

Chinese Square Dance, Media, and Ideological Dynamics in Contemporary China

by

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Abstract

In China, square dance refers to a dancing activity named after where it usually occurs, a public square. Contemporary Chinese square dance started in the 1980s, in the wake of the Chinese Communist Party's Reform and Opening Up policy. My paper explores Chinese square dance as a collective method of expression under contemporary ideological dynamics, which combine earlier socialism and the more recent neoliberalism. It entails the study of Chinese domestic news media, which represent the dialectical tensions of socialist and neoliberal ideologies when presenting the image of square dance. Using Chinese square dance as a focal point to study the interplay between media, society and the party state, we see a dynamic struggle occurring between the often despised, orthodox socialism and the arguably heterodox, yet penetrative neoliberal way of life.

Keywords: Chinese square dance; socialism; neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics; ideological dynamics; Chinese domestic media; Sina web portal

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Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Tables.....	vi
List of Acronyms.....	vi
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2. Square Dance and China's Social Transformation.....	5
2.1. Chinese Square Dance and Its Historical Variations.....	5
2.2. China's Reform and its Neoliberalization.....	7
2.2.1. China's Reform and Consequent Social Changes.....	7
2.2.2. Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics.....	10
2.3. Contemporary Chinese Square Dance and Catalysts of Its Rise.....	13
2.3.1. What is Chinese Square Dance Like Now?.....	14
2.3.2. The Rise of Contemporary Chinese Square Dance.....	15
Chapter 3. Square Dance and Chinese Domestic Media.....	19
3.1. The Double-Track Character of the Chinese Media System.....	19
3.2. A Case Study of Sina Web Portal.....	22
3.2.1. Web Portals, Chinese News Website Regulations, and Sina.....	22
3.2.2. Mediated Disputes on Chinese Square Dance and Their Meanings	28
3.2.3. Media's Ideological Dynamic and Discursive Strategies.....	36
3.3. Implications: Neoliberalization, Emerging Media, and <i>Damas'</i> Right to Communicate.....	43
Chapter 4. Conclusion	46
References	49
Online News Resources from Sina.....	54
Appendix	58

List of Tables

Table 3.2.1.	Chinese Web Portals Top 6 Ranking List in Recent Three Months (Updated by 2015.06.30).....	24
Table 3.2.1.	Layout of the Themes of Chinese Square Dance Stories on Sina (2015.01.01-2015.06.30).....	26
Table 3.2.1.	Top 10 Most-viewed Chinese Square Dance Stories on Sina (2015.01.01-2015.06.30).....	27

List of Acronyms

BTV	Beijing Satellite Television
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CFLAC	China Federation of Literary and Art Circles
CR	Cultural Revolution
GASC	General Administration of Sport of China
KMT	Kuomingtang
MC	Ministry of Culture

Chapter 1.

Introduction

At the 2015 Spring Festival Gala, an annual TV special that has been annually broadcast live for more than 30 years by China Central Television (CCTV) on the eve of the Chinese lunar new year, a group of seniors in gym suits from Beijing's Mass Art Center (*Beijing Qunzhong Yishuguan*) delightfully performed a choreographed square dance (*Guangchang Wu*). This performance was accompanied by a new song "The Most Dazzling Little Apple" (*Zuixuan Xiaopingguo*), which dazzled millions in the audience because it was an elaborately remixed version of two most popular songs among square dancing seniors - "The Most Dazzling Folk Style" (*Zuixuan Minzufeng*) and "Little Apple" (*Xiao Pingguo*). The mash-up of two "juggernauts" (*shenqu*) in square dancing was applauded by some Chinese media as the most "down-to-earth" (*jie diqi*, affable and vernacular) performance in this year's Gala (Chen, 2015). However, part of the Chinese media also reflected people joking that square dancing seniors have "seized all spaces, even including CCTV No.1 Studio", in reaction to this performance. Straightforward dislike was also expressed, specifically highlighting that another special song mix performance "Eulogy to Youth" (*Zhi Qingchun*) was canceled right before the show due to an alleged "time limit". This canceled act would have been performed by four young rising stars and was highly anticipated by many young people, who later cried out on social media - "why retain the seniors' square dance instead of young idols singing if there is a time limit? I'm so pissed off."¹

This was the first dramatic news event about Chinese square dance in 2015. In the Chinese context, "square dance" refers to a dancing activity named after the place where it usually takes place, a public square. It can also take place in other open spaces such as parks or plazas. A recent report from CCTV claimed that as many as 100 million

¹ See the comment of Weibo account "情不重不生婆婆" (*Qingbuzhongbushengposuo*) posted on February 17th under a February 14th post titled "The Last Rehearsal Finished" by Weibo account "央视综艺" (*Yangshi Zongyi*, CCTV Variety), previously known as "央视春晚" (*Yangshi Chunwan*, CCTV Spring Festive Gala). Source: <http://www.weibo.com/cctv3zongyi>

people in China have joined the square dance movement, mostly women in their 50s and 60s (“Advance”, 2014). The public has become aware of the movement’s enormous scale, benefits in maintaining health, and more recently, the massive amount of complaints against practitioners’ extraordinary enthusiasm and its disturbance of public order. Now the public’s concern has gradually moved towards digging out the social meaning of this movement and figuring out ways to manage the contemporary social dynamics.

How should we understand Chinese square dance? What does it have to do with contemporary China’s fast-developing society? As Johnston (2009) suggested, “the body is a crucial site of sociospatial relations, representations and identities... [It] is bound up in knowledge and power...[It] is a site of struggle and contestation” (p.326). In this sense, we should examine the underlying appeals and ideological dynamics at play behind China’s ostensibly blatant square dancing. Such dynamics say a lot about China’s “fractured society” (Zhao, 2003, p.53) where socialist consciousness and centralized control are currently challenged by ubiquitous privatization and neoliberal lifestyles. Chinese square dancing means many things to different social group members in the face of a double-track situation in contemporary China, where sustaining institutional legacies of state socialism still play a major role in social development while neoliberalism has shown its ability to infiltrate routine life in multiple ways.

Interestingly, Chinese domestic media have become involved in many public incidents related to square dance in recent years, playing a role as both a loudspeaker for those who are for and those who are against the activity as well as a multi-layered forum for a chorus of different voices. Along with other aspects of contemporary society, Chinese media have been going through their own transformations, operating on a similar double-track model of integrating market dynamics with party-state regulation. In the matter of square dancing, CCTV’s annually broadcasted Spring Festival Gala shows the positions of media have upgraded from a supporting to a leading role in the long-lasting drama over square dancing. It is now directly showing support and joining hands together with the activity, pushing its relationship with square dance further than usual. Moreover, since the Gala, meticulously produced by China’s top state-run media giant, has a distinctively political nature and is kept under ideological scrutiny (Zhao, 1998,

p.43), the subtle and increasingly intimate relationship between square dance, media, and the party-state is intriguing. So how is the social spectacle of Chinese square dance represented on Chinese domestic media? How does the dialectic co-existence of socialism and neoliberalism affect Chinese media, and more particularly, its representation and interpretation of square dancing? And overall, what does the interplay between vernacular square dancing, media representation and party-state administration say about the ideological dynamics that simmer below the thriving Chinese contemporary society?

With these questions in mind, I analyze the phenomenon of Chinese square dance and its multi-layered representations in Chinese domestic media. Such an analysis cannot ignore the contextual dynamics of what Harvey (2005) called “neoliberalization with Chinese characteristics”, defined by the “compatibility between authoritarianism and the capitalist market” (p.120) as a result of “three-decades of social transformation” (Yeoh, 2010, p.239) since the Reform and Opening Up (*Gaige Kaifang*) policy in the late 1970s. As such, I explore the meaning of the practice for its notable practitioners, and the polemics around them, which are largely condensed in media representations. I conclude that the Chinese media’s representation of Chinese square dance is a noteworthy example of the essentially ideological dynamic or tension that is going on in China, which integrates the often despised, orthodox socialist practice and the arguably heterodox, yet penetrative neoliberal way of life.

To begin with, I provide a brief historical overview of public dancing in China, and square dance as a subset thereof, arguing that the ebbs and flows of public dancing in China have often synchronized with the tides of Chinese political history. Next, my analysis probes into China’s recent social transformations, beginning with the government’s Reform and Opening Up policy, and accelerated in the 1990s by Deng Xiaoping’s “No Debate” decree – that there should be no debate about the capitalist or socialist nature of the reforms - and the dictum that “development is the only hard truth” (*fazhan cai shi ying daoli*) (Zhao, 2011, p.206). On the one hand, this frames square dancing as a popular reaction to the increasing conditions of globalization and neoliberalization of Chinese life, including the atomization of collective society, the collapse of the socialist welfare system, and other challenges to past social norms. On

the other hand, it offers a background to contextualize the chorus of opinions around square dance and its practitioners and their representation on Chinese domestic media. In order to study the media's representation on this issue, my focus targets one of China's top web portals - Sina.com.cn, where stories from multiple media organizations with different forms of ownership are brought together. I use Sina's search engine to search for headlines with the key word “广场舞” (*Guangchang Wu*, square dance) and eliminating reduplicative ones and netizens' posts, I collected 261 effective Chinese-language stories about Chinese square dancing within the time period from January 1st, 2015 to June 30th, 2015. By categorizing them and performing a critical discourse analysis, I lay out the relationship between Chinese square dance, media, and society, including how the media represent Chinese square dance and how the media interacts with a society that is going through an ideological struggle.

Chapter 2.

Square Dance and China's Social Transformation

In this chapter, I begin with the history of public dance in China. I argue that collective expression through dancing in public is in fact a vernacular tradition for the Chinese masses that has existed for hundreds of years. For one thing, the contemporary form of square dance is a culmination of many variations of public dance evolved through the passage of time. For another thing, as famous culture studies scholar Stuart Hall (1981) argues, the popular must be understood as “the capacity to constitute classes and individuals as a popular force - that is the nature of political and cultural struggle” (p.452). Political and ideological meanings have therefore explicitly or implicitly been attached to public dance throughout history, and have become especially explicit during the recent century. Therefore, the dancing tradition is not only a cultural one, but also a political one. As such, there is no way to explore the significance of contemporary square dance without taking China's ongoing comprehensive social transformation into consideration.

2.1. Chinese Square Dance and Its Historical Variations

Public dancing has a long history in China. It can be traced back to the rice-sprout dance (*yangge*), which is thought to have originated during the Song Dynasty (959-1278) during the feudal age of Chinese history (Gerdes, 2008, p.139). As a traditional folk dance with “stylized movement, singing or chanting, and role-playing with wide-ranging regional variations”, it was originally linked to agricultural ceremonies and served to express joy, gravity and infatuation (Noble, 2003, p.107). Through to the early 20th century, peasants throughout China still practiced the rice-sprout dance as a collective activity in community celebrations of agricultural events, holidays, and temple festivals (Noble, 2003, p.110).

The political function and ideological meaning of the rice-sprout dance began to be investigated into by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when Mao Zedong's “Talks

at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts" (*Zai Yan'an Wenyi Gongzuo Zuotanhui shang de Jianghua*) were made in 1942. The CCP vigorously promoted the learning of folk song and dance, especially the rice-sprout dance, and promoted the "New Rice-Sprout Dancing Movement" (*Xin Yangge Yundong*) in areas that were still controlled by the Kuomintang (KMT), their political rival before the 1949 revolution (Gerdes, 2008, p.140). As a propaganda instrument for the CCP, rice-sprout dancing was promoted to "incite revolutionary fervor and patriotic pride" (Noble, 2003, p.110), encouraging people to "effect change *en masse*" (Gerdes, 2008, p.138). Specifically, Graezer (1999) exposed how the follow-the-leader nature of rice-sprout dancing, where many dancers hold a fan and a scarf in their hands and follow the movements of the person at the head of the procession, reinforces top-down leadership. (p.32) Along with this, a strong sense of unity is strengthened. This is also the case with other collective dancing forms I discuss in this essay.

