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## Operational Mechanisms and Activity Patterns of Domestic Reading Clubs: An Exploratory Analysis Based on Questionnaire Surveys and In-Depth Interviews of 135 Reading Clubs Nationwide (Postprint)

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study describes the organizational landscape, specific activity modalities, and reading methods of various types of reading clubs in China, analyzes the practical problems and crux issues in their operation, and provides directions and recommendations for the operational development of reading clubs. [Method/Process] Using social surveys and in-depth interviews as methods, quantitative data and first-hand evidence from the actual operation of reading clubs in China were obtained. [Results/Conclusion] The study finds that there exist crux issues in the operation of reading clubs, including unclear development positioning, lack of entry mechanisms for membership thresholds, and absence of measures for reading effectiveness, and accordingly proposes targeted recommendations such as utilizing technical means to segment reading behaviors, establishing effective membership entry and exit mechanisms, and combining exit surveys to measure the activity effectiveness of reading clubs.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

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#### Abstract

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clubs in China, analyzes practical problems and cruxes in their operation, and provides directions and recommendations for their development. **[Method/Process]** Through social surveys and in-depth interviews, quantitative data and first-hand evidence regarding the actual operation of reading clubs in China were obtained. **[Result/Conclusion]** The study finds that reading clubs face several cruxes in operation, including unclear development orientation, lack of entry mechanisms for personnel, and absence of reading effect measurement. Targeted recommendations are proposed, such as using technical means to segment reading behaviors, establishing effective personnel entry and exit mechanisms, and measuring activity effects through exit surveys.

**Keywords:** reading club; operating mechanism; activity model; reading orientation; reading effect

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## 1 Research Background and Questions

Since the beginning of this century, with continuous government advocacy for nationwide reading and the growing demands of the public, various types of reading clubs have sprung up across China. People often gather in groups of three to five or dozens, united by similar reading interests, goals, or shared love for reading, to read together and mutually encourage one another.

Previous research on reading clubs has primarily focused on three levels: Categorizing reading clubs by type and conducting classified studies on operational experiences and potential problems. For example, Liang Zhimin used questionnaire surveys to study the status, problems, and development strategies of public library-led reading clubs in China [1]; Huang Hui et al. identified development cruxes and solutions for university reading clubs based on experiences from other countries and regions [2]. Tracing the definitional and historical development of reading clubs both domestically and internationally. For instance, Xiang Jianqin systematically reviewed literature, summarized four perspectives on the modern concept of reading clubs, and analyzed their evolution [3]. Examining foreign or Hong Kong and Taiwan reading clubs to explore advanced experiences or conduct case studies. For example, Chen Yuxing quantitatively analyzed reading club programs at the Toronto Public Library in Canada to extract beneficial lessons [4]; Hou Junjie introduced development experiences from Hong Kong through field observations and documentary analysis from both organizer and participant perspectives [5].

This study adopts a more micro-level perspective to describe the organizational features, specific activity methods, and reading approaches of various reading clubs in China, analyze practical problems and cruxes in their operation, and thereby provide a fundamental basis for clarifying development pathways.

## 2 Research Methods

### 2.1 Sample Frame and Sampling Channels

From July to November 2018, the authors conducted a small-scale social survey of reading club organizations nationwide using random sampling. The survey was administered via questionnaires, with the sampling frame primarily drawn from two sources: first, a reading club contact database established by the People's Publishing House Reading Club through years of reading promotion and alliance training activities, from which valid questionnaires were obtained through random telephone surveys; second, electronic questionnaires distributed in WeChat groups for the second to fourth Reading Club Development Conferences, where group administrators or staff from reading clubs responded randomly, with responses collected directly into the questionnaire sample database.

### 2.2 Data Sources and Distribution

A total of 135 valid questionnaires were collected through both telephone and electronic channels, covering various reading club organizations in 16 provinces and municipalities nationwide. Since this small-scale survey employed random sampling rather than quota sampling based on the overall number of reading clubs in each province, the percentages do not represent the approximate proportion of reading clubs in each province relative to the national total, but only show the geographical distribution of reading club organizations within the two sampling frames used in this survey.

### 2.3 In-Depth Interviews

The authors and team members have been following reading club activities and various seminars and training sessions nationwide since 2015, conducting interviews with over 50 reading club leaders or founders. Interview outlines focused on club establishment, positioning, reading scope and activities, member groups, funding and resources, and difficulties and problems. Relevant interview findings are also incorporated in this paper.

## 3 Operational Profile of Reading Clubs

### 3.1 Establishment Time

Among the 135 surveyed reading clubs, 41.48% were established in 2015-2016, and 36.3% were established in 2010-2014, meaning nearly 80% of reading clubs were founded after 2010. Additionally, 13.33% were established after 2017, while 8.89% have a longer history, having been founded before 2010.

