

Modern Chinese Literature Sells Out

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ABSTRACT

Books have become an important market commodity in mainland China since 1978. This development has greatly impacted the actions of readers, writers, and publishers—and has had far-reaching implications for the broader socio-cultural context in which modern Chinese literature is evolving. From a pragmatic standpoint that views reading as an act of consumption, subject to the push and pull of the market, Kang Xiaoguang and his co-authors bring a refreshing perspective to the study of modern Chinese literature with their 1998 survey of the reading preferences and practices of Beijingers from young to old, *A Perspective on Reading Among the Chinese: Surveying the Reading Activities of the Masses from 1978 to 1998*. By extension, their findings indicate the alarming degree to which the academic field of modern Chinese literature studies, with its predilection for various “postist” approaches, is becoming increasingly detached from what actually transpires in mainstream modern Chinese literary culture. This article concludes that scholars of modern Chinese literature must approach their research with a heightened sense of reality, emphasize empirical approaches in research methodology, and better extend their purview to popular literature.

KEY WORDS

avant-garde literature
best-sellers
entertainment literature

reader reception
reader surveys
yanqing xiaoshuo

market
“postist” polemics

Yu Hua



Introduction: Books as Market Commodities

Beijing, 19 August 1999: Mr. “Can’t-You-Just-Write-Mr. Wang,” manager of Beijing Wholesale Book Market 北京圖書批發交易書城, proudly reports that the 196 Chinese publishing outlets housed in this newly built three-story complex operate with an annual inventory turnover of 100 million RMB (approximately US\$12.5 million). “The rest is secret,” he adds, and judging from his studied manner this is hardly an understatement. Beijing Wholesale Book Market is clearly a busy enterprise. Its air-conditioned corridors, redolent with the prematurely musty odor of mainland books just off the press, is a slight respite from the heated atmosphere as buyer and seller exchange information about which books are faring well on the market [*zoude hao* 走得好], and energetically haggle over precisely which discount applies to what quantity of books.¹

Book trading and the wider social, economical and cultural significance of the activities of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) readership have become a manifest part of the Beijing cityscape in the late 1990s. Beijing Wholesale Book Market’s move indoors from a dusty lot behind a bus station on Jintai Lu to its present prominent quarters up the road in May 1997 was a natural response to the pull of the market following the reinvigorated interest in books in contemporary mainland China. Currently, two other retail book markets of a scale unknown in most Western countries are open in Beijing: the five-story Beijing Tushu Dasha 北京圖書大廈 (popularly known as Xidan Shucheng 西單書城), which was completed in August 1998 at the busy intersection of Chang’an Jie and Xidan Beijie, as well as the

upscale new home since May 1999 of Zhongguo Haidian Shucheng 中國海澱書城 (the previously much shabbier Haidian Shucheng), with four floors of publisher outlets. In August 1999, at these three book markets there seemed to be readily available a more complete and up-to-date selection of books—foreign and Chinese, fiction and non-fiction, modern and traditional—than at any other time in Beijing in the 1990s.² These three prominent enterprises are among the more physically apparent signs of the rapidly growing presence (and presumably significance) of books in the personal lives of contemporary PRC citizens—as well as in PRC society in general.

The problems of the PRC readership and the broader socio-cultural and economical context of the production and distribution of books in mainland China have rarely received adequate attention from Western or Chinese literary scholars, whose general interest has lately been channeled in the more confined directions of intrinsic literary values and “postist” polemics. However, without a close observation of the stirrings in the broader literary culture of mainland China, and without an intimate understanding of the actual preferences and dislikes of the contemporary Chinese readership, for whose attention writers and publishers are continually vying, an in-depth and truly critical evaluation of recent Chinese literary texts and their authors seems regrettably out of reach for the scholar of modern Chinese literature.

