

Abstract and Keywords

Dissertation title : *Elder gangs. A Sociology of Young Retirees' Spaces of Sociability in Contemporary Urban China*

Abstract

This dissertation stems from the observation of a booming number of elderly who have been gathering in Chinese urban public spaces to engage in collective activities since the beginning of the 2010s – a phenomenon exemplified by the 2013 controversies surrounding the “square dances” (广场舞) practiced by millions of elderly women, criticized as such for being too loud. Drawing from a sociology of ageing perspective and paying close attention to the meanings invested by actors in their daily experiences, I wish to examine this intensification of elderly gatherings by confronting it with the recent experience of retirement of the first cohort of one-child parents, who were born and grew up during the Maoist period, and who constitute the main population of these gatherings, termed “young retirees”.

The ethnographic practice, concerned with “following actors” and “letting them deploy their own world” (Latour, 2009) allowed me, through the initial investigation of a Beijing public park, to measure the diversity of spaces of intra-generational sociability these young retirees actually circulated through. Such spaces included public parks and squares, of course, but also stock exchange centers, matrimonial markets, neighborhood-based activity centers or for retired cadres, travel tours, digital groups, as well as health-products companies, all consequently appearing as a coherent network of spaces in which numerous urban young retirees were engaged.

Thanks to enquiries conducted in Beijing and Kunming between 2014 and 2016, this network is analyzed in the dissertation from a double perspective. On the one hand, my work endeavors to analyze the different “group styles” (Eliasoph, 2003) in which these young retirees are involved, the variety of forms taken by relationships and interactions within these groups as well as the meanings individuals invest in them in view of their lifecourse, their experience of retirement and the transformations of intergenerational relationships. Four case-studies, each presented in separate chapters, thus allow us to better grasp the various ways young retirees associate with each other in different spaces : the Sunshine Chorus, located in a Beijing park and composed of loosely acquainted participants ; the Joy Squadron, a group of people who were “sent down” to the countryside together at the end of the 1960s and who nowadays gather daily to practice *taiji* ; the Longevity Group, a pyramidal-sale company of health-products based in Beijing ; and the Yunnan University for the Elderly, a learning institution strongly supervised by the Party-State.

On the other hand, beyond these singularities, this dissertation also takes seriously the strong resemblances which echo between these spaces, and therefore analyses from a more structural perspective the meanings of these resemblances : not only the emergence of a Chinese “third age”, as well as a rising generational and age consciousness between people sharing common worries and interests, but also the mobilization of generationally shared modes of action and resources in order to give meaning to old age in a context of strong uncertainty. Taken as a whole, the dissertation illustrates how, among such resources, the production of collective joy occupies a predominant place.

Keywords : *young retirees ; China ; sociability spaces ; ethnography ; third-age ; collective joy*