

# Factory State of Mind: Spreading “Three Ardent Loves” via Collective Reading Activities in Tianjin, 1983–1985

Damian Mandżunowski<sup>1</sup>

Reading groups, the organizational structure arising from state-sanctioned collective reading activities, were a common occurrence in most workplaces of the People’s Republic of China from the 1950s until the 1990s. Industrial factories in particular were sites where knowledge was created, disseminated, and performed in reading groups in direct communication with the party-state’s subjects. This paper discusses the case of reading activities aiming to advance workers’ “ardent love for the motherland, for socialism, and for the party” in Tianjin in the early 1980s. By showing where the readings took place, analyzing what was read, and describing the guidance of the activities, the paper reveals how the Chinese industrial space—a site for producing goods—became a site for producing political knowledge.

## *Introduction*

Seven group reading activities (*dushu huodong* 读书活动) took place between June and October 1985 at a taxation bureau of a district in Tianjin. An internal note on their results elucidates the development of one particular cadre as follows:

Let’s take for example a middle-aged section chief from our office [whose] thoughts and methods in the past were rather one-sided: he [used to] see the advanced comrades as flowers and the backward comrades as tofu dregs. [...] As of recently, he pays attention to using a dialectical approach when dealing with comrades: [while] recognizing the deficiencies of the advanced comrades, [he] analyzes the strong points of the less advanced comrades and is passionate about helping them [in their] progress.

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如我局一位中年科长,过去思想方法有些片面,看先进同志象一朵花,看落后的同志是豆腐渣 [...] 最近他注意用辩证的观点看待同志,对先进同志看到其不足,对后进同志分析其长处,并热情关心邦 [sic] 他们进步。<sup>2</sup>

The note further explains the effect of the guided reading of assigned texts at organized group study sessions: through the “linking of theory with reality, and a simultaneous exchange of studies, discussions, practices, and conclusions” (理论联系实际,边学、边议、边实践、边总结交流), the erroneous behavior of the section chief in question was reformed to the general benefit of the whole work unit.<sup>3</sup> This example of a rapid transformation of social practices via the act of reading resulted from propaganda activities (*xuanchuan huodong* 宣传活动) intended to promote “ardent love for the motherland, for socialism, and for the party” (*re'ai zuguo* 热爱祖国, *re'ai shehui zhuyi* 热爱社会主义, *re'ai dang* 热爱党), hereafter “Three Loves,” which was carried out in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the initial phase of Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) of the early 1980s.

This essay presents a case study shedding light on the dissemination of political knowledge by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in this period. Reading, I argue, in its organized and guided form, was a key social ritual in this process. To study the social history of reading is to investigate the ways in which people engaged with texts at various points in the past. Arising as a counterpart to the history of books, the field marks a turn from the producer to the consumer of the written word.<sup>4</sup> The research into the history of reading in Imperial and Republican China,<sup>5</sup> and the social and political uses of reading under Mao and beyond,<sup>6</sup> are both relatively advanced. This

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2 X0087-C-002971-024.

3 The form and goals of the collective reading activities discussed in this paper were closely related to party rectification movements (*zhengfeng yundong* 整风运动), such as from 1942–1945 in Yan'an or, concurrently, from 1983–1987 within the CCP nationwide. See Cheek 2016; Dickson 1990.

4 Three key works on the history of reading: Manguel 1997; Fischer 2003; Lyons 2010.

5 One of the most comprehensive studies on the history of reading in China is Wang Yuguang 2017. Other important examples include Hegel 1998; Yu Li 2003; McLaren 2005; Dennis 2015; Dai Lianbin 2017.

6 For a bibliographic discussion of the current state of the history of reading field in contemporary China, see Xiong Jing 2017. Altehenger 2018 describes how new laws were disseminated via mass-reading campaigns in the early 1950s; Zhou Haiyan 2017, Yang Liping 2018, and Zhan Jiaru 2018, among others, investigate the social impact and propagandistic uses of newspaper reading groups in the 1950s and early 1960s; Whyte 1975 analyzes the importance of small groups (*xiaozu* 小组)—collective political study sessions being one

paper adds to the field by investigating reading groups, which are understood as the organizational structure arising from formalized sessions of reading together. Given the highly politicized nature of the workplace (*danwei* 单位) in the PRC,<sup>7</sup> I focus in on its most widespread form at the time: the industrial factory. Due to its immediate and marked impact on the working class, the society, and politics at large, the factory has been researched based on a variety of perspectives and approaches.<sup>8</sup> By analyzing the reading group at the Chinese factory as a site of knowledge, this paper shows how a site for mass production of goods was also a site for the production and dissemination of political knowledge.

In order to do this, I focus on the collective reading activities of the above-mentioned “Three Loves” campaign at a dozen work units and factories in the coastal city of Tianjin. This eastern metropolis was chosen due to its established position as a large industrial hub<sup>9</sup> and the availability of local archival sources. The paper begins by discussing how the “Three Loves” emerged from an increased drive to create and communicate new socialist knowledge in the early reform era. Then, scrutinizing the experiences of both participants and organizers of collective reading activities, I sketch how and where the sessions were planned, what texts were read, and why and

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of them—for the Maoist political system; Henningsen 2017 looks at the varied and unexpected ways in which reading played a role during the Cultural Revolution; Link 1985 focuses on the patterns of readership in Southern China in the late 1970s and early 1980s; reasons for the surge in popularity of reading-for-leisure throughout the 1980s are presented in Chen 2016; Neder 1999 surveys changes and patterns in reading habits among the people of Beijing in the reform era; and further changes in the manner of reading in the new millennium with the arrival of widespread consumerism are approached in Wang, Davis, and Bian 2006.

