

“Beijing *Dama* Have Something to Say”: Group Identification and Online Collective Action among Retirees in Contemporary China

JUSTINE ROCHOT

ABSTRACT: In 2016, a WeChat account called “Beijing *Dama* Have Something to Say” was created by a small Beijing-based company. Now widely known among retirees throughout China, this platform provides its public – mostly composed of recently retired women born between the late 1940s and the mid-1960s – with hundreds of videos where volunteer retired women speak up in the name of elderly people’s interests and spread awareness of their shared difficulties and injustices as a generation. Using ethnographic materials and video content analysis, this paper takes the “Beijing *Dama*” as a case study to address the development of new forms of “group consciousness” among Chinese retirees, leading them to defend their collective interests online despite China’s constraining political environment.

KEYWORDS: China, ageing group consciousness, online collective action, gender, generation, intergenerational relationships, Third Age, elderly rights.

First encounters

In January 2016, Mr Zhou tagged me in a WeChat group. I had met the 67-year-old two years before, during my fieldwork among a group of former *zhiqing* (知青, educated youth or sent-down youth) who, now retired, met daily on a public square in Kunming City. Knowing that I was conducting research on retirees’ gatherings in urban China, Mr Zhou forwarded to me and his friends a link to a video uploaded on QQ Video by an account called “Beijing *Dama* Have Something to Say” (*Beijing dama you hua shuo* 北京大妈有话说, thereafter “Beijing *Dama*”). *Dama* 大妈, as I will explain further in the article, is a Chinese word that has been recently used to designate “aunties” or women belonging to the “middle-elderly” (*zhonglaonian* 中老年) – a rather newly formed age category, located between the middle-aged and the oldest old, which in the Chinese context roughly includes people in their fifties to seventies and usually retired, given the extremely low average age of retirement in China (51.2 years old in 2009 according to Chen and Chen (2009: 68)).

In his message, Mr Zhou encouraged me to check out the video, commenting: “Let’s support Beijing *Dama*!” The video featured Sun Huilan, a 68-year-old woman appearing in the credits as a retiree living in Beijing’s Chaoyang District who volunteered for the show. Facing the camera, she was talking, with a strong Beijing accent, about the pensions her generation received as retirees, which she

considered particularly low given what they had endured. Before her five-minute speech, punctuated by funny video inserts and sound effects, an on-screen sentence read: “You don’t have to be someone to have a say; Senior Citizens Day is not the only time to hear their voice: let’s listen to their takes on society’s hottest topics.” Also uploaded to the channel were other videos where Sun dealt with a variety of topics such as the elderly’s relationships with their adult only children, respect towards older people in public spaces, or health practices.

The Beijing *Dama* public WeChat account had only been created for a month and was associated with a WeChat institutional account registered by a small Beijing-based company. On top of Sun’s weekly videos, the account rapidly started to develop and manage group chats that retirees scattered around the country could join to get in touch with their peers, exchange shared experiences, and provide Sun with new ideas for topics. “This will be a home for you and for millions of other elderly companions, where you can talk with people your age about what makes you happy, about the country’s important events, and what’s happening in your home,” stated the front page. I immediately joined, and was placed in group No. 19, as the first ones had already reached, in a matter of days, the 100-person limit imposed on WeChat groups composed of unverified personal accounts. There I found myself in the company of people mostly aged between 50 and 70, essentially female (two third of the group members) and coming from places

as varied as Beijing and Tianjin, Shandong, Yunnan, and Heilongjiang Provinces. After the 100th group was created a few weeks later, Mr Bian, the 40-year-old producer of the show, decided to stop opening new groups, the company's six young staff members being already overwhelmed by managing the existing ones (interview with Mr Bian, 26 August 2016).

Beijing *Dama* has greatly expanded since then. As of December 2019, the account had about five million followers, including two million on WeChat, 2.4 million on Douyin, and 26,000 on QQ.¹ A year later, Sun Huilan quit her position as a show host to pursue her career as an online celebrity, making room for other middle-elderly volunteers. Ruan Yaqing has since replaced her as the backbone of the show: a classy retired kindergarten teacher born in 1963, she suffered from depression after the recent passing of her husband and initially entered the show in order to raise awareness of the elderly's mental health issues and to keep herself busy after her daughter left for Europe to study. A dozen other retired women also occasionally appear, though without achieving similar success. Videos (whose content is essentially written by show hosts) have also been produced more regularly: in June 2020, 1,324 videos existed on QQ Video – a monthly average of 23 videos – and most managed to be widely viewed: on QQ alone, one third of them had surpassed 100,000 views and 10% had over a million. Show hosts have also become celebrities among retirees and are often recognised on the streets and in public parks or hospitals. I also realised that most of the informants I met among gatherings of retirees in various Chinese cities had grown familiar with the show and were often sharing its contents on their own Moments and friends' chats. By early 2020, however, one could find evidence of the show being co-opted by the authorities and witness important changes in the topics of the videos as well as in the profile and tone of show hosts – a development that I will address in the conclusion of this paper.

