

# The Reading Movement in Shanghai, China in the Late 1950s

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At the end of the 1950s, Shanghai region of China carried out the Lu Xun Medal Reading Campaign and the Red Flag Reading Campaign one after another, aiming to guide young people to read good books and cultivate a positive interest in life through reading, which is a gentle and constant form of ideological education. Based on the historical materials collected by Shanghai Archives, the author investigated the background, development, main links, and effects of the reading movement. The research shows that the reading movement has promoted young people's political awareness, broadened their knowledge horizons, and promoted the formation of a good social atmosphere.

*Keywords:* Lu Xun Medal Reading Campaign, Red Flag Reading Campaign, youth, ideological education

## Introduction

As a spiritual nourishment, books often have a subtle impact on readers. Youth, with a strong desire for knowledge, are always the largest readership of books, eager to learn various knowledge and understand the reasons behind them. Young people are the driving force of society and have their unique social status. Therefore, the education of young people is related to the future and lifeline of the motherland, and the question of what books and how young people read is crucial. Looking back to history, the reading movement carried out in Shanghai, China, in the late 1950s was a successful case of the CPC and the government leading the ideological construction of young people through reading, which is a way of cultural education.

## The Motivation for Launching the Reading Movement

As a cultural and educational activity facing the broad masses of the whole society, the reading movement was not carried out under the drive of accidental factors, but under the leadership of the Party Committee of the CPC in Shanghai, the trade union, the Communist Youth League, and other organizations made a comprehensive analysis on the basis of investigating the amateur life and reading conditions of young people at that time.

Youth's leisure life needs to be regulated. In the second half of the 1950s, while the majority of young people invested in the front line of production and construction, there were also some problems that could not be ignored, which attracted the high attention of the CPC and the government. A survey by the Shanghai Trade Union summarized the negative tendencies among some young people at that time: firstly, corruption and corruption in their daily lives, some young people gambling and engaging in fraudulent activities after work; the second is work anxiety, with some young workers eager to improve their skills and even unwilling to learn; thirdly, there is a lack of unity among employees; fourthly, there is a lack of legitimate entertainment life. At the same time, a large number of new employees have been introduced into factories. However, some young workers

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have lax labor discipline which makes them uneasy about their work. Regarding this phenomenon, Li Qitao, who was then the Secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League, once made a judgment that

some young people have insufficient understanding and have a high standard of living that is detached from reality. After their lives have improved, the phenomenon of not being able to properly arrange their lives, dominate the economy, indulge in extravagance, and be good at extravagance has increased. (Li, 1956)

Serious extravagance and waste have emerged in youth life, and a few young people have even experienced moral corruption such as corruption, theft, and corruption.

The reading tendencies of young people need to be guided. The unhealthy leisure life of young people is directly reflected in their reading tendencies. Although relevant government departments have repeatedly rectified the book market, young people still have a tendency to underestimate and downplay politics in their reading. According to a survey report by the Shanghai Trade Union and the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League (1958),

At that time, more than 90% of the books read by young people were literary and artistic books, and more than 50% of the literary and artistic books were Chinese and foreign classical literature and old sayings, while political reading only accounted for a few tenths of a percent.

For example, in the first semester of 1957, Huangpu District 67th Middle School had 8,684 people borrowing books from the school library alone, with an average of four books borrowed per person. However, among the borrowed books, more than 6,000 were Chinese and foreign classical novels, while only 18 borrowed books on politics and youth cultivation (Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League, 1958). The borrowing situation of the factory is similar, with less than 20% of the political and scientific and technological reading materials lent by Guomian No. 9 Factory in 1957. At the same time, the relevant departments lack guidance on reading, and the library has not played its role in serving readers. For example, workers from the 521 factory have reported that the library is not managed, books and magazines are littered by children, the club reading room has no newspaper, and the library of the Fifth Printing and Dyeing Factory is open for two hours a day and not on Sundays (Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions, 1956b).

