

Being Together at a Distance, Talking and Avoiding Talk: Making Sense of the Present in Victory Square, Tianjin

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Abstract

This paper explores a “public gathering” which took place every evening from 1991 to 2017 in Victory Square (Shengli guangchang 胜利广场), a public square in Tianjin. The essay opens with an analysis of the type of publicness that stems from the way participants “do things together.” It then describes how a specific public realm appears through the way participants “talk together.” It finally suggests that even if they are overrun with doubt, indeterminacy and anxiety, or embedded in a specific distance-based sociality, the conversations on Victory Square are not a minor, secondary activity. On the contrary, they take place on a common stage where participants interact with one another, reveal themselves as unique individuals and discuss their everyday affairs and common practices. Grasped as an “intermediary public sphere,” this type of gathering engenders and reinforces not only shared meanings and evaluations but also practical knowledge whose validity goes beyond this situated gathering.

Keywords: Tianjin; intermediary public sphere; public gathering; public realm; indeterminacy; strangers; social reality

This paper analyses talk as it unfolds in China in public spaces. Following the attention previously paid by the author to oral and written complaints addressed to Party or state representatives, or to the effects of speech acts within migrant workers’ associations, it joins recent efforts to describe what happens as people gather in public or semi-public spaces¹ while focusing on an overlooked aspect of these forms of sociality – verbal exchanges between participants. More pointedly, this contribution is based on a research programme on “public gatherings” in the city of Tianjin.

The first gatherings observed in Tianjin were very eclectic: there were gatherings in public places as well as in private places, and exclusive gatherings

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1 See, e.g., Graezer-Bideau 2012; Chen 2010; Zito 2014; Farrer 2000; Farquhar and Zhang 2005; Farquhar 2009; Qian 2014; Richaud 2016; Hampel 2017; Rochot 2017.

based on pre-existing ties of familiarity or more open ones. To circumscribe the study to comparable objects, the sociological notion of “gathering” was narrowly defined. According to Erving Goffman, a gathering is characterized by persons physically present and engaged in the same activity.² Examples are a conversation, a group deliberation, a boxing match or any task jointly performed. For the current study, the choice was made not to study short-lived encounters but rather those which exhibited some form of continuity and thus some degree of institutionalization. Such a definition seemed consistent with the term *juhui* 聚会, which was often used by informants in Tianjin when they spoke of the distance travelled to “gather” with others in a park or in a restaurant in the city, or by Christians who invited me to join their “domestic gathering place,” or *jiating juhuidian* 家庭聚会点. Moreover, to exclude private gatherings held in public spaces, a criterion of publicness was retained, the first of the 18 “public/private” distinctions listed by Michael Warner: only those gatherings which were “open to everyone” were eligible for inclusion in the research.³ As moments of potential encounters with a stranger, such gatherings resonate with existing debates in China studies on relationships with strangers.⁴ However, to engage with such literature would require a more detailed discussion about “strangeness.” Indeed, if it is often stressed that economic reforms scrambled the webs of familiarity, one can argue that the present blurring of shared means of mutual identification, of ways to assess “who is one for the other,” is rooted in a longer history and cannot be disconnected from the experience of the pre-reform decades.

The selected criteria, together with the fact that the gatherings observed would have to take place in the same neighbourhood to allow for the potential circulation between them, resulted in the study of several gatherings located in the northern section of Heping 和平 district in Tianjin.⁵

This article examines one of those gatherings, which from 1991 to 2017 took place every evening in a public square, Shengli guangchang 胜利广场 (Victory Square hereafter). Up until 2018, when work began on the square to make way for the construction of a new metro station, several dozen men and women would gather there every evening at seven o’clock to perform physical exercises, or *jianshen* 健身.⁶ Although some participants had attended the gathering since its early days, each evening would see the appearance of newcomers as this social occasion was “open to everyone.” The analysis draws on the observations made during the author’s daily participation in this gathering from 2011 to 2013, and then during repeated stays in Tianjin. Rather than taking publicness as

2 Goffman 1963.

3 Warner 2002, 29.

4 See, e.g., Lee 2014.

5 The other types of gathering were the activities of the “Team for the protection of the architectural heritage of Tianjin city” and Christian assemblies in a local church and in a “domestic gathering point.”

6 Several of Judith Farquhar’s publications have been devoted to *yangsheng* (nurturing life) activities. However, we should point out that this term was never used in Victory Square. Farquhar and Zhang 2005.

a given, one question this article addresses is what kind of publicness and public realm emerges as participants “do things together” and “talk together.” It finally suggests that even if they are overrun with doubt, indeterminacy and anxiety, or embedded in a specific distance-based sociality, the conversations on Victory Square are not a minor, secondary activity. On the contrary, they enable shared meanings and evaluations but also practical knowledge whose validity goes beyond this situated gathering, to appear in public and be strengthened.

