The Bookstore-Café: Emergence of a New Lifestyle as a “Third Place” in Hangzhou, China

Thuy Van Thi Nguyen1,2, Ying Hao Han1, Noman Sahito1,3, and Tram Ngoc Lam4

Abstract
This article introduces the Chinese bookstore-café, which indicates a change of lifestyle occurring in the contemporary big cities of China. Based on the concept of “third place,” which was first introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg to indicate places that are neither home nor a workplace, we argue that the bookstore-café represents the emergence of a new lifestyle. Oldenburg’s “third place” concept is deployed as a framework to explore the role of the bookstore-café in Hangzhou, China, based on a study conducted at three popular bookstore-cafés in central Hangzhou, to clarify its involvement in urban life. As part of the study, we used the observational method to help determine consumers’ visual behavior and an on-site survey questionnaire to collect data for measuring the qualities of the bookstore-café. The research findings contribute profound insights into the bookstore-café in Chinese urban life and deepen our understanding of Oldenburg’s “third place” concept.

Keywords
Third place, bookstore-café, consumer behavior, urban life, China

In his well-known book The Great Good Place, sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999) claims that “third places” are places such as bars, coffee shops, and barber shops—generally, places that are neither home nor a workplace. Traditionally, people have flocked to these public-accessible places “for informal association, and to have a drink or talk” (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Therefore, a “third place” is not a totally new conception. Oldenburg also suggests that these public places are necessary for community and public life and, additionally, to provide health benefits because they provide opportunities for socializing, combating loneliness, and having a sense of reality through conversation.

The bookstore-café, which is a modern concept, is a combination of two traditional places—a bookstore and a café shop. It is not merely a space for book lovers; more important, it is a venue for people to enjoy their books while sipping their favorite cup of coffee with or without their

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friends. In China, the bookstore-café is usually called *shuba* (“book-bar” in Chinese). Many studies have pointed out that the Chinese version of the bookstore-café is one of the most important recreational sites for the youth in China’s urban communities. It was observed during this research that in China, the bookstore-café is a place for spending leisure time, regardless of whether people are doing things related to books. It is worth noting here that the bookstore-café is not necessarily a quiet place; in contrast, it is a place where conversation is expected.

Even though the bookstore-café has been in existence for a long time in Western countries, it was only introduced in China, in its big cities, at the turn of the 21st century. This is because recent decades have witnessed significant developments regarding the middle class in China (Goodman, 2008), which has led to increased access to foreign goods and hence an emerging consumer culture, giving a new identity for this class (Croll, 2006; Elfick, 2011; Lin & Wang, 2010; Tian & Dong, 2011). Before the bookstore-café became a part of people’s habitual life, other foreign consumer goods and brands had landed in many, if not all, big cities. For instance, Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald’s, and Starbucks are now very ubiquitous to urban consumers. Impressively, Starbucks is a potent symbol of the “new” China, popular among the middle class and young adults and a common presence in shopping malls and gentrified neighborhoods (Han & Zhang, 2009; Lin, 2012; Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008). This consumer revolution has brought about a new wave of recreational places for China’s urban residents, especially the youth. Besides, the market reforms in China have triggered a “consuming revolution” as well (Davis, 2005, p. 692). Consequently, the bookstore-café is deemed one of the most representative of this phenomenon. Accordingly, the growing trend of the bookstore-café requires an academic inquiry into the characteristics of the interactions taking place in it. However, when the bookstore and the café are integrated into the bookstore-café, there are not many specific studies conducted on the concept of the bookstore-café as a third place.

This study aims to extend the academic knowledge on how consumers use the bookstore-café beyond the simple act of purchasing books and examine in which context and to what extent we might call the bookstore-café as a third place for young adults. In addition, it not only enhances our understanding of how and why people use the bookstore-café but also brings out the essence of the new role of the bookstore-café in urban communities.

