luo's words something special and thought-provoking. As X, a 40-year-old IT engineer, put it, "My feeling was like, hwa! The world is in a new light." The experience of N, 31, a full-time civil servant and part-time wedding host, is quite representative:

I sometimes got a feeling of fighting a lone battle in some sector of a forum, because mine was the minority point of view. After reaching Bullog I found this minority, at Bullog this initial minority became the relative majority. Most people [there] shared a baseline. Just as in the pre-internet era, when they read extracurricular books in solitude and sought connections in printed words, oftentimes my interlocutors were the only Bullog readers in their offline social circles and reveled in meeting kindred spirits through online texts.

They talked about this period with passion; their narrations were filled with "a whole lot" [*daliang*]"—"a whole lot of time," "a whole lot of information." "In those days, Google Reader helped me through all the long, dark nights," said R, 39, a divorced middleman with a small daughter. Like R, many of my interlocutors used RSS (Really Simple Syndication) services to keep up with the updates on dozens of blogs. Others stayed on the Bullog homepage to trace newly published posts from affiliated bloggers. They had been obsessively checking new content, over about two-year's time. I should emphasize that Bullog posts ranged from esoteric theoretical discussions about politics and society to detailed polemics over specific current affairs. Indeed, they could be several screens long, filled with extensive references and logical inferences, and were not easy reads. Furthermore, Bulloggers closely engaged with each other's and external bloggers' arguments. As a result, intricate conversations and debates blossomed in waves, and the threshold for ordinary readers to enter was high. Nonetheless, my interlocutors tagged along tirelessly. They could talk in volumes and with animated expression about individual bloggers' writing styles and the contours of their viewpoints and topic preferences; they could also recall the course and various stances of specific controversies occurring four, five years previously.

Their blog reading reflected a further convergence of reading preferences. The bloggers they once followed, Bulloggers or non-Bulloggers alike, overlap even more significantly. These bloggers also acted as literary mediators that shaped their readers' book appreciation. First, my interlocutors appreciated books written and produced by prominent Bulloggers. An example would be *Details of Democracy* [*minzhu de xijie*], a collection of column articles on the mechanisms of Western democratic systems. There are also the *DuKu* series, an ongoing *New Yorker*-style series of edited volumes, and a handful of long semibiographical novels fraught with realistic touches and biting reflections on transitioning China authored by several other bloggers. Moreover, my interlocutors followed book

recommendations at Bullog, and ended up reading books banned by the Chinese government. Many of them obtained these banned books either through internet downloads or from Hong Kong and Taiwan via personal connections and travels. Top mentions include Gao Hua's *How Did the Sun Rise Over Yan'an?* [*gongtaiyang shi zenyang shengqide*], a 547-page academic history of the early Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Mao's rise through ruthless political struggles, and Long Yingtai's 320-page *Big River, Big Sea* [*dajiangdabai 1949*], which contains stories of ordinary people who survived the bloody Chinese civil war between the CCP and Kuomintang. R particularly asked me to find an original Taiwanese copy of *Big River* for his 12-year-old "super-smart," "scorpion" daughter, who he strove to raise as an "independent thinking" person (Wu, 2012).

Their personal reading histories evidence a definite spillover from literary works to nonfiction and political writings, and in this sense they seem to have taken most advantage of the expanding scope of the Chinese cultural field, defined by the book market and the domestic web. Nonlinear media indeed make niche choices more accessible. However, as already discussed, people do not necessarily develop alternative tastes once introduced to such media. What accounts for the observed divergence to niche reading materials, shared by my geographically scattered interlocutors, is an alternative mode of reading with specific expectations and competence.

Alternative modes of reading

Classrooms provide the most formal literary socialization sanctioned by local authority. Chinese national education is exceptionally powerful in producing standardized subjects, as the state dictates textbook content, curriculum design, and classroom norms for the 12-year schooling (Kipnis, 2012). As for *yuwen* (language and literature) education, China had followed the Soviet model since the 1950s. Carefully selected literary and expository prose, as well as short novels, made up the compulsory reading materials for political-education and language-teaching simultaneously. As a major component of learning, students had to rote memorize the official interpretation of texts, including the central idea, gist of paragraphs, and detailed deciphering of key sentences (Weng, 2010). Not only were they tested on this textbook content, but their interpretation of unfamiliar texts provided in exams also had to conform to the official answers—usually centering on the patriotic, pro-Party moral-political ideals (Kipnis, 2012).

