

The Banality of Singing Red:

Secondary production of everyday life in Chongqing's Red culture campaign

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the interaction between Chongqing's Red culture programme (2008-2012) and the practices of Singing Red by retiree participants during the campaign. Drawing on ethnographic data collected during fieldwork in Chongqing, this paper argues that the community practices of retirees constitute a distinctive structure that is less powerful but more durable than that of the official Red culture programme. The practice of Singing Red by the retirees in their daily life did not subvert, but exercised tactical effect on the official programme.

KEYWORDS: Singing Red, Chongqing, Chinese politics, practices of everyday life.

Introduction

Chongqing, the sprawling, mountainous municipality in the hinterland of southwest China, has attracted enormous attention from home and abroad in recent years. Besides the dramatic political persecution of its Party Secretary Bo Xilai since March 2012,⁽¹⁾ heated debate had been carried out on various social and economic policies executed under Bo's leadership. For example, a number of programmes were implemented in the name of pursuing "common prosperity," such as the construction of 40 million m² of affordable public housing, special assistance given to left-behind children and elderly in rural areas, policies to boost income for rural households, subsidies for micro-enterprises, etc. More eye-catching was a relentless crackdown on organised crime, which evoked both approval from local residents applauding the significant improvement of public security in the city, and heavy criticisms from China's legal community, accusing the authorities of violating legal procedures and tampering with human rights.⁽²⁾ Equally controversial was the Red culture campaign (June 2008 - March 2012), which featured the four elements of "Singing Red, Reading Classics, Telling Stories, and Spreading Mottos" (*chang du jiang chuan* 唱读讲传).

Despite many public comments made on Chongqing's Red culture campaign, there is a glaring lack of in-depth understanding of the discrepancies between the political message carried by the Red culture campaign and how people experienced the programme on the ground. The experience of local participants was often misrepresented in political analysis. Bo's supporters would argue that his policies adhered to socialist values and were supported by local people,⁽³⁾ and therefore constitute a correct direction for China's future reforms in general.⁽⁴⁾ His opponents, on the other hand, accuse the programme of bringing back the horror of the Cultural Revolution, and argue that the masses were near-sighted and deceived by Bo's populist appeal.⁽⁵⁾ The masses, who neither unanimously supported Bo nor collectively fell victim to cajolery or stupidity, often fell hostage to commentators' personal political convictions.

This paper treats the Red culture programme and the practice of Singing Red by the participants as two different conceptual entities. The former refers to the blueprint of the programme designed by the Chongqing government, whereas the latter refers to the actual social experience of the

participants. In this paper, inquiry focuses on one major group of participants – retirees.⁽⁶⁾ Singing and dancing as community activities have long been prevalent in local retirees' social life.⁽⁷⁾ However, to qualify as the practice of singing Red, activities need to be either organised by the government as part of the Red culture programme, or identified as *Red* by the retirees

1. In February 2012, Chongqing's former chief of police, Wang Lijun, fled to the US Consulate in the neighbouring city of Chengdu. He was said to fear for his life after a falling-out with Bo Xilai over the murder of Englishman Neil Heywood by Bo's wife Gu Kailai. Bo Xilai was sacked from his position as Party Secretary of Chongqing in March 2012. His membership in the prestigious Central Committee and Politburo was terminated in April under allegations of "severe discipline violations." Four months later, Bo Gu Kailai was convicted of murdering Neil Heywood and received a suspended death sentence. In September 2012, Wang Lijun was sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of bending the law, abuse of power, and bribe-taking. Later in the same month, Bo was expelled from the Party, accused of abuse of power, corruption, and violations of Party discipline. In October, he was stripped of his position at the National People's Congress, China's top legislature. Bo underwent a five-day trial in Jinan, Shandong Province, between 22 August 2013 and 26 August 2013. He was sentenced to life in prison on 22 September 2013.
2. Tong Zhiwei, "Chongqing dahei xing shehui guanli fangshi yanjiu baogao" (Report on Chongqing's social management in the style of the "anti-crime" campaign), *Zhongguo xianfa xue yanjiu hui*, 22 October 2011, www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/ggzhc/article_2012021353482.html?1329286156 (accessed on 7 October 2013).
3. Su Wei, et al., *Chongqing moshi* (The Chongqing Model), Beijing, Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 2011; Hou Huiqin (ed) *Wenhua minsheng de shidai jiedu* (A timely reading of Chongqing's cultural welfare), Beijing, Renmin chubanshe, 2011.
4. Cui Zhiyuan, "Chongqing jingyan" jingxingshi: guozhi zengzhi yu cangfu yu min bingjin" (The "Chongqing Experience": Concurrent increase of wealth between national property and the masses), *China Review of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 2010; Cui Zhiyuan, "Chongqing 'shi da minsheng gongcheng' de zhengzhi jingjixue" (The political economy of Chongqing's "Ten Projects for Public Welfare"), *Institute for Advanced Historical and Social Research*, 19 June 2011, www.lishiyushehui.cn/modules/topic/detail.php?topic_id=362 (accessed on 7 October 2013); Li Xiguang, "Chongqing meng yu Zhongguo moshi" (The Chongqing Dream and the China Model), *Phoenix Caijing*, 5 September 2010, <http://finance.ifeng.com/news/20100905/2588460.shtml> (accessed on 7 October 2013); Philip C. C. Huang, "Chongqing: Equitable Development Driven by a 'Third Hand'?", *Modern China*, Vol. 37, No. 6, 2011, pp. 569-622; Zhang Weiwei, "Chongqing guilai hua Chongqing" (Talking about Chongqing after a trip to Chongqing), *Hongqi Wengao*, No. 2, 2012; Wang Shaoguang, "Tansuo Zhongguoshu shehuizhuyi 3.0: Chongqing jingyan" (To explore Chinese socialism 3.0: The Chongqing Experience), www.snzg.cn/article/2011/0610/article_24308.html (accessed on 7 October 2013).
5. For example, Fan Zhongxin's speech "Fazhi zhuiqiu yu Chongqing moshi de jiaoxun" (Pursuit of the rule of law and lessons to be learned from the Chongqing Model) at Central South University, 23 May 2012, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_89aa0dc0d01013ld8.html (7 October 2013); Wu Zuolai, "Chongqing renmin xihuan 'Bo shuji' ma?" (Do Chongqing people like Party Secretary Bo?) <http://jjliuyougancheng.blogchina.com/1259463.html> (accessed on 8 October 2013).
6. The other major groups of participants include students, teachers, soldiers, bureaucrats, etc.
7. David Bray, "Building 'Community': New Strategies of Governance in Urban China," in *China's Governmentalities: Governing Change, Changing Government*, Elaine Jeffreys (ed), Oxon, Routledge, 2009.