Rice-sprout dancing kept its momentum after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), but was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution (CR, *Wenhua Dageming*, 1966-1976), a social-political movement that paralyzed China politically and significantly affected the country economically and socially. Given the stated goal of preserving "true" Communist ideology in the country by purging remnants of capitalist and feudal elements from Chinese society, many ancient traditions were discarded. Despite the changes made to the thematic content of the rice-sprout dance, Mao could not overlook its feudal origins (Gerdes, 2008, p.140, p.141). But the thread of public/square dance did not stop, as indicated by the emergence of the "loyalty dance" (*zhongzi wu*), arguably "the largest square dance in China" (Wang 2014). It was performed in public to express infinite respect for Mao and determination for revolution by simple and dramatic movements. To some extent, the loyalty dance could be considered as a more polarized version of the traditional rice-sprout dance. Both of them shouldered significant political and ideological meaning in their respective periods of time, but the difference is that the loyalty dance died out with the end of its particular era, because of its historical sensitivity.

Later on, China, which had just recovered from the "ten-year catastrophe" (*shinian haojie*) brought by the Cultural Revolution, saw the resurrection of rice-sprout

dancing and the spread of other types of dance as well. This included social/ballroom dance (*jiaoyi wu*), which was first introduced to a few harbor cities from Western countries during the 1920s but did not spread further until the 1980s. Wu and Gaubatz (2012) suggest that, as Chinese people were increasingly exposed to Western lifestyles, ballroom dancing was regarded as “an expression of Chinese modernity”. In keeping with folk dance traditions, ballroom dancing was widely performed at public places during that time. As a measure of “setting things right” (*boluanfanzheng*) after the destruction of social and cultural life during the Cultural Revolution, the popularity of ballroom dancing was encouraged by the authorities through organized activities.

Thus it is evident that public dancing has historically been deeply embedded in Chinese people’s lives, and it has gone through ups and downs with changes in society. As a collective method of expression, dancing in public connotes certain meanings and emotions, which aligned with the CCP’s desire for social mobilization and stability. In this sense, the activity of dancing in public can be linked with the political will of the state during specific periods in time. Based on this, understanding the current fad of square dancing entails knowledge of the on-going social transformation and the consequent ideological struggle that is occurring in both overt and latent ways in China.

2.2. China’s Reform and Its Neoliberalization

2.2.1. China’s Reform and Consequent Social Changes

Faced with the dual difficulties of political uncertainty and several years of economic stagnation following the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese leadership under Deng Xiaoping announced a program of economic reform in late 1978 (Harvey, 2005, p.120). This made the 1980s a crucial watershed for China, followed by what Chinese people often call “earth-shaking changes” in the whole of Chinese society.

In the Maoist era before the reform process was initiated, as anthropologist David Harvey (2005) concluded, almost everything of significance in China lay within the state sector (p.125). On one hand, large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and institutions not only contributed profitable national revenue, but also offered a long-term safety net,

known as “the iron rice bowl” (*tie fanwan*) for a great part of the Chinese population. This included the offer of stable employment and a wide range of welfare and pension benefits, including housing, child care, education, and medical service, among others. Along with government sectors and schools, all enterprises belonged to a general sociospatial idea of “work unit” (*danwei*), a key concept that in some sense represents a communal space and a communal culture, which will be further explained in regard to square dance disputes in Chapter 3. On the other hand, the agrarian sector was organized according to a commune system, which created a stable yet socially immobile environment. Overall almost all sectors were either state-owned or collectively-owned and were integrated within a state planning system, in which output targets were assigned and inputs allocated according to plan (Harvey, 2005, p.125). But many accounts agree that such a state socialist approach might easily reach its limit in developing its potential as there is no alternative space for growth within the framework. Scholar of Planning Fulong Wu (2008) argues that state-led accumulation developed a pool of idle production factors and labor could not be effectively turned into a productive force (p.1094). Moreover, the system preempted an equal distribution of welfare benefits as social provisions were allocated according to an urban-centric mode of delivery.

The primary purpose of the reform and opening up was to increase productivity and stimulate competition, thereby sparking economic growth and ultimately reaching the level of a “moderately prosperous society” (*xiaokang shehui*), which was meant for all social members. It denotes a middle-class level of prosperity according to which basic needs are comfortably met, with excess production to spare (The Economist, 2003). The reform introduced market forces to the Chinese economy and encouraged individual and local initiatives. For rural peasants, a “personal responsibility” system was first established with the gradual break-up of the rural commune system. Township and village enterprises (TVEs) as well as wholly private enterprises arose, injecting vibrancy to China’s overall economy. Communication between urban and rural areas became relatively dynamic, especially with the emergence of rural migrant workers. Equally important, foreign capital flowed in, gathering momentum during the 1990s. This is also the time when the market sector gained strength and significance, and when the whole economy moved towards a neoliberal structure (Harvey, 2005, p.126).

The influence of the economic reform never confined itself within the limits of the economic sphere. As Harvey (2005) would summarize, China's lesson learned from the major move towards an embrace of capitalism is that the market can do little to transform an economy without a parallel shift in class relations, private property, and all the other institutional arrangements that typically ground a thriving capitalist economy (p.122). While the reform has delivered spectacular economic growth and the rise of living standards for a large proportion of the population, it has brought woes to the marketizing society as well. The 1989 Tiananmen incident reflected "the tension in the political realm that paralleled economic neoliberalization" (Harvey, 2005, p.123) and compelled the state to re-evaluate its role in the development, ultimately paving the way to more thorough marketization (Wu, 2010, p.623) and culminating in Deng's "no debate" principle in response to the question of national policy reflecting socialism or capitalism (*xing zi xing she wenti*).

Since then, commodification was ruthlessly and pervasively pushed throughout society (Wu, 2010, p.624). Trading became more and more prosperous as an increasing number of people plunged themselves into the tides of market economics. Social inequality was aggravated under the disguise of Deng's dictum - "Let some people get rich first" (*Rang yibufen ren xian fuqilai*) because disparity was thought to be inevitable and tolerable during the process of development. Rapid urbanization of rural areas has generated confrontations in the land conversion process.

In addition, "three big mountains" (*san zuo dashan*) have taken shape little by little since the end of the 20th century - the high costs of housing, health care, and education. As public housing dwindles and house prices inflate at tremendous rates, home ownership has become a huge burden for individuals, especially for middle and low income families. Accompanying this is the development of "entrepreneurial governance", with property management companies assuming more responsibilities transferred from government (Wu, 2010, p.624). The socialist public healthcare system collapsed. Hospitals increasingly rely on charging fees for tests and selling medicines with the decline of government funding. Education was also to some extent privatized in line with marketization. Not only are fees increasingly charged for basic education, universities also introduced tuition fees in the 1990s.

What made the social situation even worse was the restructuring of SOEs into joint stock corporations, leading to an expansion of the wealth gap and the laying off of millions of workers. This exponentially expanded the developing social lacerations as managers owned significant portions of shares and sometimes received a yearly salary one hundred times that of their average workers (Harvey, 2005, p.144). Corruption and misappropriation of resources also occurred due to legal loopholes in this reform. Moreover, the grim jobless situation gives rise for the potential of social unrest and creates what Solinger (2004) called “a new urban underclass” (p.177), as 27 million workers were let go from SOEs just between 1998 and 2002 (Harvey, 2005, p.144).

All in all, starting from the 1980s, China has steered off the path of purist Maoist state socialism. Just as anthropologist Lisa Rofel (2007) suggested, at the time, while “some still believed in the basic tenets of socialism, many were disillusioned by the destructive passions of two basic principles of Maoism: class struggle and continuous revolution” (p.7). Mass endorsement of the government’s claim that “development is the only hard truth” (*fazhan cai shi ying daoli*) lead to the dominance of market logic. The vast shift in social structuring has also brought a change in ideas, especially with exposure to “exotic” Western culture. The logic of market exchange and contractual relations is entrenched in many domains of social life, not exclusively in the economy. As emphasis on efficiency and importance of individual consumption infiltrated people’s daily life, the collective society organized by socialist principles began to atomize. Following the Tiananmen incident, the constitution of a post-socialist humanity in China entailed an elaboration of individuals’ self-interest to become cosmopolitan citizens of a post-Cold War world (Rofel, 2007, p.13). Through the construction of self-conscious enthusiasm, neoliberalism appeared as if it were a unified entity that signaled a new era (Rofel, 2007, p.13). However, this does not mean that China has fully adopted neoliberalism as its model for development. China’s neoliberal turn remains complicated and deserves deeper analysis.

2.2.2. Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics

The transformation following China’s reform and opening up in the post-Mao era is a double-edged sword. On one side is the spectacular economic growth and social

development that China has never experienced before. The flip side is the multi-layered social incompatibilities which result from the unbalanced development of the country. This does not just refer to wealth disparity or the strained relationships among various classes, but most importantly, the challenge to ideological legitimacy caused by the mixed governance approach, which “has combined earlier Maoist socialist, nationalist and developmentalist practices and discourses of the Communist Party with the more recent market logic of ‘market socialism’” (Nonini, 2008, p.145).

Neoliberalism can be briefly interpreted as:

“a market-driven approach to economic and social policy based on neoclassical theories of economics... that maximize the role of the private business sector in determining the political and economic priorities of the state” (Wu, 2010, p.619).

As a theory at variance with the more laissez-faire doctrine of classical liberalism, neoliberalism is involved with “the priority of the price mechanism, the free enterprise, the system of competition and a strong and impartial state” (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009, p.13). The state relies on the market and the private business sector, instead of public institutions, to fulfill political and economic interests. It can also be categorized as a dominant Western ideological paradigm which accords priority to such goals as economic efficiency, consumer choice, and individual autonomy, thereby shifting responsibility from governments and corporations onto individuals (Wu, 2010, p.619). In this sense, the social transformation since the 1980s imposed upon Chinese society is a consequence of a neoliberal political economy, as can be seen in the aforesaid examples, such as the “three big mountains”, that burden Chinese people.

There is no doubt that China’s neoliberal trend has infiltrated social life in multiple manners, with pervasive effects on ways of thought that have increasingly become common-sense knowledge and normalized phenomena. Nevertheless, at the same time, the Chinese party-state has never relinquished its political control and socialist ideology (Yu, 2011,p.39). Therefore, China has a dual-track developing model. It retains an orthodox socialist governance and political consciousness, in which the party-state plays a large role in defining the interests of the people and supporting the nation through its

institutions. However, it adopts a prevalent neoliberalist market approach to fulfill the economic priorities that are meant to serve the people and the nation.