Discovering the Beijing *Dama* was a turning point in my research. I was already buying journals and regularly following WeChat accounts specifically targeting an elderly audience, which were often quite popular among my interviewees – a fact that echoed an overall increased use of social media among Chinese older people in the past decade (Huang and Zhang 2017; Li 2017; Li 2021). However, existing content was rarely produced by retirees themselves, nor did it state as clearly the ambition to speak in the name of the elderly's collective interests. As illustrated in Li's case study of a WeChat public account targeting older adults (2021), the type of content I was used to typically concentrated on topics such as leisure and recreation, while past collective memories and generational identities were largely underrepresented. Moreover, even though my informants circulated among a dense network of spaces of intragenerational sociability, none of these spaces had ever connected my interviewees the ways Beijing *Dama* did. In this account, I unexpectedly found a space where uncertainties, viewpoints, and identities voiced in scattered fashion during my fieldwork (2013–2016) coalesced into a discourse expressing common interests and a shared destiny. My informants – mostly composed of the first cohorts of urban parents of only children, born and raised during the Mao era, and actively engaging in collective activities since their recent retirement in the 2000s – seemed to have found a platform that legitimately expressed their viewpoints as a group.

This paper uses Beijing *Dama* as a case study to address the emergence of new forms of collective identification among Chinese retirees, leading them to defend their collective interests despite China's increasingly restrictive political environment. How can one explain the specific timing at which a space such as the Beijing *Dama* appeared? Why are retired women particularly visible? What do these retirees concretely have to say and how do they formulate their grievances? Through an analysis of the show's videos and interviews with some of its core members, this article aims to illuminate the different spheres of identification leading these recently retired women to speak up as a "we." I argue that Beijing *Dama*'s creation and success can be understood as the product of various social processes reinforcing the collective identification of this new generation of retirees: while some of these processes echo observations made in other national contexts, others are specifically Chinese and shape the unprecedented form taken by this collective of retirees.

Literature review

Collective actions by the elderly have been studied by social scientists in various contexts. In his 1962 seminal essay, American sociologist Arnold Rose laid the foundation for the study of "aging group-consciousness" (1962: 125). It is probably true, he noted, that "elderly people have been complaining for some time about their reduced income, their inadequate housing, the difficulty of paying for medical care (...), their reduced prestige, and general social neglect. Recently, however, they have come to talk about such not only in reference to themselves as individuals but with awareness that these things occur to them as a social group" (*ibid.*: 126). Rose argued that growing life expectancy, the development of compulsory retirement, separate living between generations and the costs of medical care increased older people's likelihood of developing an ageing group consciousness.

While the creation of influential senior advocacy groups pushed American academics to focus on the political mobilisation of senior citizens and the electoral consequences of population ageing (Pratt 1976; Weaver 1976; Myles 1984), researchers have since paid growing attention to the generational, cultural, and gender factors shaping senior citizens' political formations in other national contexts (Blakie 1990; Viriot Durandal 2003; Charpentier *et al.* 2004; Takao 2009). However, most research remains focused on democratic countries and is dominated by political sciences and electoral sociology, leaving little space for ethnographic enquiries letting us hear the elderly's own voices, let alone in non-democratic contexts.

In China, research on ageing still tends to focus on policy making and on the most dependent fringe of the elderly in a context of strong demographic ageing. Philip Olson's (1988) account of "the politicization of the elderly" in China actually focused on the old-age policies implemented since the late 1970s: for him, the creation

1. "中老年内容观察(上)" (*Zhonglaonian neirong guancha (shang)*, Observations on contents for the middle-elderly (part 1)), *Xinbang* (新榜), 4 December 2019, <https://www.36kr.com/p/1724777988097> (accessed on 20 July 2020); Duan Mingjie 段明杰, "深度专访北京大妈有话说" (*Shendu zhuanfang Beijing dama you hua shuo*, An exclusive in-depth interview with Beijing Dama Have Something to Say), *Zhihu* (知乎), 16 March 2020, <https://zhuankan.zhihu.com/p/113617304> (accessed on 25 July 2020).