- 7 For more on the role and set-up of the *danwei* system, see Lü and Perry 1997; Tanigawa 2007.
- 8 For a comprehensive study of the relationship between the factory and the emergence of modernity, see Freeman 2019. For an account of the roots of the modern factory as a social institution and its continuities beyond the 1949 divide, see Frazier 2006. For an analysis of how the young socialist state adopted modes of production and management from the Soviet Union, see Kaple 1994. Andors 1977 provides a collection of texts on the state of the factory in the 1960s and 1970s. The most comprehensive study of industrial workers (and their relationship to the factory) is provided in Walder 1988; the henceforth-adopted term of “neo-traditionalism” in relation to the industrial workplaces also originates here. An equally inspiring and more recent study on the social dimension of the industrial factory, and on the consequences of its dissolution after Mao, is provided in Andreas 2019.
- 9 For an important discussion of the social-political changes in Tianjin during the Mao era, see Brown 2012.

how the sessions were guided and performed. All this aims to advance our understanding of how reading groups were employed as communicative sites of knowledge advancing novel ideas related to socialist modernization.

### *Socialist Political Knowledge of the Early 1980s*

The period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dageming* 文化大革命) and its tumultuous aftermath in the late 1970s damaged the perceived legitimacy of PRC state institutions and, albeit to a much smaller extent, the social legitimacy of the CCP as a ruling party. To address the injustices of the previous years, wrongdoers were recognized (or constructed) and, eventually, put on trial. At the same time, a large-scale campaign to reverse verdicts was also underway.<sup>10</sup> December 1978 saw the re-introduction of an earlier idea to refocus the state economy on boosting agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology, grouped under the slogan of the Four Modernizations (*si ge xiandaihua* 四个现代化). In March 1979, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997), by then the de facto paramount leader of the PRC, outlined the Four Cardinal Principles (*si xiang jiben yuanze* 四项基本原则) of upholding the socialist path, the people's democratic dictatorship, the leadership of the CCP, and Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism as the core concepts without which the CCP could not continue. Then, in June 1981, the 6th Plenum of the 11th Central Committee adopted a resolution presenting a hegemonic historical narrative of the recent past.<sup>11</sup>

The Four Cardinal Principles were key to forging a new set of rules and fundamental political knowledge in this period; they were designed to symbolically communicate that, despite the ongoing economic liberalization, the ideological superstructure created by the party in power would be upheld.<sup>12</sup> One of the first nationwide propaganda activities promoting elements of this new socialist knowledge was referred to by the composite name of “Five Emphases, Four Beauties, and Three Ardent Loves” (*wu jiang si mei san re'ai* 五讲四美三热爱, hereafter “Emphases/Beauties/Loves”).<sup>13</sup>

10 See Cook 2016; Leese 2020.

11 For a discussion of the context and drafting of the resolution, see Saich 1995. For an overview of the social changes of the early 1980s, see Shapiro and Heng 1986.

12 For historical context on the Four Cardinal Principles, see Vogel 2013, pp. 262–265.

13 Previous scholarship has translated the terms *wu jiang* alternatively as “Five Disciplines,” “Five Dos,” or “Five Stresses,” *si mei* as “Four Graces,” and *san re'ai* as “Three Adorations,” “Three Worships,” or “Three Admirations.” In this paper, “Emphases/Beauties/Loves” is used to refer to the full range of propaganda activities related to the slogan from

Initially started in early 1981 and only comprising the first two of the numbered slogans, the propaganda activities focused on the implementation of socialist civility, courtesy, hygiene, social order, and morality (*jiang wenming* 讲文明, *jiang limao* 讲礼貌, *jiang weisheng* 讲卫生, *jiang zhixu* 讲秩序, *jiang daode* 讲道德), whilst the beauty of language, spirit, actions, and environment (*yuyan mei* 语言美, *xinling mei* 心灵美, *xingwei mei* 行为美, *huanjing mei* 环境美) was to be celebrated every day.<sup>14</sup> The related activities primarily targeted the youth at first as the “Emphases/Beauties” campaign was framed with reference to commemorating the May Fourth Movement and rolled out by the Communist Youth League.<sup>15</sup> Starting in 1982, March was to be a “Month of All People’s Socialist Civility and Courtesy” (*quanmin wenming limao yue* 全民文明礼貌月).<sup>16</sup> In a televised address to the nation on February 28,<sup>17</sup> Premier Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 (1919–2005) stressed that the ideas at the core of the campaign were to be vigorously advanced and performed by all. As dutifully reported in articles and photographs, there were indeed many activities organized.<sup>18</sup> Then, on April 8, Vice Premier Wan Li 万里 (1916–2015) gave a celebratory speech during the grand closing ceremony of the first “Month,” further underlining the importance of the activities.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, in early 1983, the ongoing campaign was expanded with its third element, the aforementioned “Three Ardent Loves” for the motherland, socialism, and the party, which were to be evoked in the entire population.<sup>20</sup> Based on a positive evaluation of the initial activities, all major ministries related to education, propaganda, and civil affairs, as well as many other party-affiliated organizations and trade unions, were called upon to take part in the expanded “Emphases/Beauties/Loves” campaign starting in 1983. The authorities requested that all provinces, cities, and autonomous regions establish activity committees (*huodong weiyuanhui* 活动委员会).<sup>21</sup> A central

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1982 to 1985, whilst “Three Loves” is used to refer to the group reading sessions of 1983 through to 1985.

14 *Gongqingtuan zhongyang xuanchuanbu* 1983, pp. 2–10.

15 *Renmin Ribao* 1983b.

16 *Renmin Ribao* 1982a.

17 For a transcript of Zhao’s speech, see *Gongqingtuan zhongyang xuanchuanbu* 1983, pp. 11–12. See also Shapiro and Heng 1986, pp. 48–49.

