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Places of "heat and noise": sonorous presence and the interstitial time-spaces of everyday life in contemporary Beijing

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ABSTRACT

Public parks in urban China have become places where elder and middle-aged city-dwellers join in varied group activities such as choral singing, plaza dancing, or traditional and revolutionary opera, to name but a few. While these places have been analyzed as a setting for a rich, everyday public life, the sonic dimension of park life has been relatively unexplored. Based on recent ethnographic accounts of encounters and performances in Beijing's public parks, this article explores these practices as an intervention in the daily sonic order of the city, an active production of the textures of the everyday through "heat and noise" (*re'nao*). Using voices and technologies to perform in public, the display of sounds by park-goers who experienced the Cultural Revolution echoes the loudness of those days while creating temporal assemblages of their own. Simultaneously, they reshape the patterns of co-presence and engagements among strangers, allowing for convivial interactions. Constitutive of the everyday, the tension between familiarity and strangeness, between routine and playfulness, is thus cultivated through "the sensorial production of the social" in ways that shape a pleasurable urban experience.

Introduction

On a winter morning in Beihai Park, one of Beijing's former imperial domains, a man and a woman in their sixties stroll down the north-south alley. In his handbag is a portable amplifier playing repertoires as varied as a Michael Jackson's hit track and some Western opera. As the machine blares, their audible presence triggers no particular reaction from passersby. Nobody stares at them or looks for the source of noise. The varying tempo of their musical accompaniment does not seem to elicit changes in the couple's walking rhythms; observation provides little clues about the ways in which they let themselves be affected by the music. As I follow them while they engage in what may be an everyday routine, it becomes evident that, as it occurs *in the park*, where deliberate sonic practices have become legitimate, this morning perambulation allows for a pleasurable intervention in the sensory environment of their walk. This may not be the case outside: when they reach the eastern gate, the woman walks out while her companion stops a few meters

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behind. He fiddles with his portable stereo for a few seconds and finally turns it off before leaving Beihai.

This case of outdoor music display is but one example of the deliberate uses and production of sound which unfold in China's urban parks on a daily basis. One only needs to step into Beihai's north gate between 7 and 12 a.m. to experience this complex sonic assemblage. Beginning with the successive beeps of the electronic card reader that resonate as regulars swipe their monthly or annual pass upon entering this heritage-listed site, one may suddenly feel immersed in an environment distinct from that of the streets. On the busiest days, walking through the northern gate, only a few meters suffice for tooting horns, car brakes, buses and all sort of traffic noises on Di'anmen Avenue to give way to myriads of voices and recorded or live music. Each day, groups of middle-age and elderly city dwellers temporarily appropriate portions of these public spaces for the purpose of their own leisure activities: choral and opera singing, plaza dancing (*guang-changwu*), recitation or calisthenics, to name but a few. Sound is ubiquitous to most of them, except perhaps for the water calligraphers who still manage to find an unoccupied surface in the midst of this cacophony. This "tuning of place" (Coyne 2010) involves an uncoordinated alignment of a plurality of gestures and utterances: turning up the volume of loudspeakers, singing revolutionary model operas in a microphone covered in red cloth, blowing brass instruments, choosing an appropriate tune to dance to on a portable MP3 player, relentlessly chanting positive slogans to the ceaseless sound of body-slapping (*paishen*) gestures, or *Qigong* practitioners' shouts … The sensory experience of walking down Beihai's north-south alley is akin to "a continuous pulse of contrapuntal rhythms: bubbles of acoustic space expand and contract in rapid succession," to borrow Sophie Arkette's account of the soundscape in London's Camden High Street (2004, 165). (Figure 1).

Parks, then, do not only afford a different kinesthetic experience from that of streets or domestic spaces. The enclosed environment also enables the production of a different sensory and affective experience. The creation of acoustic territories is crucial to the place-making processes that have resulted in the appropriation of the city's public parks. Thus, if as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it "[t]he ears don't have eyelids" (cited in Simpson 2009, 2568), and if sound always exerts a resonance in human bodies (albeit sometimes "indifferent" or "not pronounced enough"), being in the park implies being permeated by the ongoing musical or vocal performances and recorded sounds.

But while congregations of middle and old-aged people in parks across China have aroused scholarly interest (Boermel 2006; Chen 2010; Farquhar 2009; Kraus 2000; Orum et al. 2009; Qian 2014a, 2014b; Richaud 2018; Rochot 2017; Thireau forthcoming; Zito 2014), social scientists in China scholarship have seldom engaged with the sonic dimensions of what has typically been regarded as particular forms of public life. While foregrounded in regulars' characterizations of parks as "lively" places (*re'nao*, literally, "hot and noisy"), the sonorous texture of the gatherings has been relatively muted in ethnographic descriptions. Scholars with an interest in singing repertoires have been concerned with more representational aspects of park music, such as the lyrics, ideological content or political meanings of "Red songs" (Qian 2014b; Mei 2013), rather than examining, at a more phenomenal level, these modes of "sonorous presence" (Simpson 2009). The work of Paul Kendall (2019) on the production of social space through musical practices in the city of Kaili, Guizhou Province, constitutes to date the most substantial engagement with the *problématique* of sound. While his ethnography provides vivid

Figure 1. Members of the amateur "art troupe" Xiyangyang, performing in Beihai Park on a Saturday morning of April 2013. Besides the drum kit and keyboard, note the loudspeaker at the back.

descriptions of amateur singing groups in public parks, he mainly focuses on the production and social hierarchization of amateur musical spaces in the context of the sonorous ordering of the city

Drawing on thirteen months of fieldwork in Beijing's Jingshan, Beihai and Zizhuyuan Parks between 2011 and 2014, this article echoes Kendall's endeavors to bring sounds back in the study of China's urban public places, while adopting different empirical and theoretical perspectives. If, much like Kendall, I follow a long-standing urge to adopt a "multisensory conceptulization of place" (Feld 1996, 94; see also Oosterbaan 2009), I also depart from his Lefebvrian-inspired analysis to draw on approaches to the "sensorial production" of emplaced sociality (Chau 2008), attentive to lived situations. This article thus takes readers on a journey along the sights, rhythms and sounds that transform these portions of the urban environment into what, using anthropologist Albert Piette's conceptualization of festivals (1992) I refer to as "interstitial time-spaces."