The article is organized into four parts. First, we review the literature on third places and then on the bookstore-café in the context of Chinese culture. Next, in the methodology section, we use the qualitative approach for data collection and analysis. Finally, we report the findings and conclusion, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

**Theoretical Context**

**Third Place**

In his book, Oldenburg (1999) interprets a third place as a place other than the home or workplace where people can regularly visit and communicate with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers. Indeed, his writings on third places mainly discuss the social components, such as the characteristics of the so-called third place, the visiting frequency of customers, the purpose of their visits, and so on. Third places that commonly come to mind are cafés, bars and pubs, community centers, the grocery store, and so on. In Oldenburg’s ideal settings, third places are public places that are used neither for work nor as a home but on are places where people gather voluntarily, informally, and frequently. Oldenburg particularly emphasizes that third places offer a space for people to escape from their daily routine, allowing them to experience “a temporary world within their ordinary world” (p. 282). More precisely, Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) suggest that third places exist outside the ordinary dwelling and the typical working sites of daily life. In many contexts, third places perform a function as unique public
places for social communication, and they offer a casual occasion for sociability, spontaneity, community building, and emotional expression. In other words, third places could help people keep “in touch with reality” (p. 280) by means of interpersonal connections outside the home and workplace.

According to Oldenburg (1999), there are eight specific characteristics of third places:

1. Third places are neutral ground; all are welcome, and no one plays the “host.”
2. Third places are considered as levelers; people of different social classes can visit.
3. Conversation is the main activity; even though the setting could be a place for drinking, exercising, or playing a game, talking always occurs.
4. Third places are accessible and accommodating.
5. Several “regulars” come there, and they also attract newcomers.
6. The interior is without extravagance or grandeur and has a homely feel.
7. They are like a home away from home. Regular visitors find the atmosphere comfortable enough to “root” them there.
8. The mood is playful, and laughter is often heard.

Oldenburg (2001) list out several typical venues where social interaction can be savored in a nonjudgmental environment to which the concept of the third place has often been applied, namely restaurants, bars, bookshops, and even gardens. However, the research on restaurants and diners is likely to take over the concept of the third place (Cheang, 2002; Rosenbaum, 2006), followed by the study of video arcades and gyms (Rosenbaum, 2008). More recently, online networking and virtual reality have caught the attention of scholars, hence several attempts have been made to apply Oldenburg’s concept to this newly emerged context, particularly MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games) (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Many U.K. bookshops have been reprofiled as destination stores (Clements, 2005; Giles, 2011; Horner, 2009); the role of the coffee shop as a third place has been examined, as it enables people to socialize and meet with others. For managers, there are opportunities to encourage retail venues to explore their potential to be third places and restorative servicescapes. This can be an advantage for generating revenue profit. Libraries have been investigated in the context of third place as well (Fialkoff, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Lawson, 2004), and the presence of coffee shops seems to support this view (Waxman, Clemons, Banning, & McKelfresh, 2007) because the therapeutic qualities associated with such settings are then recognized (Banning, Clemons, McKelfresh, & Waxman, 2006; Fialkoff, 2010).

Although Oldenburg’s concept of third places was introduced and applied to diverse public places worldwide, the research was often undertaken in the West, not in Oriental countries. The bookstore-café is not only a relatively new concept compared with the bookstore and the café, but it is also yet to thrive in urban life in China. The bookstore-café itself has a unique environment, with the integration of mobile technologies and various types of typical spare-time activities such as reading or buying books while enjoying drinks and chatting. Besides, there is a recent description of a bookstore-café as a work space. In most big cities, it can be observed that people go to bookstore-cafés not only for reading but also for socializing while consuming food and drink available for purchase, and even more commonly, one can see people working with various technological communication tools. Such a setting is meant for people to be able to relax so that they can be inspired to engage in different types of activities. There are tables and chairs with electrical sockets for electronic devices, while Wi-Fi is almost always available for Internet connection. Within the past decade, because of the advances in technology that have enabled many forms of work to become transportable, people now can finish their job while they enjoy sitting in their chosen environment (Christie, 2009). The result of this transformation is a new trend of working while relaxing, with more people working from home, who seek out public places for
communication, even on weekdays, not only on weekends as before. In many cases, they want to be surrounded by others but do not need to have a social interaction. In other words, their involvement seems to remain as a kind of virtual existence because they mainly communicate with others via network-connected devices.

