

Joyful singing in parks: encounters, appropriations, and contradictions in the dynamic of state governance in urban China

Cantando alegremente em parques: encontros, apropriações e contradições na dinâmica da governança estatal na China urbana



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Jun Zhang^{1a*}

Abstract Older citizens engaging in casual choral singing in public parks — a form of “social nonmovement” — can serve as a locus to show how cultural and spatial strategies of state governance become entangled, not without friction, in a Chinese city. Marginalized by the new urban economy, the choral singing participants appropriate an older socialist form of state-orchestrated public culture — which has shaped their bodily habitus during the earlier stages of their lives — for fun and socialization. In turn, the central government appropriates this leisure form of choral singing to re-animate Party public culture as a means to secure political legitimacy and promote a harmonious society. Such state-orchestrated public culture, with its implicit spatial order, justifies mass gatherings in public spaces and legitimizes the choral participants’ claim of

Resumo Cidadãos mais velhos que se envolvem em práticas casuais de canto coral em parques públicos — uma forma de “não-movimento social” — podem se tornar num ponto de enfoque para mostrar como as estratégias culturais e espaciais da governança estatal se enredam uma na outra, não sem atrito, numa cidade chinesa. Marginalizados pela nova economia urbana, os participantes nestas práticas de canto coral estão a apropriar-se de uma forma socialista mais antiga de cultura pública orquestrada pelo estado — que moldou os seus hábitos corporais durante os estágios iniciais de suas vidas — por razões de diversão e socialização. Por sua vez, o governo central apropria-se desta forma de lazer para tentar reanimar a cultura pública do Partido como meio de fortalecer a sua legitimidade política e promover uma sociedade harmoniosa. A

¹ Department of Public and International Affairs, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

^a orcid.org/0000-0002-4196-8101

* zhang.jun@cityu.edu.hk

public space, even though the post-socialist urban economy has given rise to a new spatial order that marginalizes such activities. This article shows how different state governing strategies designed to govern different aspects of life with different concerns formulated at different times intersect with one another and with ordinary citizens' quotidian practices. Such encounters of governing strategies create space, albeit vulnerable, for creativity in the everyday life of the ordinary.

Keywords: Social nonmovement; mundane lives; public culture; embodied practice; spatial politics.

Introduction

In her late 40s, Aunt Ye was laid off when her work unit, like many other state-owned enterprises (SOEs), went bankrupt in the late 1990s because of the economic reforms in China. She was struggling in all aspects of her life. In the mid-2000s she gradually became a regular participant in a choir group in White Cloud Mountain Park, a public park in the city of Guangzhou in southern China. The choir was mostly made up of similarly aged individuals with similar work experience. Aunt Ye would get up very early in the morning and head to the park, then hike up a trail

reanimação desta cultura pública do estado, com a sua ordem espacial implícita, justifica a realização de reuniões em massa em espaços públicos e legitima a reivindicação do espaço público pelos participantes nos coros, apesar da economia urbana pós-socialista ter dado origem a uma nova ordem espacial que marginaliza tais atividades. Este artigo mostra como diferentes estratégias de governança estatal desenhadas para governar diferentes aspetos da vida com diferentes preocupações formuladas em diferentes momentos se cruzam entre si e com as práticas quotidianas dos cidadãos comuns. Tais encontros de estratégias de governança criam um espaço, ainda que vulnerável, para a criatividade no quotidiano do comum.

Palavras-chave: Não-movimento social; vidas mundanas; cultura pública; prática corporizada; política do espaço.

to reach a flat, open space where the choir group would meet. Approaching midday, the group, having done several hours of singing, would part ways. Aunt Ye and her acquaintances often brought their own lunchboxes and ate together after the singing, but, occasionally, they would treat themselves with an inexpensive meal at a restaurant. Afterward, Aunt Ye would head home and let household chores and sewing work keep her busy for the rest of the day. At first, Aunt Ye went to the park once a week; the frequency gradually increased. For several years before her grandson was born in 2014, Aunt Ye attended the choir group five days a week.

Aunt Ye has consistently told me that joining and continuously participating in choir singing made her feel happy and relaxed, and that was why she had been so committed to it. I found this somewhat puzzling: Most of the songs the choral group sang were the so-called “red songs” (*hongge*¹), which glorified the Communist Party and the socialist revolution, praised the Party’s political leadership, and promoted patriotism. But the state-led economic reforms broke the socialist promise and brought them unemployment and hardship. Why is it that people like Aunt Ye, who have been marginalized in the new political economic order of the Reform era, still engage happily with the socialist public culture of “red songs”? The answer to this question quickly became clear as I started to realize that this practice of singing “red songs” in public parks was a widespread form of leisure that reflected a shared set of generational experiences.

Aunt Ye’s commitment to choral singing is by no means unique amongst her generational peers, particularly women, in contemporary urban China. In Guangzhou, open spaces in major public squares and parks are usually occupied by groups of middle-aged or older women singing and quite often dancing in the mornings and evenings.² These collec-

tive leisure activities are not always well received by other urban residents. Many complain about the singing or music as noise, saying that such choral and dancing groups should not occupy leisure space that is meant for the general public.³ Older women who participate in collective leisure activities in public spaces are called “*dama*”, a term that is used to refer to older women in general but that is now imbued with derogatory connotations — loud, unpolished, and old-fashioned; they have become objects of ridicule in the media and among the younger generations (Wang, 2015; Huang, 2021).

The visibility of leisure activities in public spaces reflects a significant change in urban life in China over the past decades. In fact, urban residents, especially the older ones, have long participated in various forms of leisure activities such as *taiji* in public parks and squares; what has newly emerged in the past two decades are the sheer scale and predominant presence and involve-

many older citizens continued their leisure activities whenever local government relaxed the control of outdoor activities (mostly in 2021).

³ In a few cases in some cities, the fight over who had access to specific public spaces led to violent confrontations. See, for example, ‘Guangchangwuchongtupinfa’ (Conflicts over square dance frequently occurred), *ZhongguoQingnian Bao*, November 24, 2013, news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/24/c_125751851.htm, accessed March 4, 2017; Zhao, Kiki, 2016, ‘China’s “Core Socialist Values”, the Song-and-Dance Versions’, *The New York Times*, September 2, www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/world/asia/china-dance-socialist-values.html?_r=0, accessed March 4, 2017.