18 See *Renmin Ribao* 1982b.

19 For a transcript of Wan’s speech, see *Gongqingtuan zhongyang xuanchuanbu* 1983, pp. 13–17.

20 *Renmin Ribao* 1983a.

21 *Renmin Ribao* 1983c.

35-person strong leading group was also established under the Central Committee to supervise all activities, consisting of various cadres working in education and propaganda within the CCP, People's Liberation Army (PLA), and party-affiliated organizations. In his capacity as a top government leader, Wan Li was appointed its head, and Deng Liqun 邓力群 (1915–2015) and Huang Yukun 黄玉昆 (1917–1997), responsible for CCP and PLA propaganda respectively, were appointed deputy leaders.<sup>22</sup>

Officially organized reading sessions were one of the main ways in which the themes of the “Three Loves” were communicated to ordinary people. These reading sessions took the form of collective reading activities (*jiti yuedu huodong* 集体阅读活动), reading groups (*dushuban* 读书班), or political study groups (*zhengzhi xuexi xiaozu* 政治学习小组), among others. What these different formats shared was their design as collective (as opposed to individual), organized (as opposed to underground), and guided (as opposed to uncontrolled) activities. As a direct continuation of social rituals common to the Mao era, the reading activities of the “Three Loves” constitute an early example of how practices of the Maoist past were combined with novel ideas of the Dengist present.<sup>23</sup> However, they were repurposed to communicate a new message. Furthermore, although “Emphases/Beauties/Loves” was foremost an umbrella term used in state media reporting and internal publications to cover a wide range of activities in a pattern of policy blending common to socialist states, the reading-based propaganda rituals make it stand out against other activities and campaigns of the period.<sup>24</sup>

### *Creating a Site of Knowledge in the Factory*

The concept of a “site of knowledge” (*lieu de savoir*) is Christian Jacob’s proposition for incorporating the spatial turn to the field of intellectual history.<sup>25</sup> In short, investigating sites of knowledge involves focusing on the material and spatial dimensions

22 *Renmin Ribao* 1983d.

23 See also Murthy 1983, p. 8.

24 Another important group reading-related movement taking place concurrently was the campaign to “Eliminate Spiritual Pollution” (*qingchu jingshen wuran* 清除精神污染) in the fall and winter of 1983. While many of the patterns of performative social rituals described in this paper also occurred in similar ways during this campaign, I leave this out of the discussion due to its very specific context and content. See also Wang 1986.

25 See Jacob 2007, 2011, and 2017.

of knowledge production. Jacob defines knowledge as “a set of mental tools, discourses, practices, models, and shared representations allowing a society or smaller groups in this society to provide the world they live in with meaning and to act upon it.”<sup>26</sup> He considers knowledge to be a process ruled by social codes; these, in turn, rely on very concrete spatial dynamics.<sup>27</sup> Jacob thus proposes four main categories for sites of knowledge: places where activities related to knowledge take place (e.g. universities or laboratories); the working space itself (e.g. the writing table or laboratory desk); schemas, maps, photographs and other similar “inscriptions” essential for the production of knowledge; and, finally, the very practices through which knowledge is eventually produced.<sup>28</sup>

The industrial factory of the early 1980s—and, for that matter, any other period—was the, albeit unexpected, place where knowledge was created and disseminated (fulfilling Jacob’s criteria for the first and second categories). It was in the factory that theoretical knowledge about industrial engineering was constantly put to the test and expanded in the practice of production. This was knowledge about the machines and goods, about the uses and difficulties of established or new technologies, about the owners of means of production, about those whose physical labor these owners depended on, as well as about the social and class relations between all the actors involved. At the same time, elements of meta-knowledge—that is, knowledge about the norms of how to understand the relationship between politics and production or between political and social affairs—were also continuously disseminated.

Given the spatial focus of this study, it is necessary to take a closer look at the characteristics of the Chinese industrial factory under state socialism. In November 1952, on the brink of rapid industrialization under the First Five Year Plan (*wunian jihua* 五年计划, 1953–1957), which, notably, adopted a Soviet approach to economic policies, the Beijing gongye chubanshe 北京工业出版社 (Beijing Industrial Publishing House) put out a translation of a Soviet manual on factory construction.<sup>29</sup> The small booklet includes detailed descriptions, plans, blueprints, and tables of a wide variety of rooms, workshops, offices, halls, and other sites that a modern socialist factory ought to have (see figure 1). While not all factories built in the next three decades were exact replicas of the Soviet model, the overall approach of socialist

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26 Jacob 2017, p. 86.

27 Jacob 2017, pp. 88, 94–95.

28 Jacob 2017, pp. 96–99.

29 Song et al. 1952.

industrial architecture remained constant. The modern factory was to be a place for large-scale production flows, while also ensuring that workers and their families—who, as a norm, would live and be schooled on the premises of the factory plant—were safe and somewhat comfortable.<sup>30</sup>