Students who receive such teacher-centered literary education tend to read less later in their lives (Verboord, 2005). Moreover, what was taught is a mode of reading that serves to enhance cultural norms. The reader's "understanding of the text must be developed within the framework" accepted and imposed by the social community. S/he is not expected to "pick out inconsistencies of

argument, or extemporize on the meaning of words” (Resnick & Resnick, 1989: 176). The tight political and pedagogical control in *yuwen* education started to loosen only around 2000, when a major curriculum reform took place. In pilot class activities (eg., “a thousand readers have a thousand Hamlets”), senior high students were eventually encouraged to perform guided polysemic reading of select texts (Nie, 2009: 22; Weng, 2010).

During the 80s and the 90s, my interlocutors’ reading practices developed in intricate tensions with *yuwen* education. They were able to name textbook essays, and to even repeat some paragraphs that required mandatory recitation, but they did so in a sarcastic tone. All of them denounced *yuwen* for imposing the orthodox attitude toward texts. They noted that schooling can turn great literature dull and dismal, such as in the case of Lu Xun, a highly complicated writer whose articles were extensively used in *yuwen* readers with fixed interpretations.

Upon close examination, however, it seems that with keen interest in language and reading, my interlocutors utilized the resources provided by *yuwen* classes to their own ends. Nearly half of them mentioned that they were once in the class of a good teacher, who recommended after class readings, personally lent students books, and graded take-home essays attentively and insightfully. Many interlocutors invested more than needed in their assignments of weekly essays [*zibouji*] and excerpts collection [*zhaichao*]—both common forms of *yuwen* homework that required no specific topics. Some wrote short novels, and some wrote essays as in private diaries. As teenagers, they keenly followed the *Reader’s Digest*, *Middle School Student Literature* [*zhongxuesheng wenxue*], and *Yuwen Weekly* [*yuwenbao*] to excerpt eye-catching paragraphs into their meticulously kept notebooks.

Their substantial extracurricular reading nurtured reading dispositions alternative to what national schooling propagated. They read, to begin with, not for instrumental reasons—not just for school or, later, for work. They read regardless of their varied occupations. A, 31, described her occupation as an editor to be “not at all what people presume,” but “tedious” and “boring,” filled with proof-reading collections of bureaucratic documents. She buys three to five books a month; however, “My work and life,” she emphasized, “are separated from my interest.” N, the civil servant, reads many classics in economy and philosophy, such as Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* and Karl Popper’s *The Poverty of Historicism*. When asked whether this pursuit helps his work, his answer shows that his reading keeps him discordant with the workplace:

It has absolutely no use for work. Perhaps I even deliberately hide my interest in the workplace. For example, when I order books on these subjects, I’m unwilling to place them

[in the open space] in my office. I would first lock them in my closet, and after work take them home to read.

Furthermore, they were willing to plough through taxing materials, and this attitude became increasingly pronounced as they aged. In secondary school, interestingly, a surprising number of eight interlocutors developed Classical Chinese reading as a pastime. Obsolete since the early 20th century, Classical Chinese is only superficially introduced in *yumen* classes and largely opaque to untrained contemporary Chinese eyes. When talking about his fondness for studying Classical Chinese essays by himself, N commented: “At the time I acquired the taste for Classical Chinese quite a bit. Another thing was that when reading I managed to take it all in, which was a good reading habit.” In fact, without such a conquering attitude, later my interlocutors could not have dived into nonfiction, political argumentation, and analyses of public affairs. According to Resnick and Resnick’s (1989) typology, what these interlocutors practice is not reading for “pleasure”—since these books are neither “naturally” absorbing nor “simple” to them.