When the reform first started, Deng's idea was to take a market-first approach (Wu 2008, p.1093), seeing this as being a politically neutral move rather than an overhaul in the CCP's orthodox socialist ideology. For instance, the Tiananmen incident was a public demonstration for political reform. There was the desire to re-position the role of the party-state, which was thought to be in accordance with reform in the economic realm. The crackdown of the Tiananmen incident, however, indicated the restricted scope of China's liberalization to economic spheres under the inalterable basis of socialist legacies. Indeed, the state continued to deepen economic reforms in the 1990s, in order to "escape from a second crisis" due to any half-measures in economic reform (Wu, 2010, p.628), but it never altered the position of the party-state. A move, which appears to pay off for the CCP, as Wu (2008) argues, the economic growth in return "strengthens its political capacity" (p.1093). In other words, the neoliberal policies are no more than an attempted remedy for vulnerabilities in the party-state's legitimacy. The cooperation between the two sides, a socialist government and capitalist economy, works the other way around as well. While the state continues market reforms and maintains a monopoly of political power and ideological legitimacy (Nonini, 2008, p.156), it justifies its intervention as exactly what is needed to enhance competitiveness as a latecomer to industrialization (Wu, 2010, p.1093). So, China has been constructing a particular kind of development model that incorporates neoliberal elements with authoritarian centralized control (Harvey, 2005, p.120). Paraphrasing Deng's "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*), which emphasizes the insistence on the Socialist path while addressing China's need for economic growth, Harvey (2005) named China's model as "Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics".

How to define China's neoliberal restructuring remains a problem. China's experience with market development has not followed the path laid out in orthodox neoliberalism as an ideology different from neoliberalism as a practice. According to Brenner and Theodore (2002), China's restructuring is more like "actually existing neoliberalism" in practice, rather than an ideology. The purpose of neoliberal restructuring is to maintain the legitimacy of the party-state through rapid economic

growth and modernization. After all, the neoliberal shift has been a political project led by the party-state in order to address socio-economic issues that occurred in both the Mao and post-Mao eras. When considering the political-economic origins of China's transformation, not only is the nation state still over extended (Wu, 2010, p.621), but its political power ultimately outweighs the capacity of capital in the market. Therefore, the state's capacity during the transformation has increased instead of being diminished or becoming "minimal", as envisioned in orthodox neoliberalism (Wu, 2010, p.626). This is not only through its continued macro-control, but more importantly, through itself becoming an active agent that continually throws itself into global market competition.

However, what is problematic with China's "Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" is that while it defused the legitimization crisis brought up in 1989, it has instigated fresh challenges from "disenfranchised groups", as seen in the hundreds of thousands of China's traditional working class, more than 230 million migrant workers, and the continued dispossession of the peasantry (Hu, Zhang & Ji 2013, p.148). These are the very proletariat that the socialist party state is supposed to serve. Harvey (2007) suggests that there exists a whole new, sophisticated and subtle class struggle on the part of the upper strata to restore their class dominance in China. Given Harvey's emphasis on the "restoration of class power" (p.29) as an essential feature of neoliberalism, the CCP's seeming turn to serve the interests of an "opposing bourgeoisie class", combined with the rise of a cosmopolitan urban middle class, leads to a confusion in interpretations of China's current development path. The introduction of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics", almost brings an end to the debate of "reflecting socialism or capitalism". Under such seemingly depoliticized social circumstances the debate of ideology is muted by both tight political control and busy economic development. The tension caused by this complex of ideological dynamics is passed on to issues that connect different parties of society. Chinese square dance along with its media interpretations, exemplifies this kind of ideological collision between orthodox socialism that is often overlooked in many cases and the arguably heterodox neoliberalism that is penetrative for contemporary China.

2.3. Contemporary Chinese Square Dance and Catalysts of Its Rise

2.3.1. What is Chinese Square Dance Like Now?

Most contemporary performances of square dance in China are based on line dance (*pai wu*). This is a dance form with a repeated sequence of steps in which a group of people in one or more lines, all facing either each other or in the same direction, execute the steps at the same time. Line dance was introduced to China in the early 2000s, and promoted in 2009 as a competition item by the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC, *Guojia Tiyu Zongju*), in a move that is thought to have accelerated the popularization of square dance (Li, 2011, p.54). But generally speaking, Chinese square dance is more flexible and abundant in its variations, including both traditional Chinese dancing forms such as the rice-sprout dance, and foreign dancing forms such as ballroom, rock n' roll, *etc.* This is not only because of its general spontaneity and amateurism, but also due to the rich sources of public and collective dance throughout history.

In fact, the definition of square dance can be rather blurry. The dance can be done in a variety of styles as long as it is practiced in public. The practitioners are mostly women in or above middle age, often dubbed as “Chinese *dama*” (meaning “big aunt” in English, also known as “dancing grannies”). They dance in a loose formation and loose groups accompanied by finger-popping music, usually pop music, coming from an amplifier attached to an MP3 or cassette player. Much more rarely, especially nowadays, they are accompanied by a live band of musicians playing drums, cymbals, and flutes (Chen, 2011,p.38). Though Chinese square dance can be seen in rural areas, it mostly takes place in cities, which is also where it attracts most of the public attention.

Dancers are mostly ordinary residents of the neighborhood, with different family backgrounds, educational levels and social status. They usually congregate in the early morning or evening, at parks or public squares, or anywhere they can find enough space regardless of what other use that space may have – such as a parking lot or even a shopping mall lobby. Dancers usually organize themselves in a rather free and self-supported style. The routines are choreographed by group members who learn them from various sources including online teaching videos. Any expenses for facilities are often paid by group members themselves. There are competitions for square dance,

mostly organized and supported by local government. Some major enterprises and television stations have held contests too.

Since 2010, Chinese square dance began to grab people's attention and aroused social controversy. Its low-level and old-fashioned aesthetic styles, occupation of space, as well as the loud volume of music, all elicit confrontations. Local authorities have put forward some regulations in response to the chaos caused by dancing *damas* and complaints from the public. Most of the regulations are about the time, space, or volume of sound related to square dancing in local neighborhoods. Some dance groups have been aware of the problems they might cause and have made some adjustments. But it seems the situation calls for more improvements. The latest, and also the first officially national-level regulation jointly issued from GASC and Ministry of Culture (MC) has caused a new round of controversy. The authorities announced that they produced twelve standardized "model square dancing routines" and would train instructors to spread them around the country. Most public opinion, including those from neighborhood dance groups, were against this intervention from the state. They say the authorities have missed the point, and reject the twelve model routines. Chapter 3 will elaborate more on the public's reactions to this policy.

2.3.2. The Rise of Contemporary Chinese Square Dance

While not popularized as a public issue until the 2010s, the contemporary emergence of square dancing can be traced back to the 1980s. Similar to its predecessors, the emergence of contemporary Chinese square dance has its historical roots and contemporary causes.

The 1980s is not only a time period that saw the resurrection of traditional rice-sprout dance and the spread of exotic social/ ballroom dance. It is also the time when the contemporary Chinese square dancing began to be innovated. Like today, one of the most important purposes of square dancing for the masses was exercise. Just as Wang (2014) said, people's fitness needs should be met, and square dancing arose to meet this need. Interestingly, it seems to also be an indication of the achievements of China's neoliberal economic reform and opening up. A symbol of leisure time opened up as people's livelihood, especially in urban areas improved since people no longer needed to

struggle with basic “food and clothing problems” (*wenbao wenti*) and started paying attention to their personal happiness, primarily by keeping healthy both physically and mentally. In this sense, square dance was firstly a symbol of individual autonomy.

But as the side-effects of China’s transformation began to be exposed, square dance’s function and symbolic place in society shifted. Instead of a sign of the positive effects of neoliberalism in society, the activity has more and more become a “pressure release valve” for people facing heavy burdens such as increasingly higher costs of living and an exacerbating sense of insecurity. Just as previously elaborated, the marketization and privatization that have been sweeping most aspects of society have led to the atomization of collective society, the collapse of the socialist welfare system, and challenges to previous social norms. The loss of a sense of security is not just material, but also spiritual. The tension between the notion of “survival of the fittest” in neoliberalism and the perspective of “common wealth” in socialism constitutes an ideological crisis, stimulating other ways to establish a new “moral philosophy” and “knowledge system” to ease the social anxiety (Zhao, 2003, p.211); according to Zhao (2003) the practice of Falun Gong is one such example. This unrest climaxed when the reform of SOEs resulted in the massive amount of “laid-off” (*xiagang*) workers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. By that time, as He (2014) has analyzed, “with a strong desire to pursue health and entertainment but a lack of public facilities, [Chinese *damas*] had plenty of time but little money.” So it is not a coincidence that Falun Gong could sweep the entire nation at the time. But “after Falun Gong was banned by the authorities, low-cost square dancing soon became the most fashionable form of exercise for Chinese *damas*” (He, 2014).

Furthermore, for social groups disenfranchised by the social reforms, including dancing *damas* and their husbands who have stepped into their senior age and no long belong to the main force of the society, nostalgia for socialist philosophy and their youth in the Maoist past, as well as the desire for collective norms, have developed in response to the complication of neoliberal tendencies in society. However, all other vernacular forms of moral standards and knowledge systems, i.e., Qigong, Falun Gong, etc., were thought to be doomed to fail because they were judged by the party-state as anti-science and anti-social practices. Such nostalgia is especially true for the groups

disenfranchised by the social reforms, including local seniors who no longer belong to the main force of the society. Just like the Singing Red campaign (*Changhong Yundong*) launched in Chongqing since 2008, a movement that centered on reading classics, telling revolutionary and uplifting stories, texting exhortative maxims, and especially, singing “red songs” (*hong ge*), old songs eulogizing revolution and homeland, Chinese square dance, which often uses such red songs and involves a style of quasi-loyalty dance in the CR, can be interpreted as yearning for social justice, equality, and a sense of community, “underscoring the centrality of lived experience and the power of popular culture” (Zhao, 2012, p.9). The activity echoes

“historic government manipulation of bodies, emotions and affect through... organized dance routines to ensure productive workers, good citizens and to mark national identity that took place in nations across the world, but particularly in Socialist and Communist countries”. (Jayne & Leung, 2014, p.258)

In an interview with *Los Angeles Times*, Liu Jilu, a retired driver who is a drummer in a square dancing group, said that the dances reminded her of her youth and she felt the same kind of spirit and emotions as she did in the past. Another woman, whose troupe used the red songs, said they could remind people how the Chinese leaders fought hard for the Chinese people to have a good life today (Makinen, 2014). As Caroline Chen, an environmental planning expert, argued, “the dancing also helps older Chinese recover a sense of Mao-era collectivism at a time when old neighborhoods have been razed and replaced with high-rise living” (Chin, 2014).

The final factor contributing to the popularity of Chinese square dancing is the support from authorities. He (2014) and Zhao (2013) have respectively noted that since the mid-1990s, the Chinese state has advocated the importance of a “nationwide fitness program” (*quanmin jianshen jihua*) and the “establishing national civilized cities” (*chuangjian quanguo wenming chengshi*) program, which require cities to report on some health and fitness indices. It is required that each community should have at least 15 amateur teams for sports and recreation, and should hold public cultural events more than 8 times every year. It is also required that local communities should be equipped with counsellors for sports and recreation, and there should be 45% of residents who frequently participate in daily exercises.

From the authorities' perspective, while the state is able to base its ruling legitimacy on rapid economic growth (Hong, 2010, p.313), the rising social resistance needs to be attended to. The party-state responded to this in the 2000s by shifting from its priority of economic growth to emphasis on the comprehensive development of society, which includes all-around cultivation of their character as people. Square dancing is considered by the authority as compatible with "Socialism with Chinese characteristics". Wang (2001) and Hong (2010) have pointed out that, the linchpin is that the regulatory capacity of the state largely depends on its "its success in reactivating the people's memory of a socialist ideology" (Wang, p.321; Hong, p.94). Square dance can work in the same way as the previous collective dancing activities, being an embodiment of socialist norms that are still held in esteem and a carrier of the party-state's political propaganda, as can be seen in a case of a county in Hubei province, where the local authority organized 1,700 dancers to perform square dance in the theme of "Motherland in My Heart" during national day in 2013(*Daxianggonghui*, 2014).