This contribution thus draws on the polysemy of the notion of “publicness,” with its wide range of possible connections between descriptive and normative perspectives, as recently analysed by Sebastian Veg.⁷ More precisely, it will consider the publicness of the public space observed not as inherent to its legal qualification as “public” but as a dimension that its users make mutually perceptible and consolidate by adopting certain behaviour. It will also rely on the aesthetic model of the “public realm” as discussed by Hannah Arendt, rather than on the notion of “public sphere” attached to Habermas, and will consider “publicness” from an anthropological perspective as the “framework, recomposed anew in every situation, in which actions and words, events and persons, acquire as phenomenal realities their individuality and sociality, their intelligibility and objectivity.”⁸

A Distinctive Type of “Publicness”

Victory Square is situated in one of the busiest commercial areas of Tianjin. It is a rectangle, with an area of 7,500 square metres, bounded to the north and west by buildings from the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century. Heping Road 和平路, a major commercial artery, runs to the south of the square, and where it intersects with Duolun dao 多伦道 stands the imposing hulk of the first department store of the former Japanese Concession, opened in 1928 and renamed Baihuo dalou 百货大楼 after 1949. Prior to the construction of the new metro station, at seven o'clock every evening the first notes of music would ring out from one corner of the square to signal that the “rejuvenating medical exercises” (*huichun yiliao baojiancao* 回春医疗保健操) were about to begin. These movements, which lasted about 40 minutes, would be followed by the *qigong* 气功 exercises known as “the eight pieces of brocade” (*baduanjin* 八段锦), and then a period of *taiji* 太极. The whole session would end at about 8.20pm.

Victory Square has been revamped several times, most recently in 2010 with two official objectives: first, to allow people coming and going to the businesses along Heping Road to rest for a few minutes, and second, to host stalls and promotional activities during the weekends. The two functions are clearly demarcated on the ground, with a dark, slightly slippery coating running around the

7 See Veg [forthcoming](#).

8 Arendt 1958; Habermas 1989; Quéré 1992, 87.

perimeter where a few benches are provided, and an empty space in the centre, with five wide red bands marking a number of places where stalls can be set up. External to these formal objectives, two gatherings regularly occupy the square. One, from eight o'clock in the evening, is composed of a group of women rehearsing dance routines in anticipation of public performances. Nobody is allowed to join the group unless the leader agrees, as entry is determined by age, figure and dance ability. The other gathering, which is the subject of this paper, begins an hour earlier. It is run by Wu Daye, a retired model worker who in 2012 was aged 85.⁹ This gathering operates on the principle of openness, or one might even say hospitality – anyone who happens to be crossing the square at the time can join in.

Repetition, visibility and legitimacy of a daily experience

A first aspect of the gathering observed is its seeming instability. The exact number of people who meet every evening and stand next to one another is largely unpredictable. Some of them come almost every day, others less often because of all kinds of family and work obligations, or just because they enjoy summer rather than winter evenings on the square. These fluctuations are increased by the almost daily arrival of new people, who either come alone or are brought by regular members, and whose commitment will only become apparent over time.

There is also a variation depending on the time and the kind of movements being executed. The session begins indeed at seven o'clock in the evening and most of the participants usually arrive in the first ten minutes, but there are also many who choose to join in only at certain points. The formation and dispersal of the gathering are thus processes which occur over time, every person coming “as it pleases them” or *suibian* 随便. The *suibian* behaviour is actually pervasive throughout Victory Square. For instance, although the gathering is explicitly related to health practices broadly understood, movements are performed “as it pleases everyone” and newcomers with higher or stricter expectations will in the short term leave the square to perform *qigong* and *taiji* exercises elsewhere.

This disorderly appearance of the group is increased by the ever-shifting ways in which the square is occupied. For the first series of exercises, everyone can indeed stand where he or she wants. As a consequence, if Wu Daye is a shared point of reference, participants spread out around him in a rather haphazard fashion and at different distances from him. Some are facing him, some stand beside him or behind him, others stand with their backs to him. Pairs form and evolve side by side, circles are established. It is only when the time comes for *qigong* that the participants line up in several rows behind Wu.

⁹ Wu Daye is a pseudonym.

The ever-changing nature of the gathering is associated with its social heterogeneity. Counts suggest that, on average, 41 people gather in the square (numbers vary between 28 and 65). Men make up about 25 per cent of this public and two-thirds of the regular participants are 50 years old or more. The youngest is 16 and the oldest 88. Moreover, those who attend come from a variety of social backgrounds and occupations: there are female factory workers, technicians, clerks, administrative officials, saleswomen, accountants, kindergarten heads, primary and secondary school teachers, driving instructors, warehouse managers, small traders, soldiers, political officials – the list of jobs, whether current or in the past, is eclectic. Finally, the diversity is also geographic, with about a fifth of those who turn up every evening originating from Shandong, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Henan and Wenzhou.

The fluctuating nature of this gathering contrasts with its stability in time and space. This collective encounter has indeed taken place at seven o'clock every evening for more than 20 years, usually interrupted only by rain, snow and the week-long holiday at New Year. The gathering is not unsettled by the frequent absences of some participants since they do not affect the activities of the others: nobody depends on the others to carry out the exercises, which do not require any particular collective configuration.