The above cases and various investigation results have attracted the attention of the youth league organization and various aspects of society. Due to their simple thinking and lack of life experience, young people often consciously or unconsciously suffer from the infringement of bad ideas. It is necessary to further strengthen the ideological education of young people and help them learn, read, and understand more. Conducting in-depth and meticulous ideological education on what young people are thinking and caring about, starting from reading and helping them form a healthy leisure life, is undoubtedly the most effective path choice.

### **Overview of the Reading Movement**

In March 1958, the Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions, Communist Youth League, Student Union, and Youth Federation jointly issued the “Joint Decision on Holding the 1958” Lu Xun Medal Reading Movement, which pointed out that

all grassroots factory and shop employees, as well as young people from universities, middle schools, rural areas, government agencies, and regional counties with a level of education equivalent to junior high school or above, can

voluntarily register. After reading the prescribed books and achieving excellent results in the evaluation, the Lu Xun Medal will be awarded. (Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League, 1958)

After the decision was made, it immediately received a positive response from a large number of young people, and by August, more than 400,000 people had been attracted to participate in the first and second five months. Given the continued demands of many workers and young people to participate at that time, the reading movement, originally scheduled to end in November of that year, was “planned to be postponed until January of next year”. The Lu Xun Medal Reading Movement enabled the workers and young people who participated in the reading movement to read an average of five or more books, which stimulates the learning enthusiasm of the whole society, especially young people.

After participating in the Lu Xun Medal Reading Movement, the reading atmosphere of the masses has significantly improved and received many good results. On this basis, the four departments issued a joint decision on carrying out the “Red Flag Reading Movement” on May 4, 1959. With the mass foundation of the Lu Xun Medal Reading Movement and the decision to launch the Red Flag Reading Movement, a nationwide reading frenzy emerged. By December 1959, the total number of workers participating in the Red Flag Reading Movement in the city reached 287,809 (The Propaganda Department of the Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions, 1960). About 80% of students in schools also sign up to participate (Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions and Shanghai Committee of the Communist Youth League, 1959).

During the two years from 1958 to 1959, the number of participants in the reading movement gradually increased, and the scale grew year by year. For example, the number of people participating in the reading movement at the National Cotton Factory increased from 1,093 to over 6,000, and the number of books lent increased from 10,258 in 1957 to 78,324 in 1959 (Shanghai Guomian Ninth Factory Committee of the Communist Youth League, 1960). The development of the reading movement has sparked a nationwide reading frenzy.

### **The Main Characteristics of the Reading Movement**

The reading campaign was launched under the leadership of the CPC by the trade union and the Communist Youth League and other organizations. Its main links include the selection and recommendation of reading bibliographies, strengthening leadership and guidance in the process of carrying out the campaign, and summarizing the work through evaluation and award in the later period of the campaign to consolidate the achievements of the campaign.

The Reading Movement Guidance Committee attaches great importance to recommending reading materials. The recommended books for the 1958 Lu Xun Medal Reading Movement and the 1959 Red Flag Reading Movement were 42 and 95, respectively. The number of recommended books in 1959 was more than twice that of the previous year, fully demonstrating that the enthusiasm of the masses to participate in the reading movement has significantly increased. Among the recommended books, political and ideological cultivation books are mainly Mao Zedong’s works. In response to the characteristic of young people’s love for reading novels at that time, in addition to political and ideological cultivation, the recommended book list also focuses on recommending some excellent revolutionary literary and artistic works, such as *Lovely China*, *Forest Sea and Snow Plain*, etc.; natural science books cover multiple fields such as astronomy, mathematics, physics, and chemistry, such as *Fun Astronomy* and the *Utilization of Chemical Knowledge*. These recommended books were all proposed after careful analysis and scientific exploration of the actual situation of the audience by

organizations such as the labor union, youth league committee, writers' association, and science association, and were finally determined after discussion by the Shanghai Reading Movement Guidance Committee and approval by the Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department, fully demonstrating that the reading movement has received high attention from the Party and government.