themselves. This paper examines how the retirees experienced the Red culture programme by incorporating it into their everyday routines, habits, and value systems, and how this process of incorporation interacted with the officially designed programme. Although the programme went bankrupt as Bo was sacked from his position, the ways in which it was organised and implemented, and the ways in which it was actually received and appropriated by the public and ordinary participants, sheds light on long-term questions about ideological control by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the prospects for building a civic society, and implications for the effectiveness of social and political reform in China.

Data utilised in this paper was collected during fieldwork conducted in Chongqing between October 2011 and March 2012.⁽⁸⁾ Data was collected from 18 semi-structured interviews with 23 retirees⁽⁹⁾ and observations of their singing and dancing activities. Retiree participants consisted of people who were members of community art groups, i.e., chorus and dancing groups, and those who voluntarily formed singing groups in parks in Chongqing. Four such community groups,⁽¹⁰⁾ Spring Breeze (Shapingba District), White Cloud and Autumn Moon (Nan'an District), and Blue Heaven (Yuzhong District) represented four different types of communities that supported the retirees' activities. Team Spring Breeze recruited members who retired from the same corporation. Team White Cloud recruited members based on the common experience of being "educated youth" sent down to the rural villages during the Cultural Revolution. Team Autumn Moon belonged to the residential community in which it was located. Team Blue Heaven was affiliated with an artistic organisation with government background. Community art groups were often invited to perform at various Red themed shows organised by the government. For example, during October 2011, White Cloud was busy preparing for a dancing competition organised by Yuzhong District. The two music tracks they danced to were "Harmonious China" (*hexie zhongguo* 《和谐中国》) and "My Motherland" (*wo de zuguo* 《我的祖国》). Blue Heaven, thanks to its affiliated organisation, which was a main organiser of many big shows at the municipality level, attended more than 20 performances in the year 2011.

Shaping Park (Shapingba District), Bijin Park (Yubei District), and Eling Park (Yuzhong District) were selected as major locations for interviews and observations. They hosted a variety of different activities under the name of singing Red. In Shaping Park, singing spots were organised by voluntarily gathered amateur musicians. In Bijin Park, there was free teaching of singing Red songs every morning. Eling Park had a well-equipped karaoke spot set up by the park's administrative office.

The Red culture campaign

The Red culture campaign was officially launched in June 2008. A large performance, "Ode to the Dear Party – Singing Contest in Commemoration of 'July 1st,'" was carried out by employees of the municipality's government bureaucracies. The official Red culture campaign quickly spread throughout Chongqing and mobilised millions of local people.

Singing Red was probably the most prominent and controversial part of the programme. Songs that were defined as Red extended far beyond "old songs" of the revolutionary era. Red songs were officially designated as songs about "saving the nation, building the nation, and strengthening the nation" (*jiuguo de ge, jianguo de ge, qiangguo de ge* 救国的歌, 建国的歌, 强国的歌). Regular activities under the supervision of the government included an annual Singing Red competition at the municipal level, a TV pro-

gramme named "Daily Red Song" broadcasted by Chongqing Satellite Channel, regular Red singing and dancing performances at public squares, an Internet forum set up for promoting Red songs, etc. The first "China's Red Song Gala" (*Zhonghua honggehui* 《中华红歌会》) was staged in October 2010. It attracted performers from 31 provinces around the country. The "Reading Classics" section of the programme focused on the publication of small pocket books edited by Chongqing's Propaganda Department. The intention was to encourage the officials and the masses to read classical works that "represent the fruits of civilisation and wisdom of humanity."⁽¹¹⁾ The first collection of "Reading Classics" was published in December 2008. In subsequent years, 28 series of small booklets were published, claiming a total issuance of more than 17 million units. The third element – "Telling Stories" (*jiang gushi* 《讲故事》) – was introduced in March 2009. Pamphlets of as many as 8,000 stories were printed out and disseminated to the public. The fourth part – "spreading mottoes" – involved sending Red themed text messages. The most famous one was probably what Bo sent to millions of Chongqing mobile phone users on 28 April 2009. He quoted several of Mao Zedong's famous sayings, including "Humans need to have some spirit" (*ren shi yao youdian jingshen de* 人是要有点精神的). In 2008 and 2009, Chongqing organised two consecutive "Red text-message composition contests" to encourage "the study, composition, and transmission of Red mottoes."⁽¹²⁾ Some lower-level governments in Chongqing even set up "Red message offices" (*hong duan ban* 红短办) to take charge of sending messages to the public on a regular basis.