The continuity of this experience is likewise inscribed in the spatial points of reference. Since 1991 and up until the first months of 2018, none of the refurbishments or changes to Victory Park, which opened in 1952, dislodged the gathering – not the demolition of the wall which used to surround the park, nor the disappearance of the lawns and paths, nor the park's transformation into a public square in 2009 after most of the trees were cut down, nor the last attempt at "greening" it by putting back some plants and bushes in 2010.

This stability in time and space is also based on repetition: of sessions which happen day after day, of sequences performed and the links between them, and of movements to be executed. Such repetition anchors this social encounter in perseverance and continuity; it is constitutive of its legitimacy. It reinforces its density and consistency while limiting the need for coordination: each person can anticipate its unfolding and enter it when and how he or she wishes. This gathering is thus characterized on the one hand by the relationship between the possibility for everyone to come to the square when and how they want to, their rights of presence, arrival and departure being confirmed every day, and, on the other hand, the consolidation of a familiar, secure and reliable environment. It is partly but not only based on routine and a kind of "comfort taken in conformity."¹⁰ It belongs indeed to the realm of everyday life whose driving force consists "in the discreet domestication of non-daily reality, i.e. the transformation of the stranger into the familiar."¹¹

10 Farquhar and Zhang 2005, 308.

11 Bégout 2010, 45.

Victory Square thus accommodates various forms of coexistence in public. In other words, its designation as a “public space” does not exhaust the multiple configurations of its “public” nature which depend on the various uses effectively made of it. There is, for instance, the kind of co-presence typically associated with urban public spaces, characterized by anonymity and indeterminacy and consisting of the people who, alone or in small groups, pass through the square or come and sit there; the kind of co-presence observed in the private group of dancers showing up at 8pm and marked out by a kind of closed and exclusive membership; and finally the kind of co-presence observed in Wu Daye’s gathering, which is less transitory and more interactional than the first one but more open than the co-presence of the dancers.

More pointedly, the gathering under study is not characterized merely by the activity practised together, *jianshen*. Public gatherings focusing on the same activity may indeed constitute different social occasions and exhibit different patterns of publicness. They differ, for instance, according to distinctive features such as their degree of closure or opening (that is, the extent to which they establish a distinction between insiders and outsiders); the address eventually made to potential or effective audiences (another meaning of publicness then arises, such as in the case of the “public man” analysed by Qian Junxi¹²); and the space allocated to talk (ranging from gatherings which limit the possibility for talk to those which focus on talk, as in the case of the public speaking clubs studied by Amir Hampel¹³).

The specific form of publicness observed in Wu Daye’s gathering is oriented by the fact that it is open to newcomers at any time; it is not addressed to a public; and talk is possible but by no means compulsory during the exercises.

The “right distance” between the participants

The forms of co-presence observed within Wu Daye’s gathering, seemingly characterized by a certain form of routine, are actually rather complex. A first characteristic is distance, or more precisely the question of “the right distance” to be established between the participants. As noted earlier, during the rejuvenating exercises, participants are spaced out all over the square. Far from standing close to Wu Daye, they spread out to cover an area of between 435 and 1,538 metres square, depending on the day. The distance between Wu and the participants is very variable, ranging, for example, on 24 December 2012 from three to about forty metres. The same applies to the distance between participants who separate off into isolated units, distant pairs or conversation groups. Empty and full spaces, proximities and distances are then revealed, forming a configuration that changes daily, although it is not free from regularities.

These rejuvenating exercises are carried out in accordance with loud recorded instructions, which can be heard throughout the square thus enabling some of the

¹² Qian 2014.

¹³ Hampel 2017.

participants to stand at a distance. At the same time, and in contrast to the two sequences which come afterwards and require that everyone concentrates on their breathing, these first exercises allow participants to strike up verbal exchanges. And it is precisely this possibility of speech which brings the participants together or keeps them at a distance, and partly explains the dispersal observed during the sequence.

In fact, even if participants stand wherever “it pleases them,” they do not take up their positions in a purely random way. Everyone places themselves at the right distance from others, a “right distance” which shows their desired mode of engagement in the gathering. The behaviour observed thus covers a continuum, ranging from those who perform the movements in silence and keep their distance from others, to those who carry out the movements required while continuing to talk to others, through a wide variety of articulations of distance and proximity, silence and verbal communication. Contrasting situations arise as result of the contrasting wishes manifested by the participants in the way they position themselves to have interlocutors or not, to have few or many of them, to have steady or limited exchanges with them, to speak to everyone or only to specific interlocutors.¹⁴

In other words, in a situation where talking or remaining silent can both be inscribed in a form of normal behaviour, talking with others is sought out or kept at bay. Borrowing from Nina Eliasoph’s famous expression, we could describe the situation observed as both “talking and avoiding talk.”¹⁵

This varying physical distance between the participants cannot be disconnected from the varying relationships that exist between them. Several modes of mutual cognition and recognition coexist and contribute to the configurations that surface. One may, in a somewhat simplifying manner and position from the ego’s point of view, divide the participants into three major categories. First, there are those who remain vague and undefined because they are rarely seen in the gathering. This “undefined” category covers a number of different situations, from the unknown person who comes to the gathering for the first time to the loyal attender who returns after a long absence. Then there are those of whom little is known – perhaps only a few words have been exchanged, or they persist in saying nothing. Even so, their daily presence allows a progressive schematization process in the sense that some of their habitual and recurrent behaviour is observed and noted and ultimately characterizes them. Among those whom one could describe as “typified individuals,” there is for instance the person who always stands in the same spot, i.e. near a particular tree or next to a certain other participant, or the “grandmother who is always afraid that we begin one minute late.” Lastly, there are those, albeit not many, for whom some biographical details are available, sometimes passed on by others but most often confided

14 Such a feature is on par with Lisa Richaud’s findings about the complex nature of social relationships that spring from urban encounters in Beijing’s public parks. Richaud 2016.