Instead, they read to sharpen thoughts and to figure out the world. X considers book reading as “very important recreation [*yule*] and learning” in his life. Once X had a conversation with a self-identified libertarian on a short foreign business trip. Always assuming himself to be a liberal, he sensed the person’s anarchist tendency which had not occurred to him as part of “the liberal stance.” X later collected several English books the libertarian recommended to differentiate subtler strands of liberal thoughts. “Sometimes I read theoretical stuff [like this], but [to me] it’s still recreation. I just want to see what they are talking about, how they lay it out.” Several individuals mentioned that for a time period they diligently read books about Japan, such as Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, to counter their anti-Japanese impulse rooted in Chinese mass education and media. F remembered that in those days he “consciously told [himself]: ‘the more problem you have with it, the more you try to understand it, from multiple angles and through triangulations.’” “It’s like for small children, when you have loose bowels, you drink raw water [to cure it]. Hair of the dog [*yidugongdu*].”

The ways in which my interlocutors perceive their online reading resonate with their general attitudes toward reading. When asked why they did not speak out more often on Bullog, they stressed that they were there to learn, to expand their own “knowledge and experience” [*jianshi*], and/or to form their own standards to evaluate whose arguments were more solid. Online reading also fostered their continued book reading agenda. For example, Bullogger Luo Yonghao (2009) promoted Thomas Sowell’s *Ethnic American: A History*, because he believed the majority of Chinese people to be “latent racists.” Following his recommendation, Bullog readers, several of my interlocutors among them,

looked for the book in order to examine their own xenophobic tendencies. The induced book hunt led to the complete disappearance of the existing translated edition (5000 copies) from the market, and then to a 2011 reprint.

In sum, my interlocutors treasured texts that introduce new perspectives, conduct thought experiments, and challenge their existing points of view. They read, it seems to me, as efforts for a larger and long-term project for self-development. Their recent experience with weibo, China's twitter, further elucidates their preferred modes of reading. Whereas my interlocutors unanimously acknowledged weibo's strengths in agility and inclusivity, which challenge state control, they were very conscious that it does not enable in-depth reading due to its—in their word—"fragmentation" [*suipianhua*]. They pointed out that "dozens of Chinese characters" in a tweet cannot convey the comprehensive reasoning and facts they seek in reading. A few interlocutors left weibo after a year; many others feel concerned and even guilty about their weibo usage. "I'd rather turn around and read a book written a hundred years back," concluded A.

Reading dispositions, web use, and changing political understanding

This study calls attention to the consistency between distribution systems that govern book reading, on the one hand, and internet surfing, on the other. By investigating reading as socially constituted practices across media platforms over a long time period, it complicates our understanding of the cultural and political impact of the internet, especially in non-liberal societies with powerful ideological apparatuses. What is under authoritarian rule in these societies, I highlight, is not just the information regime, but also the ways in which ordinary people engage with it, including what they seek and how they make sense of the content.

It has been argued that internet technologies afford richer information and thus provide a crucial venue for political education otherwise unavailable in authoritarian contexts (Wu, 2012). However, for changes in political outlooks to occur, generally, a sustained commitment to reading and deliberating political information, especially information that challenges one's existing viewpoint, is indispensable. But even in formal democracies, these engagements, considered as "political use of the internet" and an extension of conventional news media consumption, are constantly mourned for being inadequate for a healthy democratic citizenry. In nondemocratic countries, where the press for "citizen's duty" in participatory politics has been completely absent, we should not expect ordinary individuals to devote time and passion to these burdensome and demanding practices. By examining reading histories of 26 Chinese individuals who developed nonconformist political attitudes during their time online, I found that politically-oriented web usage have their roots in local book reading

practices from the pre-internet era. Given that these reading practices were constituted largely by established cultural institutions and thus tend to be part of the hegemonic formation, it is not surprising that, *on an aggregate level*, a shift from reading print to reading online failed to bring about sea changes in political understanding.

I also explored what reading practices were associated with changing political understanding via web use. As geographically scattered solitary readers, my interlocutors shared strikingly similar reading trajectories and pattern of “politicization.” These individuals relied mainly on books and the internet, rather than on various other mass media. From a very early stage, they developed affinity toward books such as Classical Chinese, foreign literature, or even encyclopedias; these books were the least associated with the central ideology of the party-state and the socialist literary system that strove to “engineer” the people (Link, 2000). And as China’s book market, and later the Chinese web, turned increasingly plural, these individuals diverged further from the hegemonic culture while becoming more articulate about their marginal positions.