Perspectives on the Contemporary Reading Activities of the Chinese

Two distinguished scholars of modern Chinese literature, Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, have recently penned an ambitious general outline of the zigs and zags of 20th-century Chinese fiction, poetry, and essays—*The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*. This book concludes with a salient reference to the importance of production and distribution in the development of modern Chinese literature: “The achievements of twentieth-century Chinese literature are also related to its changing patterns of production, distribution and

consumption” (McDougall and Louie 441). This borderline truism has curiously been played down in recent scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature.³ The authors then go on to regret the scarcity of scholarship on the 20th-century Chinese readership—a branch of scholarship without which the field can gain only an incomplete picture of modern Chinese literary history. McDougall and Louie thereupon offer a prudent but perhaps overly pessimistic comment: “Statements on readership, however, have to remain speculative, since it is difficult to discuss twentieth-century Chinese readership other than conceptually or anecdotally, since statistically rigorous surveys of reader preferences are almost non-existent” (McDougall and Louie 443).

Because of the above-mentioned lacuna in research on modern Chinese literature, the following book-length study has arguably made a major contribution to the field: *A Perspective on Reading Among the Chinese: Surveying the Changes in the Reading Activities of the Masses from 1978 to 1998* [*Zhongguoren dushu toushi: 1978-1998 dazhong dushu shenghuo bianqian diaocha* 中國人讀書透視: 1978-1998 大眾讀書生活變遷調查], by Kang Xiaoguang 康曉光, Wu Yulun 吳玉倫, Liu Dehuan 劉德寰 and Sun Hui 孫慧 (published by Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe in 1998). The volume presents a statistical study of the Chinese readership in the two decades following Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in 1978, while mindful of the larger economic, historical, and socio-cultural processes in which the readership has evolved. Thus taking a rare and long-needed holistic approach to the subject of Chinese literature (in the broadest possible sense of the term), the study views books as market commodities. Accordingly, its analysis begins from extrinsic factors relating to books’ production, distribution, acquisition, reader-reception, and post-consumption fate, and subsequently probes into the intrinsic factors related to the more private act of reading itself. Conducted by a team of four colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and sponsored by China Central Television (CCTV), the study was intended to mark the twentieth anniversary of the PRC’s open-door policy as a celebration of cultural pluralism in the reform era after Mao.

Yet even though the authors seem to be motivated by such celebratory sentiments, they appear to have made no particular effort to hide the dirty linen in the survey's results from public view; for the most part, the authors display a healthily critical attitude to their study and the results it generated. Therefore, *Zhongguoren dushu toushi* is likely to prove an eye-opener for both Chinese and Western scholars of the literature, popular culture, and sociology of contemporary mainland China.

The data from the study's reader survey are among the most intriguing revelations in the volume, and will be the focus of the present discussion. The survey consisted of questionnaires that were administered to a random sample of 500 Beijing households, and to 500 bookshop-browsing Beijingers during 1998. These surveys were complemented with interviews of leading authorities in the contemporary publishing industry. Although it is a matter of some regret that the data from these two separate surveys were presented together in aggregate, presumably resulting in a bias towards "bibliophiles,"⁴ the survey is nonetheless the strongest indicator available of developments in the PRC readership after Mao. Furthermore, the sample on which the study is based looms considerably larger in both breadth and depth than previous reader surveys conducted in the PRC.⁵

In a rough summary of the findings from the readership survey presented in the third and fifth chapters of *Zhongguoren dushu toushi*, readers in contemporary Beijing may be characterized as follows (figures have been rounded): on average, they spend slightly under two hours every day reading books,⁶ typically before going to bed at night. Curiously, a considerable portion of the interviewed readers (37%) also have the habit of reading in the toilet. About half of the total reading time is spent on entertainment fiction [*xiaoqian xiaoshuo* 消遣小說], which in the opinion of the majority of readers (70%) noticeably affects their emotional balance. They purchase the larger portion of their readings (71%), and the smaller portion is borrowed from friends (11%) or libraries (10%) or otherwise acquired (8%). However, the vast majority of interviewees (72%) spend less than 15% of their total disposable income on books. The three factors which most