¹ The official pinyin system for romanizing Chinese characters is used throughout the text.

² Covid-19 has brought tremendous interruptions in leisure activities in public spaces in China since 2020. Nonetheless, according to my interlocutors,

ment of women.⁴ To put this scale into perspective: some have estimated that collective dancing had by 2015 amassed more than 100 million participants (*The Paper*, 25 Nov. 2020). Unlike in the Maoist years (1949–1976) where one’s life was constantly under the gaze of the party-state through various state-affiliated institutions from schools to work units, in the reform era, urban residents have much more autonomy in deciding how to lead their lives and to use their free time (Rolandsen, 2011). That said, anthropologists who study public leisure activities in Chinese cities have suggested that public spaces are “tightly controlled by the city and the state” (Farquhar, 2009: 559; see also Huang, 2016). If the state’s control of public spaces is indeed tight and large groups that engage in collective activities are under constant surveillance, then why does the government tolerate such a highly visible, large-scale way of claiming public space, organized neither by the government nor by state-affiliated organizations?

Existing studies read these leisure activities as “a form of peopling the city” (Farquhar, 2009: 559), a “non-political social collective” outside the reach of the state (Huang, 2016), or an alternative form of social space to the ideal space intended by urban planners and lead-

ers (Oakes and Yang, 2020). While existing studies of collective leisure activities offer plenty of insight, their analysis may give the impression that the state imposes its control in a top-down manner and follows only a singular, coherent logic of governance. Drawing on long-term fieldwork with older women in Guangzhou, this article suggests that mundane practices such as collective singing among older citizens in public spaces do not simply defy or exist as an alternative to the state-sanctioned social-spatial order.⁵ Rather, they are integral to the complex dynamic of state governance.

This approach reverses the conventional analytical tendency to find agency only in practices that explicitly defy a given, suppressive political authority or system. The women in these choral groups have agency but the agency of their actions is not explicitly defined in opposition to the party-state. This article draws upon anthropological scholarship of the state to focus on mundane action as the locus to unpack the multi-dimensionality, inconsistency, and dynamics of state governance. This approach takes note of the risk of interpreting agency in the re-

⁴ This gender dimension of these leisure activities can be contextualized in a range of important social, economic and political forces, which will be addressed in a different article. For existing analysis focusing on gender, see (Wang, 2015; Yang and Feng, 2017; Huang, 2021).

⁵ I started to pay attention to park choral groups in Guangzhou in the mid-2000s. I spent a substantial amount of time observing the singing practices and listening to the stories of some participants. I studied the collective singing more systematically in the summer of 2013 when I lived in a low-income neighborhood and tried to understand the impacts of the new urban development regime on the lives of low-income residents. I continued such observation and conversations with my interlocutors through regular short field visits in Guangzhou between 2014 and 2019.

sistance-domination dichotomy without contextualizing local practices that are historically and culturally specific (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Ortner, 1995). This is a bottom-up approach, and such an approach is important because it provides a more nuanced understanding of the larger political implications of non-politically-motivated mundane action, especially in countries like China ruled by powerful authoritarian regimes with a clearly-articulated agenda of governance and an unquestionable capacity for imposing their will on society and citizens.

Rather than focusing on the subjectivities of individuals, this article pays more attention to practice and impact. This by no means tries to downplay subjective experiences or to separate practice from subjectivity. As will be shown later, how individual choral participants feel is crucial to understanding the complex role that individual subjectivities play in the multi-dimensional dynamics of state governance. Individuals are often inadvertent political actors, and their actions are often open for interpretation. The action and the ensuing interpretations affect both lives and social order at multiple levels and scales. This is particularly true of the action performed by large collectives of people. The notion of collective action is particularly intriguing in the Chinese context because of the importance of collectives during the Maoist decades. Present-day collectives like choral groups have little to do with Maoist collectives but they also have a large number of partici-

pants. I use “collective singing” and “choral singing” interchangeably to acknowledge the scale of action and the socialization dimension of these group activities.

Drawing on Asef Bayat’s work (2013), I approach the choral singing of older citizens in public spaces as a form of “social nonmovement,” bringing to the forefront the generational dimensions and pragmatic concerns of choral singing participants and the political potential resulting inadvertently from the scale of their collective leisure practices. Meanwhile, this nonmovement shall be understood as a space for encounters. Collective singing in public by older citizens is an embodied practice that evokes an earlier form of state-orchestrated public culture emerged during the Maoist period. Collective singing in public spaces was a key part of the fabric of daily life under Mao and an important cultural strategy of state governance to establish and reproduce political legitimacy. After decollectivization, the practice of choral singing lost much of its cultural and political salience in the public sphere before being revived at the turn of the millennium. It was in this context that officials and local governments re-appropriated this earlier form of Maoist public culture and capitalized on its authority to further their ends. Such re-appropriation can be seen as a cultural strategy of state governance, but it also legitimized older citizens’ massive presence in public spaces, even though the new spatial order under the contemporary state-led model

of urban governance marginalizes the value of such noisy, collective activities in public spaces.

This ethnographic study conceptualizes collective singing among older citizens as a space in which different state governing strategies — designed to govern different aspects of lives with different concerns formulated at different times — intersect with one another and with the quotidian practices of ordinary citizens. Such encounter manifests the multi-dimensionality, temporalities, hidden contradictions, and multiple appropriations in the workings of state governance, as governing strategies, some clearly articulated and some inherent, permeate everyday life. This bottom-up approach shows that, for an in-depth understanding of how state governance works, it is not enough to focus only on the rationale and objective of specific governing strategies, as the unfolding of everyday life often complicates the operations of governing strategies in unintended ways.

Deconstructing the monolithic state: the quiet encroachment of the ordinary

Anthropologists and social scientists working on contemporary China are sensitive to questions of power and domination and many are inclined to look at the authoritarian state as *the* defining structure that directly configures everyday life. Some researchers may emphasize the suppressive and controlling dimension of the state (for example, studies concern-

ing civil society), while others focus on the productive side of state power (for example, those following the Foucauldian line of biopolitics). This concern with state power is very insightful when it comes to making sense of the relatively subtle forms of politics that permeate the fabric of urban lives and landscapes, but it can also be somewhat misleading because it often leads researchers to make sense of mundane practices like choral singing primarily in relation to state power and without unpacking the complexities and contradictions of state-led practices of governance.