The distinct reading disposition my interlocutors shared played a significant role in their political subject-formation through uses of the internet. They have been, for a much longer period of time, “alternative readers,” a tiny fraction of the national population. Whereas 12-year national *yuwen* education imposed upon their generations a norm-enhancing mode of reading, my interlocutors, through substantial extracurricular reading, carved out and inhabit an alternative reading space. Compared to the majority who read for school, work, and immediate pleasure and relaxation, these individuals read for new knowledge and understanding. This on the surface resembles Resnick and Resnick’s (1989) “informational” mode of reading, an example being elite’s newspaper reading with certain taste and leisure. However, beneath my interlocutors’ insistent acquisition of “impractical” information lies their conviction that carefully planned reading, which includes choices of texts and ways to read them, is capable of self-reinvention, a long-term project they deem precious and worthy of efforts. I consider this conception of reading as reading for self-development.

Highly individualistic and future-oriented, this conviction resembles to an extent the mandate of the growing “self-help culture” among the Western middle-class to constantly labor on the self, particularly by reading the advice genre (Knudson, 2013). Yet in contrast to the Western self-help culture that focuses on the emotional self (self-love and intimate relationships), what my interlocutors shared is an explicitly “public” orientation, given their strong preferences for political, historical, and cultural topics; they consider reading about these topics, especially about the unfamiliar and even the contrary, works to expand and transcend the old self that has taken shape within the existing social

structures. This reading disposition, at least incipient prior to internet use, oriented their online reading; adding to it, their well-exercised strenuous reading competence helped them pull off a significant amount of challenging materials indispensable for the development of their political outlooks. In other words, this combination equipped them for political self-education online.

Finally, my interlocutors transformed through self-driven reading from “literary and art youth” to political nonconformists. This resonates with Simmel’s (1990: 454-5) argument that cultural pursuits and aesthetic sensitivity protects individuals from the conformism and instrumentality of mass culture. In his extensive research on the socialist Chinese literary system, Perry Link (2000: 318) remarks, “mental space that literature can open within relatively closed societies has special importance that people accustomed to open societies do not easily appreciate.” Indeed, this case study seems to suggest that in “closed” societies literary reading may better prepare the mind (and person) to take up alternative political stances once more political information is available.

This study is limited to exploring how people’s pre-internet reading practices conditioned their web use, and what cross-media reading histories accompanied the rise of new political subjects in China. Much work is called for to account for the historical conjuncture and discursive environment prior to the internet, in which the alternative reading dispositions had taken shape.

¹ To preserve anonymity, I randomly assign English alphabetical letters to my 26 interlocutors.

References

- Barton D, Hamilton M (2012) *Local Literacies*. London: Routledge.
- Bennett WL, Segerberg A (2012) The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society* 15(5): 739-768.
- Castells M (2012) *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. New York: Polity.
- Chang LT (2012) Working titles: What do the most industrious people on earth read for fun? *The New Yorker*, 6 February, 30.
- Chartier R (2002) Labourers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader. In: Finkelstein D and McCleery A (eds) *The Book History Reader*. London: Routledge, 47-58.
- China Publishers' Yearbook (n.d.) Beijing: China Publishers' Yearbook Press.
- Chua EH (2009) The Good Book and the Good Life: Bestselling Biographies in China's Economic Reform. *The China Quarterly* 198: 364-380.
- CNNIC (n.d.) Statistical Reports on the Internet Development in China. Available at: <http://www1.cnnic.cn/en/index/00/02/index.htm>
- Cull BW (2011) Reading revolutions: Online digital text and implications for reading in academe. *First Monday* 16(6).
- Darnton R (1984) *The Great Cat Massacre*. New York: Vintage.
- Darnton R (2010) *Poetry and the Police*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Davis D (2000) Introduction: A revolution in consumption. In: Davis D (ed) *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-22.
- Farquhar J (2010) How to Live: Reading China's Popular Health Media. In: Khiun LK (ed) *Liberalizing, Feminizing and Popularizing Health Communications in Asia*. Farnham: Ashgate, 197-216.
- Griswold W, McDonnell EM and McDonnell TE (2007) Glamour and Honor: Going online and reading in West African culture. *Information Technology and International Development* 3(4): 37-52.
- Griswold W, McDonnell T and Wright N (2005) Reading and the reading class in the twenty-first century. *Annual Review of Sociology* 31: 127-141.
- Griswold W, Wright N (2004) Wired and well-read. In: Howard PN and Jones S (eds) *Society Online*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 203-222.