influence their book purchases are: first, a given book's author (especially for unmarried female readers as compared with married male readers); second, the book's price; and third, the quality of the printing (especially for unmarried female readers). Generally, readers report that they are unswayed by either advertisements or propaganda related to books; 27% of the interviewed readers never use public libraries, while only 12% never visit bookstalls and 3% never visit bookstores. Bookstalls and bookstores have replaced schools and newspapers as the most popular venues for obtaining information about books. Readers have no qualms about purchasing pirated or banned books, which are generally cheaper than their legitimate counterparts. Yet contrary to PRC government fears, the vast majority of interviewees (71%) believe that banned political books cannot effectively change the political orientation of the reader. Beijing readers thus overall appear to be keen, self-conscious, and opinionated consumers of books, and have a detailed familiarity with both the cost of books and where they can be most conveniently acquired.

Since the interviewees were asked to answer questions separately for five distinct periods, namely pre-1978, 1978-1984, 1985-1989, 1990-1992, and 1993-1998, it is possible to reconstruct the trajectories of individual writers and their works during the twenty-year period under study. Keeping in mind that a difference of 0.1% is statistically well within the margin of error, we can sketch the contours of the post-Mao readership's evolving preferences. Not surprisingly, what is most conspicuous is the steep fall in popularity of Mao Zedong's writings, which from being grouped among the works with absolutely most influence on readers [*dui geren yingxiang zuida* 對個人影響最大] before 1978 by 9.8% of the interviewees, in the period 1978-1984 were named so by only 1.8%. For the period 1978-1984, the book considered most influential was Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 mid-Qing novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* [*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢] (at 7.4%), followed by the late sixteenth-century *Journey to the West* [*Xiyouji* 西遊記] (at 4.4%). This period also witnessed a rise in the influence of martial arts fiction represented by the Hong Kong writer Jin Yong 金庸 (at 1.9%), and Kong-Tai 港台 romance fiction

[*yanqing xiaoshuo* 言情小說] represented by Qiongyao 瓊瑤 and Sanmao 三毛 (at 0.7%). Moreover, the total number of titles mentioned rose from 142 for the period prior to 1978 to 178 in the period 1978-1984, while the influence of any one single writer or book decreased. These changes are suggestive of the early burgeoning of PRC cultural pluralism (the above data are from Kang Xiaoguang et al. 46-48).

In the subsequent period of 1985-1989, the popularity of Jin Yong's works rose to 5.2%, now second to only *A Dream of Red Mansions* (at 6.8%) in its influence on readers, while Qiongyao's and Sanmao's semi-fictional emotional escapades were considered most influential by 2.1% of interviewees. Nikolay Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* [translated as *Gangtie shi zenyang lianchengde* 鋼鐵是怎樣煉成的] was still among the first ten on the lengthy 210-title list of most influential works. However, by this time Mao's works had further declined in influence (to 0.7%), while Deng Xiaoping's works rose to fourth place in the top-ten list of favorites (at 2.6%) (Kang Xiaoguang et al., 49-50).

By the period of 1990-1992, the spectrum of books considered most influential by readers now had increased to 241 different volumes, and incorporated a large proportion of practical books of all sorts (GRE study books, computer manuals, etc.). In a formerly unimaginable development, Mao's works were now considered less influential than the Bible (at 0.5%). The work considered most influential was the sentimental magazine *Duzhe wenzhai* 讀者文摘 (at 6.0%). Jin Yong was the only literary figure to be considered the most influential by more than 3% of the interviewees. His martial arts novels (at 4.8%) outranked *A Dream of Red Mansions* (at 2.8%) and Qian Zhongshu's 錢鍾書 *Fortress Besieged* [*Weicheng* 圍城] (at 2.7%), as well as *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* [*Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 鄧小平文選] (at 2.5%) (Kang Xiaoguang et al. 51-52).

