

Standardization, Refinement, and Anti-Enlightenment: Reflections on Reading Promotion in the First Two Decades of the 21st Century from the Perspective of High-Quality Development of Chinese-Style Modernized Libraries

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Abstract

Reflection and experience constitute dual approaches to understanding truth. Reading promotion in the new century has undergone more than 20 years of development. Both traditional and new forms of reading promotion require continuous reflection and sublation in their development, enabling us to gain enlightenment and guide practice. Employing the Frankfurt School's socio-cultural critical theory as an analytical framework, this article focuses on the false needs already generated among readers, the pseudo-individualization crudely replicated by case competitions, the instrumental rationality and reified consciousness revered as a standard by data providers, and the anti-enlightenment nature of reading promotion within the cultural industry perspective, thereby revealing the problems in China's reading promotion in the new era and aspects that merit attention from both readers and promoters. Reflection and experience constitute dual approaches to understanding truth. Reading promotion in the new century has undergone more than 20 years of development. Both traditional and new forms of reading promotion require continuous reflection and sublation in their development, enabling us to gain enlightenment and guide practice. Employing the Frankfurt School's socio-cultural critical theory as an analytical framework, this article focuses on the false needs already generated among readers, the pseudo-individualization crudely replicated by case competitions, the instrumental rationality and reified consciousness revered as a standard by data providers, and the anti-enlightenment nature of reading promotion within the cultural industry perspective, thereby revealing the problems in China's reading promotion in the new era and aspects that merit attention from both readers and promoters.

Full Text

Preamble

This article is one of the research outcomes of the 2023–2024 General Project of the Liaoning Provincial Higher Education Library and Information Committee, titled “Research on the Disciplinary System of Chinese Path to Modernization Libraries’ Reading Promotion+” (Project No.: LTB202318).

Title

Standardization, Refinement, and Counter-Enlightenment: A Critical Reflection on Reading Promotion in the First Two Decades of the 21st Century from the Perspective of High-Quality Development of Libraries on the Chinese Path to Modernization

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Abstract: Reflection and experience constitute dual pathways to truth. More than two decades into the new century, reading promotion—whether traditional or innovative—requires continuous critical reflection and sublation in its developmental process to yield genuine insights and guide practice. Employing the Frankfurt School’s social and cultural critical theory as an analytical framework, this paper examines four key dimensions: the false needs already generated among readers, the pseudo-individualization replicated in case competitions, the instrumental rationality and reified consciousness venerated by data providers, and the anti-enlightenment character of reading promotion within the cultural industry perspective. Through this critical lens, the paper reveals fundamental problems in China’s contemporary reading promotion and identifies aspects that warrant serious attention from both readers and promoters.

Keywords: Frankfurt School, cultural industry, false demand, pseudo-individualization, instrumental rationality, materialized consciousness

0 Writing Origin

The Frankfurt School (Frankfurter Schule/the Frankfurt School) is an academic designation born in the 1960s, characterized by its interdisciplinary and comprehensive research and critique of modern society [1]. As Xu Chongwen stated, “The Frankfurt School made its name by establishing social critical theory” . This theory emerged during the rapid development of advanced industrial society, specifically targeting mass culture and the cultural industry in the 1940s. Key figures include philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer, philosopher and aesthetician Theodor Adorno, philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse, and psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm. The core objective is to “overcome the blindness and weakness among the general populace” and enable them to “develop critical attitudes and capacities, forming critical thinking” , thereby establishing “a critical rationality to counterbalance the escalating

instrumental rationality” . This blindness and weakness have become unconscious and unexamined mental habits that coexist harmoniously with daily life, naturally providing a certain necessity and fundamental premise for reading promotion, which claims to illuminate minds and awaken wisdom. Overcoming blind conformity and vulgarity thus becomes the essential driving force for promoting reading. Combined with the foregoing statements, we can clearly see the current state of reading promotion in China and the urgent problems that need addressing: keywords such as mass culture, cultural industry, and instrumental rationality undeniably summarize the social context and operational environment in which China’ s reading promotion finds itself.