The Bookstore-Café: A Newly Emerged Local Lifestyle

China is well-known for its long history of paper and printing. In China, reading has long been recognized as a symbol of the rich Chinese culture; for this reason, bookshops have always played an important role as bearers of culture and tradition. This has consequently nurtured a long-standing tradition of reading among Chinese people, hence it is no surprise that many people in China express a strong preference for books, especially paper books. In pace with the social development, Chinese people are well adapted to and are more than willing to consider the physical bookshops as bearers of culture. Hence, it is expected that bookshops with a strong cultural atmosphere can retain their attractiveness in a country like China.

In recent years, Chinese people tend to value intangible experiences; especially, people in major cities have more disposable incomes and more flexible leisure time than before. Moreover, the increase in the national education level and enhancement of civilized culture make Chinese people more likely to have rich spiritual experiences. Chinese people now know how to derive enjoyment in life through a higher level of entertainment, either material or spiritual. However, because of their heightened expectation for some adaptive transformation to be made, it could be at times quite difficult for ordinary bookshops to fulfill the increasing demand of the consumers. Accordingly, a lot of researchers have explicitly commented on the fundamental difference between a bookshop and a coffee shop. Whereas a bookshop is a place where a person might seek to be alone, a coffee shop is apparently a place where socialization is expected. Specifically, Kotler and Armstrong (2006), Dibb, Simkin, Pride, and Ferrell (2006), and Jobber (2010) all point out the significance of the impact of the human factor on customers’ experiences at any servicescape; the waitpersons likewise have a high potential to have favorable relationships with the customers (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Price & Arnould, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2008), and they even offer social support more than just a service. This element of human interaction is also concretely supported in the environment of any typical bookstore-café. Christie (2009) claims that a bookstore-café helps combine a conventional leisure space in which people can now perform other types of work, including work using networking devices, with the public sphere, which can have an influence on people’s working temperament. For example, there are more freelance jobs that allow people to work in different places rather than in a fixed office. These places could be their regular bookstore-café, which then becomes their mobile office, not to mention that the fast-developing technology has given way for people to work in boundary-less organizations or virtual work spaces (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). Hence, it is vital to reassess the role bookstore-cafés play in the social life circle, from a place for pure leisure to a space for working and studying and even more.

In the case of the city of Hangzhou, we could observe the emergence of the bookstore-café in the past two decades (see Figure 1). In 2000, the first bookstore-café, Zhen Chun Nian Dai, was opened in the central tourist area of Hangzhou. It then became a familiar place for book lovers to frequent or a quick stop for curious tourists passing by the store. A decade later, in 2010, there were five bookstore-cafés spotted at the site. Moreover, since 2010, there was a significant increase in the number of bookstore-cafés in Hangzhou, with 6 more opening in 2012, double that number in 2014 (13), and 29 bookstore-cafés in 2016, the number once again doubling in 2 years. Therefore, it is clearly seen that the emergence of the bookstore-café is a contemporary phenomenon in Hangzhou as a new lifestyle and a new way of spending one’s leisure time for the people.
Research Design and Methodology

To clarify the common practices and motives of bookstore-cafés consumers in Hangzhou City and to further explore the essential role of the book-store café in their daily life, an on-site questionnaire survey was administered at three bookstore-cafés in Hangzhou City, namely Chun Zhen Nian Dai, Yue Lan Shu, and Yun Tai Shu She (see Figure 2). The reason for choosing three bookstore-cafés turned on the logistical challenges of the task; for example, it was deemed too risky to investigate only one bookstore-café given that the number of valid responses obtained could well be insufficient. Moreover, the number of respondents could vary greatly because of objective conditions such as the weather, week dates, and so on. To avoid these potential risks in data collection, the investigation was carried out over the three bookstore-cafés, and the time of conducting the survey varied.