15 Eliasoph 1998.

in private moments by the person concerned, for whom the shift from undefined to defined operates through a greater singularization process but also, because the two often go together, through the establishment of relations of greater proximity. These might be referred to as acquaintances. Observations show that every participant usually has but a few acquaintances, and that most of the persons have only partial knowledge of others in spite of their having a sometimes lasting coexistence, a knowledge which is restricted to what everyone has seen fit to divulge and which is quite limited.

Contrasting with the varying distances thus made public on the square, participants designate their gathering as based upon the act of “doing together,” or *yi kuai zuo* 一块做. In other words, attention is focused on a common experience rather than on a group and its contours and, in fact, no list of membership or WeChat group delineates the boundaries of this gathering. Such a common experience and the specific relationship and emotions associated with it arise from the movements being carried out in unison to the same flow of music and oral instructions. It can be briefly outlined by mentioning the “tuning-in relationship” analysed by A. Schutz and characterized “by the reciprocal sharing of the other’s flux of experience in inner time, by living through a vivid present together, by experiencing this togetherness as a ‘We’.”¹⁶

This public gathering is therefore embedded in a distinctive form of “publicness.” On the one hand, it reveals the wide range of information considered unnecessary to be disclosed in public and the varying answers given to the question of the “right distance” to be kept among participants, answers that are not hidden but made visible. Moreover, such publicness derives not only from the plurality of distinct individuals coming together. It is a publicness stemming from the overlapping of diverse patterns of mutual recognition and forms of relationships, with the multiple types of connections and disconnections, proximities and distances thus weaved together. Although not formulated in the gathering in abstract terms, such diversity and overlapping are actually perceived as something desirable and to be protected. Indeed, when, for instance, the younger participants leave the gathering temporarily to try out a new dance in the next square, it is not unusual to hear someone say, wistfully, “Don’t you feel that the *qi* that used to be here has gone?” A more thorough comparison with the literature on distance-based or stranger sociality would be needed to show how a specific culture of distance, with the varying reasons that may account for it, is both disclosed and overcome in this gathering, precisely through the overlapping of multiple forms of mutual recognition.

On the other hand, this gathering shows the “we” that emerges from an experience lived together and simultaneously, a “we” that is not bordered but reconfigured every day. The particular relationship arising from such a process of “doing together” does not contradict the distance established between the

16 Schutz 1951, 96.

participants; on the contrary, both stand in a kind of reciprocal dependence. This social encounter thus exhibits a specific articulation between a process of self-individuation, the acknowledgement of a plurality and the perception of the common engendered by “doing together.”

Stepping into the “Public Realm”

Although talk is not that obvious within the gathering, conversations open to all are nonetheless held on a daily basis. If they cannot be assimilated to the kind of rational-critical deliberation that stands at the core of the concept of the “public sphere,” they allow for the identification of everyday affairs and their discussion from different points of views. It is difficult to summarize briefly the exchanges observed. First, because of the number of topics covered, which range from the demolition of a block of flats near the square to the accident in Fukushima, via all kinds of comparisons between life in Tianjin and in other Chinese cities. And second, because the words pronounced should be inscribed in the contexts in which they were uttered. They are not the same, for instance, before, during and after the session; they vary according to the distance and mutual orientation of the participants but also according to the emotions in which they are embedded. Moreover, several participants warned me that very few of the participants were to be trusted and that I should be careful about what I said to them.

29 April 2012. Victory Square.

F1: For us here, talking to each other is a pretty complicated thing. You don't know what people expect from you. You don't know what they think. You don't know what they're going to do with what you tell them or if they mean what they tell you. It's very complicated. That's why life here, day after day, is so tiring.

These repeated remarks cast a new light on the enduring silence of some participants, and on the choice made by others to have exclusive interlocutors.

At the start of the conversations: common preoccupations

8 May 2012. Victory Square.

F1: Prices are so high, it's impossible! I bought some Haihe milk yesterday, and it had gone up from 1.60 yuan a carton to 1.9!

F2: Yes, everything is going up – those little chocolate sweets the kids like so much used to be 2.30 a packet and yesterday I saw they were 4.50, with not a lot inside them. I don't understand.

F3: Prices are just doubling.

F1: I bought six tomatoes yesterday, for 10.80 yuan. People's incomes are going up a bit, but much less than inflation. Electricity, gas, water, they're all going up. I generally pay for my gas every two months, and it's usually about 70 or 80 yuan, but yesterday they wanted 99 yuan. I handed over a 100-yuan note, as usual, and waited for my change. He gave me one yuan. That scared me. I asked him if he had made a mistake, and he checked, and said, “No, Grandma, that's right.”