Since the 2010s, the growth of square dance has met with increasing resistance in public opinion. Given the social background of the government's hybrid political philosophy, the paradoxical dynamics of this ideology, and the restructuring of class relations, it is arguable that Chinese square dance is at the intersection of these converging trends. The following chapter will analyze the disputes around Chinese square dance in China's domestic media, and their implications for the developing dynamics of the neoliberal and socialist state.

Chapter 3.

Square Dance and Chinese Domestic Media

The mass media serve as a principal connection between people and the world. In a large sense, the media create images of the world in the mind of the public. As for the case of Chinese square dance, the heated discussions may not be so dramatic if media do not add fuel to the fire. Through selectively delivering information relating to square dance and expressing opinions from certain chosen perspectives, the media basically shape what square dance has become in China and indicate how the masses should view the phenomenon. Thus it is important to bring in China's domestic media's representations of Chinese square dance when unscrambling the meanings of the activity as well as the controversies around it.

What is also worth mentioning is, China's media system has also gone through reforms as part of the overall social transformation from Maoist socialism to "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics". This shift impacts the way square dance is presented to the public. This chapter starts with a brief introduction of the Chinese media's double role. Using Sina web portal, one of China's most influential news websites, as a site to study stories aggregated from different types of media, three major questions are to be addressed. First, what are the main disputes around Chinese square dance, and what are their implications? Second, what discourse strategies do various news media adopt when reporting Chinese square dance? Third, what impacts does the neoliberal/socialist ideological struggle have upon news media's representation of Chinese square dance, further influencing public opinion about the activity? At the end of this chapter, implications of the media representations will be identified and places where future research is required advocated for.

3.1. The Double-Track Character of the Chinese Media System

China's media reform started as an attempt to "correct specific theories and practices of the Cultural Revolution" (Zhao, 1998, p.34), but such reforms have

established a whole new model for the Chinese media and communication systems, which echoes China's overall economic and social transformation. Despite some tensions and confrontations still waiting to be taken care of, the hybridization of socialist traditions and neoliberalism has proved to be a feasible model for China at large. This model has also been implemented in China's media since the 1980s, activating "a series of reforms towards decentralization, [and] marketization,..., led by the party-state" (Yu, 2011, p.35). Since then, Chinese media have seen a revolution in operation and management dynamics, including capitalization and conglomeration of party-affiliated news outlets, contract-based employment, an explosion of new lifestyle tabloids, metropolitan dailies and entertainment programs. China's media system now follows a "double track," typically summarized as "public institution in nature, business enterprise in management" (*shiye jigou, qiye guanli*).

One track of the system - "public institution in nature" (*shiye jigou*), is the continuation of traditional socialist legacies. The core component of the legacies lies in the "party principle" (*dangxing yuanze*), which can be traced back to the 1920s with the founding of the CCP. It requires the media to accept the Party's ideology as their own, follow the Party's leadership, observe the Party's regulations, and propagate the Party's programs. Further, the media must handle the responsibility of educating the masses and creating a good environment for development as defined by the leadership of the CCP. In this sense, the media serve as the "mouthpiece" (*houshe*) of the Party and the people by extension of facilitating the Party's "basic aim" (*genben zongzhi*) of "serving the people" (*wei renmin fuwu*). Back when the PRC was founded much of the media industry's administrative work was transferred to the government and the Party in an effort to control ideology (Zhao, 1998, p.22). The PRC exists as a party-state, where the Party commands, controls, and integrates all political organizations and institutions (Guo, 2012, p.139). This intricate relationship between the party and the government makes the media the mouthpiece of the government as well.

Therefore, the major regulatory role of the party-state guided by socialist ideological orthodoxy was entrenched in the Chinese media system, and has not changed much in essence throughout the 30 years of media reform. For one thing, the predominance of public ownership of the media is unshakable. Although private capital

has stepped into the industry in an increasingly explicit and substantial way, they are strictly confined to a “profit-making rather than speech-making imperative” (Zhao, 2011, p.216). On another note, while the party-state has withdrawn from directly running all the news outlets, it still controls the system’s “macro-structure and editorial orientation” (Zhao, 2011, p.212). Typical reporting strategies still play a significant role, such as “general copy” (*tonggao*) - a practice that involves a uniform transcript on a major story to be transmitted in a top-down manner to “ensure the correctness and responsible nature” of the reporting of government news (Jin & Dai, 2005, p.202), and “positive reporting”(zhengmian baodao) - a reporting genre that concentrates on the positive, role-model side of a story. Even entertainment content and various market-oriented media outlets are under the scrutiny of the CCP’s ideological orientation. While not specifically required to be a channel for political communication, they are more broadly expected to be an instrument for building a well-developed society and raising people’s “quality”(sushi) referring to all-around cultivation of their character as people.

The other track of the system - “business enterprise in management” (*qiye guanli*), refers to the rather neoliberalized side of management. While the party-state maintains control over the overall media situation and media are still claimed to be an extension of central or local party-state organs, media are given more room to develop themselves based on their own perspectives, rather than simply being a rigid continuation of the party-state’s propaganda programs. As a result, private capital and transnational capital are allowed to flow in under rigorous regulation. Additionally, core media outlets that are entwined with the state as major mainstream ideological instruments are encouraged to capitalize, reconstruct, and conglomerate, “turning Party organs into business consortia” (Zhao, 1998, p.65). Thus the Chinese media have grown into a competitive market for commercial audience, advertisers, and ultimately, profits.

Taking a profit-seeking approach, media content has evolved into a more diversified ensemble. On the one hand, advertising, commercial sponsorship, and other business operations have come to occupy a certain proportion of media space, catering to the needs of many industries focused on marketization, and simultaneously constituting indispensable sources of media revenue as well. On the other hand, content has become more audience-oriented for the benefit of both the media and their related

advertising enterprises. Most often metropolitan lifestyles are highlighted, glamorizing and consolidating the urban middle class and upper middle class, who comprise the social groups with the most purchasing power.

The result of this neoliberalization lies in the shift of the Chinese media's economic basis from complete reliance on state subsidies to increasing dependence on commercial revenue. Many media organizations have achieved complete financial independence and contribute profits in the form of taxes to the state treasury (Zhao, 1998, p.67). The subtle part here is that while for-profit media entities are decoupled from the government institutions with which they were affiliated and "go to the market", several internationally-recognized media organizations such as CCTV, are specially favored in terms of funding and policies by the authority, becoming mighty conglomerations that are thought to be the flagships for the whole media industry. This can be seen as a sign of the party-state attempting to retain socialist orthodoxy in maintaining ideological dominance by mastering the most important "mouthpiece" of the country in a newly liberalized economic environment. However, political news has become less prominent and less pervasive in spite of this reinforcement of control (Zhao, 1998, p65).

The intense dynamic of the Chinese media system, which has a huge impact on the media's agenda setting and discursive strategies, deserves consideration.

3.2. A Case Study of Sina Web Portal

3.2.1. Web Portals, Chinese News Website Regulations, and Sina

Since the 1990s, with leapfrog advances in digitalization and information and communication technologies (ICTs) development (Yu, 2011, p.35), China has ushered in a bloom of various domestic internet services, among which web portals represent one of the earliest and also the most influential forms. A web portal is usually a specially designed web page that brings information together from diverse sources in a uniform way. Examples of early public web portals in the West include AOL and Yahoo!. Web portals offer multiple services such as email, stock quotes, social platforms,

entertainment, and most significantly for our purposes, news. While some portals provide search engine services for users to browse content both inside and outside their website, some portals provide a specifically intranet content search service limited to their site, as is the case of Sina, or more precisely, sina.com.cn.

In the late 1990s, several Chinese online media companies were founded and have become leading internet industries since then, including Sina, Sohu, Tencent, *etc.*. Though these companies provide various online services and have different distinguishing features, news is a vital sector for each of their websites. Technically, according to state regulations, news sections on Chinese commercial websites are “Comprehensive Non-News-Unit Websites”(*zonghexing feixinwendanwei wangzhan*), as opposed to “News Websites”(*xinwen wangzhan*”), such as people.cn, affiliated with People’s Daily (*Renmin Ribao*). The latter are lawfully established websites that operate directly under central or local news organs. The former are deprived of independent rights to conduct interviews, copyright their own material, and use of news sources other than central or local news organs. They can only collect, edit and publish stories from media that they have bought from or created in cooperation with legitimate news entities. (*Information Office of the State Council, 2000; Chen, 2002, p.22*) This is because non-public capital is not allowed to invest and operate in news media. Such regulations have become more flexible in recent years, as commercial companies can independently report on stories in areas that are not so politically sensitive, such as entertainment and sports.

Thus competition is shaped between privately-owned commercial web portals and publicly-owned ones, as commercial websites have got momentum with strong social support, while the party-state organ media are encouraged and supported by the central government to combine their resources to support one another in their ventures into the Internet (Yu, 2011, p.39). The emergence of web portals has expanded the media scope that people are exposed to, as they contain news sources from extensive areas. Meanwhile, since the number of netizens has reached 649 million by the end of 2014(*China Internet Network Information Center, 2015, p.1*), internet services, including web portals, have had a huge impact on people’s imagination of society. Sina.com.cn is one of the largest Chinese-language web portals in China, and is known for its news

conglomeration in comparison with other web portals. According to iWebChoice, an organization that puts up Chinese websites' ranking lists based on data traffic monitored by Alexa, Sina has ranked as the No.2 most visited site in China from April to June in 2015.

Table 3.2.1. Chinese Web Portals Top 6 Ranking List in Recent Three Months (Updated by 2015.06.30)²

Rank	Web Portal	Unique Visitors (UV) ³	Page View (PV) ⁴	PV per Person ⁵
1	Tencent (<i>Tengxun</i>)	81810.0	3948.00	4.23
2	Sina (<i>Xinlang</i>)	56470.0	2704.00	4.33
3	Sohu (<i>Souhu</i>)	33230.0	1103.10	3.00
4	NetEase (<i>Wangyi</i>)	13560.0	1124.90	7.50
5	CCTV (<i>Yangshi</i>)	12520.0	842.50	6.08
6	Xinhuanet (<i>Xinhua</i>)	11120.0	710.10	5.77

Thus, in order to explore how Chinese domestic media represent Chinese square dance and its controversies, Sina.com.cn serves as a representative platform offering a collection of news reports that are produced by various news outlets across China. These include state-run news agencies such as Xinhuanet (*Xinhua Wang*), local party official newspapers such as Guangzhou Daily (*Guangzhou Ribao*), local metropolitan dailies such as West China City Daily (*Huaxi Ddushibao*), commercial lifestyle magazines such as Sanlian Life Weekly (*Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan*), and even Sina's own respective information centers - Sina Entertainment (*Xinlang Yule*) and Sina Sports (*Xinlang Tiyu*), etc..

² Source: Retrieved June 30, 2014 from Alexa & iWebChoice.
http://www.iwebchoice.com/html/class_9.shtml?3Months

³ UV: the number of visitors of a web portal per million Alexa-installed users.

⁴ PV: the number of viewed pages of a web portal per million viewed pages for Alexa-installed users.