Over the last few years, these grassroots forms of spatial occupation have been the object of increased regulation in the name of limiting "noise" (*zaoyin*)[1] and "noise pollution" (*shengyin wuran*), in ways reminiscent of Western contexts. As my fieldwork and follow-up visits to the field show, this Chinese case offers yet another story of "sensuous governance" (Hamilton 2020). While a growing concern with the reduction of noise pollution in urban outdoor spaces can be traced back to the early years of the Post-Mao era (Li 2019, 43), one period of my fieldwork (2013–2014) coincided with an

intensifying regulation of sound-making in the city's parks (see also Seetoo and Zou 2016, 38–9). Formal requests for retirees to keep the volume of their activity under 80 decibels were direct attempts to restrict the use of amplification.[2] In Jingshan and Beihai Parks, two former imperial domains and iconic sites in China's capital, these constraints have been particularly obvious ever since. If park administrations do welcome or promote active modes of inhabiting these spaces among the elderly in the name of healthy leisure, retirees have also been expected to comply with "civilized" (*wenming*) norms of sonorous presence. In July 2013, local newspapers spread warnings about the enforcement of bans from future visits to the park should parkgoers disregard the new regulation, although some of my informants felt that such measures were not applied uniformly.

While I will return to this construction of sonorous presence in parks as "sensory excess" (Hamilton 2020, 1) in the conclusion, this article mostly leaves aside the question of what is at stake in the categorization and policing of "hot and noisy" public audibility. Whether this is another attempt on the part of the authorities to contest and redefine the "boundaries of social heat" (Steinmüller 2011) would deserve an analysis in its own right, one that my ethnographic data does not allow. Drawing instead on descriptions of performances as they unfold, I focus on the world-building dimension of these practices. If "noise" as defined through sensory governance (here, *zaoyin*) "is a sound which is out of place" (Gurney cited in Atkinson 2007, 1905), throughout this article, I refer to "sound" rather than "noise" to emphasize how, for retirees, the "noisiness" and attendant "heat" is an expected, constitutive quality of these places,[3] and this despite occasional conflicts over, or reluctance toward, groups deemed more noisy than others.

In line with reiterated calls for caution against a mere "countermonopoly of the ear" (Erlmann 2004, 4; see also Kendall 2019, 37), the specific attentiveness to the oral-aural dimensions I propose in this article is a mere analytical device; the auditory is not divorced from the other senses and should be considered alongside the visual. For the ethnographer, the significance of this argument becomes most obvious in China's public parks, where retirees make themselves both "visibly audible" (Fickers 2012) and audibly visible to fellow parkgoers, tourists, young people and other users (Figure 2). But joining in these bustling, "hot and noisy" gatherings, one is also reminded of recent calls for broader understandings of the "social senses" beyond the arbitrary categorization of the "five exteroceptive sensory modes" (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2012, 7) with which the auditory and the visual are usually associated. Emic descriptions of parks as places of "heat and noise," or *re'nao* also draw attention to what, following Adam Chau (2006, 2008), we may call the (socio)thermic, that is, an atmospheric warmth generated through crowded-ness and animation (Chau 2006, 155).

With this in mind, I explore these retirees' intervention in the sensory environment of Post-Maoist China's urban spaces where past uses of sounds have been muted. Two aspects of repeated sonorous presence will be examined: first, I will look at how parkgoers imbue these places with distinct temporalities through sound. Second, I will show how sonic exuberance re-shapes the patterns of co-presence. In parks, both mutual visibility and audibility can give rise to unpredictable convivial interactions among the unacquainted. Forms of personal knowing are thus established in and through sound.

One overarching question this article intends to address is as follows: If amateur music-making and other forms of deliberate sonic interventions in China's parks are viewed as constitutive of "the everyday realities" of retired and middle-aged city dwellers (Kendall

Figure 2. Park visitors watch Old Sister Kang's "song and dance" performance, on a morning of May 2014, in Jingshan Park. Note her microphone.

2019, 15), then what is the nature of "the everyday" as produced through these sonorous modes of presence in public places? Sounds, some have argued, introduce a "caesura" in space-time (Ingham, Purvis, and Clark 1999, 285). While musical and non-musical sounds in the urban "everyday" have long been of interest to social science research (Battesti and Puig 2020; Bull 2000; Thibaud 2003), there is a tendency in empirically-grounded studies to take the very concept of the everyday as an "uninterrogated category" (Pink 2012, 7). When the "caesura" becomes daily routines, the everyday is one in which its constitutive tension between familiarity and strangeness (Bégout 2010) is cultivated in these interstitial time-spaces, shaping a pleasurable urban experience.

Heat and sound from the Mao era to the reform

Before turning to the analysis of public performances as they unfold in parks, a brief historicization of these forms of heightened sensory experience in China's urban public places is in order. According to municipal gazetteers (*difang zhi*), the daily occupation of Beijing's public parks by middle-age and elderly city dwellers traces back as early as the 1980's (Beihai Jingshan gongyuan guanlichu 2000). Photographs of women dancing in Di'tan Park only a few years after the end of Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (see Rochot 2017) epitomized the capacity of those who lived through the Mao era to reclaim these sites for themselves as the state had loosened its grip on public space (Farquhar 2009). From a sensorial perspective, such deployments of portable amplifiers in the capital's

public parks came in contrast to the post-Mao sonic ordering of urban public life. In these early years of the Reform era, the dismantling of public loudspeakers that took place after 1977 had made official uses of sound in the outdoor spaces of the city less pervasive (Li 2019, 43). This marked a shift away from the "sensual life of the state" (Linke 2006) of the Mao era, which had relied on the omnipresence of music and sound, especially during the Cultural Revolution (Coderre 2014; Li 2019; Mittler 2012).