F3: It's frightening this year – a 10-yuan note is worth nothing these days! I suppose it's OK for those who have a shop but not for people on salaries or pensions. Those aren't going up. I remember in 1990 or 1991 when prices suddenly started rising.

F2: Yes, they went up first in Shenzhen. My husband was there in 1989, and a small pastry cost 40 fen there when it was still 2 fen in Tianjin. A dumpling was 50 fen in Shenzhen. We used to wonder how they managed down there. It seemed incredible – and then prices started going up

in Tianjin as well – vegetables, cabbages. I remember we used to refuse to buy things at those prices, and the vegetables piled up in the shops and rotted. It was totally unacceptable. Small cabbages used to be 2 fen a pound then they went up to 10 fen. Now they cost 1.3 or 1.5 yuan. F1: Yes, no one could afford them at that price. But then gradually people have had to accept it. You may go without for two or three days, but after a while ...

21 April 2011. *Victory Square*.

F1: The Earthquake Office should have issued an alert. What are they doing? What are we paying them for?

F3: They can't know in advance ... It's a technical problem. There's a joke right now, the director of the Earthquake Bureau his name is Jin Minghou, so he should be able to predict today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow! [She laughs].

F2: They say you can't really predict.

F1: Before maybe, but now there is a bureau for that.

F2: They can measure an earthquake when it's there but they can't predict it. Even Little Japan which is so technically advanced cannot predict earthquakes.

F3: These earthquakes are a way to test the new leaders. In 2008, at the time of Wenchuan, it was Wen Jiabao who had just taken the stage. And now it's Li Keqiang. With every change in the national leaders of the country there is an earthquake.

One way of analysing these exchanges is to try to grasp what kinds of topics can be raised in public. As shown in the two examples above, the opening sentences in a conversation have generally to do with current and immediate concerns which are considered as shared interests. These may be divided into two main categories. On the one hand, there are comments about the day-to-day environment that affects everyone: the climate, pollution, the cost of living. Conversations may start with observations about the square – the colour of the sky, the air quality or the temperature – but they usually concern situations encountered outside the square, situations which cannot be doubted because they have been experienced by all. On the other hand, there are particular events linked to the district, the city or to situations which occur suddenly, in China as elsewhere, and which are considered to be worth commenting on together.

Prices, to mention only one example, are one of the most frequently discussed topics. Not a day passes without somebody recalling a purchase they had made – or had to forego – that day, before commenting on the price increases, which they are all having to deal with, increases which are all the more worrying because they are mostly of foodstuffs. This inflation, which affects everyone, attracts everyone's attention. The prices of basic products are talked about almost to the nearest cent, sometimes with memories of how they have changed over the years; purchases made and the surprises they have caused are described in great detail. Shared assessments are made of the unreasonable price rises that have been spotted. Practical information is also exchanged – where to buy cheaper, for example, a question which elicits a variety of responses according to the product concerned, the distance which has to be travelled and the mode of transport involved. Health advice is exchanged, as pointed out by Judith Farquhar, as well as where to find not too expensive but reliable doctors.¹⁷

17 Farquhar and Zhang 2005, 307.

Word spreads about promotions or bargains, along with the names of shops which have just opened and are offering discounts to their first customers.¹⁸

Factual information is exchanged, indicating what it is that people are worrying about – in this case, prices – and inscribing the worries in a kind of normality. Practical information and useful tips also circulate, and recipes are passed on based on the ingredients which are the cheapest at the moment or which can easily be used to replace other ingredients. From a discussion of current prices and the effect they have on domestic budgets, conversations often move on to other topics, such as which bank to use – the interest rates on offer are compared and evaluated, as are the freebies banks distribute to their customers. In being well-informed or in search of information, depending on the day, and exchanging factual knowledge and practical advice, those who talk during the gathering are not only striving to define together “what is” and to make their environment more intelligible but also to define the best way in which, together, they can exert some control over their daily lives.

Yet the discussions do not cover all prices. They focus on the expenses that everyone there has to contend with – food, health, transport, gas and electricity; expenses which could expose disparities and jeopardize the ongoing interactions are avoided. In other words, discussions are about prices which unite rather than prices which divide. Housing, for example, which is one of the most significant factors of inequality, is rarely brought up, or if it is, it is spoken of allusively, even though it becomes a major topic of conversation when leaving the gathering.¹⁹ Such avoidance reflects the way voicing concerns about shared issues enables the performance of sociability. These characteristics of talk cannot be separated from its propositional dimension and explain why, if the recalling of past experiences does sometimes surface during the course of conversation, it never really opens a discussion. Indeed, no matter whether it is the personal past of the participants, the past they have shared by exercising together in the square over the years, or the past of the square itself and the buildings around it, these are all topics which are deemed inappropriate to bring up during the gathering.