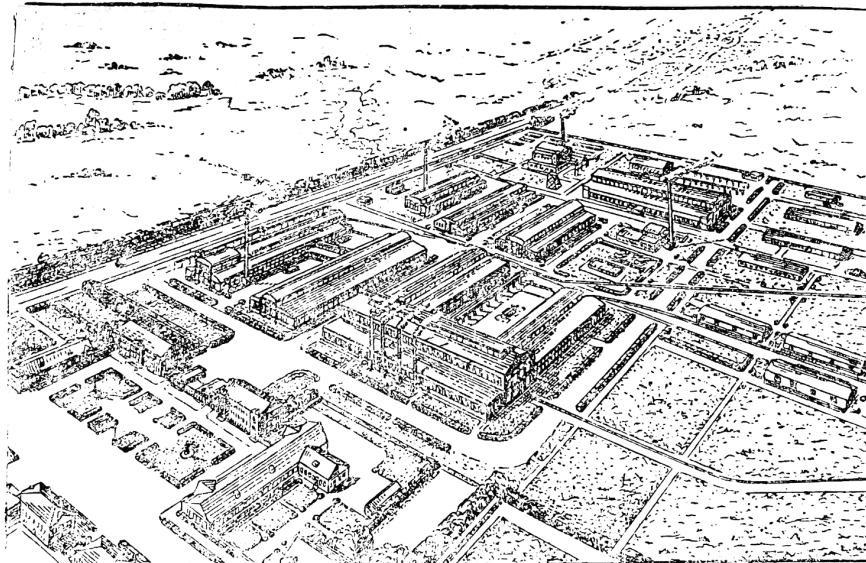


圖10 蒸氣機製造廠鳥瞰圖

*Figure 1. “Bird’s-eye view of a steam-engine factory” (Zhengqiji zaochang niao-kantu 蒸气机造厂鸟瞰图), one among a dozen similar sketches featured in the handbook on socialist factory design. Source: Song et al. 1952, p. 41.*

The factory floor was as essential for producing knowledge as it was for acting as a stage for knowledge-creation practices (in accordance with the fourth category proposed by Jacob). The very same rooms in which workers assembled shoes, airplane engines, and bicycles became the sites for disseminating selected, guided, and politicized truths. The levels of noise and air pollution, the sounds and smells of the operating machines, perceptions of how crowded the space was, and the social constitution of the people all shaped the spatial setting of the factory. Due to its location at the very center of the social lives of the workers and their families, the factory was much more than simply a building in which goods were manufactured by human-operated machines; the factory was also a site for direct communication between the party-state and

30 This can be compared with key studies on the Chinese factory listed in footnote 8 above.

the Chinese working class—a social group that at its highpoint consisted of over 100 million members.

As outlined above, reading groups were organizations arising from the activity of collective reading. These groups undertook reading activities of two kinds: exclusive, where only one form and interpretation of a given text was allowed, with leaders policing and enforcing the reading; and inclusive, where a more open-ended discussion was encouraged, with leaders acting as guides. Each of these collective reading activities consisted of five main elements: texts, readers, leaders, spaces, and time. In the following sections, I present an overview of the systemic setup, the construction and content of reading materials, and the expected ways of performing during the session. The hypothesis underlying the discussion is that the activity of collective reading symbolically transforms the space where the reading occurs. Therefore, when a factory floor or workshop office is used as a site for collective reading, the aim of producing goods, engraved deeply into the design and layout of the space, is momentarily suppressed as it is made to work for a new aim: the production and communication of political knowledge.

## Setup: Sites and Forms of Group Reading Activities

As a first step in the creation of a site of knowledge within the factory, the reading activities had to be organized. The group reading sessions of the “Three Loves” in Tianjin, like most similar official propaganda activities, were organized by specially-created small groups (*dushu huodong xuexi xiaozu* 读书活动学习小组) in each work unit. These, in turn, were managed by leading small groups (*dushu huodong lingdao xiaozu* 读书活动领导小组) comprising leading cadres from the party branch, labor union, and propaganda committees at the given unit.<sup>31</sup> All of these groups consisted of ordinary factory cadres who were assigned responsibility for the reading activities, in contrast to work teams that would come in from the outside during other activities or campaigns. The objectives of each reading activity were divided into main topics (*zhuanqi* 专题), and each topic was to be studied for a certain length of time.<sup>32</sup> For example, some reading activities were organized regularly over a period of three

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31 X0401-C-000275-001.

32 X0382-Y-000084-003.

months,<sup>33</sup> whilst others took place three times with each time lasting one week,<sup>34</sup> and others still were organized bi-weekly.<sup>35</sup>

Before the given collective reading activity began, a discussion meeting (*taolunhui* 讨论会) was organized to set the goals and agenda for the day, week, or month. Then, a couple of discussion questions (*sikao ti* 思考题) and a few assigned readings were chosen. The frequency of the subsequent reading sessions varied: sometimes they were to take place once a week on a day set by the leading group,<sup>36</sup> or it was simply stated that they were to last half a day without specifying when or how often they should be held.<sup>37</sup> In other cases, a certain day and time was set by default; for example, every Saturday until noon.<sup>38</sup> The size of each reading group varied as well, usually depending on the size of the factory or work unit and the number of people who were to take part in the mass reading campaign. At a larger administration bureau, for example, over 12,000 workers (accounting for almost 60 percent of the total number of workers at that unit) participated in reading activities organized in 1,146 small reading groups, averaging just over ten people per group.

The sites in which collective reading activities like those of the “Three Loves” took place differed and largely depended on the spatial configurations of the work unit or factory.<sup>39</sup> A factory is an unusual place for group reading sessions as it rarely has comfortable seating arrangements and related conveniences. Only in rare cases was a factory library or designated reading room (*tushushi* 图书室) available for the adult workers to occupy during the activity.<sup>40</sup> More often, the sites used during the day as schooling facilities for children of the workers became group study rooms for their parents in the evenings. Other dedicated meeting areas ranged from the factory’s management offices to the canteen and production halls, and even—when the conditions were particularly unwelcoming, such as in cases of extremely loud and constant machine work—outdoors, on the premises of the factory.

33 X0401-C-000275-001; X0357-Y-003234-002.

34 X0173-C-000621-006.

35 X0087-C-002971-024.

36 X0357-Y-003234-002.

37 X0087-C-002971-024.

38 X0382-Y-000084-003.

39 This can be compared with Kaple 1994, chapters 4–7; Walder 1988, chapters 2–3.

40 This can be compared with <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-268> and <https://flic.kr/p/bffENp>. For more on how posters worked within the PRC state propaganda system, see Landsberger 2013.