In 2009, the Red culture campaign was placed at the top of the municipal government's cultural agenda.⁽¹³⁾ By the end of 2010, it was reported that 148,000 "Singing Red" performances had been carried out, with an aggregate attendance of more than 87.3 million people. "Reading Classics" activities totalled 44,000, with an aggregate attendance of 17.6 million. There had been 86,000 "Telling Stories" gatherings, and 0.17 billion "Red motto" messages sent out through mobile phone text messages, or shared on China's most popular social media, such as QQ.com.⁽¹⁴⁾ The spectacle of the Red culture campaign reached its most explosive scale and effects in the few months leading to the 90th anniversary of the founding of CCP in July 2011. A series of mass activities featuring the theme of "Love the Party, Love the Nation, Love the Hometown" were produced with dazzling frequency and intensity, including "Daily Red Songs," "Red Song Singer Competition," "May 1st Labour Day Gala," the first "Youth Chorus Singing Competition." Between 28 June and 1 July, the second "China's Red Song Gala" (*Zhonghua honggehui* 《中华红歌会》) amassed 108 choruses and 8,000 performers from all over China. A series of performances claiming an attendance of more than 800,000 participants concluded the spectacular Red season in Chongqing. By July 2011, the campaign claimed an aggregate participation of more than 100 million people in all kinds of activities. By January 2012, it was reported,

8. Supplementary field trips to Chongqing were made in June 2012 and May 2013.

9. Two group interviews (one with four people and the other with three people) were held.

10. The groups' names are fictitious.

11. "He Shizhong: 'Chang hong' shi jian kang youyi de qunzhongxing wenhua huodong" (He Shizhong: Singing Red is a beneficial cultural activity for the masses), *Chongqing Daily*, 11 July 2011.

12. Chongqing Government Directive, "Decision of the Chongqing Municipal Committee of the CCP on Promoting Vigorous Development and Prosperity of Culture" (*Zhonggong Chongqing shiwei guanyu tuidong wenhua dafazhan dafanrong de jue ding*), 18 June 2009.

13. "Bo Xilai: Chang xiang zhuxuanlu, ningjiu jingqishen" (Bo Xilai: Sing aloud and spirit up), *Chongqing Daily*, 23 June 2009.

14. "Renmin ribao zhuanfang He Shizhong: 'chang du jiang chuan' tizhen shehui jingqishen" (The People's Daily interviewing He Shizhong: "Singing Red, Reading Classics, Telling Stories, and Spreading Mottoes" raises of the social spirit), *Chongqing Daily*, 4 December 2010.

for the last time on record, that more than 250,000 performances of the Red culture programme had been staged in Chongqing.⁽¹⁵⁾

The structures of the Red culture programme and the practice of singing Red

In the following sections of the paper, I utilise Michel de Certeau's concepts of *strategy* and *tactics* to examine the differences between the official programme and the everyday practices of singing Red by retirees.⁽¹⁶⁾ The differences were analysed in terms of *resources* and *cultural schemas*, two crucial elements that constitute William H. Sewell Jr.'s definition of *structure*.⁽¹⁷⁾ By tracing the interaction between the official programme and the practices of singing Red by retirees, this paper highlights the fact that although the Red culture programme and its participants' practices possess different structures of operation, they nevertheless actively appropriated each other into their respective courses of development. It was during this process of mutual appropriation that a tactical effect was exercised on the official programme by the practices of ordinary people.

The official Red culture programme resembled what de Certeau would call a *strategy*. *Strategy* consists of established, rationalised, expansionist, centralised, and dominating rules employed by "a subject of will and power," on the basis of which "objective" political, scientific, and economic models are built. A strategy circumscribes its own "proper" place, and generates relations that are isolable and extractable from the environment. It constructs grand narratives of history, and holds the "power of knowledge." The strategic system is often gigantic, tightly woven, prescribing, and repressive.⁽¹⁸⁾

In order to forcefully circumscribe a place for itself within the Party's political landscape, the Red culture programme had to mobilise resources.⁽¹⁹⁾ Firstly, executive power allowed the campaign to mobilise all levels of governments in Chongqing to pour an incredible amount of monetary and human resources into sustaining a wide range of Red-themed activities all year round. Two directives were issued by the Party Committee and the municipal government in 2008 and 2009 – "Directive on the Launching of Singing Red Classic Songs Activities" (*Guanyu guangfan kaizhan hongse jingdian gequ chuanchang huodong de yijian* 《关于广泛开展红色经典歌曲传唱活动的意见》⁽²⁰⁾) and "Decision of the Chongqing Municipal Committee of the CCP on Promoting Vigorous Development and Prosperity of Culture" (*Zhonggong Chongqing shiwei Guanyu tuidong wenhua dafazhan dafanrong de jue ding* 《中共重庆市委关于推动文化大发展大繁荣的决定》⁽²¹⁾). These directives urged the bureaucratic organs, social groups, large enterprises, and higher education institutions to be diligent in organising Red culture activities in Chongqing. The Propaganda Department subsequently nominated 405 Red culture bases in Chongqing, including all levels of government agencies, schools and universities, and the PLA troops based in Chongqing. The fact that the number of activities organised by local governments was regularly reported and evaluated made it a "political commitment" for the local cadres to promote the programme.