Let me elaborate this point by zooming in on three studies on collective leisure activities in public spaces in Chinese cities. Having conducted ethnographic research in the city of Chengdu in the mid-2010s, Claudia Huang (2016) attends to the collective dimension of older women dancing together. She suggests that this collective activity cannot be seen as the practitioners' endeavor to re-activate the collective ideal from the Maoist years; instead, collective dancing shall be seen as a venue through which the practitioners cultivate individual identities "through consumer choices" (p. 238). With emphasis placed on individualized choices, the collective in collective dancing is therefore understood as a co-presence of individuals rather than a social form inherent in the socialist state. Huang thus sees collective dancing as "a large-scale, non-political social collective ... one of the only means through which people can

participate in large-scale groups outside of the grip of state control" (p. 238).

Working in the city of Beijing, Judith Farquhar (2009; also 2002) is equally sensitive to the state but in a different manner. She conducted research on leisure activities in Beijing in the 1990s and early 2000s. This was a time when a series of social and economic reforms, in which the centrally planned economy was gradually replaced by a market-oriented economy, extended from rural areas to the cities, bringing a sea of changes that Yan (2010) calls "individualization." In this context, many scholars observed the retreat of the state and the de-politicization of everyday lives. Yet, Farquhar cautions against a narrowly defined concept of the political. Shifting from politics in terms of state-individual relationships to politics in other social and political arrangements such as the rural-urban divide, Farquhar suggests that the "ordinary action of the people" can be understood as "quiet politics" (p. 559).

Like Farquhar, cultural geographers Tim Oakes and Yang Yang (2020) also attend to the ordinary people's experience but from a spatial perspective. Drawing on fieldwork in Guizhou province, an area of southwestern China with many ethnic minority groups, they suggest that collective dancing here expresses a form of "vernacular urban modernity". This vernacular form emphasizes the urban as "a developed, non-ethnic space of civilised modernity" against the perceived backward rural spaces, which dif-

fers from the "hyper-visualized" one that is designed and envisioned by planners and officials with ethnic tourism in mind (p. 64). Yet, the kind of social space produced by collective dancing should not be seen as a challenge to the state's spatial order, but rather an alternative way in which ordinary residents imagine how city life should look or sound like.

These works provide vivid descriptions and plenty of insight to understand the leisure activities and their participants. Looming in the background is the party-state: in Huang's account, the state is presented as tight control of large social groups, in Farquhar's, surveillance of public space, and in Oakes and Yang's, officials in pursuit of hyper-visualized, civilized urbanism. Each of these representations portrays state governance in a somewhat static and one-dimensional manner, with a single rationale and functional coherence in its governing strategy or practice. These representations are very insightful, but as I will show later, they do not capture the messiness, ambiguities, and dynamics of state governance on the ground. Building on the insights of these studies, this article proposes a practice-oriented approach to state governance and collective leisure activities in public spaces that reverses the order of the analysis. Rather than reading the meanings of mundane action against a presumed order imposed by the state, I take mundane action as the focal point to understand state governance.

Critical studies of the state in anthropology and the social sciences have carefully unpacked the concepts of the state and governance. Instead of being one holistic entity, the state is a machine with layered structures and institutions, the operation of which is made possible and complicated by politicians, bureaucrats, experts, and ordinary people holding different socio-economic positions under historically specific conditions (see, for example, Gupta, 2012). The state is as much about its institutions, bureaucracy, and paperwork as it is about ideas and imaginations with discrete temporal and spatial dimensions (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Hull, 2012). If governance is understood as “all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others”, as Rose suggests (1999: 3), the study of state governance is to investigate political reasons and technologies that contour various forms of state discourses, institutions, apparatuses, and practices (Barry et al., 1996). State governance is heterogeneous (Rose, 1999). Political governance emerges out of the recombination of heterogeneous elements that may not have functional coherence (Collier, 2009). Meanwhile, the formation and re-formation of the state unfold on the legal-institutional level as well as in the lives and everyday encounters of ordinary citizens (Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Santos, 2021). This study takes mundane practices — in this case, choral singing among older women — as a key domain in which various logics of gover-

nance and technologies of state power have been deployed and the incoherence if not contradiction of these logics and technologies becomes visible, negotiated, compromised, and sustained.

Here I see choral singing as a form of “social nonmovement,” a term that sociologist Asef Bayat (2013) proposes in his nuanced analysis of street politics in which marginalized groups illegitimately occupy streets for their own use in Middle Eastern societies. With attention to actions and effects rather than articulations and subjectivities, Bayat coins the term “social nonmovement” to refer to “the collective actions of noncollective actors” (p. 15). The “nonmovements are made up of practices that are merged into, indeed are part and parcel of, the *ordinary* [sic] practice of everyday life” (p. 21) such as the poor selling goods on sidewalks. They do so out of everyday pragmatics to “survive and improve life” (p. 48). Such nonmovement is thus a “quiet encroachment” of public spaces. As in the “quiet politics” suggested by Farquhar (2009) in her analysis, “quiet” here does not refer to the sonic scape of these collective actions. One could easily imagine the lively cacophony in the streets and other public spaces with people selling merchandizes or singing and dancing.⁶ “Quiet” here is used metaphorically, hinting at the nature of the action of occupying public space being illegitimate or without prior official approval. “Quiet” also refers to the

⁶ For an exploration of the sonic dimension of park activities in Chinese cities, see Richaud (2021).

fact that participants of the nonmovement are not ideologically driven and do not pursue a clearly articulated political agenda. This is not a “movement,” as is usually understood in social activism and movements. As suggested in Huang’s (2016) observation of collective dancing as co-presence, the collective dimension of the nonmovement is a result of convergence rather than intentional organization. The “power of nonmovements rests on the power of big numbers, that is, the consequential effect on norms and rules in society of many people simultaneously doing similar, though contentious, things” (Bayat, 2013: 21).