of the National Committee on Ageing (*Guojia laoling gongzuo weiyuanhui* 國家老齡工作委員會) in 1983 and the development of a large network of local committees co-supervised by retired cadres illustrated the “bureaucratic politics model” of the People’s Republic of China, where “significant’ interest groups are those persons and units within the bureaus of government, rather than those out in the public arena” (*ibid.*: 244). The 2000s marked the development of case studies regarding the growing political activism of specific fringes of the Chinese elderly – the surge of pensioners’ protests in the 1990s, retired officers and veterans’ petitioning, and rural Societies of Senior Citizens (Hurst and O’Brien 2002; Halskov Hansen 2008; Frazier 2010; O’Brien and Diamant 2015). Frazier observed, however, that the pattern of contention followed by veterans and retired state-owned enterprises’ (SOE) workers demanding the payment of their pensions resembled what Lee has dubbed “cellular activism,” in the sense that targets remained local governments without scaling into cross-local collective actions in the name of pensioners (2010: 83).

The case of Beijing *Dama* contributes to these discussions by allowing us to point out the emergent expression of cross-local grievances among new generations of Chinese retirees. It also enriches China studies on a wider range of subjects: the life course of the “lost generation” (Hung and Chiu 2003; Bonnin 2013); changes in intergenerational expectations and the development of peer-ageing strategies (Zhang 2009; Yan 2016); online activism and rights consciousness (Sullivan and Xie 2009; Yang 2009), as well as shared normative repertoires and senses of justice (Thireau and Hua 2003; O’Brien and Li 2006; Thireau 2014). Indeed, few scholars have approached these topics through the prism of ageing, much less from the perspective of the current generations of retirees.

Methodology

My analysis draws on various sources of ethnographic data. In August 2016, I was able to interview the creator of the account, who offered me a chance to appear in the show along with Ruan Yaqing to talk about the life of the elderly in France, my home country. This allowed me to secure an interview and stay in touch with her, and let me get a better understanding of her personal relationship to the show. My interactions with them were facilitated both by the volunteers’ curiosity towards models of ageing in other countries, and their wish to see Chinese elderly’s experiences known beyond the country’s borders, but also by the producer’s hope that I would introduce them to similar projects in Europe and promote the show abroad.

Since then, I have been regularly observing interactions among elderly members in the WeChat groups and monitoring media coverage about the show. I have also watched all 1,324 videos uploaded on their QQ account between December 2015 and June 2020, and have thematically analysed the 395 videos with more than 100,000 views to get a better understanding of the content and evolution of the show. The table below summarises the topics tackled in these videos, offering a preliminary idea of the audience’s major concerns. Drawing from these statistics, the article aims to explain the centrality of these topics using more qualitative and interpretive methods.

Table 1. Statistical overview of the main topics tackled in the show’s 395 videos with more than 100,000 views (uploaded between December 2015 and June 2020)²

Videos’ main topics	Number of videos	Percentage of most viewed videos
Health (self-care, food quality, medical system)	178	45.1%
Social uncertainties (scams, rumors, corruption, lack of trust)	102	25.8%
Intergeneration relationships (conflicts, solidarity, care of grandchildren)	76	19.2%
Pensions and social insurance (reforms, inequalities, subsidies)	72	18.2%
Elderly rights (stigma, exclusion, neglect)	56	14.2%
Generational identity (post-1950s/1960s, childhood memories, one-child parents)	50	12.7%
Elderly care (elder homes, ageing models, dependency, end of life)	32	8.1%
Loneliness (living alone, empty nesters, mental health, widowhood)	28	7.1%
International comparisons (ageing and pension systems)	22	5.6%
Technology (smartphones, WeChat, online scams)	21	5.3%
Leisure and retirement (tourism, hobbies, lifelong learning, arts)	20	5.1%

Source: author.