With the advocacy and promotion of nationwide reading, more reading club groups have emerged since 2014, becoming fresh and active forces in fostering reading culture across society. However, we must also pay attention to

potential problems reflected in the survey data, particularly the sustainable development of civil society reading clubs. During the research process, we found that many civil reading clubs were active around 2010, organizing activities through posts on Douban groups and Baidu Tieba. When we further searched for their recent activities, records were difficult to find. Some clubs ceased operations after changing organizers, while others stopped due to limited time and energy of founders who abandoned the clubs. When conducting telephone surveys based on the People's Publishing House Reading Club's contact list, the research team often received responses such as "no longer operating," "person in charge changed," or "unclear." Some respondents explained that they had temporarily established a reading club to organize activities but subsequently stopped due to cumbersome operational matters and because it was not their main business.

### 3.2 Team Profile

**3.2.1 Team Size** Among the survey respondents, 61.48% of reading clubs have a team size of "under 10 people"; 17.04% have a team size of "10-30 people"; 8.15% have a team size of "31-50 people"; and 13.33% have a team size of "over 51 people."

Thus, over 60% of reading clubs are run by teams of fewer than 10 people, with some having only 2-3 people handling regular operations, including offline activity venue arrangements, activity design, member recruitment, online publishing of activities, summary of outcomes, and multi-channel dissemination.

Although many reading club operating teams are small, they can achieve clear division of labor and responsibilities in their work scope and specific duties, ensuring operational efficiency. For example, the Lanping Cangjiang Reading Club has established four functional groups: an office, publicity group, activity group, and logistics group, with 3 people in each group (office), assigning detailed work to specific individuals. This approach ensures clear work responsibilities and division of labor on one hand, and on the other hand, fixed personnel guarantees team structure stability and smooth coordination, creating management conditions for the stability and continuity of reading club activities.

**3.2.2 Occupational Status** Among the 135 surveyed reading clubs, in terms of team members' occupational status or identity in engaging in reading club activities, 74.07% of reading clubs have team members who are "more part-time than full-time"; 16.3% have team members who are "more full-time than part-time"; and 9.63% have staff with "equal full-time and part-time" status. The authors randomly inquired about the occupational backgrounds of several reading club founders or leaders, with results shown in . Reading club advocates come from all walks of life and persist in founding and operating reading clubs to the best of their abilities.

Occupational Backgrounds of Reading Club Leaders (Examples)

Reading Club Name	Establishment Time	Founder/Leader	Occupation
Grain Storage Plan Reading Club	November 2015	-	Corporate Employee
Daqing Book Friends Reading Club	May 2012	-	Software Engineer
Cangjiang Reading Club	October 2017	-	-
Olympus Academy	July 2013	-	-
Yanshi Reading Club	February 2011	-	-

Not only are many reading club leaders part-time, but staff members or long-term volunteers serving reading clubs also serve outside their primary occupations. In the view of many respondents, reading clubs themselves are teams or organizations formed spontaneously based on reading interests, with members coming from society, and their development must utilize and draw upon broad social forces.

Reading clubs have always been groups organized spontaneously based on reading interests or individual spiritual needs. In China, reading clubs have relatively diverse attributes. Reading clubs led by administrative or public institutions, primary and secondary schools, universities, and libraries are often a branch or part of the larger organization, receiving varying degrees of support in personnel, finances, and materials. However, a large number of civil reading clubs lack external support and are constrained by shortages of personnel, finances, and materials—key reasons for their weak development and insufficient vitality.

## 4 Activity Patterns of Reading Clubs

### 4.1 Front-End: Online Recruitment and Offline Group Formation

Currently, most reading clubs release activity information and recruit members through online channels, with some clubs using more than one online platform. Therefore, this question was designed as a multiple-choice item, allowing reading clubs to select one or more commonly used online information channels. Among the 135 surveyed clubs, 70.37% frequently use WeChat official accounts for online information release or activity recruitment; 54.07% frequently use WeChat groups; 20.74% frequently use QQ groups; 14.07% frequently use Weibo; 11.11% frequently use their own official websites. Additionally, 8.89% of reading clubs selected other online channels for information release or activity recruitment, including “Douban groups” and “Hudongba APP.”

### 4.2 Activity Process: Four Typical Reading Formats

Based on preliminary research and interviews, we listed four reading formats most commonly used in reading club practice: reading discussion, leading reading, author lectures, and listening to books. In pilot surveys, these four formats were found to broadly cover the operational reality of most reading clubs; cases beyond these four formats in the formal survey were recorded under “other.” Surveyed reading clubs could select one or multiple commonly used formats.