Historic photographs created during and for the sake of mass-reading campaigns are useful sources to further our understanding of the particularity of the spaces in which collective reading sessions took place; they provide visual traces of how and where reading activities were held.<sup>41</sup> Below (figure 2) is an official Xinhua News photograph of a group reading session at Lanzhou Knitting Factory (Lanzhou zhenzhi chang 兰州针织厂). The photo does not show a reading session of the “Three Loves” but is from a closely related context. As noted above, the “Three Loves” arose from a larger framework of propagating the Four Modernizations and the Four Cardinal Principles. Thus, the “Three Loves” was far from the only reading-related campaign at the time. In fact, just a few months before it began, the Party Center dispatched a notice from the Propaganda Department calling for a widespread “study and propagation of the documents of the 12th Central Committee” (学习、宣传党的十二大文件).<sup>42</sup> The photograph shows a collective reading activity organized for this purpose, but we may assume that reading sessions for the “Three Loves” campaign were held in a very similar fashion.

In the photograph of the Lanzhou factory, we see 17 members of the party committee engaging in reading and discussion of the chosen texts. The activity takes place in what looks like a designated meeting room, or, perhaps, the factory party committee offices. The people in the photograph are mostly smiling and engaged in the activity, with some focused on silent reading (such as the second person from the right) and others pointing to the texts while explaining something (such as the man in a flat cap in the middle of the table who, most probably, is the leader of this reading session). This site of reading supports the dissemination of political knowledge: there is enough space and seats for everyone, the walls are decorated with motivating slogans and

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41 This argument is based on the assumption that these kinds of photographs were taken in the space where the reading activities actually took place. The cadres in charge of taking the photographs may have selected factories with particularly well-equipped reading rooms and arranged the settings to include impressive machinery or to get better lighting. Moreover, the exact moment of the photograph may have captured a re-enactment of an actual reading session rather than an actual reading session. However, nothing indicates that the images were outright faked in the sense of being utterly untrue. For a history of journalistic reportage photography in the PRC, see Jin Yongquan 2009; this can also be compared with the discussion presented in Jie Li 2020, chapter 3.

42 Zhonggong zhongyang and Zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuanbu 1982. The 12th Central Committee was in session from September 1982 to November 1987; its first Plenary Session took place on September 12–13, 1982, and confirmed the leading positions of Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping—all key figures for the “Three Loves” and other campaigns touched upon in this article.

certificates, two tables form a comfortable centerpiece, and tea or hot water is also provided. Led by a designated session leader, new political ideas and insights circulate between the participants in the course of the collective reading.



*Figure 2. A Xinhua News photograph depicting collective reading; an attached note reads: “The Party Committee of the Lanzhou Knitting Factory organized the production model workers and advanced production workers to discuss the documents of the 12th CC Congress, to implement the spirit of the 12th CC through practice, to further improve the quality of products and overfulfill the annual production quota” (兰州针织厂党委组织生产标兵, 先进生产者座谈讨论十二大文件, 以实际行动落实十二大精神, 进一步提高产品质量, 取超额完成全年生产任务). Source unknown, photo in author’s collection.*

Many group reading activities were based on sequential reading out loud as not all workers were familiar with the theory-heavy words and terms in some of the reading materials. We get an idea of the lecture style of the reading activities from a less-staged photograph (figure 3). A few dozen people are captured sitting behind tables in what looks like an assembly hall, or perhaps a factory school gymnasium. Taken during the “Emphases/Beauties” activities in early 1982, the people in the image are all listening to a speech or lecture, as is further indicated by the fact that some are

taking notes. Here the setting is very different: this is a large, overwhelming room without any of the conveniences seen in the previous context. Most faces bear tired expressions. Not all collective reading sessions were characterized by energetic participation, in particular when the sessions were held in a lecture style with only one person actually reading. The site of the reading activities, in combination with the way the texts were read, thus had a direct impact on the circulation of knowledge. Another reason for this discrepancy, as the following section explores, relates to the texts being read and discussed.<sup>43</sup>



*Figure 3. Attendees at a group address during “Emphases/Beauties” activities, place unknown, 1982. The slogan in the back reads “Extensively, thoroughly, and persistently launch the activities of ‘Five Emphases and Four Beauties,’ strive to construct a socialist spiritual culture” (Guangfan shenru chijiu kaizhan Wujiang simei huodong, nuli jianshe shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming 广泛深入持久开展五讲四美活动，努力建设社会主义精神文明). Source unknown, photo in author’s collection.*

## Texts: Constructing What to Know

The first step in creating a site of political knowledge in the factory entailed setting up the space and organizing how the collective reading activity was to take place. The second step was the selection of the study material. The texts therefore constituted the knowledge to be spread in that moment. The exact subject matter of the texts to be read and discussed depended on the nature of the work unit (i.e., what goods it was

43 For more photographs of collective reading in twentieth century China, see also Mandżunowski 2018.

producing), the participants (e.g., workers, young workers, or party cadres among the workers), and the point in time, as slightly different texts were read during different periods.

For example, a document sent out by a local trade union in September 1983 records a selection of 14 recent speeches, political essays, and opinions from the *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 邓小平文选 (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping) as the texts that need to be thoroughly studied.<sup>44</sup> Another dispatch sent out by the party committee of Tianjin's Municipal Bureau of Hygiene (*Zhonggong Tianjin shi weisheng ju weiyuanhui* 中共天津市卫生局委员会) on February 13, 1984, outlines 15 texts by Deng, all dated between 1977 and 1983, as well as two speeches by Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915–1989), the General Secretary of the CCP at the time, and the Party Center Decision on Party Rectification (*Zhonggong Zhongyang guanyu zhengdang de jueding* 中共中央关于整党的决定) from October 11, 1983.<sup>45</sup> A later notice on organizing reading sessions in a factory in Tianjin in 1984 lists over 30 texts from the *Sanben zhengzhi lilun shuji* 三本政治理论书籍 (Three Books on Political Theory), that is, from *San Zhong Quanhui yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* 三中全会以来重要文献选编 (Selected Important Documents Since the Third Plenum of the National Congress of the CCP), *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* and *Chen Yun tongzhi wengao xuanbian* 陈云同志文稿选编 (Selected Documents of Comrade Chen Yun).<sup>46</sup> In addition to reading Deng and Hu, the notice also recommends speeches by other party elders, such as Deng Yingchao 邓颖超 (1904–1992), Nie Rongzhen 聂荣臻 (1899–1992), and Ye Jianying 叶剑英 (1897–1986).