As the diversity in the subject matter of listed books increased after 1993, the frequency with which individual writers and literary works appeared on the list decreased significantly. Interviewees named a total of 382 different books which they considered most influential since 1993, of which an increasing proportion consisted of

practical books, manuals, and guides to better living. For the first time in the period under study, individual writers and fictional works were absent from the top five places on the list of most influential works;⁷ the first creative works to be listed were Jin Yong's martial arts novels and Lu Yao's 路遙 three-volume novel *An Ordinary World* [*Pingfande shijie* 平凡的世界] (both at 1.6%), which thus outpolled *Fortress Besieged* (at 1.1%), and *A Dream of Red Mansions* (at 1.0%) as well as Lu Xun's 魯迅 works (at 0.6%) in the competition for influence on contemporary Chinese readers (Kang Xiaoguang et al. 53-54).

Below is an overview of the preferences and dislikes of the Beijing readership in the two decades since 1978, according to the findings of Kang Xiaoguang and his co-authors:

Figure 1: Readers' top-ten ranking of the most influential books to date

Title	Listed by % of interviewees
<i>A Dream of Red Mansions</i> 紅樓夢	17.7
<i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i> 三國演義	13.9
<i>How the Steel Was Tempered</i> 鋼鐵是怎樣煉成的	13.0
<i>Selected Works of Mao Zedong</i> 毛澤東選集	9.6
<i>Water Margin</i> 水滸傳	7.1
<i>An Ordinary World</i> 平凡的世界	4.8
<i>Jane Eyre</i> 簡愛	3.6
<i>Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping</i> 鄧小平文選	3.5
<i>Fortress Besieged</i> 圍城	3.3
<i>Marxist Philosophy</i> 馬克思主義哲學	3.0
<i>Song of Youth</i> 青春之歌	3.0
<i>Journey to the West</i> 西遊記	3.0

Source: Kang Xiaoguang et al. 58-59.

It is worth noting the fact that modern Chinese literary works

appear towards the bottom of this top-ten list of books that have exerted the most influence on contemporary Chinese readers. In contrast, leading classics of premodern Chinese vernacular fiction such as *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Water Margin* surface near the top of the list, along with the modern Russian novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*.

Figure 2: Readers' list of the four books they detest the most

Title	Listed by % of interviewees
<i>The Abandoned Capital</i> 廢都	4.3
<i>A Dream of Red Mansions</i> 紅樓夢	0.8
<i>China Can Say "No"</i> 中國可以說《不》	0.6
<i>The Ugly Chinese</i> 醜陋的中國人	0.5

Source: Kang Xiaoguang et al. 60.

The survey indicates that PRC readers' two "most detested" [*zui fan'gande* 最反感的] books since 1978 are situated at opposite ends of the spectrum of famous Chinese novels with a strong love interest or erotic theme. At the cynical or sensationalist end of this spectrum may be found Jia Pingwa's 賈平凹 best-selling 1993 novel of urban sexual depravity, *The Abandoned Capital* [*Fei du* 廢都], which was all the rage among a large segment of the readership upon its publication, even though it received mostly negative reviews. In contrast, the mid-Qing novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* is found at the opposite end of the spectrum, in which the more delicate and idealistic aspects of romantic love are highlighted; although this masterpiece has arguably enthralled more readers and attracted more critical study than any other Chinese novel, its influence on PRC readers has declined significantly since 1978. The other two most despised titles may be considered two polar opposites among the many works of contemporary Chinese national "soul-searching" literature. At the end of the spectrum that extols PRC achievements and downgrades or rebukes its rivals (especially the U.S. and some other Western nations) is *China Can Say "No"* [*Zhongguo keyi shuo "bu"* 中國可以說“不”] (1996) by Song Qiang 宋強 et al., which seeks to restore pride in the main-

land Chinese government's present-day role in international politics. On the other end of the spectrum, consisting of works that are strongly self-critical in cultural or national terms, is the Taiwan essayist Bo Yang's 柏楊 *The Ugly Chinese* [*Choulou de Zhongguoren* 醜陋的中國人] (1985), which attempts to unravel the cultural roots of the alleged failure of China's struggle for modernity and civility.