Statistics show that 83.7% of reading clubs have practiced the “reading discussion” format in daily activities; 52.59% have practiced “author lectures”; 53.33% have practiced “leading reader” formats; and 17.78% have practiced “listening to books.” Overall, the “co-reading” format where members jointly participate in reading and discussion is the most popular and commonly practiced. The “other-reading” plus interaction format featuring book authors or “opinion leaders” with expertise in certain fields, works, or topics is also relatively popular, with over half of surveyed clubs having adopted “author lectures” or “leading reader” formats.

**4.2.1 Reading Discussion** Reading discussion, also called “co-reading,” requires every participant in reading club activities to read, speak, or discuss during the activity, with multiple people jointly completing the reading of book content while their cognitions and viewpoints intersect and collide, enabling participants to gain fuller reading experiences through “co-reading.” This format typically requires readers to share insights and viewpoints within a specified time, interspersed with interactive discussions.

For example, Lin Kai, founder of the Hangzhou Bochang Reading Club, mentioned in an interview: “A co-reading salon runs from 13:30 to 17:00—three and a half hours, with only a 10-minute break before continuing discussion. Those who have read the book each share for 5-10 minutes, deciding for themselves how to share. They can outline the book’s 脉络 or main viewpoints, or discuss their views on certain points and extended reflections. Participants share one by one, with brief discussions after each sharing.”

This offline co-reading discussion format is typical and representative, with only slight variations in total time and speaking duration across different clubs. However, this format suits popular, accessible readings with lower difficulty and strong participatory nature. Participants can read, discuss, or summarize chapter by chapter. For more specialized or obscure reading materials, such as philosophical classics or ancient texts, small-group offline intensive reading is more appropriate. Intensive reading can also be participatory but requires timely intervention in discussions and Q&A, even sentence-by-sentence interpretation and analysis.

For online reading clubs, online co-reading is a supplementary format to offline activities, conducted when necessary through the currently popular “online check-in” method for reading discussions.

**4.2.2 Leading Reader Model** Literally, leading reading refers to one person guiding and directing collective reading activities in a group. Compared with co-reading, leading reading has two key characteristics: First, the individual serving as leading reader needs deeper engagement with the reading material or richer experience in reading activities, possessing stronger reading ability or comprehensive reading qualities than others. In co-reading, participants’ reading abilities are generally more balanced. Second, leading reading behavior

typically generates opinion leadership, making the leader easily become an opinion leader in reading club activities. In co-reading activities, individuals have equal opportunities, with on-site control by a moderator, so opinion leaders do not naturally exist.

Precisely because leading reading can 切入 key points and essentials of reading materials, saving time and effort in providing reading suggestions for participants and achieving “twice the result with half the effort” in reading effects, “leading readers” have become valued roles in various reading clubs. Moreover, national-level reading promotion institutions have also developed mechanisms for discovering, training, and rewarding leading readers, cultivating them from social forces to serve as “role models” for reading participants and encouraging them to conduct public reading services in schools, communities, and libraries. For example, in 2018, Dongcheng District in Beijing launched the “Scholarly Dongcheng Family Leading Reader Plan,” which selected over 50 leading readers for systematic training, who then went into various communities to help establish and organize reading clubs.

In the routine operation of reading clubs, leading readers are part of the organizational structure. When leading readers function well, reading clubs’ reading effects can be immediately apparent. At the macro level, leading readers are important forces in national and social reading promotion, bearers of this long-term and arduous task, and thus their roles and functions demonstrate long-term effectiveness and persistence. In fact, beyond some well-known leading individuals who have received public honors, numerous readers and volunteers within reading clubs are quietly engaged in leading or guiding reading work.

A potential problem with the leading reader model is whether other participants’ reading effects are truly enhanced. Leading readers or main speakers possess rich reading experience and preparation, easily forming opinion guidance and becoming opinion leaders in reading activities. Meanwhile, because a leading reader is present, other participants may develop reading inertia, participating with a passive “listening” attitude, which likely results in weaker reading effects than co-reading.

**4.2.3 Author Lectures** This format refers to reading clubs inviting book authors or scholars and experts with insights and speaking authority on certain topics to conduct reading dissemination through special lectures. For organizers, author lectures are a relatively simple format to operate: centered on the author or expert’s lecture, with a moderator interspersed and audience Q&A at the end. Meanwhile, fans of the book or author are natural audiences, making this format also characterized by ease in attracting participants.