- Hall K (2010) Significant lines of research in reading pedagogy. In: Hall K et al (eds) *Interdisciplinary perspectives on learning to read*. New York: Routledge, 3-16.
- Ji, T. (2012) The past BBS affairs. *Southern Metropolis Weekly* 20.
- Jiang Y (2012) *Cyber-Nationalism in China*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.
- Kipnis A (2012) Constructing Commonality: Standardization and Modernization in Chinese Nation-Building. *Journal of Asian Studies* 71(3): 731-55.
- Knudson S (2013) Crash courses and lifelong journeys: Modes of reading non-fiction advice in a North American audience. *Poetics* 41(3): 211-235.
- Kong S (2005) *Consuming Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lee W, Tan TMK and Hameed SS (2005) Polychronicity, the Internet, and the Mass Media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11(1).
- Leibold J (2011) Blogging Alone: China, the Internet, and the Democratic Illusion? *Journal of Asian Studies* 70(4): 1023-1041.
- Li Y (2013) Once upon a time at Bullog (in Chinese). *Blog Weekly*, 5 August.
- Link P (2000) *The uses of literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Long E (1993) Textual interpretation as collective action. In: Boyarin J (ed) *The Ethnography of Reading*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 188-212.
- Long E (2003) *Book Clubs*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Luo Y (2009) *Ethnic America: A History*. Available at:
<http://luoyonghao.i.sohu.com/blog/view/133289963.htm>
- Meng S (2012) China's Book Publishing Industry. *Publishing Research Quarterly* 28(2): 124-129.
- Nie X (2009) 60 years' of yuwan education (in Chinese). *Outlook Weekly* 28: 18-27.
- Resnick DP, Resnick LB (1989) Varieties of literacy. In: Barnes AE and Stearns PN (eds) *Social history and issues in human consciousness*. New York: New York University Press, 171-196.
- Shao Y (2012) The Internet age: The rupture of the New Literary tradition and reconstruction of the "mainstream literature" (in Chinese). *Southern Cultural Forum* 6: 14-21.
- Shufanlaoren (2013) Revisiting the reading life between 1966 and 1979. Available at:
<http://www.douban.com/note/283587182>
- Simmel G (1990) *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge.
- The 10th National Reading Survey (2013) *China Reading Weekly*. Available at:
http://books.gmw.cn/2013-05/06/content_7532250.htm

- UNESCO (2012) Adult and youth literacy, 1990-2015. Available at:
<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/adult-youth-literacy-1990-2015-analysis-data-countries-2012-en.pdf>
- Verboord M (2005) Long-term effects of literary education on book-reading frequency. *Poetics* 33(5-6): 320-342.
- Wang Z (2012) *Never Forget National Humiliation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Webster JG (2009) The role of structure in media choice. In: Hartmann T (ed) *Media Choice*. New York: Routledge, 221-233.
- Weng L (2010) Shanghai children's value socialization and its change. *China Media Research* 6(3): 36-43.
- Williams R (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wu AX (2012) Hail the independent thinker: The emergence of public debate culture on the Chinese Internet. *International Journal of Communication* 6: 2220-2244.
- Wu X (2007) *Chinese Cyber Nationalism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Yang G (2009) *The Power of the Internet in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Zhou Y (2006) *Historicizing Online Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Table 1 Interlocutor Demographics

Gender	Male	Female		
	14	12		
Birth Year	1971-1975	1976-1980	1981-1985	1986-1990
	5	5	15	1
Location	Beijing	Shanghai	Shenzhen	Other cities
	14	4	2	6
Education	High School	College	Above	
	3	16	7	