Figure 3: Readers' top-ten list of the writers they most detest

Author	Listed by % of interviewees
Wang Shuo 王朔	8.5
Qiongyao 瓊瑤	7.5
Jia Pingwa 賈平凹	6.8
Ke Yunlu 柯雲路	5.0
Sanmao 三毛	1.3
Mo Yan 莫言	0.8
Xi Juan 席娟	0.6
Liu Xinwu 劉心武	0.5
Liang Xiaosheng 梁曉聲	0.5
Wang Xiaobo 王小波	0.5
Lu Xun 魯迅	0.4
Yao Xueyin 姚雪垠	0.4
Jin Yong 金庸	0.4
Guo Moruo 郭沫若	0.3
Cen Kailun 岑凱倫	0.3

Source: Kang Xiaoguang et al. 64.

Remarkably, every one of the authors featured on the readers' list of the "most detested" writers falls into the category of modern Chinese literature. Furthermore, most of these detested writers are emblematic of fiction with a high entertainment value—four are best-selling writers of *yanqing xiaoshuo* (namely Qiongyao, Sanmao, Xi Juan, and Cen Kailun). The findings reported in Figure 3 may not be particularly representative, however, as over 55% of the interviewees

refused to answer this question (for reasons not discussed in the study). Since there is an unusually low appearance of writers with overt political affiliations, it is likely that this question was perceived to be politically sensitive. As Figure 4 and Figure 5 below indicate, several of these detested authors also appear on the lists of the “greatest” [*zui weida* 最偉大] and the “best” [*zui haode* 最好的] writers.

Figure 4: Readers’ top-ten list of the greatest Chinese writers

Authors	Listed by % of interviewees
Lu Xun 魯迅	55.9
Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹	15.3
Lao She 老舍	4.0
Mao Zedong 毛澤東	2.5
Ba Jin 巴金	2.4
Sima Qian 司馬遷	2.2
Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中	1.9
Mao Dun 茅盾	1.4
Cao Yu 曹禺	1.1
Confucius 孔子	1.0

Source: Kang Xiaoguang et al. 61.

Figure 5: Readers’ top-ten list of the best modern Chinese writers

Authors	Listed by % of interviewees
Lu Xun 魯迅	15.4
Jin Yong 金庸	8.2
Jia Pingwa 賈平凹	6.6
Ba Jin 巴金	6.4
Lao She 老舍	5.1
Wang Meng 王蒙	4.0
Liang Xiaosheng 梁曉聲	3.7
Lu Yao 路遙	3.4
Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨	3.1
Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書	3.1
Wang Shuo 王朔	2.7

Source: Kang Xiaoguang et al. 63.

An interesting contrast emerges when comparing Figure 4 and

Figure 5: in the case of Lu Xun, for example, it is found that he is considered the “greatest” by 55.9% of interviewees, but among the “best” writers by only 15.4% of the interviewees. In fact, there is much more consensus among readers on who is a “great” [*weida* 偉大] than who is a “good” [*hao* 好] writer. Judging from Figure 4, to be a great Chinese writer, one must not only be dead, but also clearly associated with a political agenda or marked by an official (political) evaluation. Who is considered among the “best” of modern Chinese writers would seem to be a more individual judgment of quality, and there is more breadth in the readers’ nominations. Yet the writers considered among the best in modern Chinese literature generally represent work with a high entertainment value. According to Figure 5, the entertainment fiction preferred by contemporary readers is characterized by a relatively intellectualized or subtle humor represented by the wit of Lu Xun, Jin Yong, Wang Meng 王蒙, and Lao She 老舍—as opposed to what a good many readers detest as entertainment fiction that is earnestly sentimental and simple-minded (in the case of *yanqing xiaoshuo* writers), or as mere burlesque or flip-pantly satirical entertainment fiction (in the cases of Wang Shuo 王朔 and Wang Xiaobo 王小波). Moreover, many of the most detested writers have been or still are at the source of a national literary “craze” [*re* 熱], some of which have focused strongly on the writers’ personalities and have taken their name directly from the writers themselves (Wang Shuo *re*, Qiongyao *re*, Sanmao *re*) as opposed to their works (for example, *wuxia xiaoshuo re* 武俠小說熱). Indeed, the hype around certain contemporary writers is so intense that one can validly question whether the qualities that readers admire or detest in a given writer are more personal than literary in nature.