During the Mao period, "affirmative resonance," that is, both the "political strategies for acoustic presence" (such as through the use of loudspeakers installations) and the "vocal and corporeal participation of crowds" (Birdsall 2012, 32), was no less pervasive than in other totalitarian contexts (Li 2019).[4] Public broadcasting, theatrical street performances and mass gatherings were common features of the ordinary citizens' daily living (Clark 2012; Li 2019, 38; Wang 2014). These participatory routines and rituals were often framed in the language of the sociothermic. For such acclamatory sonic events to fulfill their political function, participants would be requested to act "enthusiastically" (*re'lie*). Combining ideas of heat (*re*) and intensity (*lie*), the term appears frequently in Party-language set formulae calling the masses to participate in state-orchestrated celebrations (Chau 2006, 149). It connotes normative ideals of emotional (over)involvement associated with these political "rites of convergence" (Chau 2006, 159). Notwithstanding the various motivations and affects among the participants themselves (Clark 2012), the becoming-*relie* through public performance was supposed to shape committed socialist subjects.

In parks today, the manifestations, among the elderly, of a feeling of entitlement to occupy the aural environment appear as a lingering *habitus*,[5] a differentiated sensory relationships to public space (Pêcqueux 2012) forged through repeated participation in the political rituals of their younger days.[6] A number of my interlocutors partook in the propaganda teams (*xuanchuan dui*) that mushroomed across the country, in schools or work units during the Cultural Revolution. But what becomes of these sensibilities when, in Post-Mao Beijing, state-organized sonic display in the city's public spaces remain largely confined to specific, relatively bounded settings, such as daily morning physical exercises in schools (*guangbo ticao*)?

In a time of social (and sensory) change, retirees' performances have thus filled a sonic space in post-Reform public places that the Party no longer occupies; they have joined in the creation of the sonic texture of the Reform era, acting upon sensibilities shaped through collective history. Their performances, however, no longer echo a political imperative to create bustling scenes of "enthusiastic" (*relie*) commitment. While official media discourses have celebrated these daily activities as evidence of a "healthy" (*jiankang*) "culture of the masses" (*qunzhong wenhua*), the Party-state itself did not exactly stir up these "self-organized" (*zifa*) forms of "heat and noise." As recounted by one choir organizer in Jingshan Park, over the years, the authorities have oscillated between restriction, recognition or conditional acceptance, but their action seldom involves direct orchestration of the gatherings.[7] Granted, the tone is largely congratulatory: while varied, musical repertoires often perpetuate habits of praising Mao, the Party or the Nation, be they sung or played. But for those "peopling the city" (Farquhar 2009) through everyday "heat and noise," this seeming overlap between the voice of the Party and that of the People is of lesser relevance than the sheer fun derived from self-entertainment (*ziyu zile* or *wan'r*) (Richaud 2020). Of course, this could still be apprehended as yet another echo of governmentality (Farquhar and Zhang 2005), a biopolitics of pleasure enacted surreptitiously through familiar cultural

Figure 3. In Jingshan Park, amateur singers and musicians share a joyful moment as they wait for the afternoon choir to begin, in May 2013.

forms. But sensuous pleasures and fun often exceed the workings of power and politics (Anjaria and Anjaria 2020).

This article thus takes up the language of *re'nao* and the "sensorial production of the social" (Chau 2008) to attend to the animation of public space, often irreducible to "the usual hyperlegible registers of normativity and the state" (Stewart 2017, 194; see also Amin 2015). While *re'nao*, or "heat and noise," does connote massing in public spaces, it lacks the political directionality of *relie*. An atmosphere of *re'nao* is one that retirees craft out for themselves. Foregrounding the "sociothermic affect" (Chau 2008) expected to be produced through these activities, *re'nao* first and foremost speaks of an enjoyable mode of sociality, which takes shape through sensory liveliness (Chau 2006, 2008; Steinmüller 2011) (Figure 3).

Re'nao-seeking in Post-Mao Beijing

As the quality of bustling scenes of crowdedness, *re'nao*, Chau (2006, 150) tells us, is "a condition of social life that is exciting and highly desirable." Desirability is often deemed to be largely shared in China, be it in the rural areas or in urban environments (Chau 2006, 2008; Farquhar and Zhang 2012, 57). To emphasize the experience of *re'nao* as "unequivocally evaluated positively," however, may obfuscate the heterogeneous meanings attached to this quality in various contexts (Steinmüller 2011, 267–8). In parks, where

retirees from a wide range of social backgrounds[8] gather, to describe oneself as merely "*re'nao*-watching" (*kan re'nao*) can index a sense of distancing from participants in amateur performances deemed devoid of genuine artistic pursuits.[9]