A mixed-methods approach was taken for the data gathering to answer the research question most effectively and to triangulate the findings (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Hence, this study
used an on-site survey and direct observation to find the optimal answer to the research question (see Figure 3).

In the first stage of the investigation, an overview survey was distributed to collect demographic information and find out the general preferences of bookstore-café goers. This survey was taken as a starting point because it had a high potential to provide insight into the consumer experience based on actual consuming behavior. At the same time, observation was also used to find out about the regular occurrences, such as the most common activities, the noise level of the conversation, the frequent visitors, and so on. Observation has the potential to offer a very deep understanding of the consumer experience as it describes people in their own environment based on their actual behaviors (Gault, Masthoff, & Johnson, 2015). In the next stage, this foundational information was analyzed for some initial basic assumptions, which then became a firm basis for the second survey, using Oldenburg’s “third place” concept as a crucial theoretical framework to adjust the former questionnaire. To clarify the perceptions, impressions, and experiences of the bookstore-café goers, the primary survey was adjusted to serve the purposes of deeper research, with more focus on the characteristics of Oldenburg’s third place. The second round of survey and direct observation was then conducted. At this time, the data obtained were more concrete and close to Oldenburg’s concept.

In line with the mixed-methods approach, the first stage of the study was to conduct initial research by providing 70 questionnaires on the three chosen bookstore-cafés. The questionnaire survey took the first step of finding out whether the bookstore-café atmosphere was important: the time spent in the store and the kind of experience (relaxing, happy, or intimidating) the consumers might have.

In the second stage, once all the data were collected and analyzed by SPSS software, the characteristics of the bookstore-café were measured using the scale based on Oldenburg’s (1999) “third place” concept as a crucial theoretical framework. Lawson (2004), Fialkoff (2010), and Johnson (2010) had also investigated the library context based on the concept of third place, while Christie (2009) claimed that there would be stereotypic behaviors witnessed when people go to the library and these behaviors correlated with the concept of Oldenburg’s third place.

The Likert rating scale was used to measure self-efficacy, as this measure has been proven to be a useful and reliable instrument (Maurer & Pierce, 1998). When applying this Likert-type scale, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is vital, which helps estimate the internal consistency reliability of an instrument by determining how all the items in the instrument relate to all the other items and to the total instrument (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used with principal component analysis, using varimax rotation to identify and measure the model item (Anderson & Gerbing, 1982). EFA was conducted to examine the possible relationships between each of the item variables, which allows the formation of aggregate
variables in individual dimensions. Thus, when designing studies in which EFA is likely to be used, we consider the nature and number of the common factors we expect to emerge. The total number of measured variables included should be at least three to five times the number of expected common factors, and the selected variables should include multiple variables likely to be influenced by each of the common factors (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999). Therefore, in the questionnaire, 24 items were listed to measure and analyze visitor consumption behaviors. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree, with 3 = a neutral type of response (Jamieson, 2004). Demographic questions were also included, covering age, gender, and occupation.

**Results**

**Results From the Initial Research**

As can be seen from Table 3, from the perspective of in-store consumer experiences, the overview survey shows that spending time for individual and social purposes is an important component of the bookstore-café experience for many consumers. Particularly, the questionnaire respondents were asked to select from a list and rank which bookstore-café qualities were most crucial to them. Examining Table 1, which illustrates the most favorable bookstore-café qualities for consumers, it is clear that there is no significant difference among these qualities, except for comfortable feeling and atmosphere, which are of prime importance for 77.1% and 70% of the respondents, respectively.