The disadvantage of author or expert lecture formats is that general readers or reading club participants have relatively low reading engagement efficiency. In this format, the communication relationship is clear, with authors or experts as communication subjects and audiences as objects. Audiences have few opportu-

nities for active feedback, and their participation level is difficult to control and measure. Even listeners who have never read the book can passively attend the lecture.

**4.2.4 Listening Model** The listening model is a reading format that has gradually become trendy with the emergence of online reading tools and services. Unlike other reading formats, listening requires reading individuals to read through online channels on their own, without requiring special gatherings.

Listening to books fully utilizes users' fragmented time, representing typical accompanying reading where users can engage in other activities while listening. For most reading clubs, listening is a supplement to conventional paper reading or a means to conduct online reading activities. Audio resources for listening are often produced internally by reading club members and shared in the club's public space for member use. For example, the Daqing Book Friends Reading Club releases audio versions alongside members' original works on its WeChat official account; the Wuhan Lingjiaohu Reading Club leader reads book chapters aloud daily in the WeChat group, which members can click to listen to and further discuss questions in the group. Additionally, reading club members can share links to their personal online listening in the group for interested parties.

Listening is an important pathway for online reading clubs to organize online reading activities or conduct check-in reading. In online reading clubs, each member is scattered in various corners of society, not needing to participate in offline collective reading at fixed times, locations, or in fixed ways—only a network link or reading APP is needed to connect them in the same virtual space. In this situation, good online reading services are fundamental to attracting readers and traffic. For example, Fan Deng Reading Club members can read through the club's own APP or the Ximalaya FM channel entrance, accessing not only online text but also audio listening for accompanying reading. Similarly, Tencent's "WeChat Reading," launched based on its massive WeChat user base, also provides listening services for subscribers, meeting users' actual needs for accompanying reading.

### **4.3 Broad Reading Model: "Reading Plus" Perspective on Reading Club Activities**

To enrich the diversity and interest of reading club activities, many clubs have experimented with formats such as recitation, film viewing, calligraphy, painting, seal carving, games, and performances. These activities can combine with participants' personal interests to mobilize their participation enthusiasm. Among surveyed reading clubs, 71.85% have adopted "chapter recitation," making it the most popular activity format beyond paper reading; clubs adopting "object display," "film appreciation," and "calligraphy and painting activities" account for 32.59%, 32.59%, and 31.11% respectively; those adopting "parent-child interaction" account for 29.63%; and those practicing "reading games" and "outdoor

sports” account for 25.19% and 24.44% respectively.

Diversified “Reading Plus” activity formats can enliven reading atmosphere and consolidate popularity, but they also raise a question worthy of discussion and reflection: Under the concept or category of “reading clubs,” what exactly does “reading” refer to? In the narrow sense, reading is knowledge acquisition behavior mediated by paper or electronic book texts. However, for reading clubs targeting children, adolescents, or middle-aged and elderly people with poor eyesight, narrow reading is insufficient and may not achieve good results, necessitating the development of broader reading formats. Can the broad sense of reading or reading encompass the above artistic activity formats? Different contexts yield different answers. In individual reading situations lacking interpersonal interaction, reading naturally returns to its original meaning of book-mediated reading. Collective reading in the form of reading clubs, however, has the conditions and necessity to develop interpersonal interaction, making various artistic activities beneficial to information cognition and knowledge acquisition practical forms of broad reading.

## 5 Cruxes and Challenges in Reading Club Operation

### 5.1 Unclear Development Orientation

Reading clubs are group organizations that need to develop along certain pathways. How should these pathways be planned? Where do they lead? How are the width, length, and breadth of the pathways defined? These questions concern the development orientation and direction of reading clubs. The survey found that reading clubs of all types generally lack reflection on this issue.

**5.1.1 What to Read: Content Orientation Issues** Most reading clubs have not considered content orientation issues when founding. They typically select and determine reading content from the personal perspective of the founder or organizer, informing members to prepare or purchase books and subsequently organizing reading activities. This personal-preference-based selection method results in many reading clubs having broad and scattered content arrangements, leading to a lack of coherence and depth in reading and giving members a superficial impression, which is detrimental to member retention and long-term development.

**5.1.2 Who Reads: Personnel Orientation Issues** The survey found that most reading clubs adopt a “broad call for heroes” approach when recruiting participants, publishing activities to WeChat groups, official accounts, or other online channels to 号召 members and readers to actively participate. While this approach can maximize notification and recruitment, it overlooks a crucial prerequisite: whether members or readers in the groups have consistent reading preferences and abilities, and whether the proposed reading themes or materials fall within their interest range and acceptance capacity. Some reading clubs

fail to hold activities after publishing notifications due to no participation or insufficient numbers, with a key reason being the misalignment between activity content and personnel attributes.