The logic is straightforward: the purpose of reading promotion is universal reading, whose connotation and denotation both point to the masses. Consequently, mass culture constitutes a crucial component of reading promotion content. Although, broadly speaking, mainstream culture, elite culture, and mass culture should be promoted in a tripartite balance, mass culture accounts for a considerable proportion in both quantity and scope, making it impossible to ignore within the framework of the cultural industry and cultural industries. Instrumental rationality precisely diagnoses people’ s worship of and dependence on technology—a dependence that erodes psychological principles and individual personality. China’ s current reading promotion increasingly demonstrates subservience to digital and smart libraries and modern information technology, with standardized and refined services completely prostrating themselves before the “altar” of technology supremacy. The enlightenment and cultivation of humanitarianism and humanism have been suspended and stranded by instrumentalization. While this may not be entirely the fault of reading promotion, it has at least fanned the flames and fueled the fire during the first two decades of this century. The most critical issue is that reading promotion has never questioned its own lineage, developmental path, or foundational beliefs since its inception—it may be doing good with bad methods. Here, I must clarify that the benefits of reading for humanity and its significance for social and historical progress need no elaboration, but reading and reading promotion are entirely different concepts and natures, just as they are vastly different from education and learning—predecessors have discussed this extensively, so I will not dwell on it. Reading promotion has its own starting points, means, and purposes. Good intentions with improper methods, deviation from course, poor results, or frequent side effects and complications are equally unacceptable products that need to be taken off the shelves for redevelopment. In my view, current reading promotion is precisely such a “problematic industry.” This is not my subjective research or judgment but is well-documented, nor does it mean I am anti-technology, pedantic, or biased. Partial reflection does not equal total negation; pointing out errors and raising questions stems from the hope that things will improve.

Following the discussion of the “instrumental rationality” meticulously crafted by advanced industrial civilization, which is transforming people’ s modes of thinking and ideals, we have indeed become accustomed to this state of affairs.

Yet this is an artificial construct that runs counter to nature and contradicts learning, education, and enlightenment—the very processes that emphasize human value and self-growth. Listening to Marcuse’s words should give us pause for thought, insight, and alternative action. According to Marcuse, “Technological progress places advanced industrial society above a level of affluence, making people satisfied with immediate material needs at the cost of no longer pursuing freedom or imagining alternative ways of life. Technological progress allows advanced industrial society to infiltrate people’s leisure time and occupy their private space through mass media such as television, radio, films, and newspapers without provoking resistance. It provides rational operational methods for political and economic functioning, achieving high-level organization and thus harmonizing rulers and ruled at the rational level. It leads to the dominance of scientism and positivist thinking methods, transforming human thought into an analyzable and manipulable domain where doubt, negation, critique, and transcendence vanish” . We know that human needs have two aspects: rational and emotional. As Feng Youlan summarized in *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (p. 125), there is what we “know” and what we “hope for” : “Knowledge is important, but one cannot live by knowledge alone; emotional satisfaction is also needed.” Therefore, while pure technological development and application greatly promote knowledge renewal and learning, they simultaneously weaken emotional and aspirational fulfillment, causing people to lose their genuine needs, natural endowments, and the full expression of individual wisdom and personality. As a result, human beings as subjective, active agents become increasingly instrumentalized—complete faith in and reliance on technology ultimately leads to the alienation and dissolution of individual value. This paper proceeds from this logical starting point, advocating that reading promotion bravely undertake the mission of countering alienation, reification, and instrumental rationalization (or at least stop adding fuel to the fire). It should return to readers the rights, autonomy, agency, and creativity for self-exploration, self-selection, and self-discovery. Promotion should only ensure equal access to information, guarantee unimpeded reading, and provide services and materials whenever, wherever, and for whatever needs any reader may have—without making “increasing promises and ever-better unlimited entertainment to dissolve people’s spiritual transcendence and resistance, causing them to lose self-reflection capacity, escape reality in flattened cultural patterns, and indulge in sensory pleasure while conforming to reality” (Chen Shibu, *The Historical Evolution of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, Anhui University Press, 2010, p. 70). Unintentionally wading into the “manipulative, dominating, and deceptive” waters of early mass culture, reading promotion should fully realize its functions of inheriting civilization, serving society, and enlightening readers. Standardization and refinement should be applied to establishing service systems and reflecting on and improving evaluation indicator systems—not to transforming people’s inner spiritual life and ideals into conservative factors fundamentally opposed to the free and transcendent artistic life described by Horkheimer.