The authors of the knowledge communicated during the reading activities were some of the top leaders of the CCP. Unsurprisingly, the person with the largest number of titles in my sample from Tianjin's factories is Deng Xiaoping. Of the 51 texts in total mentioned in a small number of official notices related to the “Three Loves” and kept at the Tianjin Municipal Archives, 23 are by Deng, seven by Hu Yaobang, six by Chen Yun 陈云 (1905–1995), and three by Zhao Ziyang. Together, the four authors comprise more than three quarters of all the reading material. There are no texts by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) or Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976), and also

44 X0401-C-000275-001.

45 X0357-Y-003234-002.

46 X0382-Y-000084-003. Despite not being explicitly framed as part of the “Three Loves” activities, I include this particular collective reading activity in the discussion here as it took place at the same time and the reading material was very closely related to the goals of the “Three Loves.”

nothing by the rehabilitated Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (1898–1969). However, the most notable absentee is perhaps Hua Guofeng 华国锋 (1921–2008), the short-reigning heir to Mao who was removed from the center of power and replaced by Deng in the late 1970s. This is especially noticeable given that Ye Jianying, the man who Hua teamed up with in 1976 to arrest the Gang of Four, is represented with one text. Another seven titles are collectively attributed to either the Central Committee, the State Council, or other CCP bodies. While these include the aforementioned and related notes on party rectification, others are on consolidation and reforms of state-owned enterprises, and the role of intellectuals.

Although these examples are far from constituting a complete list of all that was read in the collective activities of the early 1980s, they allow us to better grasp what constituted the communicated and reproduced knowledge during the collective reading activities of the “Three Loves” in Tianjin (and, to some extent, nationwide). We can immediately observe from the titles that most of the texts were speeches by political leaders.<sup>47</sup> Due to the accessibility and straightforwardness of the messaging, this genre was also most often read in previous political campaigns. Accessibility was important when assigning texts for group discussions with workers, in particular because the activities were primarily targeting young workers and youth cadres who might not (yet) possess the required base knowledge to engage with more theoretical texts. No fiction, poetry, or nonverbal texts were considered for the group reading activities, and almost all of the texts were contemporaneous, created in the mid-1970s or later. However, the spectrum of reading materials during the propaganda activities related to the “Three Loves” was more complex as other officially-approved texts were disseminated concurrently.

Evidence of this can be found in a list of recommended books for reading rooms in factories, which was compiled and dispatched nationwide by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (*Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui* 中华全国总工会) on January 9, 1984.<sup>48</sup> This selection of 77 titles is impressive in its comprehensiveness: it contains classics of Marxism-Leninism and Chinese socialist thought, positions on modern Chinese history, aesthetics, art and philosophy, contemporary Chinese popular literature, and works related to science and technology. The contents of this list of

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47 The following discussion is based on X0401-C-000275-001, X0357-Y-003234-002, and X0382-Y-000084-003.

48 X0044-C-000781-012.

recommended books shows that a division existed between what people were encouraged to read in organized and guided collective reading activities, and what was accepted that workers would read in their spare time, suiting their own taste within limits. Different levels of institutions also recommended different reading materials. The titles discussed in the example from Tianjin in the paragraph above were compiled and sent out by party organs at the municipal level, whilst the much more extensive list of titles by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions was dispatched by a central organ at the national level. This shows how multiple voices related to collective reading activities symbiotically coexisted during a single political campaign.<sup>49</sup>

## Performance: Discipline and Guidance

It was the duty of the leaders of the “Three Loves” reading groups to ensure active participation and correct reading of the texts. A system of incentives for taking part and penalties for dropping out of the activities aided them in this task. For example, during reading activities at one of Tianjin’s labor unions, advanced readers (*dushu xianjin geren* 读书先进个人)—particularly well-performing participants in the sessions who were deemed worthy of special recognition by the leading cadre in charge of the given session—were awarded 5 Yuan each, and members of advanced reading small groups (*xianjin dushu xiaozu* 先进读书小组) 2 Yuan each.<sup>50</sup> In other cases (see figures 4 and 5 below), and similar to previous mass-reading activities, the organizing committees handed out commemorative notes or medals to activists (*jiji fenzi* 积极分子).

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49 Here, the drive to update the selection of common literature for CCP cadres since the late 1970s might be of interest too. One of the longest-lasting consequences of the Cultural Revolution was the significant intake of new party members. However, with the removal of the Gang of Four (*siren bang* 四人帮) and their followers from party rank, many top positions were assumed by rehabilitated party veterans. This situation resulted in a generational gap between scores of young (and relatively new) cadres and the much older local and national leaders. To address the potential for disagreements or even party-internal conflicts, Hu Yaobang argued in early 1979 that special booklets should be printed and distributed, consisting of key political and theoretical concepts laid out in a comprehensive manner. This further shows how the collective reading activities of the “Three Loves” were embedded in larger, reading-based attempts to create the perfect party member of the modernization era. See A22-4-295-1. Thanks to Puck Engman for alerting me to this context and for sharing the relevant sources with me.