However, other distinctions appear relevant to understand the discussions. These can be differentiated according to the certainties or, at the other end, the doubts which permeate them. More precisely, there are interactions which confirm what is known and familiar, and others which try to limit the uncertainty of the situations everyone is confronted with. Once again, the distinction here is not a binary opposition but signals the extremes of a spectrum along which situations are in flux.

The gathering constitutes a stage where what is known to all can be reaffirmed. In other words, one is inclined there to speak of things which others already know

18 These conversations are reminiscent of the “bargains and coupons” described by Alain Cottureau and Mokhtar Mohatar Marzok in their study of a family of Moroccan origin in Andalucia living on resources totally invisible to institutions. Cottureau and Marzok 2012.

19 Yi and Huang 2014.

and which delineate a common world. For instance, the calendar and the festivals which punctuate it are often mentioned as obvious facts that influence the daily life and actions of everyone within the gathering. They reflect a “form of life” or “images of the world” which affect everyone and leave no room for doubt. Relying on these basic certainties, participants interpret the climate of the day, mention the upcoming festival and the dishes which need to be cooked for it. These habits, recipes and remedies are seen as incontestable knowledge. A shared and indisputable world is thus affirmed which encompasses shared beliefs and the practical activities demanded by those beliefs.

Surprisingly, the things which are posited as certain are also those which it is necessary to be wary of in day-to-day life. Indeed, a significant proportion of the conversations revolves around things which are decidedly not to be trusted: goods, persons and institutions. It is certain, for example, that fruit and vegetables are harmful owing to the quantity of pesticides used. It is taken as a given that farmers sell products to town-dwellers that they will not use for their own consumption. These beliefs are not discussed, even if some evidence is sometimes put forward to justify them. They are interwoven with discussions about what should be done when facing such a reality: how, for example, should fruit and vegetables be washed? It is impossible here to quote the list, which grows longer by the day, of the harmful products, actions and situations which are validated, confirmed and re-affirmed in the square.

Such conversations thus reveal the shared anxieties arising from situations experienced outside of the square. In a rather paradoxical manner, they help to calm such anxieties as lists are drawn up together and available solutions are identified and tested for efficiency. The conversationalists repeatedly articulate two types of beliefs or certainties: those which concern what is harmful (and the level of risk involved) and those which concern measures that can be taken to prevent the threats identified.

More pointedly, talk seems to support here a process of collective inquiry to establish some certainty as to “what is” – in other words, to determine the social reality. This entails expressing all kinds of certainties but also eliminating shared doubts and worries. On 21 September 2011, a number of Chinese websites picked up on the marketing of “gutter oil.” That same evening, there were questions in the gathering. Which sort of oil should one buy? Which brand? Where? How could the lack of information in the press be explained? Some participants kept reaffirming that “experts” would certainly be called in and that they would not hesitate to conclude that all was well since this would be what they were required to say. Some months previously, the Fukushima accident had occurred. On 18 March 2011, the questions concerned the bulk buying of salt, which had been noted in China after rumours of radioactivity circulated: shops in Tianjin were stripped by lunchtime.²⁰ That evening, some participants put forward good

20 On this rumour, see, e.g., Kennedy 2011.

reasons for not believing that any salt had been contaminated: if there was a problem, the Chinese government would have done something about it. But other participants explained why the threat might have been well grounded: a senior Chinese official had stated that the salt works on the east coast of China had definitely *not* been exposed to radiation, which suggested that danger existed. On 4 September 2015, the questions were about the blue sky which had appeared over Beijing the previous day, on the occasion of a grand military parade to mark the anniversary of the “resistance of the Chinese people to Japanese aggression.” Had this fine weather been artificially produced? And if so, how? Attempting to disentangle truth from falsehood, comparisons were made between the clear sunshine on that day and the hazy sunlight, surely brought about artificially, during the 2008 Olympic Games. Some weeks beforehand, and for several days in a row, the talk had been more serious in the wake of the explosions which occurred on 12 August 2015 in a chemical storage depot in the new coastal district of Binhai. The discussion centred less on the eventual consequences for the inhabitants of Tianjin, which is dozens of kilometres from the port and deemed to be “much too far away to have any problems,” and more on the precise number of firemen who died.²¹

As shown above, discussions often revolve around what should be believed, or disbelieved, about public reports and commitments. They reveal the shared assumption that some form of disconnection usually prevails between the reality of a situation and what is said about it publicly. During the conversations, doubts are expressed about the kinds of disconnection observed in the issue at stake. These forms of disconnection include simulation, concealment and, as the following example illustrates, denial.

22 October 2011. Victory Square.

They keep saying that those who say today that education became too expensive are lying, that it is not true, that public schools have not become too expensive in the big cities, that they are free as long as you are a local resident. But how can they deny something everyone knows? You see, just to enrol my grandson we were asked to pay 90,000 yuan ... We cannot pay that kind of money, so although we have been living in this district for three generations, I had to put my grandson in a school for migrants' children! I think about it every day ... It means that my grandchildren won't be able to go to university, that Beida and Qinghua are not for them. I can't calm down. If the situation was as they say, would I have made such a choice? Would my choice just be understandable?