Like the subjects described in Bayat’s writings, older women like Aunt Ye, rendered marginal in the new political economy of the Reform period, gather to sing in public spaces voluntarily without formal mobilization or organization. They do so because of the need to get out and to socialize without any clear intention to either show allegiance to the state or challenge it. That said, there are also important differences between the Middle East and China, and these differences need to be taken into account. Bayat makes the case that nonmovements in the Middle East are possible because regimes “lack capacity, consistency and machinery to impose full control” (p. 28), but the state apparatus in China does not have this problem. In fact, increasing control of public spaces and large-scale gatherings has been one of the key tasks of the Chinese govern-

ment. Moreover, as Bayat focuses on the topography of social nonmovements, the link between these nonmovements and state power has not been sufficiently analyzed. So what makes Aunt Ye and her peers’ “noisy” encroachment of public spaces possible? What does this not-so-quiet “quiet encroachment” entail for the norms and practices associated with state power? More broadly, how does choral singing as a form of nonmovement contribute to an in-depth understanding of state governance?

The not-so-quiet encroachment of the ordinary: singing and the politics of life

An urban forest park on a hill not far from the city center, White Cloud Mountain Park has been popular among urban residents wishing to get some fresh air and physical exercise upon an easy hike. This was where one of the earliest choral groups in the city emerged in the mid-1990s. According to Aunt Ye and her acquaintances, that choral group was started by several regular park visitors, all of whom laid off by SOEs, gathered to sing where there was a relatively open platform but shaded by trees from direct sunlight. Very quickly the group attracted other passers-by and exercisers. As the number of participants grew, the group gradually took the shape of a choir. One participant volunteered to handwrite the lyrics and musical notations in big fonts on large newsprint paper, hung up for participants to follow along as they sang. Some took



Figure 1. A choral group with its own ensemble. Photo by the author in 2017.

turns to be the conductor; some chipped in to buy stereo equipment for accompaniment. The singing could begin as early as 7:30 in the morning, and many would stay on for hours. The peak time was roughly between 10 am and noon. Some participants would bring lunchboxes and hang around until early afternoon. On some weekends in the late 2000s and early 2010s, there were more than a hundred participants gathering at the forest park (Figure 1). Similar choral groups can be seen in other urban parks in the city and anyone can join in at any time. In some other parks, choir groups even had their own instrumental ensembles.

The choral groups I have observed over time have comprised mostly people born in Guangzhou in the 1940s

and 1950s, with their teenage/formative years shaped by waves of political movements, including the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s. Upon graduating from middle school or high school, many were sent by the government to rural areas for “re-education”, living and working in collective farms for various lengths of time, some over a decade.⁷

When they returned to the city in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many became workers in state-run work units. These were mostly SOEs and some government-affiliated institutions. While the

⁷ The government, motivated by ideological, political and socio-economic reasons, had sent young people from the cities to the countryside for re-education. For detailed discussions on the sent-down movement, see Honig and Zhao (2019).

economic reforms were already underway in the rural areas, lives in the cities remained heavily shaped by the centrally planned economy. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, employment in a state-run work unit was stable with a welfare package unavailable to people running a small business in the city or registered in a rural area.

In the mid to late 1990s, the economic reforms shifted focus from the rural to the urban areas, and the government began to pressure many SOEs to reduce their workforce, later even letting many go bankrupt. Many of the choral participants were among the workers who were laid off during this period, and they were in their late 40s or early 50s at the time. Many had tremendous difficulty finding a new job, especially the women. The state-led economic restructuring had led to a huge number of people, who were still in working age, becoming “surplus labor,” a supposedly neutral description in the official narrative.

People like Aunts Huang and Ye experienced this process as displacement and disorientation. Many of them suddenly found an everyday void — that they had nowhere to go. This was the time when choral groups, with a substantial number of participants, gradually took shape in urban public parks. In this specific context, choral singing, as it emerged, may not necessarily be considered as a form of leisure activity from the perspective of the participants. To categorize an activity as leisure presumes the existence

of formal or informal work arrangement in one’s life in a modern society (Turner, 1982; Rolandsen, 2011), but most participants of choral singing I encountered did not have a formal job. As they tried to make a living, they often picked up gig work and worked from home.

Uncle Tan and his wife, founding members of one choral group, lost their jobs in the 1990s. With their meagre severance pays they opened a small tailor shop, offering sewing service, earning just enough to get by. Another former SOE worker, Aunt Huang lost her job when her son was in middle school. Her husband, who used to work in the same factory, also lost his job. While he managed to find employment elsewhere with his engineering skills, it was much harder for Aunt Huang. She took piecework from contractors, doing some knitting and sewing at home. During fieldwork, I saw Aunt Huang carefully mounting her beautifully hand-crafted ladybugs, flowers, and other knitted pieces to clothing items bearing international fashion labels such as GAP. Aunt Huang had neither heard those brands nor set foot in their shops, and these work orders came irregularly. Sometimes Aunt Huang had to work long hours in order to finish all the pieces on time, while there would be days for which she had no order at all.

A conversation in the mid-2000s I had with Aunt Lin, one of Aunt Ye’s companions in the choral group at White Cloud Mountain Park, well captured the feelings of many women in her position.

Aunt Lin was talking about the days not long after she got laid off:

"We were stuck at home all the time. Our attention was all on our family members. Even though I didn't like the TV drama my mother-in-law was watching at the time, I wouldn't change the channel. I just sat in the living room. My son's clothes simply didn't look right to me. I wanted to know what he was doing at school, but he wouldn't talk to me. He said I wouldn't understand. I spent time cleaning the apartment, but how big was the apartment? I cleaned it every day, so how dirty could it be? I went to the market twice a day and cooked three times. But what was the point?"

For many participants, choral singing enabled them to get out of their home and find a way to let off some steam. Aunt Lin joined the choral group in the forest park after a former colleague convinced her to give it a try. Aunt Lin then brought Aunt Ye to the group. The singing gatherings provided an opportunity to get out of home and re-socialize into circles beyond one's immediate family. People like Aunt Lin and Aunt Ye re-connected with former colleagues and made new friends.

Choral singing as a large-scale social gathering is indeed a result of convergence of individuals from the same age group navigating life difficulties. Participants gather to sing, because singing cheers them up and relaxes them. Many of my interlocutors have separately told me that their bodies feel very good,

as if they can release from the body not only merely the sounds but also the unhappiness. In addition to singing, they gather together to talk about what would be considered the nitty-gritty of life: which fresh market has the cheapest vegetables, how to cook a specific dish or clean a stain off a shirt, how their spouse or children have upset them at home, and so on. This form of sociality brings about a sense of community in life for individuals who share the experience of having no choice but to handle the ruptures. The sense of collectivity that manifests in choir groups differs from the high socialist sense of collective experienced in work units in urban areas and communes in rural areas. People like Aunts Ye and Huang are not organized in choir group collectives placed under a single authority capable of imposing work routines and controlling everyday life. Yet, while the singing and the gathering may be mundane, it is not just the sheer number of participants in public spaces but also the songs they sing that get them entangled in the complex operations of the state and its governing practices.