The respondents were asked to choose as many options as they wished from the provided list to specify what they often do at the bookstore-café (see Table 2); they could also add their own options to that list. As expected, the main activity at the bookstore-café is reading and/or buying books (40%; see Table 2). The books here can be freely browsed through without necessarily having to purchase them, and more important, consumers are provided with comfortable seating and food and beverages, the same way as in any coffee shop. Moving on to another finding shown in Table 2, the next most common activities are working/studying and meeting with friends, which account for 20% and 22.9%, respectively.
Tables 1 and 2 reveal that bookstore-café visiting is not a solely functional occupation. The two tables display a tendency of customers to participate in relatively time-consuming activities, like meeting with friends, working, or studying. The research therefore presents the bookstore-café as a venue beyond a mere purchasing place, where individual and social activities are indispensable elements as well.

These findings also initially suggest an element of “aloneness,” where it was understood that the behavior was not induced by the impulse for social communication but rather by a desire to be in the enjoyable or work-conducive setting of the bookstore-café. Evaluating this newly emerging element, it can be seen that the therapeutic effects that bookstore-cafés have on customers seem to fall into what Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) call the “third place.” That is, they emphasize the essence of a conversation as a communication tool for people, which is a key quality of any third place.

**Data Analysis**

Data collection was carried out from May to April 2017. The time of conducting the survey varied, and the survey was done on-site.

In total, 160 on-site questionnaires were collected from customers going to the three bookstore-cafés, with 153 questionnaires deemed usable. Of these, 50 questionnaires were obtained at the Chun Zhen Nian Dai book-store café, 50 questionnaires from Yue Lan Shu, and the remaining 60 questionnaires from Yun Tai Shu She. The in-store survey showed that a majority of bookstore-café customers spent around 1 to 2 hours and 2 to 4 hours at the bookstore-café, 35.5% and 35.9% respectively, followed by 19% spending more than a half-day, 7.8% spending around 30 to 60 minutes, and 2% spending around 15 to 30 minutes in the store (see Table 3).
As for gender proportion, there was a slight inclination toward female customers at 62.7%, whereas men customers accounted for 37.3% (see Table 5). Despite every effort being made to select a more balanced gender ratio, the respondents were selected by the researcher, and consequently selection bias was unavoidable. Demographic data were also collected from the respondents (see Table 4); the majority of bookstore-café customers (56.2%) were between the ages of 21 and 30 years, while the remaining encompassed a broad age range. Table 6 shows the proportions of frequent and infrequent customers.

**Table 4. Age of Respondents in Deep Research (N = 153).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable: Age (years)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5. Percentage of Respondents’ Sex in Deep Research (N = 153).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6. Frequency-Based Type of Customer.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequent customer</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequent customer</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and Bartlett’s Tests.**

| Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy | 0.737 |
| Bartlett’s test of sphericity                   |      |
| Approximate chi-square                          | 1,143.462 |
| Degrees of freedom                              | 276   |
| Significance                                    | 0.000 |

As for gender proportion, there was a slight inclination toward female customers at 62.7%, whereas men customers accounted for 37.3% (see Table 5). Despite every effort being made to select a more balanced gender ratio, the respondents were selected by the researcher, and consequently selection bias was unavoidable. Demographic data were also collected from the respondents (see Table 4); the majority of bookstore-café customers (56.2%) were between the ages of 21 and 30 years, while the remaining encompassed a broad age range. Table 6 shows the proportions of frequent and infrequent customers.