1.1 The “Soil” for False Needs

Professor Zhao Yong of Beijing Normal University, who has long researched mass culture theory and criticism, notes in his work: “To some extent, the cultural criticism that emerged in China since the 1990s shares a similar context with the Frankfurt School’s cultural criticism, but Chinese cultural criticism gradually lost its problem consciousness and critical spirit in its development”. Indeed, the same problem exists in reading promotion. Many promoters are driven by policies, project approvals, performance metrics, and 征文 (essay solicitations). While there are practical needs and rational considerations at play, the lost, suspended, or abandoned sense of crisis and problem-oriented thinking seriously affects people’s ability to excavate and explore genuine problems. Instead, they flock to word games that sideline issues, conceptual logic, mathematical modeling, and technical statistics—solutions to subsistence problems—while the proposition of reading enlightening people to seek true freedom and happiness has been cast to the winds. Reading promotion has become a self-sufficient, rose-giving paradise, falling into “the advanced industrial society’s use of technological rationality to fill the moat between private and public life, integrating all oppositions and homogenizing all different choices, thereby creating a ‘conspiracy’ between policy rationality and technological rationality (instrumental rationality)” (Chen Shibu, *The Historical Evolution of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, pp. 83-84). To cite a concrete example, consider the “2020 National Reading Research Open Project Approval” jointly released on June 1, 2020, by the Taofen Foundation National Reading Promotion Association and the National Press and Publication Administration Publishing Integration Development (Sichuan Xinhua) Key Laboratory.

All thirty approved projects are forward-looking, meaning they assume by default that reading promotion’s objects, methods, means, purposes, and carriers are qualified products requiring only specialized research in various branches and categories to achieve perfection. As seen in the list, projects are explicitly divided into four areas: talent team construction, high-quality content construction, platform and channel construction, and theoretical research, covering both theory and practice. Neither the project titles nor directions include reflective or evaluative research; even theoretical research fails to address issues of promotional means assessment, purpose evaluation, or methodological examination.

This perfectly aligns with the essential cause Marcuse analyzed in *One-Dimensional Man*: “the comprehensive penetration of technological rationality into all aspects of life in advanced industrial society...In the cultural domain, the one-dimensionality caused by technological rationality manifests as a ‘repressive desublimation trend.’ Advanced industrial society uses technological rationality to further eliminate oppositional and transcendent elements from Western ‘high culture,’ removing the contradiction between culture and social reality to peddle commercial, deceptive mass culture” (*The Historical Evolution of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, pp. 86-87). Replacing Western high culture with the reading promotion academic community, this insight cuts like a knife

to the heart of promoters who have long lacked problem consciousness and reflective spirit.

1.2 The Mechanism of False Needs Production

Reading promotion involves at least two key elements: subject and object. The promotional subjects (libraries, data providers, cultural groups, media, etc.) must meet the needs of objects (students, citizens, researchers, training institutions) to maximize promotional effectiveness by providing necessary information, resources, services, and reading methods. The question is: which comes first, resources or needs? Or do they coexist? Reflecting on current reading promotion, it seems we promote whatever is available rather than providing what is needed.

Consider Marcuse's discussion of "one-dimensional society" and "one-dimensional man": "In the last analysis, the question of what are true and false needs must be answered by the individuals themselves, but only in the last analysis—that is, if and when they are free to give their own answer...As long as they live in a 'one-dimensional society' like advanced industrial society, they are not free. Therefore, individuals are not necessarily the determinants of what they truly need". This reflects at least two problems: first, promotion without reader research and big data analysis can only satisfy false needs—it is marketing, advertising, and peddling whose true purpose is not enlightenment but commodity exchange. Second, even when genuine reader needs are identified, promotional institutions rarely have the determination, capacity, or willingness to respond to these needs, because ultimately "people living in advanced industrial society have had their humanity shaped; their needs, necessities, and desires have become conformist". They themselves do not know what they truly need, or even whether they truly need "their own true needs."

How many readers willingly lose their authenticity to serve as "integrated" "rest notes" in society, just "getting by" in their prime? How many understand that under the technological industry, our happiness and contentment come at such a cost— "(Marcuse's) basic proposition in *One-Dimensional Man* is that in advanced industrial society, technological progress creates affluence and a lifestyle that can reconcile opposition to this lifestyle and assimilate dissenting voices. The result is that eliminating material scarcity, once the prerequisite for other freedoms, has now become a productive enslaving force. When people's needs are satisfied, their reasons for dissent and protest are eliminated, and they become passive instruments of the system". Cultural promotion and reading promotion are not problematic in their starting points. The problem lies in how their carriers and means have been transformed by instrumental rationality, because once culture enters the technological and industrialized domain, it must follow commodity operation laws, which are governed by the two major factors of value and use value. Thus, the cultural industry has become an ideological melting pot—an engine or projector producing false needs (or false consciousness). Here, we collectively term any needs and consciousness that have been

marketed, intervened in, or domesticated as false needs (consciousness). The “falseness” lies in making people unaware yet not genuinely willing; this consciousness formation amounts to falling into a trap. Because once our cherished culture becomes an accessory to industry, follows commodity operation laws, and undertakes the mission of domesticating and integrating the masses, it becomes a different picture than we imagine: “Culture creates a social illusion matched to non-existent humans; it hides the material conditions that produce all human works; and through comfort and cajoling, it is sufficient to keep poor economic decisions alive. This is the concept of culture as ideology.” “Culture, divorced from material production conditions, ultimately becomes an ideological illusion” .