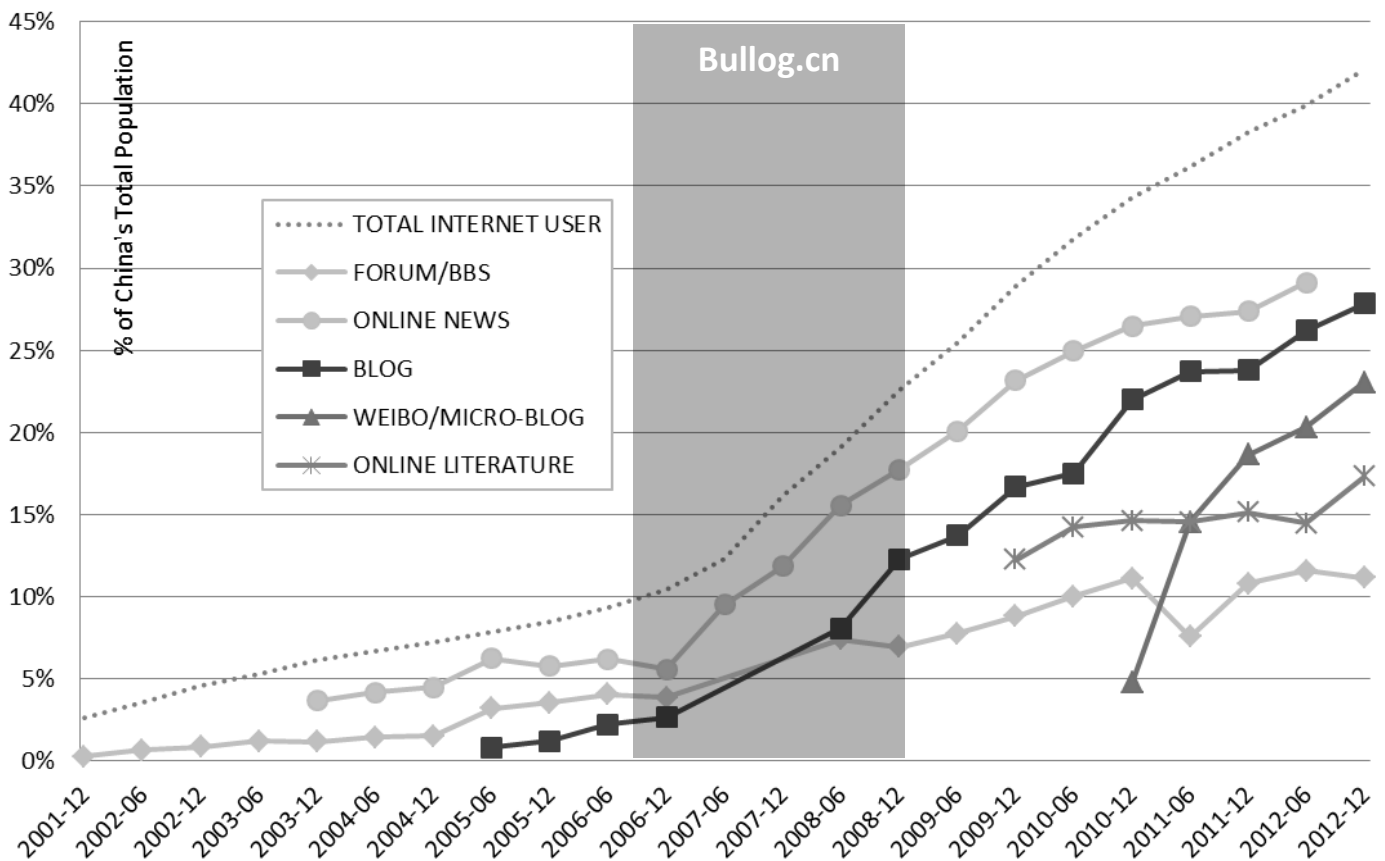


Figure 1 Chinese Internet Use Pattern over Time

Source: data compiled from CNNIC (n.d).