Secondly, Bo Xilai, an experienced, astute politician and prominent member of the "princeling" faction, possessed formidable political resources within China's ruling stratum. During Bo's tenure, many high-profile Party officials visited Chongqing and publically praised the Red culture campaign, including then members of the Politburo Standing Committee Wu Bangguo, Jia Qinglin, Li Changchun, Xi Jinping, He Guoqiang, and Zhou Yongkang. At the same time, Chongqing's delegates went on tour in Hong Kong and Beijing to showcase the achievements of the Red culture campaign. In June

2011, the Chongqing delegation went to Beijing to join the national celebration of the Party's birthday in the capital. In addition to performing at The Beijing Cultural Palace Grand Theatre at the opening ceremony "The Fragrance of a Hundred Flowers – Holding High the Banner of the Party," the Chongqing delegation brought their Red programme to the PLA Second Artillery Force, Beijing's Chaoyang District, Tsinghua University, the National Committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference, and the Central Party School during its stay in Beijing. The visits by high-profile officials to Chongqing and the Chongqing delegates' tours outside of Chongqing were widely interpreted as Bo's effort to lobby for the Red culture campaign and seek endorsement from China's political elites. Successfully or not, Bo was using his own influence to promote, or at least adding a shield of protection, to his spectacular campaign.

Thirdly, the Propaganda Department of Chongqing, as supervisor of the local media, lined up local newspapers and TV channels as devotees to the programme. A most notable example was the reformation of Chongqing's satellite TV starting from 2009. As the channel adopted "China Red" as its banding strategy, special Red programmes, including "Zhou Enlai in Chongqing" (*Zhou Enlai zai Chongqing* 《周恩来在重庆》), "Faith" (*xinnian* 《信念》), "Reading" (*pindu* 《品读》), "Daily Red Song" (*tiantian hongge hui* 《天天红歌会》), "Ten Points about People's Welfare" (*shida minsheng* 《十大民生》), "Roundtable on Common Prosperity" (*gongfu dajiatan* 《共富大家谈》), etc., were launched to build the "first public satellite channel" in China. In January 2011, Chongqing's satellite channel terminated the broadcasting of TV serials at prime time. In March the same year, it cancelled all commercial advertisement to enforce its mission as a Red channel that would send the public only appropriate and positive messages. As other provincial satellite channels were fighting tooth and nail over how to best entertain the Chinese people, Chongqing's reform of its most profitable channel was seen as a radical move to assert the cause of its Red culture agenda.

Whereas the official programme amassed a large quantity of resources through administrative orders, personal political influence, and media coverage, the singing practices of retirees involved a different composition of resources. Not surprisingly, a certain amount of pecuniary resources was essential. Both the organised community performances and voluntary singing activities in public parks had their own financing systems. The Propaganda Department of the municipal government, which was in charge of the campaign, did not directly fund the singing groups. In the case of the community teams, most of them collected an annual membership fee from their members. In addition, they received help from Residents' Committees, corporations, and art organisations. In return, the teams represented their communities or organisations in various contests and performances organ-

15. Statistics accessed at Chongqing government's website: www.cq.gov.cn/today/news/376959.htm.

16. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit.

17. Sewell Jr. defines structure as "constituted by mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action." See William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98, No. 1, 1992, p. 27.

18. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit., p.36.

19. According to Sewell Jr.'s definition, resources consist of both human and non-human objects that are enacted by cultural schemas to sustain, or strengthen, particular relations. Human resources include "physical strength, dexterity, knowledge and emotional commitments," whereas non-human resources include objects that are "animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured." Knowledge and emotions are counted as resources, but only when they are actualised in human bodies and minds. See William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *art. cit.*, p. 9.

20. 11 July 2008.

21. 18 June 2009.

ised by the government. For example, Spring Breeze received a small sum of funding from the company the members previously worked for. In the cases of Spring Breeze, Autumn Moon, and Blue Heaven, the neighbourhood committees⁽²²⁾ and the organisations they belonged to provided them with practise rooms for free. Team Autumn Moon had a particularly warm relationship with the Residents' Committee, which regularly paid for performance outfits, transportation costs, and meals when the team was on performance assignments. In public parks where singing was mainly for "self-entertainment," the cost was significantly lower. There were two main forms of singing activities in parks. One type involved a small band made up of amateur musicians playing erhu,⁽²³⁾ keyboard, etc. People who wanted to sing normally pay one or two *yuan* to the keyboardists to "cover the expenses for electricity."⁽²⁴⁾ The other type involved loosely formed singing groups without membership requirements. The participants needed to pay for copies of singing materials, but in most cases did not pay for the self-employed teachers who headed many of the singing groups in parks.