⁵ PV per Person: the number of viewed pages per day per person per million Alexa-installed users.

By using Sina's own search engine to search for headlines with the key word “广场舞” (*Guangchang Wu*, square dance) and eliminating reduplicates and netizens' posts, 261 Chinese-language news stories about Chinese square dancing within the time period from January 1st, 2015 to June 30th, 2015 are collected for analysis. The stories are ordered both according to a timeline and by the number of clicks, which together suggests the trajectory of the media and audience's concerns over this issue over time. The first half of 2015 has seen several significant events that are especially related to Chinese square dance, from local conferences known as “two meetings” (*difang “lianghui”*, Local People's Congress and Local People's Political Consultative Conference) held in late January all over China, where the representatives discussed regulations over square dancing; the square dance performance on CCTV Spring Festival Gala in February; the state-produced standard routines released in late March; and the nationwide College Entrance Examination in early June, when square dancing inspired worries of sound pollution interfering with students preparing for the exam. These time nodes are also when coverage of square dance became most intensive. But overall, stories involving Chinese square dance cover multiple themes. In many cases the themes are not very focused, and even overlap with each other. Despite that, the topics and their proportions are roughly as follows.

Table 3.2.1. Layout of the Themes of Chinese Square Dance Stories on Sina (2015.01.01-2015.06.30) (N = 261)⁶

Rank	Theme	Proportion
1	Anecdotes and general situation of Chinese square dance	19.9%
2	Comments and management suggestions	17.1%
3	Official standpoint and regulations at a national/local level	15.1%
4	Contests and public formal events of square dance	13.5%
5	Chinese square dance and celebrities/entertainment industry	12.4%
6	Topics that are not directly related with Chinese square dance	10.0%
7	Conflict events inside and outside Chinese square dance	5.2%
8	Chinese square dance going abroad	2.8%
9	Music accompaniment of Chinese square dance	2.4%
10	Health effects of Chinese square dance	1.6%
Total		100.0%

⁶ Note: Stories on these themes are exemplified in Appendix.

Table 3.2.1. Top 10 Most-viewed Chinese Square Dance Stories on Sina (2015.01.01-2015.06.30)⁷

Rank	Theme	Media	Update
1	<i>Damas</i> occupying the square outside Asian Cup stadium	Sina Sports	2015.01.14
2	Beijing <i>damas</i> performing square dancing in mariniere	Sina Photo	2015.01.16
3	Toddler charged with running into a <i>dama</i> who tumbled	Anhui Commercial News	2015.06.02
4	<i>Damas</i> as one of the highlight of Asian Cup	Sina Sports	2015.02.02
5	<i>Damas</i> object to state-produced square dancing routines	Huashang Daily	2015.03.25
6	Mocking “The Most Dazzling Little Apple”	Sina Entertainment	2015.02.18
7	Dance instructors in uniform to be trained in Jiangsu	Modern Express	2015.05.29
8	<i>Damas</i> to be diliverymen for O2O platform	Sina Finance	2015.03.28
9	GASC: Square dances are not required to be the same	Huashang Daily	2015.03.25
10	Square dance model routines to be promoted by GASC	Beijing News	2015.03.24

While the biggest proportion of square dance reports is made up of current situations and possible solutions to controversies, in which most keep a neutral tone, the top 10 most-viewed stories take a different tone, which indicates that what attracts internet users to topics of Chinese square dance lies in conflicts, oddness, and ridiculousness. Audience’s preference in choosing such news topics exposes the neoliberal ideological inclination in the media industry. First, these stories reflect neoliberal critiques of Chinese square dance as a disturbance and anachronistic to private property ownership and use, as well as being an activity reflecting older fashions rather than a contemporary cosmopolitan ethic. Second, these stories are part of the

⁷ Source: retrieved June 30, 2014 from Sina Search (*Xinlang Sousuo*)
<http://search.sina.com.cn/?q=%B9%E3%B3%A1%CE%E8&range=title&c=news&sort=count&col=&source=&from=&country=&size=&time=&a=>

larger commodification of the news media. They promote media consumption which economically benefits news outlets who are in fierce competition for advertising revenue.

The following will further deconstruct the mediated reality of Chinese square dance from two perspectives of content selection and discursive strategies, based on the stories gathered from Sina.com.cn, to explore how the ideological entanglement of socialism and neoliberalism impacts the way Chinese square dance is represented by different media entities.

3.2.2. Mediated Disputes on Chinese Square Dance and Their Meanings

To a large extent, media help construct social reality. Discussion and analysis, especially of disputes, on square dance have been largely reflected in Chinese domestic media. The disputes can be reported in a very straightforward way, by directly displaying the conflicts over square dance between opposite groups of social members. Or the reporting can be rather reserved and temperate. Explicitly or implicitly, altogether the stories largely touch upon five key aspects underlying issues around Chinese square dance: noise pollution, space occupation, lifestyle choice, the activity's relationship with culture industry, and the activity's relationship with the party-state.

The most superficial, but also the most common complaint against Chinese square dance is the volume of participants' accompanying music. As *damas* usually dance in an open space with the accompaniment of music, usually from amplifier speakers attached to an MP3 or cassette player, the sound can be disturbing to some in the neighborhood especially when the *Damas* dance in the early morning or late evening when other people are resting. One of the most drastic cases is a news report produced by Beijing Satellite Television (BTV, *Beijing Weishi*), telling a story that one neighbor was so furious about the loudness of square dancers that he threw feces at them from a high-story building (Yuan, 2015). Despite such extreme examples, regulations and management have increased this year in contrast with previous years, and many articles focus on the issue of noise control responding to public complaints. For instance, on February 1st, 2015, a news story from Huashang Daily (*Huashang Bao*) introduced a newly-established set of penalty regulations against noise pollution in the city of Xi'an, citing square dance as a specific target of these regulations (Zhou, 2015). There are

also stories which report on the noise in a positive tone, describing how dancing *damas* are conscientious not to make too much noise. In the Nanjing Morning Post (*Nanjing Chenbao*), a June 7th story was entitled, “*Damas* proactively stop dancing because of the college entrance examination”, indicating they meant to create a quiet environment for examinees (Lu, 2015). The article quoted several dancing *damas*’ points of view - e.g. one *dama* said “There is even no need to discuss it, we are all very clear that it is natural and necessary for us to stop dancing for a few days. It matters for the kids’ future.” (Lu, 2015) But overall, the subtext is mostly of the consideration that square dancing is a noisy activity.

Another disputed issue is the problem of space, which is closely related to the problem of noise pollution. Just as a square dancing enthusiast told a BTV reporter regarding the feces incident, “we all need exercise but there is no room for it except here [the square in front of the high-story building]”. Similar to the noise complaint, many stories examined complaints over the occupation of space and suggestions for solutions. Stories on Sina throughout the first half year have seen people dancing in Tiananmen Square (Sina Female, 2015), a bus station in the city of Yueyang (Feng, 2015), an ATM Hall in Taiwan (Zhang, 2015), and even outside Brisbane Stadium in Australia (Li, 2015). Meanwhile, in many commentary articles, space issues have become one of the most debatable topics. This is especially true when 12 standard dancing routines were introduced by the state. Though they generally questioned the standardization and officialization potential of square dance, many articles proposed that “where to dance” is more crucial than “how to dance” (Luo, 2015., Liu, 2015., Dai, 2015). This is not only about what Deng (2015) talked about regarding the lack of “sport area per person” at a national level, but more importantly, this leads to the requisite of scientific planning in urban construction (Dai, 2015). Just as Deng (2015) commented, “an area that does not interfere with other people’s daily life should be created, for those who love square dancing.”

As Deng (2015) compared, “nowadays nearly every residential community has an upscale club, but does not have a square for residents’ daily recreation”. The former serves as a gathering venue for Chinese middle and upper class, representing a cosmopolitan neoliberal urban lifestyle, while the latter reflects the unique understanding

of public space for Chinese people, especially for *damas*, most of whose life experience is based on the socialist revolution of Chinese culture. The imbalance between the prevalence of neoliberal ideals and striving socialist ideas of space is the root of the contention in the complex of ideological transformation; it is not simply about the noise, or the use of space.

Before the economic reform, China hardly had any acquaintance with the idea of “public space”, basically a social space that is generally open and accessible to people. The previously-mentioned concept of “work unit” was not only a place of employment in previous socialist China, but also a sociospatial concept that blurred the boundaries between public and private. Work units created their own infrastructure, i.e., housing, child care, schools, and clinics, that were supposedly collectively-owned. Undoubtedly squares, auditoriums, and parks are also included. The archetypal work unit is organized in a spatial compound where the insiders are provided with protection and a collective identity. Not only were people’s work routines standardized, their individual decisions in personal life were also heavily influenced, and sometimes had to be approved by the work unit (Hill, 2005). In other words, the work unit system in China, on the one hand, normalized the state/collective/public role in people’s personal life in a hierarchical manner, since the nominally collective decisions were centralized onto the leadership of the work unit; on the other hand, they created a semi-enclosed “acquaintance society”.

This concept, first raised by the famous Chinese sociologist and anthropologist Fei Xiaotong, describes China’s traditional social model, saying that people’s relationships develop through close friends forming connections for each other and that people rely on acquaintances rather than strangers (Fei, 1948). Thus Chinese people adhere to a collective unconscious for the idea of space and individual rights (Ji, 2014). Generally speaking, people are more familiar with “communal space” where people used to live in a collective, top-down directive order, rather than “public space” where people should maintain mutual respect towards each other’s individual right and feelings. In other words, many Chinese people lack the experience and the ability to coexist with total strangers (Zhang, 2014, p.89). This is worsened by the fact that public space is being marginalized and fragmented by a wave of commercialization and the unilateral goal of economic profits, side-effects of China’s neoliberalization, without an overall

consideration of social accountability. The communal culture is hushed (Chin, 2014) while a neoliberal idea of what a modern city should be, consisting of individual strangers happening to share a space of consumption, is put in a dominant position.

Facing side-effects at the state level and maladjustments at the personal level, square dance can be deconstructed as a sign of defiance to the neoliberal lifestyle. It symbolizes an ideologically defiant lifestyle that combines the reclamation of collective ownership of space for the state (Ji, 2014), a communal culture indicating a socialist past, and a creation of a group identity for *damas*. These ladies have lived through over 30 years of social transformation and are used to expressing their ideas through public dance, from the rice-sprout dance when they were children, the loyalty dance when they were adolescents, and even to ballroom dance when they were young adults.

The contrast in the type of lifestyle supported by different ideologies is represented in the media. This is often done in a direct way, such as China News Service (*Zhongguo Xinwen She*) uploading a collection of photos this February showing square dancers in Kunming dressed up like the Red Army (*Hong Jun*), the CCP-led army in revolutionary times (“Kunming”, 2015). In April, a “study report” was produced by Southern Metropolis Daily (*Nanfang Dushi Bao*), which comprehensively analyzed square dance by interviewing three scholars. In the report, like some other stories, scholars mentioned how the history of modern China shaped the way people live, and how the pursuit of a collective sentiment might be a contributor to square dance (Huang, 2015). Global Times (*Huanqiu Shibao*) directly cited the comment of an official from GASC saying that “dancing in public squares represents the collective aspect of Chinese culture” (Han, 2015).