The Significance of the Chinese Readership

In a somewhat ill-phrased diplomatic gesture, Kang Xiaoguang and his three co-authors conclude their presentation of the preferences of the Beijing readership by stating: “In our opinion, writers are fortunate whether they are chosen as the ‘greatest’ writers or as the

‘most detested’ writers, because at least the readers remember them. In fact, the really miserable ones are those writers whom the readers have forgotten, or those who hardly register with readers” (Kang Xiaoguang et al., 65). Among the “miserable” writers who thus apparently mean nothing or close to nothing to the vast majority of contemporary Chinese readers are a surprisingly large grab-bag of names that will sound familiar to most Western undergraduates who have sat through a semester of modern Chinese literature: for example, the “avant-garde” writers Yu Hua 余華, Can Xue 殘雪, and Ge Fei 格非, along with the “sent-down youth” writer Wang Anyi 王安憶, as well as the “roots-seeking” writers Han Shaogong 韓少功 and A Cheng 阿成. Although much acclaimed by many Western and Chinese academic researchers, the names of these writers do not appear even once in the presentation of the findings from the reader survey. Other much-studied authors Mo Yan 莫言, Zhang Xianliang 張賢亮, Zhang Kangkang 張抗抗 and Su Tong 蘇童 have the “good luck” to appear on the list of most detested writers, but even so most of them appear “alarmingly” near the bottom, and are not featured on the list of the best writers, as most of the other detested writers are. Therefore, it would seem that these writers and other literary favorites of the academy fail to significantly stir the minds of contemporary readers within their own literary culture.

The discrepancy between what transpires in a given literary culture in reality and what is studied in the academy is of course not a problem restricted to the field of modern Chinese literature. Just as students of modern American literature seldom do research on any of the writings of Danielle Steel, students of modern Chinese literature rarely study anything written by Qiongyao.⁸ This is as it should be, since the point of departure is to expose students to as broad a scope of modern Chinese literature as possible. Yet there is something fundamentally wrong when popular literature gets slighted in the academy to the extent that the vast majority of contemporary Chinese writers who are granted academic attention can be shown to exert no significant influence on readers in their own literary culture, and may even be assumed to maintain their claim to fame through their status

in the Western academy and sales to Western readers in translation.⁹ This is not to argue that it is wrong to study the interesting cultural and literary phenomena that these writers represent; of course it is not. But if the point for scholars of modern Chinese literature is to communicate a perspective on the state of modern Chinese literature that is representative of what transpires in modern Chinese literary culture, and not just to promote that literature which is most easily approached from more or less fashionable “postist” positions or idiosyncratic angles, then the field as a whole needs to reconsider its lack of interest in and engagement with popular literature.