2.1 The Genesis of Pseudo-Individualization

Needs assembled by ideology we call false needs or false consciousness. Once false consciousness emerges, it becomes unstoppable and self-satisfying because it is continuously fulfilled by a complete set of cultural industry products and services. Reading promotion has become a loyal assistant in this process. Once promotion achieves results and gains momentum, the cultural industry’ s integration of the masses is realized. Borrowing Professor Zhao Yong’ s description of art after being invaded by the cultural industry, we can elaborate on reading’ s predicament: After reading or reading promotion is taken over by the cultural industry, it is ruthlessly thrown into commodity consumption. With the involvement of data providers, smart libraries and database operations, and the participation of promotional media and cultural institutions—all following commodity operation trajectories—the joy and solemnity of reading are quietly artificialized, packaged, and marketed. Readers become “precisely calculated objects” (since maximizing value and use value is the primary premise and purpose in commodity operations). Although IFLA’ s International Marketing Award criteria proclaim “methodical, creative, goal-oriented, sustainable, and impactful,” their true intentions are revealed: method, creativity, and goal represent the cultural industry’ s covetous gaze toward reading, while sustainability and impact mean discovering “exploitable elements” in reading promotion. Once reading embarks on this standardized path, it cannot avoid being labeled with the cultural industry’ s tag and hijacked by reified consciousness, losing its inherent autonomy. False consciousness and pseudo-individualization in activities and readers emerge accordingly.

2.2 Pseudo-Individualization in Case Competitions

According to Frankfurt School member Theodor Adorno, another prominent feature of the cultural industry is pseudo-individualization: “Each product gives people a unique and individual feeling, evoking an illusion in their minds that this completely reified, processed thing is a refuge from reality and life. Thus, so-called individuality plays a role in reinforcing ideology” . This does not necessarily mean reading promotion’ s alliance with the cultural industry is

intentional, but appearances can be deceiving. Who would have thought this “Enlightenment” giant ship creates pseudo-individualized objects through standardized mass production to output their so-called products? In this process, reading promotion becomes their means, and readers become their commodities and ends. Examining these competition-selected cases reveals the cultural industry’ s tremendous power and painstaking efforts.

Take *Library Reading Promotion Case Analysis* (National Library Press, 2019) as an example. A glance at the table of contents shows Chapter 1 on reading promotion research, Chapter 2 on theoretical system research, Chapter 3 on promotional methods research, Chapter 4 on reading promoters, Chapter 5 on thematic literature promotion, Chapter 6 on reading avoidance, Chapter 7 on special activities, Chapter 8 on parent-child reading promotion, and Chapter 9 on university student reading promotion. The activities are splendid and thriving, covering multiple social strata and fields. As the preface states, they are “planned, creative, goal-oriented, and effective” —precisely the cultural industry’ s standard operation for creating pseudo-individualization: “Continuously promising audiences (readers) something different to stimulate their interest and distance itself from mediocrity, yet it cannot leave the beaten path. It must be constantly new yet constantly the same. Thus, cultural industry individualization is merely a marketing strategy, a trick to deceive consumers (readers)” . Through observation, I find that so-called effectiveness appears to benefit readers but actually serves the real purposes of selling products, achieving performance metrics, securing projects, and ensuring sustainability. Increased reader rates precisely validate and satisfy the effectiveness and integration power of reading promotion under the cultural industry track, because the promoted literature and heavily advertised activities are virtually identical. The so-called “replicability” is precisely the “standardization” repeatedly emphasized in the cultural industry, while the “operability” constantly demanded in case evaluations is the objective requirement for “mass production.” Everything is pre-digested and carefully calculated.