But what is more frequently seen in the media is that the lifestyle difference is abstracted into a conflict of normative aesthetic preferences, cultural level and social status. The process is that the media first establish a subtext that square dance participants are normally of low social status, with low tastes and poor educational levels in comparison with mainstream society, which refers to the urban middle classes that have emerged with neoliberal economic reforms. The media also give lots of attention to

people who do square dance-related things but do not seem to belong to the same group as the dancing *damas* in terms of their professional and educational background.

One of the singers from the Chinese singing duo Phoenix Legend - the original singers of “The Most Dazzling Folk Style” - said in an interview this April with Guangzhou Daily (*Guangzhou Ribao*),

“‘Juggernauts’ is the primary characteristic of our group. Our music has been considered as low class, but we love to accept the label because we sing for the ‘common people’ (*lao baixing*). There is nothing to be ashamed of.” (Zeng, 2015)

Here the word “common people” mainly refers to the traditional working class, along with migrant workers and peasantry, who are all living through tough times, but at the same time love square dance music. Because the music and aesthetics of square dance are associated with the working class, news stories grab people’s eyes if they tell of a square dancer who is stereotypically thought to live a middle or high class life or has an excellent cultural level. On Sina, we can see stories such as “Handsome graduate student loves square dancing” (“Handsome”, 2015). About 10% of the stories gathered on Sina from the first half year of 2015 are about celebrities from the commercial entertainment industry doing square dance in movies and TV shows. Additionally, mainstream musicians who do not usually produce music for the working class have released singles that are promoted by the media as the “next big square dancing song,” sometimes ironically.

The combination of square dance and celebrities is an indication that the supposedly anachronistic, troublesome, non-mainstream cultural practice can actually fit into the neoliberal culture industry. As elaborated earlier, Chinese domestic media have partly veered to profit-seeking and audience-orientation. In this context, the collision between grass-root cultural forms such as square dance and cosmopolitan urban symbols such as mainstream celebrities makes for a good product, at least catering to the audience’s morbid fascination and enjoyment of what is considered to be ugly. There are three basic ways that media represent meaning through the union of square dance and celebrities in their stories. First, for pure news outlets, the topic brings curiosity, especially if put in a headline, which leads to more readers. For instance, China Youth

Daily (*Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*) published a special feature in early June, entitled “The square dancing dilemma in the eyes of a national first-level actress” (Yang, 2015). It was a story calling for the scientific regulation of square dance, delivering no more information than other normal stories. But since it featured the perspective of a famous actress, the cultural and stylistic conflict was more vividly presented, and the call for attention to square dance was more significant. Second, these stories are good promotional material for new TV programs and albums. For example, in order to promote a reality show recording several celebrities’ foreign journey, Sina Entertainment published a story saying an actress performed Chinese square dance in Cuba with local dancers. In fact, it was not Chinese square dance at all, but the actress mocked herself as “square dancing” because it was not elegant or professional (Zhuzi, 2015).

The third layer of meaning is a little complicated because it not only reflects the media’s profit-seeking model as in the previous cases, but to some extent it represents the authority’s recognition of Chinese square dance’s legitimacy amid the opposition. A particular case is the Spring Festival Gala mentioned in Chapter 1. Undoubtedly the invitation of square dancers to the Gala is partly out of a consideration of viewers’ interests. But the tone of the performance was not based on mocking the stage-version square dance or belittling the activity for comic effect. Instead, the Gala depicted the activity in a positive tone, as something that has “propinquity” with the state (Huashang Morning Post, 2015). It did so by staging the show with fancy decorations, delicate camera work, and warm interaction with the live audience. In some other stories the tone is similar, as long as the event has a strong political character within it. For instance, a story reporting on the Spring Festival Gala of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC, *Zhongguo Wenxueyishujie Lianhehui*), which took place in the Great Hall of the People, highlighted the performance of square dance in an official manner. It read:

“What is especially exciting is that the ‘square dance,’ which is currently popular among common people is also danced in the Great Hall of the People...Thousands of artists sung and danced with the song ‘Common People’s Chinese Dream’(*Laobaixing de Zhongguomeng*)” (Du, 2015).

“Chinese Dream” is a term popularized after 2013 within Chinese socialist thought that describes a set of personal and national ideals (Qiu, 2013, p.14) and calls for all people to help fulfill the goals. In this sense, square dance can be used to impose similar ideological functions as previous public dancing forms in history.

The relationship between Chinese square dance and the party-state, which has been indicated in the above-mentioned Spring Festival Gala cases, is another major controversy for the public. Though considered as a rustic residual cultural form by an entertainment industry that promotes commodity-based neoliberal urban lifestyles, Chinese square dance was granted a unique position by the party-state, who believe that the activity “represents the collective aspect of Chinese culture” (Han 2015). Ideologically speaking, Chinese square dance has a politically favorable social position in terms of cultural forms, not only from the sense that its collectivity aligns well with China’s claimed socialist orthodox, but also because it addresses contemporary needs in the party-state’s ideological work, i.e., the need to “correct social tensions caused by China’s market economic reform” (Hong, 2010, p.314). Approximately 13.5% of the gathered stories report on contests and formal public events involving Chinese square dance. Many sponsors of these events have connections with the government. In fact, as mentioned before, the spread of square dance was partly a result of the authoritative government drive during the 2000s in the first place. A square dance event is often held under a grand political-oriented title, just like the performance at the CFLAC’s Spring Festival Gala under the name of “Chinese Dream”. Tianshannet (*Tianshan Wang*) published a story in February, on a square dance competition held by the local government. It read:

“The event... aims at accelerating overall economic and social development of Kashgar, educating and directing all ethnic groups in Kashgar in unity and harmony, eradicating extremist forces, and securing social stability” (Liu, 2015).

Besides such obvious political ties, the events are often taken as an instrument of social construction to ease the pressure caused by the defectiveness of social welfare services, as stated by Yangtze Evening Post (*Yangzi Wanbao*), “to enrich the masses’ cultural life, and fulfill the national fitness program” (Chen, Jiang, & Zhang, 2015).

However, there are two complications worth mentioning in terms of the relationship between the activity and the authorities. First of all, most attention has been focused on square dance in urban areas and its ensuing problems, such as noise and space limitations. However little attention has been paid to the rural areas. From the few stories on Sina about this issue, most take a positive attitude towards square dancing in rural areas. While being scorned in urban areas, the activity is depicted by Rednet (*Hong Wang*), as the “new fashion of mass culture” (Wu, 2015). By organizing square dancing activities, local authorities are thought to “get closer to villagers” (He & Liu, 2015). Square dance is thus seen to play an important role in constructing the cultural life of rural areas.

The second complication is even more complex. Square dance is considered to be inextricably linked with state ideological work. To some extent, it is a representative reclamation of China’s socialist orthodoxy amid the ongoing neoliberal transformation. However, when the national governmental central authority started to take control of the activity, by putting forward a standardized version of dance routines, they received a large amount of opposition from public opinion. Most of the opinion represented in commentary articles, such as an article on Rednet, argued that such “regulation of square dance will damage the original ecology of the activity” (Yue, 2015). They worried that this move would bring China back to the time of the CR, when artistic performance was tightly controlled by authorities, leading to its stiffness and lack of real artistry. Gui (2015) even argued that in the market economy, which emphasizes “small government, big society” (*xiao zhengfu, da shehui*), “whatever should be decided by the market should be left for the market”. Therefore, it is argued to be reasonable to let people regulate themselves since the dance started from grassroots.

Administrative measures might cause aversion from the public, including dancing *damas* (Gui, 2015). Some *damas*’ concern about their right and freedom to dance echoes such tones. For example, Huashang Daily cited some local *damas* in a story in March. One *dama* said: “We want to have our own square dance, have our own performance, and have our own competition. Is that not OK?” Another *dama* said: “The essence of square dance is its casualness....Now they ask everyone to do it the same, what is the fun then? They should not interfere with our personal life” (Liang, 2015). It is

paradoxical that people who long for a sense of community against ubiquitous individualism, actually defend their dancing habit on principles of individual right. As Harvey (2005) stated, “neoliberalism...has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has been incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (p.3). The development of Chinese square dance is not simply a recollection of the collective life in socialist past, but a re-collectivization of contemporary lifestyles that have experienced privatization in one way or another in a quasi-neoliberal society. Looking back at the history of Chinese square dance in the 1980s, it started as a reflection of the emergence of private life, as opposed to life under the party-state’s planning. But at the same time, the activity cannot be performed without collective organization, which is supposed to be autonomous (Yu, 2015). This is the trickiest part in the relationship of Chinese square dance and the party-state, a reminder to authorities to be mindful of overstepping.

So far, the chapter has identified five disputes represented in the media, including: noise pollution, space occupation, lifestyle choice, and its relationship with the culture industry and the party-state. The following part will dig more into the discursive strategy of the media’s representation of Chinese square dance, and further analyze the impact of ideological dynamics upon the image-building of such a controversial issue in contemporary China.

3.2.3. Media’s Ideological Dynamic and Discursive Strategies

As stated earlier, China’s domestic media system has maintained a double-track character since neoliberalism began to sweep Chinese society. This means that on the one hand the media assume a large amount of political and ideological work, on the other hand media have to cater to the masses’ multiple viewing needs so that they can financially support themselves by selling advertising space. The popular significance of political ideology has been marginalized by the goal of development and profit-seeking under the backdrop of a neoliberal turn (Hu et al., 2013, p.150). Hence, the media’s own existential philosophy and the overall social atmosphere result in a “depoliticized media environment” (Hu et al., 2013, p.153). In this sense, “politically safe and innocuous issues and issues of concern to the urban population are more likely to enter the public

sphere” through journalism and media (Yang, 2010, p.103). Chinese square dance is one of these issues, which does not seem to face the same strict scrutiny as other major events and political news. At the same time, the view of square dance has been heavily impacted by China’s neoliberal environment. The impact can be elaborated as follows.

To begin with, much of the media represent square dance in a largely negative tone. The negative attitude is derived from two main sources. One concern is the mainstream worship of cosmopolitan neoliberal urban lifestyles in contemporary Chinese society. The tone of the media stories reflects contempt and dislike for the rustic countrified features of square dance, which is contrasted with and constructed as being in conflict with the exquisite aesthetic preferences of the modern urban middle class; of which seniors’ square dance is an enormous source of dislike and contempt, as can be seen from netizens’ comments on many events. Moreover, media professionals are likely to be highly-educated urban residents. Their personal feelings towards square dance infiltrates into news stories as well. Some of them have a superiority complex and are antipathetic towards things that remind people of China’s Maoist past. Because of its collective form and occasionally patriotic or revolutionary themes, Chinese square dance is considered as one such legacy.

The other concern might be more superficial but is just as urgent – consumerism; which makes news stories into products that bring in audiences through instant sensory stimuli and superficial voyeuristic interests. Consumerism in news media means that the content should exclude heavy and profound elements and cater to common urban citizens’ interest (Jia & Li, 2014, p.1). This often means that the most lucrative stories are those which provide the audience with stigmatized images of reported subjects.