Teachers/conductors played a key role in defining the quality of the singing activities for retirees. In public parks, there were no requirements regarding the credentials of teachers in most cases. For example, the lady who volunteered to coach the singing group in Bijin Park was a retired language teacher who had a self-proclaimed life-long interest in music. The task of the teacher was to lead the sing-along and make sure everyone was engaged and happy. There was little coaching on technique, as the group did not aspire to perform at formal occasions or enter any organised competitions. The community teams, on the other hand, took the hiring of teachers seriously. Choices were made based on a combination of factors: social networks, professional suitability, commuting convenience, and budget. Team White Cloud was forced to hire a new teacher when the previous one quit due to unbearably long commuting hours. The new teacher/conductor used to be a professional singer, but not a music teacher. The team members complained behind her back that she was not a "proper" teacher, and that without a "proper" teacher, the team was "like a heap of loose sand."⁽²⁵⁾ By contrast, team members of Blue Heaven took much pride in their teacher, who was "very professional." The teacher, who was also the conductor of the chorus, was in her early thirties and had a Master's degree from a music college. She was charging as much as 300 *yuan* per teaching session, much more than the teacher of Autumn Moon, a retired middle school music teacher who made only an average of 25 *yuan* per teaching session. The teacher of Autumn Moon was willing to accept lower payment as a courtesy to the team she had been coaching for more than eight years. While Autumn Moon was invited to attend district-level activities, Blue Heaven often represented Chongqing at national contests. The quality of teaching varied significantly among community choruses in Chongqing and had an evident impact on the singing experiences of the retirees.

Cultural schemas – values, beliefs, and judgments

According to De Certeau, *strategy* constructs a grand narrative of History on the basis of which "objective" social, political, and economic systems can be built.⁽²⁶⁾ Chongqing's Red culture campaign needed to sell its own story to justify not only the culture campaign itself, but also its grand vision of constructing a superstructure that would in turn have an impact on the economic structure. The cultural schemas⁽²⁷⁾ evoked by the official narrative consisted of a number of dichotomised value judgments. Firstly, the Red culture cam-

paign constructed narratives of the CCP's glorious revolutionary past, and criticised the spiritual emptiness and vulgar culture of the present. During the enemy's invasion, it was "March the Army" (*Yiyongjun jinxingqu* 《义勇军进行曲》) and "Big Knife Marching Song" (*dadao jinxingqu* 《大刀进行曲》) that mobilised tens of thousands of people to defend the nation. However, in the past few decades, a crisis of the soul emerged during the startling economic development. In the era of information explosion, multiple value systems existed and competed with one another. It was believed that spiritual emptiness haunted people who were now enjoying a much higher living standard than in the past. The vulgar culture of the fast food era was eroding the soul of the general public, especially the youth.

Secondly, the Red culture campaign criticised the swelling social inequality resulted from the market economy, and advocated a fairer socialist approach to the distribution of wealth in society. Two points were repeatedly emphasised in the narrative of the Red culture campaign: "Serve the people" (*wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务) and "common prosperity" (*gongtong fuyu* 共同富裕). Mao's renowned dictum "Serve the people" was argued to constitute the fundamental difference between capitalism and socialism. Capitalism served capital, whereas socialism served the people. In today's China, to serve the people was to pursue common prosperity. Western technologies, corporate management, and the market economy were only legitimate when they served the people and brought prosperity to all. The significance of singing Red songs was that it not only promoted revolutionary traditions, but also helped build an advanced socialist culture, which would boost Chongqing's economic development and benefit all of its citizens.⁽²⁸⁾

Whereas the official programme did not hesitate to make grand moral judgements, the kinds of cultural schemas evoked in the practices of singing Red by retirees were much less grandiose.

Judgment on the past

Many retirees held rather different opinions and attitudes towards the past, in particular the Mao era. There was no single, overarching narrative for the collective memory of the pre-Reform years. Moreover, narratives of the past were markedly intertwined with comments on current social conditions, which again differed among the retirees. Some were critical of the Cultural Revolution, citing the anarchistic turbulence in society, the extravagant worship of Chairman Mao, and the violent disruption of daily work and study.⁽²⁹⁾ One interviewee, for example, hated the Culture Revo-

22. The Residents' Committee is the lowest level of administrative apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party in the city.

23. Erhu is a traditional music instrument in China.

24. Interview with TX 53, male, aged 70.

25. Fieldwork notes 10 January 2012.

26. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit., p. 36.

27. According to Sewell Jr.'s definition, cultural schemas refer to a wide variety of rules that exist at different levels of social life, including abstract tools of thought, such as binary oppositions of female and male, private and public, as well as more specific cultural norms, conventions, principles, habits, metaphors, assumptions, etc. Cultural schemas are *virtual* and *generalisable*, meaning that these rules and procedures are not reducible to any particular point in time and space, but are applicable to a wide range of contexts and circumstances. See William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," art. cit., pp. 7-8.

28. For example, "Bo Xilai: Chang xiang zhuxuanlu, ningjiu jingqishen" (Bo Xilai: Sing aloud and spirit up), *Chongqing Daily*, 23 June 2009; "Bo Xilai: hongge changchule zan Zhongguoren de zhihaogan he ningjuli" (Bo Xilai: Singing Red enhances the pride and solidarity of the Chinese people), *Chongqing Daily*, 8 July 2011; "He Shizhong: 'Chang hong' shi jiangkan youyi de qunzhongxing wenhua huodong" (He Shizhong: Singing Red is a beneficial cultural activity for the masses), *Chongqing Daily*, 11 July 2011.