Discerning “what is,” judging “what ought to be”

The investigation of “what is” cannot be separated from that of “what ought to be.” The former involves indeed all kinds of judgements and evaluations that irrigate the comparisons developed or the disappointments expressed while trying to make sense of social reality. Factual and normative propositions are indeed tightly entangled. At one end of the spectrum, participants of the gathering

21 Victory Square, Tianjin, 26 August 2015.

can be said to be involved in a type of collective moral investigation, i.e. discussions aimed principally at discerning what is socially acceptable and what is not, good or bad, fair or unfair. At the other end of the spectrum, they use words and expressions which include all sorts of judgements.

19 November 2011. Victory Square.

M1: Wu Daye, he's a very responsible person, not the type to bring back home what belongs to everyone ... There were a lot of Chinese like that in his generation but these people today ... When they look back, they find they were idiots, stupid, because they gave a lot more than they received. You see, someone like Wu Daye, the distribution of housing or other things, honest people like him, well, they don't get anything because the more a child cries, the more his mother gives him milk. But if you don't cry ... The work units, they take advantage of those who are honest, while those who are able to take a knife and go to the leaders, those who are able to go and find them at home, then those leaders cannot but give them what they want. But he's honest, that's how he is. So, they told him to wait. They told him that next time it would be his turn, and since he's someone who is accommodating ...

Wu Daye's situation, for instance, is assessed by the participants in the light of a diversity of normative principles. For example, there is his age and the typical dangers that await him; his status as a model worker and the contrasting appreciations that such a title summons today; his investment in this daily gathering and the positive judgement that it generates; his ignorance of effective ways to negotiate with the work units' leadership; and the feeling of injustice that is ascribed to him when he compares his past sacrifices to his present situation.

More often than not, however, events which do not directly concern the participants are reported as cases which then allow individual judgements to be expressed and confronted in order to assess "what ought to be." Numerous comments are shared, for instance, about family relationships. Family and the diversity of expectations concerning family relationships are discussed at length. Particular events observed outside the gathering provide opportunities for stories which trigger discussions that compare viewpoints and work out which subjects are agreed on and which are not. Diverse ways on how to be a "good mother-in-law," "good daughter-in-law" or "good daughter" today are offered and appreciated. Moralistic injunctions from the government are dismissed and individual behaviours not consistent with the public discourses on the Chinese family are commonly reaffirmed and supported. Parents' desire not to live with their married children, for example, is regularly expressed and justified.

13 February 2012. Victory Square.

F1: Those who were born in the 1980s or 1990s, they want to stay with their parents even after they are married, but it is the parents who do not want to stay with them because they have to be served. They come home late from work. You make two dinners every day because they can't eat cold. They don't even know how to heat up the food. If you're away one night, they go to a restaurant. Then, you know that, as long as you stay with them ... No, seeing them once a week is perfect!

Local leaders, national institutions, income disparities or the merits of different Chinese cities are also frequently weighed up. One day in May 2013, for instance, a discussion between several participants about the cost of transport in Tianjin

led to a comparison with Beijing. Although salaries are higher in the capital, prices charged there are more or less the same as in Tianjin. The discussion then moved on to assessing the merits of a former mayor of Tianjin, Li Ruihuan 李瑞环, before shifting on to the current mayor of Tianjin: “He is always in meetings but we don’t see anything coming out of them!” Then, without any apparent transition, the question of corruption burst in: “These corrupt officials, how is it that they can’t hold back a little? Take some money but leave some to the people! In any case, they have so much money that they will never manage to spend it.” One participant interjected: “Before, the workers were like the eldest sons of the family. Today they are nothing!”

Common experiences shared among those who are clustered together in their discussion on the square are thus suddenly connected to distant actors: the mayor, corrupt officials, the rich, the government. Those who are speaking identify themselves as representatives of general categories such as the workers and the people. A sense of justice or injustice is expressed, based on principles of fairness, questions of legitimacy, expectations that are considered valid or commitments that are regarded as betrayed.

At the other end of the spectrum is found the merely evaluative nature of the language used and the descriptions made. The narratives are indeed peppered with terms which, far from being neutral, carry positive or negative appraisals. To mention just a few examples, expressions circulating outside the gathering, especially on the internet, such as “the people are poor, the government is rich” are repeated and reinforced here. The term *baofahu* 暴发户 (a nouveau riche household) is now suddenly defined as the antithesis of a *shoufahu* 守法户 (a law-abiding household).

One of the participants, a retired female teacher, mentioned one day that although she chatted with friends on WeChat and read the news on the internet on a daily basis, she would not know “how things really are” if she did not come to the square every day. Her words confirm how important these face-to-face discussions are for establishing a social reality that is less confused and better shared.

Conclusion

Of course, there are issues which do not surface in these public conversations. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that the topics that do arise are not confined to the preoccupations specific to those who engage in discussion. On the contrary, they are considered to be relevant to the participants as well as to distant and imagined fellow citizens outside of the gathering. Likewise, the legitimacy of the moral assessments made together is not confined to the boundaries of the gathering but is envisioned as likely to be recognized outside the square. A correlation thus exists between the specific form of “publicness” of this gathering and the public nature, liable to a kind of generalization, of the problems debated and the judgements passed.