But whatever the connotations associated with *re'nao*, this active search for a lively, "sensorially rich social space" (Chau 2008, 488) can be understood in relation to the sensory lifeworlds of my interlocutors outside of parks, as shaped by broader socio-economic dynamics. *Re'nao* atmospheres obviously stand as the opposite of coldness and isolation (Chau 2006, 153). Over the past decade, social experiences of "old age" have been increasingly framed in these latter terms, as exemplified by the emergence of the category of "empty nesters" (*kongchao laoren*) in public discourses (Boermel 2006). This view foregrounds the effects of socio-economic change on family care, as children most often live outside of the parental house and experience the pressures posed by "the demands of the market" (Boermel 2006, 415). And indeed, some of my interlocutors described their lives and those of fellow group members in related terms. Introducing the circumstances of fellow members of the self-organized art troupe Xiyangyang, a retired female international table tennis referee told me that several were left to themselves as they dealt with life difficulties – the loss of a husband, chronic illness, and so forth. Gathering and performing in Beihai Park, she emphasized, help them endure their predicaments. Another informant, a woman in her early sixties and former "sent-down youth" sometimes complained about the changing nature of intimate relationships in post-Mao China, alluding to conflicting kin relationships resulting from the destruction of the family house in the old city. As such urban redevelopment plans have become a hallmark of Reform-era China, those who had to resettle in remote suburban areas sometimes felt estranged from their new living environment. From this perspective, engaging in "healthy" park activities produces forms of sociality which alleviate the decline or absence of family care (Zhang 2009) and changing intimate relationships while also altering the image of "old age" as a burden to society. Drawing on Anna Boermel's (2006) research on experiences of old age in Beijing, one could view *re'nao*-seeking practices as revealing forms of agency that expressions such as "empty nesters" fail to render.[10]

The language of my interlocutors was itself instructive about what in their daily lives was considered a negative contrast to the *re'nao* produced in parks. One such word is *men*, "depressing," characterizing both a dysphoric feeling[11] and atmosphere – in this particular case, that of their domestic space as experienced after retirement. For many of my interlocutors, indeed, park visits have significantly increased, if not begun, once retirement (*tuixiu*) had left them with the impression of "having nothing to do" (*mei shi'r gan*) while suffocating in sometimes very tiny houses in the city center. Interestingly, the term *men* also belongs to the semantic field of the thermic. When literally referring to the weather, it can be translated as "stifling heat." To fight such "depressed" moods, thousands of middle-aged men and women[12] have bestowed parts of their newly available spare time on leisure activities in the city's public parks.

Attempts to escape *men* can be situated in relation to the deep psychological and affective consequences of the economic reforms of the 1990s, when the downsizing and privatization of state-owned enterprises created mass unemployment (Yang 2015). Although retirement is viewed as a shared condition by parkgoers, oft-heard assertions such as *dou tuixiu le* ("we're all retired") sometimes conceal more specific, and damaging

socioeconomic dynamics that emerged in Reform-era China. The massive lay-off policy (*xiagang*) of the mid-1990s, affected members of the generations who came of age in the Mao era in various ways, but some regulars in choirs or dancing groups did mention that they began to join park activities while experiencing "dissatisfaction" (*buman*) and a need for emotional relief. In order to prevent social unrest, the Party-state relied on "happiness" campaigns, promoting values of optimism and relience to re-orient the workers' psychological distress (Yang 2015). Because park activities in particular are said to cheer up moods, as conveyed by oft-used adjectives such as *kuaile* or *gaoxing* (happy) (see also Rochot 2017), they could have been analyzed in light of the Party-state's "therapeutic governance." But again, if the parkgoers' joyful performances sound like echoes of state-promoted forms of emotional labor, to view these gatherings only in such light might obfuscate how, in the long run, the sensorial pleasures experienced by my interlocutors might have generated forms of "happiness" to be understood in their own terms. Those who, more than a decade earlier, were looking for a place to relieve themselves of the emotional distress caused by lay-off policies have turned park activities into a "playful release" (Khalili 2016, 591) in the everyday whose affective tonalities might have since changed.

"Interstitial time-spaces"

A theoretical discussion of the relationships between routinized performances in urban space and the everyday provides a framework for the two remaining empirical sections.

In parks, gatherings proceed, for the most, according to a well-defined schedule, in appointed places – a pavilion, a square or an alley, under one particular tree. Activities are varied but share a number of characteristics. Often described as "physical exercise" (*duanlian shenti*) and "self-entertainment," they often take the form of spectacle-like performance (*biaoyan*) aimed at onlookers – mostly, other retirees who have become loyal "fans" (*fensi*), but also Chinese and foreign tourists. In this search for visibility and audibility, performers sometimes bring along cumbersome equipment. This may include costumes and other visual props, but also variably heavy amplifiers and musical instruments. Often, sound levels would rise above 90 decibels. While being in the streets outside of one's neighborhood may imply unoticeability and conformity to certain norms of behavior in public, being in the park allows for different modes of presence; it renders self-exposure and "over-involvement" (Goffman 1963) legitimate: loudness, powerful voices, as well as noticeable vestimentary styles and relatively extravagant bodily movements, the latter often triggering admiration due to the age of performers. Such modes of performance, in a choir singer's own words, could be viewed as a sign of "madness" (*shenjing bing*) if enacted at home. As illustrated by the opening ethnographic vignette in which music is turned off before walking out the entrance gate, the specificity of parks is revealed through the ways in which retirees manage the temporality of playfulness, which is line with an inside/outside divide. For example, a large majority of performers wait until they have reached the park to put on their costumes, and take them off before leaving.

Scholars from varied disciplinary horizons have engaged with the aestheticization of the everyday, both theoretically (e.g. Highmore 2004) and empirically, especially with regard to sound and music (Bull 2000; DeNora 2000). Everyday life has been portrayed as the realm of

the repetitive and the mundane, waiting to be "transcend[ed]" and "resist[ed]" (Bull 2000, 57). Also central to some studies of musical sounds and sound-making in China's urban public space (Kendall 2019; Hsiao 2014), "the everyday" and "everyday life" have been depicted as less univocal, but mostly remain a backdrop against which actions unfold, or in Hsiao Wei-chen's words (2014, 411), a "platform where musical practice happens," hence the necessity of subtler examinations of "how music permeates and shapes urban life" in order to elaborate an empirically-grounded understanding of "the everyday." One way to achieve this is to undertake thorough descriptions of actual situations as they unfold in urban spaces. On such a "situationalist" understanding, urban anthropologist Agier (2009, 57–64) has argued that everyday life in cities can be viewed as a succession of situations which are never completely reducible to the "domain" of social life in which they occur – e.g. "the household," "recreation," "neighboring" (Hannerz 1980). Distinguishing between "ordinary" and "ritual" situations, Agier describes the former as routinized, place-bounded interactions (as when a group of acquaintances appropriates a particular corner of their neighborhood) (2009, 58–59). The latter implies instead a "distanciation from the everyday" (2009, 62–64) and includes a wide range of social occasions, from festivities to street performances.