50 X0192-Y-000893-004.

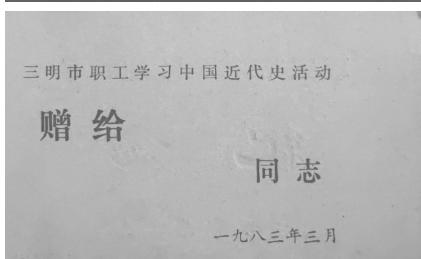


Figure 4 (left). The front and back of a blank note commemorating successful participation in “Workers’ ‘Three Loves’ Collective Reading Activities” (Zhigong san re’ai dushu huodong 职工「三热爱」读书活动) handed out by the Sanming municipal organizing committee of “Workers’ Study Activities in Modern History of China” (Zhigong xuexi Zhongguo jindaishi huodong 职工学习中国近代史活动) in March 1983. In author’s collection.

Figure 5 (right). A medal for a “Five Emphases, Four Beauties, Three Ardent Loves Activities Activist” (Wu jiang si mei san re’ai huodong jiji fenzi 五讲四美三热爱活动积极分子) handed out by the Suzhou municipal “Emphases/Beauties/Loves” organizing committee in 1984. In author’s collection.

Another common way in which group reading activities were guided towards their envisaged results—continuing an established element of mass-reading campaigns under Mao—was providing the cadres in charge with a set of questions or problems for discussion (*sikao ti* 思考题). These questions were a relatively basic didactic tool of varying preciseness used to ensure a minimum of standardization across reading groups. A selection of some of these discussion questions for reading activities used in a factory in Tianjin illustrates their scope:

Why do we say that doing well at reforming is a prerequisite for achieving Four Modernizations? Why do we need to build socialism with Chinese characteristics? Why do we say that intellectuals are an indispensable force in the

construction of the Four Modernizations? Why do we say that the construction of material culture and the construction of spiritual culture are inter-conditional and mutually purposeful? Why do we say that issues of party style are related to the survival of the ruling party? How do we correctly handle the relationship between communist ideological education and the implementation of current policies?

为什么说搞好改革，是实现四个现代化的前提条件？为什么要建设有中国特色的社会主义？为什么说知识分子是四化建设中不可缺少的依靠力量？为什么说物质文明建设和精神文明建设是互为条件、互为目的的？为什么说党风问题，是关系到执政党生死存亡的问题？如何正确处理共产主义思想教育和执行现行政策关系？<sup>51</sup>

In another dispatch, this one sent out by the Municipal Bureau of Hygiene, the questions are similar; many of them are directly related to the contents of the assigned texts—in the case of this group reading session, a selection of texts by Deng Xiaoping:

How do we correctly understand the nature, guiding principles, and the mission of the party? How do we adhere to the Four Cardinal Principles and implement the party line, its guidelines and policies on a self-study basis? How do we restore and carry forward the fine traditions of the party and actively carry out criticism and self-criticism? How do we strengthen the organizational discipline and earnestly implement democratic centralist organizational principles? What are the problems in unifying thinking and how to unify thinking? What is the guiding ideology of the reforms?

怎样正确认识党的性质、纲领和任务？怎样坚持四项基本原则，自学地贯彻执行党的路线、方针和政策？怎样恢复和发扬党的优良传统，积极开展批评和自我批评？怎样加强组织纪律性，认真实行民主集中制的组织原则？在统一思想上存在什么问题，如何统一思想？改革的指导思想是什么？<sup>52</sup>

What most of these questions have in common is that they are anything but open-ended. Rather, they tend to have imbedded answers: the reforms are correct; the policy guidelines of the party center are correct. Nonetheless, if a leader of a collective reading activity made use of one or several of the discussion questions (as they were expected to), or faced similarly formulated questions from readers during the sessions (as would often be the case), how did he or she know the ideologically correct answer? Collected experiences from previous mass-reading or political campaigns were of

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51 X0382-Y-000084-003.

52 X0357-Y-003234-002.

help, and, of course, leading cadres were expected to stay informed about ongoing political developments. However, handbooks (*shouce* 手册) and similar booklets published for the sake of laying out the current political knowledge were of even more help.

One such handbook, titled '*Wu jiang si mei*' *yibai ti* 「五讲四美」一百题 (One Hundred Questions on "Five Emphases and Four Beauties") and created in July 1982, is a useful selection of the 100 most common questions and observations raised in letters and calls to the editors of the *Gongren Ribao* 工人日报 (Worker's Daily) with regard to the new propaganda activities.<sup>53</sup> Given the focus on spreading knowledge about socialist civility and courtesy during the "Emphases/Beauties" campaign, these questions and observations included such widespread inquires as: "How should we regard damaging public books?" 怎样看待损坏公家图书的行为? "Can I scribble and doodle on the Renminbi notes?" 在人民币上能不能乱写乱画? "What should you do when people swear at you?" 别人骂你怎么办?<sup>54</sup> Authoritative bite-sized answers were then provided. For the above examples the answers were: damaging books is wrong; the state banknotes need to be treated with respect; if people swear at you, they already look bad. However, we cannot know for sure if group leaders used these statements verbatim during group activities, or if they mainly served as inspiration.

Once the mass-reading period was over, all the leading groups were asked to send detailed feedback about the study circumstances, the results, and any difficulties faced back up the organizational party structure. The leading small group was also asked to keep track of the performance of the reading activities. As we can see in figure 6, tables for collecting simple statistical information were provided for this purpose. In addition to requesting information about the given work unit and date, the table is divided into two parts. Used for a day of group reading activities, it lists all persons active on that particular day: the left side includes the names, positions (*zhiwu* 职务) and departments of the "Members of the Reading Leading Small Group" (*dushu ling-dao xiaozu chengyuan* 读书领导小组成员) of the day, as well as information on who

53 *Gongren ribao* sixiang jiaoyubu 1982. A second booklet, titled *Wu jiang si mei shouce* 五讲四美手册 (Handbook of "Emphases/Beauties") and compiled and edited by the Youth League in January 1983, is another example of a comprehensive and detailed guide to the campaign. The volume covers everything from reprints of official documents and speeches, through detailed descriptions of ideas driving the campaign, to discussions of rules of politeness and gendered advice on performing household duties. See *Gongqingtuan zhongyang xuanchuanbu* 1983.