The tendency to disregard popular literature, or to dismiss it as “commercial” or “the other” of serious literature is widespread in the field of modern Chinese literature, and is not merely a result of a predilection for postmodern theory.¹⁰ However, regardless of what our professional affiliations may be, surely we would be deluding ourselves if we maintained that only those among the most popularly read Chinese writers are vying (or yearning) for the attention of the Chinese readership. The influence of the contemporary Chinese readership permeates the literary scene in mainland China, and has a profound impact on the actions of all Chinese writers, publishers and book traders. Among those writers who are blatantly honest about their dependency on readers are two best-selling but absolutely most detested authors in contemporary China, namely pop-punk writer Wang Shuo and pop-romance writer Qiongyao (who otherwise would be hard pressed to find anything in common). Said Wang Shuo about his relationship to his readers:

Some of my works are aimed at a specific group of people. This was not my intention when I wrote “Air Hostess” [*Kongzhong xiaojie* 空中小姐 (1984)] or “Surfacing on the Ocean” [*Fuchu haimian* 浮出海面 (1986)], but these two works simply happened to appeal to those pure-hearted young men and women. Works like “The Operators” [*Wanzhu* 頑主 (1987)] are aimed at urban youths, mostly male, with taste similar to my own. Then I wrote

gain popularity with Chinese readers, and simultaneously claim for himself part of the flourishing market for books in today's China. After all, a sell-out of books does not imply a sell-out of literary or intellectual values; and readers of popular literature do not blindly buy or merely consume literary meaning. The findings of *Zhongguoren dushu toushi* clearly show that contemporary consumers of popular literature can, and do, think for themselves, and this makes for fascinating research into the world of Chinese popular literature.

NOTES

I would like to thank Perry Link and Martin Heijdra of Princeton University, as well as Maczak Tamas for their support in the course of preparing this article.

¹ All books are sold at a discount in the Beijing Wholesale Book Market, no matter whether the buyer is an individual reader or a private or state-run enterprise [*getihu* 個體戶 or *danwei* 單位]. For example, in August 1999 mainland avant-garde writer Yu Hua's series '99 *Yu Hua xiaoshuo xin zhanshi* '99 余華小說新展示 (February 1999), and Taiwanese pop-romance writer Qiongyao's complete works *Qiongyao quanji* 瓊瑤全集 (April 1999), as well as Hong Kong pop-romance writer Cen Kailun's complete works *Cen Kailun zuopinji* 岑凱倫作品集 (December 1997) all sold for only 60% of the retail price. The price of books at Beijing Wholesale Book Market thus compares favorably with pirated [*daoban* 盜版] books, which are readily available around Beijing, but which are often marred by errors in typesetting or printing.

² An impressive number of earlier Chinese and foreign best-sellers as well as hard-to-find books were reprinted in late 1998 and the first half of 1999. For example, that period saw Renmin wénxue chubanshe reprint some important collections of "misty" poetry of the 1980s, such as writings by Gu Cheng 顧城, Haizi 海子, and Xi Chuan 西川. Best-selling foreign works from the 1970s and 1980s, such as E.L. Voynich's *The Gadfly* 牛蠱 and N. Ostrovsky's *How The Steel Was Tempered* were re-released last year by various Chinese

publishing houses. As a new feature, these reprinted books often sport intriguing and “cool” cover designs. The large availability of books during 1998-99 puzzled Li Jing 李菁, a frequent browser at Beijing Wholesale Book Market: “I just don’t get it: why are they putting out so many books now, at a time when people have much less money in their pockets than previously?” (Beijing, 19 August 1999).

³ Following the increased interest in the concept of “pure literature” [*chun wenxue* 純文學] by which is generally meant “elite” or avant-garde literature, some scholars have come to regard the importance of the wider socio-cultural, economical and political context for the development of contemporary Chinese literature as minimal. See for example Henry Y.H. Zhao, “Introduction: The New Waves in Recent Chinese Fiction” in Henry Y.H. Zhao (ed.). *The Lost Boat. Avant-garde Fiction from China*. London: Wellsweep Press, 1993, 9-18; and Wang Jing’s introduction to Wang Jing (ed.). *Avant-garde Fiction from China: An Anthology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

⁴ No explanation is offered for this unusual measure. Another somewhat misleading factor which may likewise make “Chinese people” in general appear more interested in literature than is probably the case is the fact that although the data from the study were collected in Beijing, the cultural capital of the PRC, they form the core of a book entitled *Zhongguoren dushu tousi*. With these caveats in mind, the book is nevertheless highly valuable for its rare view to the changes and continuities in the mainland Chinese readership after Mao.