The example of routinized performances in public parks blurs this distinction, as it clearly involves an overlap of ordinariness and aestheticization, a routinization of performances. One concept which aptly captures this simultaneity is what Albert Piette (1992), with reference to public festivities, has called the "interstitial time-space."[13] Piette (1992) highlights how festive situations, "though differing from everyday life … [do] not signify a break from it." While certain behaviors – particularly ludic ones – which could usually be regarded as "situational improprieties" (Goffman 1963) and would likely elicit social sanctions of various degree, are temporarily permitted, interstitial behaviors yet do not completely exclude routines and ordinary modes of presence. If "rules and limitations" prevent playful behavior from expanding beyond the particular time-space in which they occur (Piette 1992, 41), the "practice of distance" and shifting attention inherent to human attitudes infuse role performance. In parks, for example, while staged manifestations of "happiness" are frequent, boredom or impatience can also surface. A choir's announcer in Jingshan Park, who was generally keen to emphasize how "beautiful" (*mei*) and "happy" (*gaoxing*) these moments were, discreetly complained during the activity of the remaining time to be spent before the end.

If Piette's theoretical articulation enables to overcome the dualism of the "liminal" versus the "ordinary," his formulation of festival as "a transfer to a separate space-time of an everyday activity more or less transformed" still revolves around a continuity/discontinuity axis. Yet, I contend that both playfulness and ordinariness, strangeness and familiarity are integral to "the everyday," understood as heterogeneous situations, temporalities and intensities, where such contradictory qualities are kept in tension (Bégout 2010). Difference does not only surface in creative moments of "micro-becomings," "whereby habits shift, practice vary, and different ways of relating emerge in the playing out of everyday life" (Simpson 2011, 417), but may also arise out of routines' "dual nature of comfort and constraint" (Highmore 2004, 308), when repetition allows for distraction "while conducting precision timed manoeuvres" (2004, 318).

In parks, sound reveals this "ambiguity of everyday life" (Highmore 2004), it is a vehicle for both repetition and difference, routine and surprise. In choirs, songs are often sung according to the same, pre-established order; plaza dancers reproduce choreographic

movements to the same repeated tunes, until a new one is eventually added to the existing list. Yet, each performance, however similar to the former, carries in itself a potential for newness. "Were you already here when we sung 'China, I love you' (*Wo ai ni Zhongguo*)?" a female conductor asked me as she noticed my presence in the gathering. While not a single Sunday afternoon was spent without singing this song, her question implied that this particular performance reached unprecedented emotional heights.[14]

Moving forward, I explore two further aspects of the interstitial nature of sonorous presence in parks, namely, the temporal assemblage that arise out of public performances, as well as the forms of openness to others conveyed through sonorous presence.

The present multiple: a sonorous temporalization of place

As every Thursday morning, members of "The Voice of the Heart of Beijing" (*Beijing xin zhi sheng*), an amateur "art troupe" (*yishu tuan*), occupies a portion of Beihai's north-south alley. They have come here for some five or six years already, and the participants' age ranges from early 50s to 76 years old. Although their performance officially starts around nine o'clock, most of the members arrived one hour prior to the beginning. They will have set up a stage by putting a red carpet on the ground as well as three amplifiers on a bench. Some troupe members are dressed in Young Pioneer (*Shaoxianduiyuan*) uniforms. Others practice their instruments – namely, harmonicas, bamboo clappers such as those used in *kuaiban*, and a snare drum –, accompanying the leader of the troupe (*duizhang*) as he rehearses revolutionary songs. Spectators slowly start massing. At few minutes past nine, "Teacher Li" grabs his microphone and formally announces the opening of the festivities. "*Wei*? *Wei*! Ladies and gentlemen, our friendly audience who warmly support us, good morning everyone! … First, on behalf of the associated members of this art troupe, I sincerely thank everyone for coming, and warmly welcome you! (…) Let our dance performances bring you joy (…) let the sound of our songs enliven your beautiful memories (*huanqi nimen meihao de jiyi*), let our Beijing opera performances bring you a good mood (…)" As his cheerful address goes on, members of the audience applaud. He then introduces Teacher Su, the woman in charge of the troupe. She says a few words to the audience and announces in her high-pitched voice: "And now, please enjoy a harmonica tune, 'Entering a New Era' (*Zoujin xin shidai*).[15]" She and "Troupe leader Li" sing in unison to the instrumental sound. Some old tunes follow, amongst which "I love Beijing Tian'anmen" (*Wo ai Beijing Tian'anmen*)[16] or "Women are Tigers" (*Nüren shi laohu*),[17] a song from the 1990s whose lyrics are based on a humorous story from the Qing dynasty.