**5.1.3 How to Read: Format Orientation Issues** Analysis shows that reading clubs' choice of organizational forms and reading methods ultimately depends on two factors: Reading content—reading clubs focusing on philosophy often adopt intensive reading, while those focusing on popular readings commonly use co-reading. Reading club type and reader characteristics—public library-led reading clubs often adopt lecture formats, with recruited readers generally being random and broadly stratified, focusing on listening rather than reading; individually-led civil reading clubs less frequently adopt lectures and leading reading formats due to difficulty in securing public resources, network resources, and financial support. The survey found that many reading clubs also exhibit blindness and randomness in selecting reading methods and organizational forms, failing to make reasonable determinations based on their own reading content, resource conditions, and reader characteristics.

## **5.2 Lack of Entry Mechanisms for Personnel Thresholds**

Reading clubs are interest-based organizations that gather originally unrelated social individuals and organizations. Strictly speaking, reading clubs need to control, screen, and segment individuals entering the organization around reading itself, establishing binding entry mechanisms to ensure internal purity and goal consistency. However, the survey found that all types of reading clubs lack such effective entry mechanisms. For example, some clubs set no threshold whatsoever—as long as outsiders express willingness to join, the group owner or leader adds them to the WeChat group, making them a member. This results in many reading clubs' online and offline groups becoming bloated and oversized, even exceeding several thousand people. Some clubs take pride in their large membership numbers, yet in reality, they have not considered practical issues such as: How much does the club know about its members? Will large numbers create management obstacles and conflicts?

## **5.3 Lack of Measurement Standards for Reading Effects**

At the operational level, reading clubs themselves mostly use oral inquiries and private conversations to gauge actual effects. For example, Li Hangwei, leader of the Dadi Reading Club, mentioned in interviews that she conducts on-site observations during each activity, watching participants' expressions and reactions and staff performance and responses. Reading club staff also privately converse with readers to understand their feelings and feedback. While this approach helps improve activities, oral inquiries and private conversations may not elicit completely honest thoughts from readers or members and cannot accommodate the opinions of the majority on a large scale.

## 6 Recommendations for Promoting Reading Club Development

### 6.1 Using Technical Means to Segment Reading Behaviors

To address unclear development orientation, some reading clubs are currently attempting to use technical means to screen and segment reading content, formats, and groups to clarify their development orientation. For example, Feimang Reading Club officially launched an intelligent book selection APP called “Feimang Study” in December 2016. After two years of operation, as of July 2018, the APP’s database had entered 6 million book entries. Meanwhile, through several artificial intelligence algorithm models, it can quickly and accurately screen book lists and push book options that meet users’ needs and preferences. The practice of Feimang Reading Club provides inspiration: various reading clubs can widely utilize the precision and convenience of big data and AI algorithmic push to segment internal readers’ preferences and reading material needs. In this process, the orientation of reading clubs regarding content, groups, and formats will gradually be adjusted and clarified.

### 6.2 Establishing Effective Personnel Entry and Exit Mechanisms

When reading clubs have established a certain reader base, they should raise membership thresholds from both objective and subjective levels. At the objective level, online questionnaires or additional fill-in items can be used to exclude users with weak reading willingness or indifferent attitudes toward joining. At the subjective level, reading club leaders or operators can conduct subjective screening based on member registration information, which also helps reading clubs further determine reading scope, content, and activity segmentation.

Simultaneously, reading clubs need to establish effective supervision and exit mechanisms to ensure a pure, equal, and harmonious reading environment. Online groups can assign administrators or duty personnel to supervise and manage online speech. If someone pushes reading-unrelated information online, measures such as one reminder, two warnings, and three removals can be adopted to purify the information dissemination environment in various online groups. Additionally, reading club leaders must control member situations, interpersonal relationships, and reading order overall. Every participant should also bear joint supervision responsibilities and obligations and can use democratic voting to decide on the removal of order violators.

### 6.3 Measuring Reading Club Activity Effects Through Exit Surveys

Exit surveys are commonly used tools and methods in foreign political elections to measure voter attitudes. Survey agencies dispatch personnel to distribute questionnaires to every voter leaving polling stations to statistically analyze and predict voting results. Exit survey tools can be adapted and applied to evaluate reading club activity effects. For example, reading club staff can pre-

pare an electronic questionnaire in advance and distribute it to online groups when activities are nearing completion, asking each participant to complete it. This can provide immediate feedback on activity effects with high universality, reflecting overall attitudes. Reading clubs can further study the feedback results from exit surveys after activities, examining deficiencies to seek improvement.

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