There are two significant tactics to stigmatize Chinese square dance and its participants - spectacularization and labeling. “Spectacularization” is a word used by Guy Debord (1995) to refer to the process of transforming lived social life to mere representation. People lose their desire and requirement for a real life in comparison to their craze for spectacularization (Yang, 2011, p.1). Debord (1995) said “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images”. In the case of Chinese square dance mediated by Chinese

domestic media, the process of spectacularization is mainly constituted by life conflicts and odd anecdotes. Conflicts not only refer to stories with regard to noise pollution and space occupation, but also include some peculiar episodes within square dancing groups or between dancing groups and other parts of society. The stories highlight the intensity of the conflicts by exposing particular details and depicting the emotions of both sides. For example, in the feces incident broadcasted by BTV, the video editor used background music to add a tense atmosphere, and put an angry woman in the middle of the lens, complaining about the severe aftermath:

“It was feces! With sand! It stank like hell (*chou de budeliao*). I immediately washed myself up in the property management office nearby, and then spent 40 minutes cleaning myself after going back home.” (Yuan, 2015)

Another woman said the neighborhood is too unconscionable (*quede*) because “they poured water to us, threw sand at us, but we’ve tolerated all of this.” (Yuan, 2015) The narrator went on to explain that the neighborhood had already asked the *damas* not to use music, or to move to another place, and was refused. In the end the narrator concluded: “It seems the neighborhood will fight to the end (*duikangdaodi*) with the *damas*.” As for the odd anecdotes, the point is to defamiliarize the normal square dance by showing its oddness in contemporary urban life, especially elements that seems, impenetrable at first glance. For instance, the media often release news on peculiar forms of square dance, e.g. a story titled “zombie dance” (*jiangshi wu*) produced by China News Service. The intrigue of the headline entices readers to find out what a “zombie dance” is. It is explained in the main text that a “zombie dance” is also called Kiamusze happy dance (*Jiamusi kuaile wubu*) because it was created by a retired teacher in Kiamusze. It imitates Michael Jackson’s movement in “Thriller”, and is good for the waist and neck (Cui & Wei, 2015). Stories about domestic conflict are written up in the form of gossipy anecdotes. Chutian Golden Newspaper (*Chutian Jin Bao*) told a story about a square dancing woman Ms. Chen who fell in love with her dancing partner Mr. Tian, which enraged Ms. Chen’s lover Mr. Wang, and Mr. Wang and Mr. Tian fought and both got hurt (Li, 2015). In the end, the comment concludes that though square dance is good for health, “recent years have seen lots of romantic disputes because of it, including some criminal cases”. Commenting further we learn that “In this case, the

dancing granny has lost her self-esteem and self-respect (*zizunziai*), and made to pay the price” (Li, 2015).

Bad impressions of square dance are often accomplished through labeling, which is to stereotype and highlight only a few chosen aspects of a story. But these aspects are often what most viewers want to see, confirming their own prejudices. In fact, the process of highlighting conflicts and oddness is a process of stereotyping. It involves labeling Chinese square dance as a bizarre activity practiced by a defamiliarized group of social members who often make trouble for themselves as well as for the whole society. Besides deconstructing the activity and its participants, media often use comparison to characterize the issue. As mentioned above in section 3.2.2, by comparing square dance and other cultural forms that are respected and beloved by urban residents, Chinese square dance is depicted as an activity with a low aesthetic level and its participants are depicted as low social status, having low tastes and demonstrating poor cultural traits. Just as in the article in China Youth Daily, the perspective of a national first-level actress, “intense music began, and tens of *damas* ‘intoxicatedly’ started to twist their bodies.....there were even a few retired professors ‘with fame and prestige’(‘*youtouyouliande*’). (Yang, 2015) “Intense”, “intoxicatedly”, “twist”, “with fame and prestige” - these are several points that could really touch upon viewers’ interests. It is the same reason why topics such as “Chinese *damas* occupying the square outside Asia Cup” could jump into the top 10 most-viewed stories on Sina in the first half of 2015.

Recently stories talking about some other topics often use square dance or dancing *damas* as a reference object or analogy. Such a practice is an extension of the labeling tactic because it works on the stereotype of Chinese square dance by referring to one or another of its undesirable features. In my collection of 261 stories 10% are of reports whose topics are not directly relevant to square dance. Though the stories have other focuses, they potentially aggravate viewers’ impression of square dance. For example, Chinese square dance is a synonym of “popularity” and “down-to-earth” (*jiediqi*), as indicated in the story of the communication of “Zhuzi Culture”, a genre of Chinese traditional culture. The interviewee said “Greater efforts are needed to promote ‘Zhuzi Culture’, to make it ‘down-to-earth’, to let it spread among dancing *damas*” (Long,

2015). Many stories unrelated to square dance contain the most disparaging representation of the practice. For instance, in an interview with a Chinese E-commerce tycoon about creating O2O platform, a business model, connecting consumers, merchants, and deliverymen, the tycoon's idea was to motivate social sources to do the deliveries in order to decrease the number of his own staff. The tycoon considered dancing *damas* to be suitable for the job "There are a lot of retired seniors who spend so much spare time on square dancing" (Liu, 2015). Here square dancer equals idle senior. It is the same case when talking about bull markets. One reporter joked that even "*damas* quit square dancing to discuss the stock market" (Zhu, 2015; Sina Female, 2015). Meanwhile, this created an image of dancing *damas* as a group of "financially illiterate maternal investors", scoffing at their apparent inadequacy and blind overenthusiasm. Illiteracy is a typical label that is attached to dancing *damas*. Besides the topic of the stock market, media also love stories in which *damas* are defrauded. Even the state-run CCTV once reported a man pretending to be an official who wanted to ask some *damas* to teach square dance for the department and conned them out of money (China Central Television, 2015).

Opposing the neoliberal critique of Chinese square dancing, there also exist some positive, supportive voices for the activity. This is where the socialist legacies in media content production remain – typically conducting "positive reporting" and "general copy". "Positive reporting" not only entails reporting in a manner of praise and eulogy, but also stands for the recognition of mainstream ideology and ethnic standards (Lu, 2012, p.27). Stories of square dancing at official performance exhibitions or contests are often framed in this way as they are organized by local authorities. The previously-mentioned case of the Kashgar local square dancing competition reported by Tianshannet is a typical example. It not only reported the event in a positive tone, but also attached some political jargon to its context, being a delivery instrument for political propaganda and social construction; such propaganda phrases include: "accelerating overall economic and social development", "unity and harmony", "eradicating extremist forces" "secure social stability", "enrich the masses' cultural life" (Liu, 2015). The writing style also conforms to the "mouthpiece" nature of Tianshanet, which is co-constructed by the CCP Propaganda Department of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Network Center of People's Daily, and mainly run by the Government Press Office of Xinjiang

Uyghur Autonomous Region. The effect of such positive reporting is prone to aggravate the negative impression of square dance because government actions are suspect and objected to in a neoliberal environment where socialist belief and the trust in party-state have been seriously damaged. So the rhetoric of political jargon which is supposed to exemplify local governments' achievements is interpreted as empty talk by many viewers. For example, a netizen, among many other negative voices, criticized: "What does square dance has to do with 'eradicating extremist forces'? Can dancing 'Little Apple' support a family (*yangjiahukou*)? You do not need to work. You do not need to do farm work. But you should be able to dance 'Little Apple'. I am so proud of Kashgar."⁸ This is what Stuart Hall(1980) called "oppositional reading" when audience are in complete disagreement with the product's message or setting.

As for "general copy", it is mainly used when an official announcement needs to be transmitted in a top-down manner in order to ensure the correctness of government news. On March 23rd, the state-level Xinhua News Agency published a press release held by the GASC, saying that the GASC is to produce and promote 12 sets of square dancing routines (Yue, 2015). Following Xinhua's article, March 24th saw media across the country reporting the story with the same copy, e.g., Beijing News (*Xin Jing Bao*), Modern Express (*Xiandai Kuaibao*) in Jiangsu Province, Huashang Morning Post (*Huashang Chenbao*) in Liaoning Province, Southern Daily (*Nanfang Ribao*) in Guangdong Province, etc. However, unlike the normal practice of general copy which results in one authoritative voice of the reported event, the GASC incident led to multiple interpretations immediately, partly because the media following Xinhua changed the headline of the copy; such to "Square dance to be unified" (Huashang Morning Post, 2015). The effect of this was that viewers misunderstood the regulation as suppressing nongovernmental routines. On March 25th, the GASC had to hold another press release to clarify that the administration's intention was not to make people all over China perform the same square dance.

The year 2015 is a turning point for Chinese square dance because the public's attention has been shifted from the "life spectacle" to the regulation and management of

⁸ See the February 10th comment by Sina account "Uyghuryar 飞剑" (*fejijian*) in the commentary section. Source: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2015-02-09/234131500859.shtml>

the phenomenon, as 32.2% of the 261 articles published on Sina in the first half of this year specifically focuses on party-state involvement, and party-state forces officially began to get involved. Media has played a significant role in connecting government departments and the public. This can be seen in the GASC incident, during which party-state official media voiced different opinions leading to public misunderstanding as well as misinterpretation by some commercialized, market-oriented media. On the one hand, they helped clarify the GASC's original intention in order to clarify the authority's move; on the other hand, it offers further analysis on regulation of the activity from the authority's perspective. For example, metropolitan dailies such as Beijing Morning Post (*Beijing Chenbao*) and Chengdu Commercial Daily (*Chengdu Shangbao*) reported people's aversion to the authority for having "bothered too much" on this grass-root phenomenon, causing "a waste of manpower and material resources" (Chai, 2015; Yu, 2015). Official media such as CRI Online (*Guoji Zaixian*) and Guangzhou Daily analyzed benefits of the standardization, saying "it saves space and enhances the dance's aesthetic level,...and more importantly, makes it more scientifically responsive to their health" (He, 2015). Further, the analysis clarified that the regulation

"is not forcefully promoted by administrative order, but an instructional promotion....it is just a suggestion rather than tough administration on people's recreational life, and it respects *damas'* choice. The public will not feel bothered" (Wang, 2015).

Admittedly, there is no absolute definition of the media's position on Chinese square dance as judged by the media's character and different ownership structures. Party-state-run media sometimes do not remain consistent with the party line. For instance the provincial party-state official web portal Rednet published a series of articles which outspokenly criticized the GASC for "imposing 'shackles' on square dance" (Qing, 2015). In a similar manner market-oriented media have also produced stories that celebrate authorities' regulations, just like a cosmopolitan daily Jinling Evening Post (*Jinling Wanbao*) report that *damas* in Nanjing welcomed the 12 sets of national routines, and the provincial government is welcomed by the locals to promote more dancing routines and to hold square dancing competitions (Fang, 2015). The mix in the media's characterizations of square dance to some extent reconfirms the "depolicization" of China's domestic media system, where the double-track system

practically means the decline of previously socialist imperatives in the media's work. Overall, reporting of square dance in Chinese domestic media is rather negative. This is, first because the issue of square dance is problematic, and there is no way to talk about square dance without touching upon its three current flaws - noise pollution, space occupation, and lack of participant self-cultivation. But more importantly, the influence of a cosmopolitan neoliberal urban lifestyle has been very evident in the media's representation of Chinese square dance. Serious analysis of square dance in the context of contemporary China accounts for a small part of the 261 selected stories as a large number of them merely offer criticism and mock square dancing and dancing groups, as well as its connections with the authority. This reflects the image of Chinese square dance in the eyes of many media professionals and many media consumers resulting in an urban bias, and epitomizing the current relationship between society, media, and the party-state in a neoliberalized Chinese society.