One aspect of the interstitial character of public parks resides in the capacity of performers to imbue these places with temporalities and rhythms of their own. This includes the temporalities of action as such, but also the senses of time that arise from the sonorous presences peculiar to park performances. Sound is crucial to these time-making processes. In the above example, the announcer's use of mediated vocal sound sets up the "primary framework" (Goffman 1974), it serves as a marker, a "temporal bracket" (Goffman 1974, 252), which sets the activity apart of the flow of loose, unfocused interactions and copresence. The utterances open a sequence, an interval which is itself entrenched within the intersection of wider linear and cyclical times. But beside the temporality created through the duration of the performance itself, a sense of

heterogeneous time arises out of the spectacle, an *impression* of the past in the present. First, this perception has roots in the assemblage of varied, if not "contradictory" repertoires, which are linked to different historical eras and ideological shifts, but yet have been made into a self-consistent category known as "red songs" (*hongge*) (Steen 2013). The above vignette gives a condensed illustration of this variety: "Entering a New Era" celebrates the Reform period, but members of the "art troupe" also enjoy performing tunes associated with the Maoist past, as well as traditional and revolutionary opera. Second, beyond the historical anchorage of songs, harmonica tunes and recorded samples of revolutionary opera, this acoustic occupation of public places can itself be perceived as a persistence, albeit under transformed guises, of the "affirmative resonance" (Birdsall 2012, 31) typical of the Mao era.

It would be insufficient, however, to dwell upon these "echoes of the past" (Birdsall 2012, 173) in the present without considering *what the present does to this past*. Bruno Latour has suggested that "no interaction is *synchronic*" (2005, 200, original emphasis). The things, words, ways of talking, clothing present in a situation are associated with different histories. Yet, these fragments of the past have a life of their own *in the present*. Time is characterized by multiplicity (Adam 1995; Conlon 2010, 74), yet multiple times coexist. If the sounds of retirees performing in Beijing's parks are "echoes of the past," then, one should bear in mind that "the echo allows for the alterations produced by its surrounding" (Birdsall 2012, 173), and, I would add, by actors themselves. These sonorous presences do not amount to a mere transposition of practices associated with a bygone period. Rather, reenacted in the confines of the parks, these practices undergo a ludic reframing, they become open to multiple meanings, pleasures and affects which cannot be easily pinned down to nostalgia (Richaud 2020). The oft-claimed casual fun (*wan'r*) should be taken seriously. It reminds us that, while it would have been so in the past, these are no longer expressions of loyalty to the Party, nor the achievement of a "political responsibility" (*zhengzhi renwu*), as some describe their *yangbanxi* (revolutionary model opera) performances during the Cultural Revolution.

This "sense of multiple temporalities" (Lovatt 2012, 427) arising from the gaps between the grand narrative of social change and the remnant past in the present has been examined in writings on contemporary Chinese cinema (e.g. Berry 2008; see Lovatt 2012 for a study of the "spectral soundscapes" in Jia Zhangke's films). Sounding practices in urban parks constitute an invaluable entry point for an empirically-grounded inquiry into this coexistence of multiple times and rhythms which pervade the everyday (Adam 1995) and are in no way exhausted by the dominant temporal order of things. An attentive, situationalist approach helps to go beyond the view that "the Beijing clock at the rail station still sounds the hour for the Party-State, and the early retirees – under-qualified because of the Cultural Revolution's impact on education, and unemployed through the economic rationalization under Reform – while away their days in the parks, or on the mahjong boards in 1970s courtyards" (Donald 2011, 328). Retirees' lived temporalities are not merely in line with the linear time of institutional and political narratives. Their everyday performances embody "a very new form rather than a mere vestige" (Dutton 2008, 137). Within the spaces of the parks, they create, manage and sustain their own, interstitial, multiple temporal frames. "We bring with us things from our past, but we also walk together with the current era (*gen zhe ge shidai zou*)," said a female choral singer I got well acquainted with during fieldwork. Rather than being simply anachronistic, their sonorous presence adds to the

multivocal and asynchronous realities' toward which "[t]ime in the city is now oriented" (Donald 2011, 328).

Encounters in sound

In the park, the nature of sound as "socially organizing" (Atkinson 2007, see also DeNora 2000) becomes utterly visible. At close range or at a distance, sound can trigger bodily responses, direct attention and guide parkgoers' paths. In the final part of this article, drawing from a lengthy fieldnote excerpt, I examine another aspect of sonorous presence: the convivial interactional styles to which it gives rise, shaping forms of mutual knowing.

It is a calm windy winter afternoon in Beihai Park. Under one of the Five-Dragon Pavilions (*Wulongting*), a scenic area built on the lake of the former imperial domain, I observe a man in his sixties engaging in recitation (*langsong*). The man sits alone in one corner, leaning against a pillar. In his hand is a microphone which is itself plugged in to a portable amplifier. I can simultaneously hear the sound of another loudspeaker two pavilions away from where I sit. The texts he recites are not of his own authorship and mostly relate to China's History. One example is the "Ode to the Chinese Nation" (*Zhonghua Song*), a lenghty praise to the fatherland written in the first person. He first selects the relevant musical accompaniment on a portable player,[18] and speaks in a moderate pace without any visual aid, in a voice that reminds me of that of the narrator in the 1950 film, "This Life of Mine" (*Wo zhe yi beizi*). He pronounces each character plainly. The arrival of tourists under the pavilion does not distract his attention. He does not look in their direction, nor does he lower his voice, despite some amused laughter. Passersby do not stop, or at best for a few seconds. (…) His facial expressions seem to embody the words he utters. In spite of the absence of a consequent audience, he is clearly engaged in a performance. Yet, while it is common to see performers stand in the middle of the surface, he does not seem to search for a greater visibility. A group of provincial tourists walks through the pavilion. Their guide addresses them in a voice almost as loud as that of the man with the microphone. The latter shows no sign of disturbance and keeps on reciting. (…) As he comes to the end of an excerpt, a woman who had been sitting there for few minutes stands up and praises him: "Excellent! (*zhen bang*)." He thanks her, and she enquires about his age, and how long he has been training. He mentions retirement, and engage in a brief talk. Supposedly taking advantage of the woman's attention, he recites another excerpt. "Definitely, you are able to perform (*biaoyan*)!," says the woman. They discuss and the man proves her his singing skills, performing a Mongolian style song (*caoyuan gequ*).