**Validity of Data and Computing**

The exploratory research was conducted on the 24 significant variances identified in support of the objective of the study. By using the analysis package IBM SPSS Statistics V23, we found that the correlations among these 24 variances were quite high, and Barlett’s test of sphericity was found to be significant at <.05 (see Table 7). In our case, the value was well below this limit, indicating that factor analysis was useful. The fundamental objective of applying EFA is to
extract a minimum number of factors that account for the maximum variance in the data. The Kaiser–Mayer–Olkin (KMO) index for measurement of sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s test of sphericity were both used to check for redundancy between the variables and whether it is possible to summarize the information provided by the initial variables with a few factors. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.737 (see Table 7), which is higher than a thumb rule value of 0.5. We also calculated the variables measure for the given data (Field, 2009). Bartlett’s test of sphericity tests the hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix, which would indicate that the variables are unrelated and therefore unsuitable for structure detection. Factors whose eigenvalues are greater than 1 constituted 61.133% of the cumulative variance confirmed by the “Total Variance Explained” table (not shown) in SPSS, indicating that an appreciable factor analysis has been conducted with the 24 variances as per KMO criteria, resulting in the extraction of six components. Table 8 represents a factor analysis (principal axis factor analysis using a varimax rotation method) that produced six factor groups for the concept of a bookstore-café as a third place. These factors were labeled as follows: (1) being a neutral ground, (2) playful conversations and communication take place freely, (3) acting as a leveler, (4) seen as a home away from home, (5) having a low profile, and (6) being accessible and accommodating.

In SPSS software, reliability analysis and internal consistency of input data are conducted by categorical principal component analysis using dimension reduction technique of factor analysis, and the reliability was found to be good \(0.7 \leq \alpha \leq 0.9\). Cronbach’s alpha was computed using menu options and all 24 variances, factor equivalents for the test (Gay et al., 2006). Our Cronbach’s alpha consistency values were consecutively computed as .802, .765, .705, .822, .757, and .764 (see Table 8), which is within the acceptable range (Bland & Altman, 1997).

Discussion

First, as shown in Table 6, there is an obvious distinction between a proportion of frequent customers and infrequent customers, which implies that, to a certain extent, the former have a sense of being in a home away from home since they would love to spend more time at the bookstore-café. In other words, they are the so-called regulars who, according to Oldenburg (1999), find the bookstore-café comfortable enough to “root” them there. In spite of the noticeable numbers of the “regulars”, infrequent customers are “unnecessarily dominated in a numerical sense” (Oldenburg, 1982). What really matters to the regulars, whatever their number at any given time, is the atmosphere of “conviviality,” which at the same time makes them feel at home. This initial finding indicated that the bookstore-café would provide a strong basis to back up the concept of “third place.” In the next step, data-analyzing results obtained from SPSS software provided six key factors that were identified as the characteristics of the bookstore-café and then labeled consecutively: (1) being neutral ground, (2) playful conversations and communication taking place freely, (3) acting as a leveler, (4) seen as a home away from home, (5) having a low profile, and (6) being accessible and accommodating.

Being Neutral Ground

According to Oldenburg (1999), a neutral ground refers to a place where people can come and go at will, where no one needs to play host, and where people feel comfortable. That is, being a neutral ground indicates freedom of access to and usability of a space, which makes neutrality a key element of the bookstore-café. Hence, this characteristic allows people from different walks of life to freely assemble at the same place without restraint. In Table 8, we can see that all the factors strongly support the notion of “being neutral ground.”

There are always places where people may come and go as they wish. These places usually give people a homely and comfortable atmosphere where people enjoy spending their time and no one needs to play host. As seen in Figure 4, different activities varying from individual to
group activities were spotted at the three bookstore-cafés. The age range of the people coming there is diverse—children coming along with their parents, the elderly, and young people, all come to the bookstore-café to spend their spare time. It can be therefore concluded that the neutral nature of the bookstore-café would enhance the potential for favorable social interaction among the visitors.