⁵ Among the few previous Western reader surveys from China in the post-Mao era the following two stand out: Perry Link (1985) and Edward M. Gunn (1985). Link’s survey drew upon both library records and in-depth interviews with urban readers. Although the scope of the study was not large, the study achieved valuable results within its given limitations. Gunn’s survey was administered to a group of 28 émigrés from mainland China, and failed to render conclusive or meaningful results, partly due to its limited scope and partly due to its flawed methodology. Surveys of Chinese readers during the 1980s

generally targeted young (*shaonian* 少年 and *qingnian* 青年) individuals, typically focusing on either middle and high school students or university students, and tended to be connected with government-sponsored investigations into the changing norms and values of young people in the post-Mao era. For an example of such studies, see Huang Ruixu 黃瑞旭, "Daxuesheng yuedu wenxue zuopin xianzhuang qianxi—Beijing daxue, Beijing shifan daxue, Beijing gongye xueyuan de diaocha" 大學生閱讀文學作品現狀淺析—北京大學, 北京師範大學, 北京工業學院的調查 in *Dangdai wenyi sichao* 當代文藝思潮 3 (1983), 13; and Yang Yiyin 楊宜音, "Cong dushu jiegou kan daxuesheng de sixiang jiegou" 從讀書結構看大學生的思想結構, in *Qingnian yanjiu* 青年研究 3 (1983): 33-39.

⁶ This number has presumably been inflated by the fact that results from the questionnaires completed by bookstall and bookstore browsers (bibliophiles?) were combined with those filled out during random house visits. It seems highly unlikely that the average Beijinger would spend close to two hours a day on reading books (excluding the time spent on other reading materials such as newspapers and magazines).

⁷ Not counting the book *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* [*Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 鄧小平文選], which ranks as number four—because such volumes in China have invariably resulted from a collective effort. The top five works in this category were as follows: unspecified books on economics (2.5%); *China Can Say "No"* (2.4%); *Dushu* magazine 讀書雜誌 (2.3%); *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (2.1%); and lastly unspecified books on computing (1.6%) (Kang Xiaoguang et al. 53).

⁸ According to the curricula in modern Chinese literature of four esteemed East Asian departments at American universities in 1998-1999 (which I refrain from identifying here), apart from a few May Fourth writers and rare appearances from the former "rightist" Wang Meng and the pop-punk writer Wang Shuo, undergraduates at these universities do not read any of the best-selling writers mentioned at the top of the quoted readers' top-tens of "most detested" or "best modern Chinese" writers.

⁹ The point argued by Stephen Owen in “What is World Poetry?” in *The New Republic*, 19 November 1990, 28-32, is perhaps more properly applied to the contemporary writers mentioned at the beginning of this section.

¹⁰ Let it suffice to mention here just a few examples of accomplished scholars who have expressed such an attitude. Consult the last chapter in Yi-Tsi Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power and Text: Self-representation and the Peasant “Other” in Modern Chinese Literature*, in which it is lamented that serious literature is being eclipsed by the “empty nihilism” of popular writers such as Wang Shuo; and Zhao Yiheng 趙毅衡: “Xu: xiaoyi xianfeng xiaoshuo” 序: 小議先鋒小說 in Chen Ran 陳染, *Shouwang zai jinzhong* 守望在禁中, in which the prospects of popular writers are simply negated, “I guarantee that in four hundred years time, by 2404 (*sic*), mandarin-ducks-and-butterflies Qiongyao and Jin Yong, or *A Chinese Girl in Manhattan* will not be considered serious literature” (Zhao 1994, 2).

¹¹ Coincidentally, France is the country where Yu Hua’s current literary agent resides.

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