29. Group interview with TX 46, 47, 48, 49 (female, aged 62, 64, 60, 60).

lution,⁽³⁰⁾ having suffered a great deal of discrimination and humiliation as child of the "Black Five Types."⁽³¹⁾ The interesting thing was that the depressing recollections of the Culture Revolution did not prevent him from singing the praises of the CCP. Instead, he was an active member of a singing team and participated in various Red-themed performances. He believed that today's Chinese society, including Chongqing, was totally different from the one during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, some interviewees offered fonder memories of the Mao era. One interviewee believed that there were no cancer patients in China during Mao's time, because "people ate well" and there was no pollution.⁽³²⁾ There was less competition for profit, and certainly much less greed in society. The cadres of the Communist Party were honest, clean, and actually "served the people." All the above attributes of the Mao era had been lost during the 30 years of Reform. The environment was in a dire state; people became more aggressive in competing for resources and wealth; corruption was rampant, and "clean officials would be considered stupid."⁽³³⁾ Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with today's China did not prevent them from singing *new* Red songs that praised the Reform era. Many people might be feeling nostalgic for the past, yet nostalgia accounted for only part of the story. The immediate needs of the retirees at the present time seemed to offer a better explanation for their involvement in the Red culture campaign.

Non-monetary benefits – "Better than playing mahjong"

Retirees believed that singing had two main benefits. The first was that singing improved health. The inhaling and exhaling process increased the circulation of oxygen in the body and was good for the organs. Secondly, singing was considered much better than playing mahjong, which was a favourite leisure activity in Sichuan and Chongqing. Retirees who spent their spare time singing instead of playing mahjong prided themselves on choosing the better hobby. They almost felt morally superior to others who indulged in the guilty pleasure of playing mahjong, which supposedly destroyed people's health and involved monetary exchanges. Joining a singing group was the retirees' pursuit of spiritual enjoyment and artistic appreciation at a higher level. Some chorus members described how they were impressed by the beauty of the chord. "I feel intoxicated by the music,"⁽³⁴⁾ said one interviewee. Singing was believed to give people a better mental outlook. Some cited Mr. Bo's well-known acclamation that singing can "raise the spirits" (*tigao jingqishen* 提高精气神).

A sense of community

The retirees were most attracted to joining a team by the sense of community they experienced in the group. Members of the Spring Breeze team loved to emphasise how well they got along with each other. It was a bustling scene whenever the team was taking a break during rehearsals. Team members gathered in small groups and chatted earnestly, while some sorted out vegetables as if they were at home. The feeling of "being at home" prevailed. One of the members volunteered to bring a rice cooker to the practise room, and a couple of people brought dishes for a "pot luck" lunch. Friendship extended beyond the practise days. On birthdays, moving days, or the marriage of someone's children, the whole team gathered to celebrate. "We look for every chance to get together,"⁽³⁵⁾ a member told me. Another member said quite emotionally, "Now we do not have 'danwei'

(the work unit 单位). This feels like we still belong to the 'zuzhi' (organisation 组织)." ⁽³⁶⁾ Retirees from other teams echoed the claim that the best thing about joining a team was that it provided opportunities for people of the same age to get together. Some of the retirees did not live with their children and called themselves "empty nest elderly" (*kong chao laoren* 空巢老人). The team provided them with company and a sense of belonging.

The pursuit of happiness

Spending time together was fun. Unlike young people who were struggling to earn a better living, the retirees described themselves as "earning by eating," referring to the fact that "after retirement, society has to pay for my sustenance for every day I breathe. I earn by simply eating."⁽³⁷⁾ The only remaining task of life was to keep healthy and happy. Whenever there were troubles in their personal lives, they sang. Worries and distress simply dissipated when they were immersed in music. During a Chinese New Year Gala performance held by White Cloud, the atmosphere was extremely jubilant. People kept singing their favourite songs over dinner, such as "We are Living Under the Sunshine" (*women shenghuo zai yangguang xia* 《我们生活在阳光下》), "It is a Great Day Today" (*jintian shi ge hao rizi* 《今天是个好日子》), "We'll Meet Again" (*zai xiang hui* 《再相会》). It was almost suspiciously happy. Or maybe they *wanted* to be happy and *chose* to be happy on these occasions. One interviewee made such a comment: "Look at how happy they are, singing and dancing. When this is finished, they have to go back home, whether it is a happy one or not."⁽³⁸⁾

Whereas the official programme constructed a narrative of History in order to prescribe a grand vision of the society for its people, the practitioners of singing Red relied on much less ambitious values, conventions, and beliefs that nonetheless helped retirees to decide whether, and to what extent, they would like to be involved in a particular cultural activity.

Mutual appropriation: How the official programme and retirees made use of each other

Although employing different sets of resources and cultural schemas, the official programme and the practices of the retirees did not run completely different courses. Instead, during the Red culture campaign, they actively appropriated each other into their respective courses of development. No matter how powerful, the government's programme relied on the "petty" existence of dispersed practices of ordinary people. On the other hand, the practices of retirees were capable of making use of the other's larger pool of resources to serve their own interest.

30. Interview with TX 59, male, aged 70.

31. The "Black Five Types" refer to landlords, rich peasants, anti-revolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists, who were targets of persecution during the Cultural Revolution.