Red songs: habituated practice, bodily performance, and public culture

Choral singing by older women like Aunt Ye in public parks has a visible feature: while the repertoire has a wide range of songs including pop songs, folk songs, scenes and numbers from Cantonese operas, many of the songs are

so-called “red songs” (*hongge*; see also Qian, 2014). The lyrics of these songs encourage people to love the country, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its leaders, to embrace socialism and revolution, and to take pride in being workers, peasants and soldiers. Typical titles and lyrics include “No new China without the CCP”; “This is a beautiful homeland where I grew up ... This is the homeland of heroes where I grew up ...”; “The east is red where the sun rises; China has Mao Zedong; He brings happiness to the People; He is the people’s savior; He is our shepherd ... leading us forward ...”; and “socialism is good; people in socialist countries have high social status ... socialism is destined to triumph; communist society is bound to arrive ...”

Having listened to their conversations and talked to them many times during longitudinal fieldwork, I have come to realize that many choral singing participants often have an ambiguous and sometimes cynical attitude towards the party, the government, and the past. Some of them told me that they used to genuinely believe in socialist ideals and the party. However, having experienced being sent to remote farmlands for re-education and later being laid off, many no longer believed in the content of the lyrics they sang. I remember vividly that in one lunch gathering among choral participants in the late 2000s, one woman angrily said: “It was a lie that people in socialist countries have high social status! CCP has betrayed us!” She was in

her early 50s. Both she and her husband had gotten laid off, her child was still at school age, and her mother-in-law suffered from a chronic disease. She was struggling financially, physically, and emotionally. Other participants chimed in, for they in many ways shared similar predicaments. They were fully aware of the fact that workers no longer had the same coveted status as before, and that as laid-off workers they did not fit into the new economy. The choral group participants pointed out that the government had broken its promise and caused them to lose their jobs. While they had to make do with meager compensations, officials’ corruption went rampant and government-level state employees were incredibly well paid. Even though choral group participants would admit that they loved their country, their attitude toward the party, the government and the past was often ambiguous at best, if not cynical. Their anger and frustration receded substantially from the 2000s to the 2010s as they gradually got into the usual retirement age. With their children joining the work force, they felt less financial stress and started to enjoy the free time. Nonetheless, they often preferred not to talk about the government, most of the time not because of self-censorship but because “it is hard to say,” as several of them told me.

Knowing their attitude, I felt puzzled: they knew that the state-led economic reforms had broken the socialist promise and brought them unemployment and

hardship, causing them to be marginalized in the new political economic order, so why would they still voluntarily sing these songs? How could they feel happy and relieved when they sang these songs?

"We don't think; we just sing", Aunt Ye and other participants told me. "I don't need to look at the lyrics. I remember them well. They are our songs!" Aunt Lin said. Aunts Ye, Lin and others have pointed out an important dimension in choral singing that observers often overlook. Singing is not just about the lyrics (meaning the text); it is corporeal and aesthetic. One's preference for a certain musical genre is an obtained taste acquired through exposure and repetition. Aunts Ye, Lin and their acquaintances were involved in collective activities of singing red songs when they were teenagers and they developed an embodied sense of fondness for this musical genre. Just as many teenagers outside China back in the 1960s and 1970s became fans of the music of rock bands like The Beatles, so Aunt Ye and her peers listened to red songs and performed these songs regularly as these were a key part of the public culture of Chinese cities in that period.

Here, public culture includes music, dance, symphony, ballet, and other cultural forms and performances. By using the term "public" rather "political", in line with Brownell (1999: 208), I emphasize the "communicative structures" and "discursive spaces" that these cultural forms provide (see also Appadurai and

Breckenridge, 1988).⁸ As many scholars have shown, the party-state has actively designed and deployed cultural performances to shape the mass's perception on history, boost nationalism, wield popular support for the party and socialism, and reproduce political legitimacy (Wang, 1997; Brownell, 1999; Hung, 2011; Wilcox, 2016). As part of the public culture, red songs were first composed in the 1930s and 1940s to bolster morale during the Sino-Japanese War and civil wars. The Maoist era, particularly the Cultural Revolution, saw the burgeoning of red songs composed or adapted in films, symphonies, ballets, and other stage performances. New themes for the red songs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, celebrating the reforms and the late leader Deng Xiaoping, while patriotism continued to permeate the lyrics.

The period from the 1950s to 1970s was a peak time when cultural performances were heavily used for propaganda. My interlocutors, who were coming of age then, listened to them on the radio, and watched choir performances of red songs. They sang red songs at school, at home and in the streets where they played with their friends. When they were working and living in the collective farms, they still sang those songs. After they returned from the countryside, participating in or watching choral singing of red songs on

⁸ The term "political culture" in the Chinese context often refers to unspoken rules and practices in high politics.

national holidays remained part of their lives in the state-run work units. Some of my interlocutors described their connection to the songs this way: "My body feels it. When the music plays, I automatically sing along". Singing these songs for the choral participants is about aesthetics as much as a cultivated form of embodied practice and a way of inhabiting public spaces without having to ponder any deeper meanings. Such bodily habits and aesthetics were acquired through rehearsing state-orchestrated bodily movements and choreographies as well as through participating in the social and human interactions that the public culture had dictated and fostered during the early period of their lives.

Meanwhile, choral singing is also a form of performance. Depending on the occasion, it involves singing techniques, collaboration among different sections of the choral group guided by a conductor, stage setting, costumes, makeup, and many other things. Some choral singing participants take this seriously and would participate in red song singing competitions and performances organized by the government or a private entity to provide entertainment on special occasions such as a company's anniversary. Some interlocutors have told me that they do it because they like the performance aspect (*xihuan biaoyan*). They enjoy singing and being on stage under spotlight. By emphasizing singing as performing and acting, my interlocutors implicitly maintain a distance

from the official meanings of the songs or the performances. This is not to deny that official meanings embedded in the public culture have no impact on my interlocutors.⁹ However, those meanings have been challenged and negotiated through different stages of their lives. What often goes unnoticed is how the form and the aesthetics of the public culture of a certain period have a lasting influence on embodied practices.