54 *Gongren ribao* sixiang jiaoyubu 1982, pp. 24, 65, 174.

acted as the group leaders (*zuzhang* 组长) organizing and guiding the meeting. The cells in the same row on the right side of the table, collecting “Individual Reading Statistics” (*geren dushu tongji* 个人读书统计), relate to the reading group of the given leader and assess the total number of participants as well as a breakdown of how many among them were workers, cadres, or technicians (*jishuyuan* 技术员). Equipped with such basic information, the propaganda department of the given factory—as well as the propaganda departments of the region and even the province—were able to extrapolate how many and what kind of readers engaged in the collective reading activities.

“三热爱”读书活动统计表					
单位：			日期 年 月 日		
读书领导小组成员			个人读书统计		
组 长			总 数		
姓 名	职 务	部 门	工 人	干 部	技 术 员
备 注	此表请填好后速交到公司工会				

Figure 6. “Three Ardent Loves” Reading Activities Statistical Table (“San re’ai” dushu huodong tongjibiao “三热爱”读书活动统计表). Source: X0401-C-000275-001

Based on findings from reports like these, as well as on-the-ground surveying work at more than two dozen factories in Tianjin between June 1983 and May 1984, 510,000 workers took part in reading sessions of the “Three Loves”. This accounted for slightly over one fifth of all workers in Tianjin at that time.<sup>55</sup> Among the investigated factories, two failed to establish reading groups at all. The fault in these two cases is put firmly on the leading cadres: they are described as “unsound” (*bu jianquan* 不健全), “weak” (*ruanruo* 软弱), and “slack” (*huansan* 涣散), and some are even said to

55 X0044-C-000785-002. The total population of Tianjin was just below four million. For more on Tianjin in the early 1980s, see Brown 2021.

show “defective thinking” (*sixiang bing* 思想病).<sup>56</sup> Another five factories faced problems at later stages of the campaign. Reading groups were established and reading activities undertaken, yet the readings soon stopped. Again, most blame is put on the leading cadres and some are described as having a “low level of personal culture” (*benshen wenhua shuiping bu gao* 本身文化水平不高), or “lacking the habit of reading” (*meiyou dushu de xiguan* 没有读书的习惯).<sup>57</sup> The tension between the focus on production work and the expected incorporation of ideological work within the daily routine of industrial workers is perhaps best expressed by a factory leader quoted as rhetorically asking: “Obviously we must put production first, otherwise we would not be able to pay wages; how can we also have hearts and minds for reading?” 当然要生产第一，不然就发不出工资了，还有什么心思读书呢?<sup>58</sup>

### Conclusion

Organization, guidance, and ritualized discipline were essential in transforming the factory into a site of political knowledge. This task was assigned to experienced workers and party cadres chosen as the leaders of the group activities. A leader of a reading group was thus steering the readers on trajectories of meaning outlined by the CCP. However, as shown, many of these group reading activities took place in spaces not designed to facilitate and boost focused engagement with texts (as opposed to schools or universities). Thus, a range of features have been found to reflect the industrial reading group as a site of knowledge: the uneasy transfer of political knowledge within a space designed for production; reading sessions occurring in spaces not well-suited to reading; the importance of the process of reading as a collective task; the attempt to restrict interpretation to predetermined trajectories; and the importance of formalized communication. The above analysis has also shed light on the content of what was communicated in political educational campaigns of the early 1980s: various contemporary speeches by Deng and a small number of other top party leaders, but few by Lenin or Mao. Patriotism, party loyalty, and socialism with Chinese characteristics were the three key themes.

Collective reading activities related to the “Three Loves” had been replaced with other contents to a large extent by late 1985, around the same time that the section

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56 X0044-C-000785-002.

57 X0044-C-000785-002.

58 X0044-C-000785-002.

chief from the example featured in the introduction to this paper underwent a significant transformation. A former fitter in a Beijing machinery plant described the changed circumstances of the presence of politics in the factory in the early 1990s as follows:

The work groups hardly ever have meetings for politics or anything else. Sometimes they will have a meeting to greet the New Year or something like that. Other than that, we only have meetings if there is an important document or speech to be covered, or if there is some kind of political crisis, like June 4.<sup>59</sup>

A production line worker in a Beijing electronics factory had similar impressions: “There is no longer any political study for the masses, only for party members themselves.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, after a decade of reforms, the only formalized collective meetings that remained common in the industrial space of the PRC were those celebrating major holidays or in times of crisis, with occasional group reading of key documents—and mostly for CCP cadres rather than the working class at large.

In this historical context, the “Three Loves” was one of the last mass-reading campaigns. What does this tell us about industrial sites of knowledge in the PRC of the early reform era? Popularizing correct understanding of what had happened during the Cultural Revolution, as well as during the following tumultuous years, the factories were sites where party-guided discipline was re-introduced among the working class via direct outreach. Although a multivocality of contents and actors was at play, the factory was re-conceptualized with a twofold approach: it served as a site of knowledge in which not only was ideology communicated via collective reading, but so was a certain way of acting in accordance with the new norms of socialist modernization. Representing another continuity with the PRC under Mao, the factory space of the early 1980s was part of a larger attempt in political communication to plant the seeds of socialist-patriotic thought and behavior in the minds of the late-socialist subjects.

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59 Quoted in Walder 1991, pp. 474–475.

60 Quoted in Walder 1991, p. 475.

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