**Acting as a Leveler**

In terms of “acting as a leveler,” Oldenburg (1999) referred to the nature of a third place as an inclusive place, where people could break out of the boundaries of their social circles to interact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8. Principal Axis Factor Analysis.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playful conversation or communication takes place freely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can have a meeting with your fellow trader to do some business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mood of the conversation is playful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lively and interesting conversations can be conducted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A simple place that invites people to come with their companions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility and accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good quality of food and drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse types of books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can go alone during any time of the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No need to feel awkward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one needs to play host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A place conducive to coming and going as you please</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The environment provides plenty of comforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is voluntary for you to come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining a low profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming there is part of the daily routine, not something unexpected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft music is played that I like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designed in a simple way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen as a home away from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to stay as long as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels close to your heart, a homely feeling arising when you enter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not bothered by the volume of the conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts as a leveler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are able to break out of the boundaries of their social circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourages pretentiousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The environment breaks invisible barriers and creates an opportunity for young people of different social status to mingle</td>
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*Note. Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization.*
*Rotation converge in six iterations.*
with each other. From Table 8, we can see that the “leveler” component of the bookstore-café is strongly backed up, which suggests that the bookstore-café is available and within the reach of people from diverse social backgrounds—all visitors are accepted as the bookstore-café does not set any social class standards for special guests. Especially, the factor of “discouraging pretentiousness” stands out as evidence that “showing off” is likely to be restrained at the three bookstore-cafés. In many respects, the inclusiveness of the bookstore-café as a leveler puts down the imperceptible barrier of social class and provides a chance for people from different walks of life to mingle together (see Figure 5).

**Playful Conversations Take Place Freely and Democratically**

 Whereas being neutral ground is conducive to making a place easily accessible and acting as a leveler makes way for people from diverse backgrounds to gather together, lively and interesting conversation is the main activity in a third place, as suggested by Oldenburg (1999). From Table 8, we can see that there are five factors that strongly support the “playful conversation” component. There is no doubt that bookstore-cafés offer spaces for people to come and talk with their companions in a lively manner (see Figure 6). We could hardly find a serious conversation that
lasted more than a minute, but the sense of joy and acceptance at the bookstore-cafés definitely overcomes any feelings of concern or alienation. Even though talking is not usually the main activity seen here, as many people preferred to read or work on their laptops, and the tone of conversations varied between the three bookstore-cafés, the playful spirit remained dominant. Based on on-site observation of conversations, we found that bookstore-cafés retain the basic feature of any coffee shop as a place for social interaction; however, bookstore-cafés mark a significant departure from coffee shops by boosting the playful mood and making people want to stay longer than intended because they feel cheerful and accepted.

**Accessibility and Accommodation**

Oldenburg (1999) argued that the accessibility and accommodation of third places would ensure “the best and fullest service” and people can come during any time of the day with the expectation that acquaintances will be there. As for the three bookstore-cafés in Hangzhou, they are all situated in the central part of Hangzhou, alongside other tourism attractions of the city, for instance, the West Lake and other surrounding retail spaces, together with private and public housing and community facilities. Except for Zhen Chun Nian Dai, which is located in a special tourism area, both Yue Lan Shu and Yun Tai Shu She are built close to the sidewalk and away from commercial buildings and crowded residential areas. As seen from Figure 7, Yue Lan Shu bookstore-café is open 24/7 to meet the needs of their customers. As shown in Figure 4, all the three bookstore-cafés had highly satisfied customers, with good comments on their services, such as courteous and helpful staff, good food and drink at reasonable prices, and diverse types of books. Thus, the bookstore-cafés are able to provide a friendly space for people to come to when they want to escape from the pressures and stress of work or merely to spend their leisure time. Because of the welcoming environment, many respondents like to sit for hours to read or study or simply spend time socializing. Besides, as Table 2 shows, 20% of the respondents said that they came to the bookstore-café to meet friends, which means that the three bookstore-cafés provide a space for social interaction. Furthermore, the possibility for people to meet each other without appointment is related to the frequency of visiting, which is shown in the dominant

*Figure 6. Diverse activities are carried out at the bookstore-café. Source. Author.*
number of frequent customers over infrequent customers. However, it should be noted that except for Chun Zhen Nian Dai, at Yue Lan Shu and Yun Tai Shu She, consumers are not required to make any purchase in return for seating, yet most of respondents were observed to have a drink or food to enhance the sense of accommodation. Correspondingly, bookstore-cafés are deemed a third place as regards accessibility and accommodation, one of the characteristics of the third place as defined by Oldenburg.