By noting the importance of form and aesthetics, I want to highlight that the act of participating in red song choral groups is not necessarily politically motivated; if these collective singing activities in public parks have a political association, it is inadvertent and largely beyond the participants' control. As mentioned earlier, supporting the construction of particular forms of public culture was a cultural strategy of governance for the party-state under Mao. The beginning of the reforms in the late 1970s led to a sea of changes in the industry of cultural productions including the commercialization of cultural institutions, industrialization of cultural practices, and diversification of cultural forms. However, the state apparatus has continuously engaged in public culture as one of the discursive domains to rebuilding political legitimacy. On the one hand, the state-controlled broadcast authority has continued to practice censorship, regularly issuing orders and compiling lists that forbid cer-

⁹ See Qian (2014) for a diverse interpretation of the song lyrics among choral singing participants.

tain topics and genres to be mentioned in various cultural performances and entertainment shows in the market-driven mass media. On the other hand, the central government has actively promoted specific songs, dances, and other cultural performances through the official New Year's Eve gala and other galas on public holidays during the year.

Red songs took center stage in the late 2000s and early 2010s when they became a tool for political competition at the top level of the state apparatus. Bo Xilai rose to political stardom in the 2000s. Bo's father was a war hero and important political leader who endured much hardship during the Cultural Revolution, and the young Bo, being part of the family, was influenced by the public culture of that period. In 2007, after Bo became the party secretary of Chongqing, one of the biggest cities in China, he deployed rhetoric that echoed what Mao utilized to launch the Cultural Revolution, a rhetoric that emphasized the significance of cultural construction.¹⁰ Bo launched a "red song campaign" as one of his initiatives to revive the "red revolutionary culture," through which the term "red song" became popular. The use of red song campaigns became a tool for Bo to assert political orthodoxy following Mao's path so as to compete for power in the political system. Local television channels in Chongqing were ordered to replace

popular soap operas and sitcoms with red song shows and censored dramas.

Red song campaigns went viral in the country roughly between 2008 and 2012 (see also Qian, 2014; Kipnis, 2016, chapter 5). Such campaigns were held on college campuses, as red songs "had great educational and moral value" for the youth. Government agencies, SOEs and state-affiliated organizations (such as hospitals) allocated work time for employees to practice singing red songs.¹¹ All efforts culminated in the grand red song competitions in 2011, with choral groups from different institutions and self-organized groups including park choral groups gathering to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the CCP. The fall of Bo Xilai in the early 2010s has since entailed a disappearing of large-scale red song campaigns. Nonetheless, local officials found a renewed interest in the collective singing and dancing activities. As such activities seemed to keep people happy, they saw in the self-organized choral groups an opportunity to push the agenda of community building, an agenda that upper-level officials regard as crucial to a broader

¹⁰ For more detailed discussion on Bo's strategies aiming at the top leadership position, see Zhang (2021).

¹¹ Unlike older choral singing participants in parks, the younger generations employed in these workplaces were not enthusiastic about the practice of red song singing. My younger interlocutors clearly did not feel the same kind of corporeal and aesthetic attachment to the red songs that I encountered amongst the older generations. For the younger generations, the red song singing campaigns only prolonged working hours and caused work delays. Sometimes workplaces had to award gift cards or cash to employees as a way to motivate them to join red song singing activities.

agenda of building a harmonious society and maintaining stability (Qian, 2014).¹²

Some of my interlocutors and their choral groups had participated in some officially staged shows. As mentioned earlier, many of them did not care about the high politics involved or the specific agenda that the local government had. Collective singing and square dancing in public spaces clearly bear the imprint of an earlier period of revolutionary state politics involving the political mobilization of the masses, the production of loyal subjects, and the tight management of collectives around work units. As forms of public culture, collective singing and square dancing are undeniably political and ideological. However, the way people related to these earlier revolutionary forms of public culture changes over time.

That said, the form itself — mass singing of red songs — is instrumental for the choir groups to be incorporated into the government's grand narrative of governance. The government and official media use photos of the park choral singers' participation in official celebration in its narrative to illustrate the ordinary citizens' devotion and love for the country and the party. The enthusiasm and engagement of the choral participants thus have the effect of keeping the state-orchestrated cultural form alive. Intriguingly, while choral participants'

singing practices have the unintentional effect of contributing to the resurgence of an earlier form of public culture, the government's exploitation of these practices of voluntary choral singing among ordinary citizens also has its own unintended consequence in complicating spatial governance.

Same parks, different spatial orders

The state-orchestrated forms of public culture have a spatial dimension: not only have they been performed in theaters, cultural halls, and other confined spaces, but they have also been spectacularly staged and displayed in public spaces. They need to be seen publicly so that what messages need to be related to the masses can be conveyed. The public space, since the CCP came into power, has gradually become (re)purposed for monuments, state rituals, symbols, and political mobilization.¹³

This is well illustrated in Tian'anmen Square in the capital city of Beijing. Originally conceived as an open space where thoroughfares intersected, Tian'anmen Square was built during the early twentieth century near the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tian'anmen) in front of the Forbidden City. Under the CCP's lead-

¹² See also Huang (2016) and Oakes and Yang (2020) regarding how local governments seek to incorporate collective dancing into their social engineering programs in a pursuit of modernity and development.

¹³ From a Habermasian framework emphasizing rational debates to a Foucauldian approach relating the production of space to the production of proper citizen-subjects, different theories highlight different kinds of social and political significance of public space. For detailed discussions, see for example, Low and Smith (2006).

ership, buildings were torn down to make room for one of the biggest squares in the world. On one side of the square the Great Hall of the People was built, where the People's Congress would take place. On the opposite side now stands the Museum of Chinese History, which projects a revolutionary history in which the CCP saved a ravaged country and led the people to triumph. At the center stands the Monument to the People's Heroes dedicated to martyrs who gave their lives to the new China. After the death of Mao Zedong, a mausoleum was added to the square in memory of this great leader. During the Maoist years, Tian'anmen Square was the center of political mobilization. Political leaders would stand atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace to accept cheers from thousands of ordinary citizens in relatively peaceful times or the red guards during the Cultural Revolution. The military marched and paraded along the street between the Forbidden City and Tian'anmen Square on important occasions. Public space as such enables a "sacralization of power" (Lee, 2011), lending legitimacy to the party and the social revolution. While Tian'anmen Square is exceptional in terms of scale and richness of symbols and rituals, many Chinese cities have similar public squares where state-sanctioned narrative of history, images, and iconography are displayed, and cultural performances performed on special occasions. Public culture and public space have been mutually embedded.