This form of “publicness” is clearly distinct from concepts such as those of “public intimacy” devised by Laura Kunreuther or “intimate publics” elaborated

by Lauren Berlant.²² Personal desires are not voiced here in public, strangers here are not related to one another as intimates. Nor can this publicness be reduced to relationships among strangers and the culture of distance with which it is eventually associated. In addition, those who attend the gathering attain a kind of visibility where “status or traditions are not decisive.”²³ More specifically, the publicness at hand allows participants to appear repeatedly to others in a public place, to appear “in the world” one might say, just as it allows them to have companions who can be either close or distant, and to “do together,” by relying on the joint accomplishment, in the same flow of gestures and sounds, of particular exercises. The multiple and varying physical distances and social relationships that are made visible weave the specific fabric of this gathering, both loose and solid, a fabric always likely to extend and be strengthened by a form of “tuning in” relationship favoured today in many public gatherings in China. Such distances and relationships account for the type of discussions held on the square, which are neither personal confidences nor factual information exchanged among strangers. In other words, they account for the establishment of an overall form of distance, neither too close nor too distant, stemming from the varying distances intertwined. Such a distance is conducive to the establishment of a kind of mutual trust, albeit limited, and to the voicing of concerns considered as shared by those present as well as by fellow citizens at a distance.

This gathering is the stage of a specific form of civil sociability. It is also the stage of a kind of collective inquiry aiming both at reaffirming shared beliefs and at lifting doubts, with all the uneasiness doubts carry along. A question emerges here: to what extent is the current social experience and environment intelligible to Chinese citizens, and how? As a very preliminary answer to this question, Wu Daye’s gathering discloses the multiple forms of indeterminacies encountered by the participants as they try to make sense of present realities. Language, for instance, appears vague and limited to designate rapidly changing realities. It is all the more vague and confusing that all kinds of anachronisms, paraphrases and well-anchored distortions between words and the realities they supposedly designate, embedded in different historical sequences, coexist and clash. The discussions also reveal the extent of the factual and normative indeterminacies (participants debate, for instance, what makes a “worker,” or what does it mean today to be a former “model worker”); they disclose the wide scope of what is perceived as worrying because it is incomprehensible or worrying because it is harmful or hostile; and they make visible the fears that stem from the dangers perceived in areas such as food or the environment, and the fears that stem from the seemingly unstable and unpredictable character of men and institutions.

However, such indeterminacies are both disclosed and partly overcome in this gathering. Victory Square is indeed a place where shared meanings, beliefs and interpretations nonetheless stabilize. It is a place where those who interact and talk to each other make judgements, contribute to assign a meaning to social

22 Kunreuther 2014; Berlant 1997.

23 Calhoun 1992, 2.

reality, and place themselves under the horizon of a common situation and a shared fate. Moreover, this gathering is concerned not only with establishing a shared knowledge but also a shared practical means to cope with present uncertainties and worries. In other words, by “doing together” in the same flow of sounds and movements, and by eventually “talking” together on a kind of median position between the personal and the impersonal, the participants connect specific forms of knowledge with relevant actions.

The public gathering on Victory Square may thus be defined as an “intermediary public sphere” in the sense given to this concept by Alain Cottureau and theorized in a series of articles since the late 1980s. A public sphere is referred to as intermediary on several grounds: it is situated on an intermediary scale between private membership and anonymous citizens; it brings together individuals among whom connections of greater or lesser proximity exist; and it stages a confrontation, which cannot be disconnected from the particular historical experience at stake, between a plurality of types and sources of legitimacy.²⁴

Wu Daye’s gathering represents an ordinary moment involving ordinary persons, something that may happen “at any time and at any moment,” as Georg Simmel would have said.²⁵ However, as a specific type of “intermediary public sphere,” it also represents a common platform where participants interact with one another, reveal themselves as unique individuals and talk about their affairs in common. As such, as with other types of “public gatherings,” it seems to be worthy of academic interest in a political situation where civil associations and intermediary bodies are formally contested and banned. And inasmuch, this study can contribute to the literature regarding the existing correlations between forms of political regimes and patterns of publicness.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical note

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²⁴ Cottureau 1992; 1995; 1999; 2002.

²⁵ Simmel 1999.

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摘要: 本文以天津市持续了二十多年（1991—2017）在胜利广场这个公共广场的一种“公共聚会”为观察点。作者尝试以“中介性公共领域”的视角，理解观察到的社会现象。在参与者健身或“一块做”的时候，在他们如果愿意的话“一块说”的时候，不同的距离，不同的参与方式，不同的期待同时展示，导致一个特定的公共性类型的出现。研究表明，即使它们被疑惑，不确定和焦虑所充斥，在胜利广场上展开的对话也不是一种次要的活动。恰恰相反，它们发生在一个共同的舞台上，参与者在这个舞台上相互交流，展现自己作为独特的个体，谈论自己共同的事务。这样的聚会不仅使共同的意义和评价得以实现，而且使社会现实得以稳定。

关键词: 天津; 中介公共领域; 公共聚会; 公共领域; 不确定性; 陌生人; 社会现实

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