**Seen as a Home Away From Home**

According to Merriam Webster’s dictionary (n.d.), there are already two definitions of “home” that third places do not satisfy. Webster draws a conclusion that “home” is either the “family’s place of residence” or a “social unit formed by a family living together”; however, Oldenburg (1999) believed that third places refer to “a congenial environment” similar to a home. Thus, third places are public settings where many people, who may or may not know each other, assemble and regularly visit as they wish; specifically, third places are incapable of hosting people without congeniality, whereas a domestic circle could do so. As shown in Table 8, the “home away from home” component is clarified by the three factors, especially the factors “willing to stay as long as possible” and “feeling close to the heart when entering.” For many respondents, the more they come to the bookstore-café, the more connected they feel to the place. Hence, it can be suggested that these bookstore-cafés are heartwarming enough for customers want to spend time regardless of their multiple purposes for coming. Oldenburg also emphasizes that this warmth comes out of friendliness, support, and mutual concern. Again, it is common at the bookstore-café to not have to purchase anything in return for seating, which makes more people feel that they have a place other than their home to come to for relaxation. On this account, bookstore-cafés succeed in allowing people to have a feeling of being in a home away from home.

**Having a Low Profile**

A low profile for Oldenburg’s (1999) “third places” concept refers to the plain and unimpressive physical structure of third places. Oldenburg believed that a low profile is a comprehensive
Figure 8. Street frontage of Yue Lan Shu, Zhen Chun Nian Dai, and Yun Tai Shu She and their interior design, respectively. 
Source: Author.
characteristic of any third places for these reasons. First, a plain structure is more likely to feel inviting for people to visit with their companions. Second, plainness would put off transient visitors and protect regulars from interference. Third, pretention will be discouraged at plain places. Last but not least, regulars perceive third places not as something unexpected or unarranged but as a part of their daily routine. In response to this point, as Table 8 shows, most of the respondents agreed that because the bookstore-cafés were designed in a plain way, they chose to come there as part of their daily routine. Figure 8 also shows that the street frontage of the bookstore-cafés seem typical and not very impressive at first sight. The interior arrangement, apart from the presence of many bookshelves, is not much different from a coffee shop. These findings reveal that people feel attached to the bookstore-café because of the internal elements of the place rather than its physical aspect, which is deemed plain. This type of setting enhances customers’ mood to read, to work/study, to socialize, or just to enjoy themselves. Thus, the bookstore-café, which is often plainly designed, presents a low profile to most passersby, except its regulars.

Conclusion

This article aims to investigate the bookstore-café in the big cities of China from the perspective of the bookstore-café as a third place, using the case study of three bookstore-cafés in the city of Hangzhou. As a starting point, the third place concept with eight characteristics suggested by Oldenburg (1999) was deployed as a theoretical framework to examine the meaning and role of the bookstore-café in Chinese modern urban life. The research findings show that the bookstore-café is not only a place for socializing but also a place for studying and working as well as reading (information) for people from different walks of life. The bookstore-café provides a place for many consumers to enjoy a restorative experience while spending time in a pleasurable setting in conversation with others, very often without considering purchasing food and drink. The relaxing ambience of the bookstore-café creates a conducive environment for people to study, work, or communicate with others. The significance and meaning of the bookstore-café as a third place lie in the fact that it is a place that continues to attract the heart and mind of consumers.

The research contributes profound knowledge of the consumer experience at the bookstore-café, evidencing the fact that sometimes it is more important for consumers to spend time and browse through the bookshelves rather than simply purchase books. Although all the elements of a third place are experienced by consumers in the bookstore-café environment, it should be noted that loud conversation rarely takes place. However, further research with a larger sample size is necessary to identify the different kinds of bookstore-cafés and distinguish between independent and chain bookstore-cafés and their unique motto and features, as this difference may convey contrasting meanings to consumers.

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