At the local level, building public

parks and squares have had another layer of spatial-political significance. Many of my older interlocutors remembered that their parents participating in the building of public parks — opening up the land and digging into the ground to make lakes — in Guangzhou in the Maoist years. This kind of work by ordinary citizens is called "voluntary labor" (*yiwulaodong*). Typically performed in their non-work time, voluntary labor was a result of mass mobilization rather than individuals' choice (Rolandsen, 2011). Such voluntary labor included all kinds of activities, from constructing parks and buildings to cleaning streets. On the one hand, the imposition of voluntary participation could be a strategy for the local government, short of money and resources, to build the new socialist cities. On the other hand, by mobilizing ordinary citizens — men and women alike, the CCP government gave ordinary Chinese — to borrow Spotts' (2002) eloquent words on architecture and other art forms in Nazi Germany — a "meaningful sense of political participation, transforming them from spectators into participants in [the] National Socialist theatre" (p. xii). In this sense, such participation in the making of public space is as much material and physical as is symbolic. While it is true that the party-state has monitored and controlled large-scale gatherings in public spaces to prevent or control protests, it is also the case that public spaces have long been intentionally used by the party-state for mass gatherings.

It should be noted that this spatial dimension of governance was not explicitly formulated or clearly articulated as a spatial strategy of governance. Instead, it is an inherent feature that comes with the coming into being of state-orchestrated forms of public culture and other forms of mass mobilization. In this sense, space has not been governmentalized; the specific spatial order has emerged as a feature and an effect of state-led strategies of cultural governance. Nonetheless, the repeated performances of the state-orchestrated public culture have inscribed into public places a spatial order that allows for certain forms of collective presence.

Many of my choral participants-interlocutors have vivid memories of rallying in parks and squares during their teenage and adolescent years in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Their schools usually organized a day-tour to parks annually. Under the national flag and banners with official slogans, they pledged to serve the party and country, often accompanied by singing and dancing in the style of the state cultural forms, not to suggest that public parks were an exclusively political space. Many of my older interlocutors remembered going to parks with their parents for fun, but, for many, this seemed more like a privilege, as parents were usually busy and entertainments such as having a boat ride cost money. The intertwining of public culture and public space fostered specific ways of inhabiting, experiencing, and sensing public spaces. Through their repeated visits to public spaces since child-

hood, my older interlocutors got used to hearing loudspeakers blasting music or speeches, watching others perform, working and performing collectively in public spaces. For them, the presence of many people engaged in some group activity in a public space has been normalized into "just the way it is" (*jiushi zheyangzi de*).

But many younger urban residents do not perceive this as normal usage of public spaces. National development started to gravitate toward cities, and urbanization became the strategy to stimulate economic growth since the 1990s (Hsing, 2010). In this development paradigm, not only have cities grown rapidly both in terms of territory and population size, but urban space has also been reconfigured according to a different set of rationales, narratives, and technologies, which I call the new urban development regime (Santos and Zhang, 2021). This new urban development regime is not unique to China. As cities have been perceived and operated as a "growth machine" (Molotch, 1976), urbanization has been recommended as a development strategy by international organizations such as the World Bank for the developing world (Escobar, 2012). The urban development regime takes on new features in the past decades, as aesthetics and the narrative of sustainability have been integrated into the urban political economy (Ghertner, 2015; Isenhour et al., 2015). In line with this globalized regime of urban development, Chinese cities have adopted strategies to produce neatly or-

ganized, functionally divided, and hyper-visualized urban space in the process of urbanization (Abramson, 2007; Oakes and Yang, 2020; Zhang, 2016; 2022). One could say that space has been governmentalized under this global regime.

Public parks and squares have become a quintessential part of the spatial strategy of urban governance. In Guangzhou, urban planners and officials have increasingly emphasized the notions of “ecocity” (*shengtai chengshi*) and “livable city” (*yiju chengshi*), notions that are associated with sustainable development and city branding.¹⁴ Parks and squares are deemed enablers of a “harmonious symbiosis of humans and nature” in a beautiful city.¹⁵ The municipal government increased the number of public parks substantially from 24 in 1990 to 239 in 2014 as the city more than doubled its size (GSYB, 2003–2014). The municipal government also gradually abolished entrance fees to most public parks. By the mid-2010s, most public parks have been made free to the public. In tourism promotion materials, public parks or squares, with carefully curated

green space but with no or only a few individuals, are often juxtaposed with high-rises to highlight the city that is technologically modern, spatially organized, and aesthetically pleasing. For the growing middle-class families, adjacency to a park or a park view is understood as a feature that adds extra value to their housing properties, as the park is supposed to bring tranquility, fresh air, and open horizon in a crowded city.

Public spaces — parks and squares — are spaces of production in terms of capital accumulation as well as spaces of reproduction due to their function as leisure spaces. The vision of leisure space embedded in the new urban development regime in contemporary Chinese cities is probably aligned with Frederick Law Olmsted’s vision of New York’s Central Park as a “refuge” from the chaotic, polluted urban environment of the then industrializing Manhattan. As Sevilla-Buitrago (2017) argues, Olmsted’s Central Park was meant to produce civic citizen-subjects with middle-class propriety, with emphasis on self-discipline and orderliness. The younger, educated, and relatively affluent part of the urban population in present-day Chinese cities has gradually become receptive to this kind of civility that emphasizes moderation and control of individual behavior in public spaces. In their eyes, modern cities are supposed to be associated with shiny high-rises, smartphones, and shared bicycles (Zhang, 2022), and trendy, “cool” activities such as skateboarding and training for a

¹⁴ See “Guangzhou chengshizongtiguohua (2001–2010)” [Master Plan of Guangzhou (2001–2010)], “Guangzhoushichengshizongtiguohua (2011–2020)” [Master Plan of Guangzhou (2011–2020)], and the draft of “Guangzhoushichengshizongtiguohua (2017–2035)” [Master Plan of Guangzhou (2017–2035)], all issued by the Guangzhou municipal government and the first two approved by Guangdong provincial government and the State Council of China.