32. Interview with TX 55, female, aged 58.

33. Interview with TX 54, female, aged 64.

34. Interview with TX 67, female, aged 53.

35. Interview with TX 49, female, aged 60.

36. Interview with TX 52, female, aged 64.

37. Interview with TX 48, female, aged 61.

38. Interview with TX 65, female, aged 55.

Nostalgia

It was widely acknowledged that retirees made up the most active group of participants in singing Red. The most common explanation was that they felt nostalgic for their youth, a time when today's Red songs were popular. Nostalgia did evidently permeate people's attitudes towards the Red songs. Some liked the songs simply because singing reminded them of the days when they were still young. The retirees admitted that they had special emotional ties to songs of the past. "We grew up under the Red flag," said one interviewee.⁽³⁹⁾ "To forget the past is betrayal," commented another.⁽⁴⁰⁾ One interviewee movingly recollected how he joined the Communist army when he was only 15 years old, how he learned the first song of his life – "The East is Red" (*dong fang hong* 《东方红》) in the army, and how he sang Red songs in the trenches of Korean War in 1952. Whenever he encountered difficulties later in life, he sang. The songs reminded him of the war and his best friend who was killed in an explosion on the very day of his arrival in Korea. He felt that he had been extremely lucky to lead a long and fulfilling life. Red songs he learned 60 years ago still lifted his spirits.⁽⁴¹⁾

Nostalgia was what the official programme relied on to mobilise the elderly. To run a mass campaign of such grand scale, the support of the large population of retirees who took a genuine interest was critical. Moreover, retirees were a population who had the time and energy to participate in the programme constantly and extensively. Furthermore, the campaign needed to adopt a broad definition of Red to quell accusations of affiliation with the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the official campaign allowed retirees considerable freedom regarding their choice of Red songs, accepting the fact that the nostalgic sentiments of the retirees applied not only to the glories of the revolutionary past but also to personal recollections of their youth. The retirees sang songs ranging from "East is Red" (*dong fang hong* 《东方红》) and "Defend the Yellow River" (*baowe huanghe* 《保卫黄河》) to "Meeting at Aobao" (*aobao xianghui* 《敖包相会》) and "Wasted Years" (*cuotuo suiyue* 《蹉跎岁月》).⁽⁴²⁾ The official programme absorbed community activities that had been popular with retirees and elevated the status of these activities with an official endorsement.

Official endorsement

Having the unique fortune of being openly supported by their government, some self-organised singing groups also actively identified themselves with the singing Red campaign. For example, at the end of each singing session for one group in Bijin Park, the teacher of the group always led her group to chant a three-line slogan: "*hongge dajia chang, yue chang yue xiangliang; hongge dajiachang, yue chang yue xiangchang; hongge dajia chang, yue chang yue jiangkang*" (to sing Red, to sing loudly; to sing Red, to sing more; to sing Red, to be healthier 红歌大家唱, 越唱越响亮; 红歌大家唱, 越唱越想唱; 红歌大家唱, 越唱越健康).

Identifying with the official programme had its advantage. Sometimes retirees used the official endorsement as a weapon to win battles against those who wanted them to stop singing. A quite intensive dispute once broke out between a group of retirees singing in Shaping Park and the management team of the park. The retirees at this singing spot were using small microphones, which kept making caustic noises. Residents near the park had been complaining about the "noise" made by the singing group, and police were called to the scene. One person from the park's administrative office confronted the retirees rather aggressively, but the retirees did not back off.

They avidly argued their case, citing the wide-spreading Singing Red campaign in the city and the support from the local government. Bystanders seemed to be more convinced by the retirees' appeal and began to voice their support. When I visited the park again the next week, a wooden sign designating recognised sites for singing Red stood where the retirees gathered to sing. They were using even bigger loudspeakers this time. Clearly the retirees won. Although the singing group was recognised by the park's administration, there was no restriction on which songs could be sung at the spot. The retirees organised themselves as a singing group rather than acting under explicit decree of the government to participate in the campaign. Nonetheless, when circumstances required, the retirees used governmental policy as a weapon to defend their habitual social gatherings. Here the boundary between the official programme and the daily life of the participants was blurred.

Performing opportunities

As the campaign needed the retirees' cooperation to implement a large-scale mass campaign, the retirees acquired unique performance opportunities that they had not dreamed of before. Performance opportunities constituted an important resource for the development of a community chorus team. It helped the team build a reputation in cultural circles and was key to securing funding and various other forms of help. For a long time, the retirees' teams relied on performance opportunities at local festivals and private parties. Only the very best ones could participate in municipal or even national competitions. During the Red culture campaign, however, performance opportunities surged. Retirees were busy accepting countless invitations from all levels of government that felt obliged to put up large-scale Red themed galas, and many also had the chance to perform at high-class venues such as the Chongqing Theatre and the People's Hall of Chongqing, where their audience included senior officials, sometimes Bo Xilai himself. These kinds of opportunities injected a large dose of excitement, pride, and honour into the everyday lives of the elderly. Moreover, the Red culture campaign fostered the establishment of many new community singing teams, which allowed previously unengaged retirees to explore a new way of actively participating in community activities.

Whilst Chongqing's ambitious official Red culture programme utilised the huge amount of resources at its disposal to circumscribe its "place" in Chongqing's political scene, the resources the retirees had and used were mainly for the daily running of the activities they enjoyed. Despite the small quantity and seemingly trivial nature, these resources were essential to the sustainability and durability of the singing Red practices. The Red culture programme and the practices of the retirees capitalised on each other's existence.