Organizations strengthen their leadership over the reading movement. The reading movement is led and organized by the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China. The trade union, Communist Youth League, Youth League, and student union work together to ensure the smooth progress of the reading movement. At the beginning of the movement, the Shanghai Reading Movement Guidance Committee was established, and various district and grassroots party committees also established corresponding guidance institutions to carry out work under the unified leadership of party committees at all levels. After the masses were mobilized, according to their different reading interests and levels, and based on the principle of voluntary participation, various reading groups for political theory, science and technology, and literature and art were organized to strengthen guidance on reading. By combining self-study with organized learning, the reading movement can be carried out more deeply and sustainably.

Organizations at all levels actively carry out coaching activities. Under the leadership of the Reading Movement Guidance Committee, cultural palaces, clubs, and libraries at all levels in Shanghai fully cooperate with the reading movement to carry out various tutoring activities, such as holding a reading movement tutoring day, organizing reading report meetings, reading tutoring lectures, reading experience exchange meetings, accident meetings, book promotion and cultural evening parties, and special book exhibitions, helping the public have a deeper and more thorough understanding of the content in the book, and better consolidate the gains of learning. At the same time, it also fully mobilizes active reading elements among the masses and adopts the method of guiding the masses to promote and publicize, making the content of the reading movement more diverse and constantly attracting more people to participate.

Organizations at all levels promote the development of the reading movement through evaluation and award work. The Decision on Carrying out the Reading Movement states that after reading the prescribed books and achieving excellent results through evaluation, they will be awarded the "Lu Xun Medal" and "Red Flag Reading Movement Medal". Grassroots units that organize the masses to achieve good reading results and individuals who actively participate in the reading movement can receive a "Red Flag Reading Movement Certificate". The purpose of evaluation and award is to set a benchmark and set a good example, promoting the further development of the reading movement. Therefore, in the process of conducting evaluation work, an important link is to mobilize the masses to summarize their achievements and experiences, and use various forms such as wall posters, essays, exhibitions, and discussions to widely promote the significance and achievements of the reading movement, in order to inspire the masses to learn enthusiasm, and to carry out the Red Flag Reading Movement more widely and effectively.

### **The Effectiveness of the Reading Movement**

The development of the reading movement has deeply rooted the learning atmosphere of "good reading, good reading, good reading" in people's hearts, and reading has become an indispensable and important part of the life of young people in the city, producing far-reaching effects, mainly in the following two points.

It has enhanced the enthusiasm of young people to learn and promoted the formation of a good social atmosphere of reading and learning. The development of the reading movement catered to the needs of the youth

of the times. In that era of material and cultural entertainment facilities being scarce, the leisure life of young people was obviously dull. The Reading Movement Guidance Committee greatly enhanced their enthusiasm for reading and learning, and adding spiritual pleasure to their leisure life. The dull and uninteresting leisure life can easily lead to corruption and even criminal activities among young people. However, through reading activities, especially competitions and awards, it has increased the motivation and fun of learning for young people, enriching their spiritual world.

At the same time, it has strengthened the atmosphere for young people to care about and learn politics. Through the reading movement, the tendency of young people to ignore politics and downplay politics has significantly improved. In 1959, among the books lent by the National Cotton Factory Library, the proportion of political and theoretical books increased by more than five times, from 5% in 1957 to 43.9% (Shanghai Guomian Ninth Factory Committee of the Communist Youth League, 1960). In the reading activity of political theory, the main content of learning is Mao Zedong's works and the major policies of the Party. Over the past two years, based on the extensive reading movement, especially the Red Flag Reading Movement, which focused on studying Mao Zedong's works, a large number of Mao Zedong's study groups were established. Through a series of political studies, the proletarian consciousness of young people has been significantly enhanced, making their political stance more firm.

### Conclusion

The reading movement launched in the late 1950s, as a mass self-education movement; although more than 60 years have passed, attaching importance to the education of young people is an eternal issue. Some methods and methods of the Lu Xun Medal Reading Movement and the Red Flag Reading Movement can provide useful experience for current youth education. At present, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era. On the journey of comprehensively building a socialist modernized strong country, young people should shoulder their mission, study hard, and strive to study hard, forging themselves into pioneers of the times who can shoulder heavy responsibilities.

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