¹⁵ See the draft of “Guangzhoushichengshizongtiguohua (2017–2035)” [Master Plan of Guangzhou (2017–2035)].

marathon. Singing, dancing, or exercising (except for running) should be done in private or semi-private spaces such as karaoke bars and gyms. Music should be enjoyed via headphones, and playing music through loudspeakers constitutes a nuisance. Thus, older women's collective singing and dancing are not perceived as the right kind of activity in the supposedly orderly and tranquil public spaces.

The stigmatization of older women in public spaces embodies the conflicts between the old and new spatial orders.¹⁶ Associated with different codes of conduct and sensorial expectations, these two spatial orders are produced with different governing agendas. Under the older spatial order, public space is highly politicized as a space of mobilization and performance of state-orchestrated forms of public culture for the purpose of (re)producing political legitimacy. The newer spatial order comes with a series of technical developmental interventions which emphasize economic growth and improvement of life quality while, as many development studies scholars argue (Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 2012), downplaying the politics involved in these interventions. The older spatial order is meant to invoke passion on a mass level, while the newer one expects individualized civility and middle-class respectability. Both spatial orders are powerful in shaping how individuals from different genera-

tional and class backgrounds inhabit and understand public space. While the new well-to-do middle class is highly educated and is able to use media resourcefully and fluently to voice their opinion against the unruly use of public spaces, older women continue their not-so-inconspicuous presence in public spaces, singing and dancing together, as long as the party-state continues to support them and see the relevance of using public culture as a core governing strategy to produce political legitimacy and social stability.

Conclusion: the art and politics of occupying public space

This article has taken a form of social nonmovement — collective singing by older women in public spaces—as a key node to illustrate the multi-dimensionality and heterogeneity of state governance as well as the intricate involvement of ordinary, even marginalized, citizens in the workings of state governance. Seeing this specific form of collective singing as a social nonmovement offers an analytical advantage: it acknowledges the mundane, pragmatic aspects of getting together — particularly pertaining to people from socially and economically marginalized groups — without losing sight of its political significance. Noticing the mundaneness is not to automatically assume that such an activity has been taken to oppose the state. As my interlocutors insist, they participate in choral singing by choice, with low expenditure,

¹⁶ There is also a gender dimension involved in the multiple spatial orders in public space, which will be discussed in a separate article.

and they do so to have fun and meet friends, all of which are mundane life matters. They come together as a result of chance and biographical convergences rather than of willful politically motivated congregation. They sing a lot of Maoist red songs, but this does not mean that their actions are politically motivated. In fact, they have diverse understandings of the past actions of the government and the party-state, and these understandings can be aligned or not with the political messages that the red songs originally intended to convey. By and large, choral group participants have no intention to engage politically; they sing red songs because the music and rhythm are aesthetically appealing and familiar, and the activity of singing itself is cathartic.

Yet, such mundane practice has been intricately interwoven into the deployment and negotiation of a series of state governing practices. Choral singing and red songs bear the imprint of an earlier form of state-orchestrated public culture that was a strategy of cultural governance aiming at mass mobilization and the production of political legitimacy. Within this framework of governance, state-orchestrated cultural performances have shaped the aesthetics, the bodily practices, and the ways that citizens — who have grown up living monotonically through these cultural forms — inhabit and perceive public spaces. While many of these citizens, now in the later stages of their lives, re-appropriate these cultural forms to fit their own purposes, in

recent years, officials and governments at all levels have in turn re-appropriated the revived performance of these Maoist cultural forms to construct a new form of state-orchestrated public culture to compete for political power or to promote “a harmonious society”.

As public culture is state-orchestrated to be performed *by* the masses *for* the masses, mass public presence is its inherent feature. The continuous deployment of public culture as a governing strategy thus provides a sanctioned ground for choral participants to gather in public spaces. While this article cannot detail every contradiction in the usage and surveillance of public space in Chinese cities, it is worthwhile to note that multiple governing strategies with different if not conflictual rationales and purposes are involved in the usage of public space. As public spaces have become an integral component of the spatial strategy of urban governance, a new spatial order has gradually come into being with the new urban economy. Unlike the spatial order associated with the deployment of earlier Maoist strategies of public culture manufacturing, the new spatial order emphasizes modernity and development, and is encoded with middle-class civility — the new spatial order marginalizes “old-fashioned” users of public spaces such as the choral singing participants, subjecting them to stigmatization. Yet, the choral singing participants’ noisy encroachment persists not because the Chinese government does not have the

capacity to control it, as it seems to be the case in Middle Eastern political regimes (Bayat, 2013), but because public culture and ordinary people's participation share a symbiotic relationship.

This article is not meant to provide an exhaustive analysis of all possible state governing strategies involved in conditioning, challenging, or sanctioning choral singing practice in public spaces; for example, one may add "therapeutic governance" (Yang, 2015; Zhang, 2020). The point is to highlight how multiple strategies of state governance become entangled as they are practiced in everyday life. Strategies governing different aspects of social and political lives may appear to be separate from one another. Tracing the rationales and purposes of a specific state governing strategy is relatively straightforward (not that it is easy), yet governing strategies that differ in political ideas, development priorities, and governing concerns do co-occur; governing strategies and their effects have a spatial as well as a temporal dimension. Each governing strategy, on its own, may be coherent, but when multiple governing strategies are applied in conjunction to regulate the conduct of everyday life, they may clash. This adds significant complexity to the analysis of state-society relations and state governance. Instead of simple domination or resistance, one has to deal with a situation where multiple appropriations take place: not only do ordinary citizens appropriate official cultural practices for their own pleasure, the government also in turn

appropriates ordinary citizens' practices to give new life to its governing strategies. Such encounters and frictions create space for creativity in the everyday life of ordinary citizens in a country with a powerful state regime. Such space is undoubtedly fragile and unstable, yet it enables (marginalized) people like the choral singing participants to inhabit places where they, in the eyes of many, do not belong.

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork that has made this paper possible was supported by grants from the Franklin Research Grant by the American Philosophical Society, and the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project Numbers: CityU 17636016, 21603019, and 17612719). The author is grateful to Yi Kang, Minhua Ling, Yu Luo, Tim Oakes and Gonçalo Santos for the discussions on various drafts and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions.

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