In this process of mutual appropriation, the practices of retirees exercised a tactical effect on the official programme. *Tactics* are procedures of practices that are dispersed, opaque, and quiet, yet capable of deflecting im-

39. Interview with TX 48, female, aged 60.

40. Interview with TX 46, female, aged 62.

41. Interview with TX 53, male, aged 70.

42. "East is Red" (*dong fang hong* 《东方红》) was produced in the 1940s and praised the great leader Chairman Mao. "Defend the Yellow River" (*baowe huanghe* 《保卫黄河》) was written in the 1930s during the war against Japan and contains strong patriotic sentiments. "Meeting at Aobao" (*aobao xianghui* 《敖包相会》) was a love song popularised after the founding the People's Republic of China. "Wasted Years" (*cuotuo suiyue* 《蹉跎岁月》) was produced in 1982 as the theme song for a TV serial that told the story of educated youth sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

posing systems and dominating institutions. According to de Certeau, a tactic does not seek to escape the space where its practitioner is constrained by existing order and institution, but poaches and diverts in an artful way. The success of a tactic depends on its users' creativity, and most importantly, their ability to catch fleeting opportunities.⁽⁴³⁾ As shown in the preceding section, the tactical effect of the practices of the retirees dwelled not on the fact that it openly challenged the official programme, but on the fact that they ran a course of their own that met the needs of its practitioners and served their own interests. The retirees knew well the benefits of identifying their activities with the official Red culture programme, and knew exactly when to utilise this affiliation to defend their interests. They also excelled at picking the "right" songs for different occasions, and understood how to exploit the freedom to sing songs that were personal favourites but not typically Red. The practices of the retirees constituted "a hidden production" of meaningful and valuable actions for themselves at the locale of everyday life.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The practices of singing Red – a less powerful but more durable structure

In the above sections, I have analysed the structures of both the official Red culture programme and the practices of singing Red by retirees in terms of resources and cultural schemas. These two structures can be further characterised by two features – power and depth.⁽⁴⁵⁾ A structure is powerful when it is capable of mobilising a large quantity of resources. The more resources a structure has at its disposal, the more power it can exercise on other structures. A structure is deep when the cultural schemas it consists of are pervasive and entrenched in social spheres. Deeply rooted structures are capable of generating practices and actions that are taken for granted by the actors.⁽⁴⁶⁾ For example, language is an extremely deep structure that possesses a modest amount of power. It is durable, yet exercises relatively little effect on organising power relations in a particular society. A political structure, in contrast, is usually very powerful in organising social relations. Yet it can be transformed rather quickly and dramatically compared to linguistic structures. The durability of political structures largely depends on the extent to which social actors internalise and neutralise the power relations entailed by this particular structure.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The structure of the practices of retirees in the programme was less powerful but more durable than that of the official programme. The structure of the practices of singing Red by retirees was less powerful because the kinds of resources at the disposal of the retirees were significantly less than that of the official programme. Nostalgia laid the emotional foundation for the retirees to share their passion for singing Red songs. Nevertheless nostalgia was not sufficient to sustain the community activities. The retirees relied on often meagre monetary resources and fluctuating quality of coaching. Regular performance opportunities for community teams were unlikely to generate much investment because they tended to be low-level and politically insignificant.

The singing activities of retirees were nevertheless more durable than the Red culture campaign. They used the campaign to make friends, shield themselves from unhappy family life, and win battles against those who wanted them to stop singing. After the collapse of the campaign, they continued to sing.⁽⁴⁸⁾ The cultural schemas activated in the practices of singing – health benefits, a non-monetary and artistic value attributed to singing, sense of community and achievement, joy, and knowledge of how to go

with the political tide – were so deeply embedded in the everyday life of the retirees that they easily outlived the imposing narratives of the official campaign.

Conclusion

While the Red culture campaign, evidently ambitious and prescribing, strove to make a strong presence in the local people's daily cultural life, it was often ignored that the practices of ordinary participants ran their own course with their own resources and convictions. The Red culture programme and the practices of its participants possessed their own distinctive structures. On the other hand, although the official Red culture programme and the practice of singing Red by retirees each consisted of a unique set of resources and cultural schemas, they relied on mutual appropriation to sustain their operations. This process of interaction provided opportunities for the practices of ordinary people to exercise a tactical effect on the official programme. The official Red culture campaign provided a precious opportunity for retirees to garner financial and political support from a strong government, which in turn needed groups of dedicated and enthusiastic participants to activate a mass campaign. As a result, the retirees turned the programme into social gatherings, for which the government provided them with meeting venues. They turned it into a chance to showcase their artistic achievements, for which the government decorated the stage.

Furthermore, the practices of singing Red by retirees were less powerful but more durable than the official programme. It needs to be emphasised here that the significance of the mundane but durable structure of everyday life should not be underestimated. Because cultural schemas are virtual and generalisable, as Sewell Jr. argues, they can also be applied in other contexts to facilitate, or impede, programmes and policies. In the aftermath of the Red culture campaign, the cultural schemas that underpinned the practice of singing Red continued to constitute the mobilising force behind the retirees' self-organised singing activities. Similarly, any political programme, whether to build civil society in China, or start political reform in any degree or form, will inevitably be filtered and reconfigured once carried out as concrete practice in daily life. At a time when China faces enormous social, economic, and political challenges, the fact that even the trivialities of everyday life are capable of running their own course of development and making changes may not be as trivial as it seems.

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43. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit., p. xix.

44. *Ibid.*

45. William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," art. cit.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 22

47. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

48. This observation was made during research trips to Chongqing in June 2012 and May 2013.