We advocate examining and regulating reading promotion through disciplinary classification models, providing decision-making bases for training reading promoters, reflecting on promotional institution activities, and supervising and managing national functional departments. This offers scientific and theoretical coordinates for the practical and disciplinary development of reading promotion theory, accelerating the specialization of reading promotion, disciplinary construction, and interdisciplinary research talent cultivation mechanisms. These are necessary steps for the self-reform, self-improvement, and scientific development of reading promotion service mechanisms. However, we must emphasize that standardization and refinement should not integrate and precisely design readers’ ideological consciousness. The objects of standardization and refinement are reading promotion itself—its service and evaluation feedback mechanisms—not the service targets and application subjects.

In short, reading promotion’ s mission and vocation lie in filtering and refining

the blindness, commercialization, and vulgarization inherent in mass culture due to technological rationality, effectively preventing reading's "anti-enlightenment effect" on readers' thinking from the perspective of thought, culture, and art. Through refined and standardized construction of promotional means and top-level design, we should tailor intelligent and humanized reading plans based on readers' ideological consciousness, disciplinary backgrounds, aesthetic needs, and reading abilities. This must not become "two-dimensional dialectical thought becoming 'defeated protest logic' under the pressure of technological rationality" (*The Historical Evolution of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, p. 88).

3 The Anti-Enlightenment Essence of Instrumental Rationality

Horkheimer and Adorno profoundly revealed technological or instrumental rationality in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Using film and radio as examples, they exposed the cultural industry's anti-enlightenment character—yet reading promotion's purpose lies precisely in enlightenment and guidance. The paradox and crisis are self-evident.

In the book's introduction, Horkheimer and Adorno state: "Enlightenment degenerates into ideology, with film and radio broadcasting as typical manifestations of this degeneration. In film and radio, enlightenment ultimately consists only in the careful calculation of effects, production, and distribution technology; ideology exhausts itself in worshiping existing things and the power of manipulation techniques, which is consistent with its content" . No wonder some scholars claim libraries are technology-driven, resource-driven, or service-driven. Whether technology, resources, or services, all are supporting components and promotional strategies of the cultural industry—standardized and manipulated standard products that are naturally anti-enlightenment.

From this perspective, if reading promotion has already retreated into the anti-enlightenment camp, its further role and mission will be to deliver humanity into new barbarism. Whether intentional or unintentional, failure to enlighten, or hindering enlightenment, makes one an accomplice of anti-enlightenment. Readers enjoying enlightenment without knowledge or genuine consent fulfill the title of a chapter in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "the Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception."

The article elaborates on what reification means and why it is so terrifying. Once "reified, largely manipulable (things)" emerge and intervene, they produce an effect independent of human will: people no longer generate "consciousness of spontaneous experience." In plain terms, readers no longer actively think and explore, losing the fundamental human motivation and subjective agency to understand and transform the world. "Reification" is intimately connected to the keywords mentioned above: standardization, commercialization, and carefully calculated pseudo-individualization. Using Jameson's explanation perfectly illustrates the difference between traditional and modern reading

promotion. Formerly, reading clubs and cultural forums featured face-to-face exchanges, heart-to-heart connections, and soul-to-soul collisions, with teaching according to aptitude, no discrimination, and a hundred flowers blooming. After the cultural industry took over, it became another scene: “interpersonal relationships transform into relationships between things...social reality is converted into exchange value and commodities...that is, the simplification, vulgarization, animalization, and barbarization of the human spiritual world, which connects to what Marx called ‘alienation’ ...On one hand, it means the comprehensive reification of the lifeworld; on the other, it means the overall alienation of the spiritual world” .

Once reading promotion’ s enlightening function is tainted by reification, it pushes human thinking to the “opposite side” of enlightenment—the “overall alienation of the spiritual world” cited above. This returns to reading promotion’ s ontology: how to promote, to whom, and why. If our original intention and positioning truly aim to enlighten readers and share information resources rather than comprehensively reify and integrate people’ s thoughts, reading promoters should demonstrate the courage and resolve advocated by Marxism: turn the blade inward, self-reform, and self-purification. With practical actions, intelligence, joint efforts, and modest prudence, we should install “bumpers” and “password locks” in every reading promotion link to effectively prevent digital browsing’ s deprivation of human sensation, culture, and psychology, and to weaken, optimize, and transform issues of standardization, commercialization, and refinement in digital products. We should actively establish humanistic reading promotion that is enlightening, value-leading, self-perfecting, people-friendly, and group-identity-based, forcefully breaking modularized, batch-produced, pseudo-individualized characteristics saturated with instrumental rationality, false needs, and reified consciousness. We must eradicate traditional reading promotion problems that lose independent thinking and abandon autonomy, effectively avoiding the tendency toward mass ideological integration and the emergence of reading “pacifier effects.”

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