It is a truism to note that mutual visual availability of unacquainted individuals characterizes the experience of being in public. With reference to Western societies, interactionist sociologists have studied the organizing principles of co-presence that prevail in urban public settings (Goffman 1963; Lofland 1998). Amongst these tacit, albeit achieved, rules of everyday behavior are "civil inattention" and "sound control" (Goffman 1963). More recent studies of daily uses of sound technology has shown how "mediated presence" (Bull 2000) was turned into a means to counter visual exposure and thereby limit interactional possibilities (Bull 2000; Thibaud 2003). While some of these observations would apply in many situations of China's urban life, sonorous presence in parks somehow re-shape (albeit without totally inverting) norms of co-presence.

Involved in their own activity, performers may be viewed as both "seek[ing] out communicative contact" (Goffman 1963, 151) and restricting it. Needless to insist, with their visual and sonic design, performances in park foreground "audience-role prominence" (Lofland 1998, 31) in ways that differ from mere "people-watching" (1998, 90–92), for it is premised upon an equally important "performer-role prominence." While in most situations in other urban settings, "civil inattention" may negatively express social recognition to strangers (i.e. acknowledging someone's presence without obviously attending to it), the transgression of the usual sound level of interactions calls for more active recognition – lowering one's voice, stopping and watching, etc. As the example of the tourists in the above vignette shows, performers do not always succeed in eliciting such attention. Yet, the fact that he is involved in a performance may cause passersby to refrain from interrupting him and ask for direction. Simultaneously, by increasing self-exposure, performers convey a greater openness toward strangers, and create a possibility for "different ways of relatedness" to emerge (Simpson 2011, 417). Technological devices are central to these processes. Functioning as a mediation of the self, it frames self-exposure in a certain way which, in turn, frame potential interactions. As epitomized by the above vignette, technologically-mediated presence is critical to "how people adjust their interactions with one another and with the places they occupy" (Coyne 2010: ix).

Thus, in contrast to the uses of personal stereo, instead of excluding all possibilities of "being with," sonorous presence may be seized as an affordance for legitimately interacting with others, both by performers and audience. A lone singer may for example invite by-standers to join him. It thus creates "mutual openness" (Goffman 1963, 131). In contrast to the streets, where interacting with strangers generally requires a legitimate reason, sonorous presence in public parks provides a basis for mutual engagements.

As I discussed elsewhere, the forms of interpersonal knowing resulting from such friendly interactions – which seldom amount to intimate ties – are often described by parkgoers in visual terms: the "face" of other regulars has become "familiar" (*mian shu*) (Richaud 2018). But sound, too, plays a defining role in how others are known, remembered, and turned into meaningful others: one choir accordionist is known for his ability to play the "notes right in tune" (*yin tebie zhun*); an amateur female singer is known for the beauty of her voice (*sangzi hao*). In the above vignette too, the "excellence" of the vocal performance might become a distinguishing mark in the framework of identification that lays the basis for future mutual engagements.

The "ethical potential" of performing in public space has been celebrated in the context of writings on the Western multicultural city (Doughty and Lagerqvist 2016). In Post-Mao China, if conviviality means "placing oneself within a collective and feeling – however fleetingly – a life lived in common" (Khalili 2016, 592),[19] such ethical potential can be situated in contrast to former experiences of institutionalized violence and class struggle among those who lived through the Cultural Revolution. If this was a period in which public presence could unpredictably become life-threatening (Wang 2014), allowing for casual engagement with strangers through sonic interventions in public space speak of a will to do otherwise (see also Richaud 2020).

And sonorous encounters sometimes lead to unpredictable, long-term associations beyond generational proximity. As one middle-aged woman used to come to Jingshan Park to sing several times a week, she was soon joined by an undergraduate female student who took this opportunity to train her voice for a singing contest, and became

a regular of these small congregations. Thus, these forms of relatedness have contributed to the formation of gatherings. Encounters between unacquainted ones can evolve into established social relationships.

Coda: from sound to "noise"

This article has explored situations of "heat and noise" in Beijing's public parks, foregrounding their world-building potential rather than attending to their representational meanings.

As evoked in the introduction, however, these forms of sonorous presence have increasingly fallen under the scope of "sensuous governance," especially in the case of public parks located at the heart of the capital city. While, visiting Beijing, one will easily realize that the purported enforcement of Municipal regulations regarding noise pollution has not yet resulted in a complete clampdown on noise-makers, there have been continuous signs of the effects of such sonic-spatial struggles. When I returned to the field in April 2014, newly installed lawns against Jingshan's eastern wall – the closest part of the park to nearby residences – prevented activity groups from gathering where they used to. Unable to find a another suitable spot, "Xinjiang dance" practitioners relocated to other parks. On a follow-up visit in December 2017, I found Jingshan and Beihai Parks nearly empty on Saturday and Sunday mornings. (Figure 4).

The recent moves toward further regulation of sound-making remind us that conceptualizations of the everyday should, to some extent, remain alive to the evolving conditions of daily life. While, in this article, I chose to avoid a conception of the everyday as the realm where both control and resistance take place – an understanding widely embraced in China scholarship (e.g. Rolandsen 2011; Wang 2008) – the future developments of

Figure 4. In Beihai Park, December 2017, at the very location where amateur musicians used to gather every Saturday morning, a billboard displays new sound-related rules, preventing the use of instruments and powerful amplification devices.

recent sonic-spatial struggles could incite to bring the "tactical" (Mei 2013, see also Chen 2010) back in, that is, to analyze how retirees manage to maintain forms of audibility and visibility in the city in a context where these modes of collective and sonorous appropriation of urban public places become increasingly illegitimate. The tactics, here, would not only help preserve a space for public audibility understood as a synonymous for recognition; they would also guarantee the reproduction of an ongoing pleasurable urban experience, through "heat and noise."