“We don’t just dance and invest in gold”: Dama, from stigma to identity

The name of the show and the time it was created are, to start with, intricately linked to a recent process of stigmatisation of Chinese ageing women observed in the past decade and regularly denounced in the videos. Literally meaning “big mother” or “aunty,” *dama* was originally used in Northern China to designate both the wife of one’s father’s younger brother, and older women in general in a respectful manner (Li, Ma, and Shi 2015). Since the early 2010s, however, the term has shifted from its original meaning to largely become an ageist and sexist slur. While fashion magazines started, as early as 2007, to publish articles about stars suddenly “becoming *dama*” and looking or dressing older than they used to (He 2013:

2. Different topics can be treated in one video.

118), *dama* only became a buzzword in 2013 under the negatively connoted expression “Chinese *dama*” (*Zhongguo dama* 中國大媽). That year, as gold prices plunged, Chinese middle-elderly women rushed to purchase 300 tons of gold as a form of investment, forcing Goldman Sachs to stop their gold short-selling and leading to critiques of *dama* in the media and on social networks (Jia 2013: 57). Other phenomena involving women of this age category also included the famous “public square dances” (*guangchangwu* 廣場舞) fever appropriated by hundreds of thousands of retired women, which generated numerous conflicts over the use of public spaces (Zhang 2016). *Dama* therefore emerged as a new stigmatising category at the crossroads of age, gender, class, and generation: it came to designate ageing – often retired – women, deemed not well educated though possessing some financial resources, and whose collective enthusiasm was strongly associated with their Maoist upbringing.

Sociologists have shown the connection between stigma and collective identification, as well as the important use of stigma reversal in minorities’ social movements (Bourdieu 1991; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Ruan Yaqing indeed sees her involvement in the show as a direct result of this recent labelling: “I used to think that old people stuff didn’t concern me, but it affects me now. Recently, whenever there is a bad phenomenon, it has to be *dama*-related. They all put it on *dama*’s heads! So, the first time I listened to Sun *dama*, I thought: Wow, she really can say what we old people think. Everything has been really one-sided until now” (interview with Ruan Yaqing, 30 August 2016). The name of the show therefore reflects this process of turning a stigmatising label into a term positively defining a collective identity, as stressed by the show’s creator: “Because *dama* have been so stigmatised lately, we thought it was important to tell them that this would be a space for them and about them (...). The original meaning of the word was actually quite positive and that’s what we wanted to convey” (interview with Mr Bian, 25 August 2016).

While show hosts proudly call themselves *dama* and present the show as an opportunity to “clean up the dirt associated with the elderly” (Video 6),³ in numerous videos they nonetheless distinguish themselves from those who regularly appear on newspapers’ front page and “make the elderly lose face” – such as these women reported to “swoop” on free buffets during the Shanghai Expo (Video 25), or to make a fuss around bus drivers (Video 22). Show hosts therefore insist that “one person does not represent the whole group,” and reject generalisations targeting “all the elderly” because of the wrongdoings of a minority “lacking in human quality (*suzhi* 素質)” – a term depicting show hosts and their public as more socially respectable than others.

“We, ageing parents of only children”: The voice of a generation

While such controversies have nourished the identification of these recently retired Chinese women, their generation-specific experiences of ageing constitute another element shaping the collective that Beijing *Dama* strive to speak for. Show hosts describe themselves and address their audience using some recurrent terms: “post-1950s and post-1960s” (*Wu liu ling hou* 五六零後), “parents

of only children/post-1980s” (*dusheng ziniu/ba ling hou fumu* 獨生子女/八零後父母), “the loneliest generation of parents” (*zui gudu de yidai fumu* 最孤獨的一代父母). As in other elderly WeChat groups, these expressions are also found on Beijing *Dama*, whose group chat members regularly share viral articles describing the specificities of their collective fate and current attitudes as a generation. Peng *dama*’s testimony offers a typical example of such narratives, which some have seen emerging as early as the late 1990s (Hung and Chiu 2003: 204):

We were born in the first years of the building of the state. We grew up in a period of great hardships. We went to middle school during a period of social disturbance. When we wanted to enter university, [enrolment] forms were all blank. When it was time to look for work, we were sent down to the countryside. When we started to talk about love, they were delaying marriage. When it was time to have children, family planning was promoted. When we started to work, salaries were low and a few years later, we went through a period of layoffs. Once reemployed and raising our kid, then came the time of high-consumption, and when they went to school, the education system opened up. (Video 23)