3.3. Implications: Neoliberalization, Emerging Media, and *Damas'* Right to Communicate

As a media platform that gathers stories from news outlets with diverse ownership structures, Sina web portal is a top choice for a case study in order to explore the representation of Chinese square dance and Chinese domestic media in the context of the current ideological environment. However, it must be said, that the choice *per se* is a result of China's neoliberalization. Among the top 6 Chinese web portals, officially state-run media - CCTV and Xinhuanet respectively rank 5th and 6th. In contrast, the first four web portals are all products of private internet enterprises that started in the late 1990s, when China's neoliberal trend gained its momentum. Meanwhile, the inferior position of state-run traditional media in this competitive terrain, on the one hand, shows their difficulty in reform and transformation to catch up with the development of information and communication technology (ICT), and on the other hand, indicates individuals' media consumption habit, which usually favors privately-owned internet enterprises, even though state-run official media are more authoritative and with more experienced journalists. Since Sina is a commercial website, it inevitably obeys the basic rules – of reform, namely, consumerism, which requires sensational headlines and seductive stories in order to attract audiences and transform audience ratings into

advertisement and commercial profits. Besides, since urban netizens account for the bigger part of all Chinese netizens, about 72.5% according to the latest report (*China International Network Information Center, 2015*), web portals definitely cater more to urban residents, who are more exposed to the impact of cosmopolitanism and neoliberalism. Thus, although Sina has gathered stories from various news outlets, it is reasonable to believe that these published stories have already gone through a selection process. In this sense, Sina lack some representativeness for understanding media's representation of square dance in contemporary Chinese society.

Nevertheless, this is not to negate the analysis of Chapter 3. Sina reflects the current situation in terms of discursive power in contemporary China, where young urban residents with sufficient media techniques have a big say in social debates, in many cases challenging the authority of the party-state and its mouthpiece. The contentions regarding Chinese square dance do not just reflect differences of lifestyle or ideology, but also the generational gaps such as ICT literacy differences between generations. That is to say, in the case of Chinese square dance, people have different levels of discursive power. As such most dancing *damas* are not only disenfranchised social members offline, but also disenfranchised groups online. The internet has played a very important role here. This is because, first, the internet is a major platform for exposing complaints about square dance, mostly brought up by urban youth, as 78.1% of internet users are people aged 10 to 39, among which people aged 20 to 29 account for the largest percentage, 31.5%. Second, the relationship between public affairs and the internet is currently so tight that it is hard to tell whether a discussion originally starts online or offline. Even traditional media such as newspapers and television are now very reliant upon news resources from the internet. For instance, many square dance stories from traditional news outlets cite netizens' comments posted on social media. In this way, the whole of society is heavily influenced by emerging media such as internet websites and social networks, which is a home field of neoliberal arguments. Therefore, studying a web portal contains much value for understanding the interactions that involve Chinese square dance, media, and social reality.

What is noteworthy is that during discussions of Chinese square dance, the participants, typically *damas*, are not in a position equal with other involved parties. No

matter whether it is government departments or social members who want to express themselves on this issue, they are all able to exercise their right to communicate through media of various types. For government departments, media are always their “mouthpiece”; while for common people, emerging media such as social media have provided them with ever greater access to speech. However, due to a knowledge gap in ICT use, *damas* almost completely lose their right to communicate in public because as an old generation, they are not familiar with new social media. Their original thoughts are not easily heard. Rather, they are always represented in different ways by media with different standpoints. The only way for *damas* to express themselves publicly is through media. As the delivery of their message depends on the media’s own framework and agenda-setting, *damas*’ own true voices are lost. Just take the GASC incident as an example, some media reported *damas* welcomed the new routines while some other media did the opposite. But they all claimed to have done interviews with local *damas*. On the whole, the majority of voices is from those who uphold an individualized neoliberal middle class lifestyle, while the voices from disenfranchised groups are in a marginalized position, waiting to be fully discovered. What is worse, as some dancing groups are invited to participate in the production of TV programs, just as many Sina news stories report, they themselves are inevitably commercialized and their images have to be misinterpreted to accommodate the audience. The whole process is another round of media commodity production based on neoliberal rules.

Chapter 4.

Conclusion

Since the reform and opening up in the 1980s, China has witnessed a massive transformation from Maoist socialism to a hybrid governance which “has combined earlier Maoist socialist, nationalist and developmentalist practices and discourses of the Communist Party with the more recent market logic of ‘market socialism’” (Nonini 2008, p.145). In the context of the contemporary ideological situation that has combined the past and the present, the East and the West, the dominant and the alternative, contemporary Chinese square dance should not be simply understood as a symbol of a socialist past fighting for orthodoxy amid the neoliberal trend. But rather, it is a site of collision - a site where voices rising for and against square dancing and its practitioners epitomize the on-going ideological dynamics beyond surface level economic growth and political control. The phenomenon is significant for representing a collectivist reaction in the face of an increasingly globalized neoliberal China, including the atomization of collective society, the collapse of the socialist welfare system, and the challenge to primary social norms and concepts, e.g., individual right and public space. Moreover and more importantly, as it can be seen as a “re-collectivization of people’s private life” (Yu, 2015), the emergence of Chinese square dance right after the social transformation in the 1980s was a joint product of neoliberal restructuring and socialist maintenance.

However, it is impossible to understand the phenomenon of square dance in China without considering Chinese domestic media. As media serve as a platform of factual information and points of views, Chinese media provide us with a relatively comprehensive picture of Chinese square dance as well as its related disputes. However, this picture is not necessarily just and balanced, as each news outlet is also experiencing the impact of contemporary ideological dynamics that affect each media outlet’s standpoint and mode of operation. Therefore, Chinese square dance is represented in various ways, the majority of which are supporters of the values of an individualized neoliberal middle class lifestyle. They express their rupture with the socialist past on one hand, by detesting Chinese square dance as “something old” that is

unreasonable and sometimes even creepy. At the same time, they further discuss the feasibility of cosmopolitan neoliberalism in China from a perspective of daily life on the other hand, by raising the issue of public and private space, the importance of urban planning, and the urgency of people's all-around development. While all these indicate the popularity of neoliberalism in China, the party-state has confirmed the unshakable orthodoxy position of socialism through its "mouthpiece", by explicitly acknowledging Chinese square dance for its collective sense and its adaptability for the construction of a harmonious socialist society, which allegedly can be enjoyed by the masses.

So in conclusion, from the interplay between media, society, and the party-state around Chinese square dance, we see a dynamic struggle occurring between the often despised, orthodox socialist ideology and the arguably heterodox, yet penetrative neoliberal way of life.

In addition, I speculate that this dynamic struggle will never end, as long as China sticks to its hybrid method of governance. The hybrid method is deeply entrenched in Chinese dialectics. Just as Confucius said: "To go beyond is as wrong as to fall short".⁹ That is to say, one should not go to extremes, but keep a moderate manner, transcending apparent oppositions, or even accepting the harmonious unity of the clashing but instructive opposites. (Nisbett, 2003, p. 27; Peng, Spencer-Rodgers & Zhong, 2006, p.256). In this sense, what matters with the ideological struggle now in China is not an end, but the process itself. The process constitutes a dynamic equilibrium for China's rapid development, complementing each other and utilizing their respective strengths, as top-down control in state socialism guarantees strong social mobilization and organization while market approach in neoliberalism stimulates vitality at both individual and national levels. In fact, the relationship between socialism and neoliberalism as ideologies is complex, which deserves further elaboration elsewhere. But it is beyond the scope of this essay. Just focusing on the case of Chinese square dance, it has played a significant role in pinpointing some problematic issues for the developing China, regardless of what ideology the society upholds. These problems include the scientificity of urban planning and development, and the enhancement of people's personal development, both of which entails authoritative emphasis as well as

⁹ quoted from Book XI, *Xianjin*, The analects of Confucius (*Lun yu*)

individual initiative. In this sense, no matter if we view China as a model of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” or “Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics”, I argue that, the struggling dynamic may serve as a means to keep China on a track that constantly corrects itself due to the counterbalance of two sides of socialism and neoliberalism. This may be where true value of the polemics around Chinese square dance, and how the activity interacts with the two sides deserves further observation and analysis.

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Appendix

Table Examples of Stories on the Themes of Chinese Square Dance Stories on Sina (2015.01.01-2015.06.30)

Example	Media	Update
<p>1. Anecdotes and general situation(19.9%): Stories that offer description of daily practices of Chinese square dance among common people as well as review the general phenomenon.</p>		
Beijing <i>damas</i> performing square dancing in mariniere	Sina Photo	2015.01.16
Local residents practices square dance in the morning in Hebei	China Youth Daily	2015.03.31
A brief history of Chinese square dance	Xinhua-Oriental Outlook	2015.06.08
<p>2. Comments and management suggestions (17.1%): Commentary articles written by the media to offer opinions on how to manage the contemporary conflicts caused by square dance in China.</p>		
Disharmony of square dance is due to government's laziness	Rednet	2015.01.27
What's next after penalty?	Qianjiang Evening News	2015.02.02
Room should be made for dancing <i>damas</i> in urban planning	Xinhuanet	2015.04.20
<p>3. Official standpoint and regulations at a national/local level (15.1%): Announcements of regulations regarding square dance put forward by the authorities at all levels.</p>		
<i>Dama</i> to be fined if they disturbs the neighborhood in Xin'an	Chutian Metropolis Daily	2015.02.02
Square dance model routines to be promoted by GASC	Beijing News	2015.03.24
Dance instructors in uniform to be trained in Jiangsu	Modern Express	2015.05.29

<p>4. Contests and formal public events for square dance (13.5%): Stories that report square dancing competitions and public performances that are organized by authorities, companies, or public institutions.</p>		
Thousands of people in Kashgar dancing Little Apple together	Tianshannet	2015.02.09
Shanghai square dance competition in 2015 officially kicked off	Sina Sport	2015.04.07
Square dance performed for lobster festival in Hubei	Chujingnet	2015.06.10
<p>5. Chinese square dance and celebrities/entertainment industry (12.4%): Stories about celebrities involved with Chinese square dance, especially in the entertainment industry.</p>		
Ma Su performed square dance in Spain in a reality TV show	Sina Entertainment	2015.03.18
The square dancing dilemma in the eyes of an actress	China Youth Daily	2015.06.03
<p>6. Topics that are not directly related to Chinese square dance (10.0%): Stories focusing on other topics that often use square dance or dancing <i>damas</i> as a reference object or analogy.</p>		
<i>Damas</i> to be deliverymen for O2O platform	Sina Finance	2015.03.28
WristBoom watch: the favorite equipment of dancing <i>damas</i>	IFANR	2015.06.10
<p>7. Conflicts inside and outside Chinese Square Dance (5.2%): Stories presenting conflicts between square dancing groups and other members of society, or between participants within square dancing groups.</p>		
Square dancing <i>damas</i> was attacked by faeces.	Beijing Satellite TV	2015.01.26
A love triangle within a dancing group	Chutian Golden	2015.06.02
<p>8. Chinese square dance going abroad (2.8%): Chinese people or Non-Chinese people performing Chinese square dance in foreign countries.</p>		

<i>Damas</i> occupying the square outside Asian Cup stadium	Sina Sport	2015.01.14
Chinese square dance was introduced into Europe	Shenzhen Evening News	2015.04.08
9. Music accompaniment of Chinese square dance (2.4%): Stories that introduce the music that square dancing groups use as accompaniment.		
Decryption of musical accompaniment of the authorized dance	Southern Meotropolis	2015.03.26
Phenix Legend accept the label of “square dance music”	Guangzhou Daily	2015.04.01
10. Health effects of Chinese square dance (1.6%): Stories that discuss positive or negative effects brought by square dance upon people’s health.		
A <i>Dama</i> almost lost her sight because of square dance	Qianjiang Evening News	2015.01.05
Square dance is good for exercise	Jinling Evening News	2015.03.26