Notes

1. I have conducted fieldwork for this research in Mandarin. Throughout the text, the quotations of emic expressions and excerpts of the performers' public speech are given in English, adding some key terms in Chinese. All translations are my own.
2. During a stroll in Shanghai's Luxun Park in the spring of 2018, I noticed the installation of decibel measurers on the squares where choral singers usually gather.
3. One might object that "heat and noise" (*re'nao*) as an often positively valued term seems to imply that the word "noise" in Chinese does not necessarily carry the connotation of sound out-of-place. But the notion of "noise" in what we, in English, render as "heat and *noise*" differs from other usual Chinese terms for noise, such as *zaoyin* or *shengyin*. *Nao*, as in *re'nao*, refers to a desirable form of commotion (Farquhar and Zhang 2012, 57) and "sound pressure" (Kendall 2019, 36), akin to what one might find in a market, for example – although in other contexts *nao* may refer to negatively-valued forms of disquiet. *Zaoyin*, by contrast, almost invariably invokes a nuisance, except perhaps in the context of experimental music circles where the expression *wan'r zaoyin* refers to esthetics use of commonly deemed disharmonic and non-musical sounds. *Shengyin*, in turn, can be used interchangeably for "voice," "sound," or "noise," without connoting a difference of qualitative nature as does the distinction between noise as *zaoyin* and noise as *shengyin*. For the sake of consistence with former scholarly use of the term (Chau 2006, 2008; Steinmüller 2011), I stick to the translation of *re'nao* as "heat and noise" rather than "heat and sound." For a range of expressions using the characters *re* and *nao*, see Chau (2006, 150).
4. Jie Li's (2019) recent study of the use of loudspeakers in Mao's China goes beyond a totalitarian framework to analyze how governance through sound served heterogeneous purposes. Li's piece also offers a nuanced account of the various modes of reception of this "wired soundscape."
5. For an analysis of park practice in urban China that foregrounds this political *habitus*, see Farquhar (2009).
6. Parkgoers belong to the Second, Third and Fourth generations of the People's Republic (Rosen 2000: xiii), who grew up under state socialism and experienced the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), albeit at different stages of their lives. While the Second generation reached adulthood during the first decade of the PRC, the Third had been entirely raised under the new regime. Growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, many of them served as Red Guards and later enrolled in the "Up to the mountains, Down to the villages" movement started in 1968.
7. Explicit promotion did occur in specific contexts, however. See Mei (2013, 2018) study of the Chongqing case, where "singing red" was one important aspect of the "red culture" campaign launched by Municipal Party Secretary Bo Xilai. Mei Xiao nonetheless emphasizes differences between campaign-related activities and grassroots singing practices in parks. Another example of collaborative relationships between "self-organized" groups and government can also be found in the case of plaza dancers, who are sometimes invited to participate in officially-organized contests or events (see Seetoo and Zou 2016).
8. Among my interlocutors, one finds former blue-collar workers and state service employees, army cultural workers and officers, teachers and university professors, physicians, engineers, institutional cadres, bank managers or small business owners, to name but a few. This

9.   diversity of social backgrounds is consistently found in other studies of park practice in China. See for example Thireau (2019), Rochot (2017), or Zhang (2009).

9.   This was the case, for example, when a retired math teacher and wife of a multilinguist scientist told me that she came to Beihai Park to engage in "*re'nao*-watching." She described the amateur dancing and other activities taking place in parks as of a lower quality than "indoor" (*shinei*) activities, such as those organized by profession-based associations.

10. Importantly, and in contrast to this image, some parkgoers also seek a relief from the burden of domestic life and do not regard sharing a roof with their children as desirable. See Rochot (2017) and Thireau (forthcoming).

11. Visually, the character *men* represents a heart within a door frame.

12. At the time of my fieldwork, the official retirement age for female workers was 50, and 55 for other women. Men were expected to retire at 60. Some were forced to retire prematurely at even earlier age and others were "laid-off" (*xiagang*) workers," as discussed below.

13. Elaborating on his concept of interstitiality – etymologically, what stands "inbetween" –, Piette at once relies on, and depart from, earlier anthropological theorization of liminality. Most famously, to Victor Turner (1969) and his followers, liminality refers to a transitional stage between two states of being, clearly marked-off from the everyday, and during which a transformation occurs (i.e. typically, a rite de passage). In contrast, Piette's interstitial time-space does imply some discontinuity with the everyday, but always remains, to some extent, entranched into it.

14. An emotional intensity which, again, may not necessarily resonate within bodies in ways that match the contours of the emotion defined by the patriotic "order of signs" (Linke 2006, 206) – in this particular case, personal "love" for the fatherland.

15. Popularized in 1997 in the context of Hong Kong's retrocession to the Mainland, the song was composed by Yin Qing, with words by Jiang Kairu.

16. A famous children's song created in 1970, with music by Jin Yueling and words by Jin Guolin. The lyrics read as such: "I love Beijing's Tian'anmen, the sun rises over Tian'anmen. Our great leader Chairman Mao, leads us forward." For a musical analysis of the song, see Bryant (2004, 148–149).

17. With music by Zhang Qianyi and lyrics by Shi Shunyi, the song was popularized by female singer Li Na in 1997.

18. The musical accompaniment (*beijing yinyue*) of such texts can usually be downloaded on the Internet.

19. Here, I borrow the apt formulation of Laleh Khalili (2016) as she writes on conviviality in a rather different context – that of young Palestinian women in Lebanon.

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