One could be surprised by the terms employed (often lumping together post-1950s and post-1960s) and by the age spectrum of show hosts and chat group members – who, from my observations, tended to be born between the end of the 1940s and the mid-1960s and were therefore aged from 50 to 70 years old during my inquiry. These thresholds indeed go beyond the spectrum China scholars usually focus on when working on generational units of people brought up during the Mao era. Stressing the role of early experience of liminal historical events in the formation of generational consciousness (Mannheim 1952: 291), China scholars initially focused their attention on the “Red Guard generation” (Chan 1985; Yang 2016) or the lost generation of sent-down youths (Bonnin 2006, 2013; Harmel and Yeh 2016), defining them according to individuals’ probability of directly experiencing one or both of these events. Different thresholds were therefore attributed to these generational units, from being “born around 1949” and “[being] in middle school in 1965” for Red Guards (Yang 2016: 5) to “being born between 1948 and 1957” for sent-down youths (Hung and Chiu 2003: 210). However, Michel Bonnin points out that as a whole, the “Cultural Revolution generation” could include “all urban people born approximately between 1947 and 1960,” regardless of their Red Guard or sent-down pasts, as urbanites born in the late 1950s tended to share with their older Red Guard or sent-down brothers and sisters both a disrupted education and a certain “discontent about the bleak professional prospects offered to them” (2006: 256).

Recently, others pointed out that youth experiences probably did not suffice to define a generation: cohort-specific events emerging later in life contribute to redefining the common experiences through which individuals identify with a generational entity.

3. Please refer to the primary sources at the end of the article for the full references of the videos mentioned in this paper.

Mentioning the Late Marriage campaign (1971-1979), the One-child policy (1979), the liberalisation of the economy and the 1990s downsizing of public enterprises, Eva P. W. Hung and Stephen W. K. Chiu showed that this essentially urban generation could more largely be characterised as being “repeatedly disadvantaged by shifting state policies,” as “each coincided with their critical life transitions” (2003: 210-1). Focusing on the role of the One-child policy and the late 1990s layoffs in the shaping of a highly gendered generational consciousness among female SOE workers, Liu Jieyu further demonstrated that women identifying with the “unlucky generation” included people born up to 1962 – the year separating those subject to internal retirement from the re-employable (2007: 103).

While these authors point out the blurriness inherent to generational units (Bonnin 2006: 253) and the evolutive nature of events leading individuals to self-identify as members of a generation, Beijing *Dama* lets us acknowledge the overlooked role of ageing experiences in reshaping generational self-identification. Show hosts insist that their experiences in retirement have reinforced their consciousness of belonging to a sacrificed generation – with successful videos titled “Parents of the post-1980s have become old, here comes the loneliest generation of parents” (Video 5), or “The helplessness of post-1960s elderly” (Video 24). Therefore, what show hosts rely on to address their audience is less based on youth experiences (not all show hosts or chat members were Red Guards or sent-down youths, and the audience is very rarely addressed as such) than on their current shared status as ageing parents of only children, seen as sacrificed once again as a generation.⁴

As such, *dama* repeatedly express a shared feeling of being unable to rely on their only children (while their parents could depend on several) who are often busy with their own careers, child(ren), and in-laws, and sometimes live in faraway cities or countries. In one video, viewed over 94 million times, Sun *dama* explains:

Now that we are old, and there are four elderly people for two only children, can they really take care of us? When we call them, the post-1980s always have to work extra shifts or go on business trips. Moreover, they have the elderly on top and children below: can we put another burden on their shoulders? One netizen told me: “I am over 50, my son works in another part of the country, he’s very filial, but he’s not by my side, I have diabetes and high blood pressure and I feel so alone.” (...) But what can our kids do? (Video 7)

Show hosts therefore describe themselves as “the first generation to have only themselves to count on in their old age,” and “not daring to get old” – especially those who have to take care of their own older parents or grandchildren, as well as women who know they have statistically proven greater chances of experiencing widowhood (Video 20). The success of videos providing the audience with low-cost solutions to preserving one’s health should also be understood in this context of uncertainty, as show hosts and chat members all repeatedly worry about the burden they may impose on their children in case of illness, given the growing cost of medical treatments (Li 2016).



Figure 1. Translation of the subtitles: “[We, people born in the 1950s, have experienced very unusual times]. The memory of these things will last forever and never be forgotten.” Credit: screenshot from Beijing *Dama*’s Video 23.

This anxiety towards the future leads show hosts to explicitly address the responsibility of the state and of employers. Videos are full of testimonies of retirees waiting for their child to come back for the New Year or to visit them at the hospital, but who are prevented from doing so because their company wouldn’t allow them to take a leave (Videos 5 and 19). Moreover, *dama* point out the unfairness between the sacrifice they were asked to make in terms of family planning and the insufficient symbolic and material compensation offered to them by the state now that they are old – an inconsistency described as a prejudice once again targeting them as a generation. Quoting a netizen who told her that “providing assistance to elderly parents of only children should be the inescapable responsibility of the government,” Sun Huilan politely encourages the state to stay coherent with its initial promise: “Slogans used to say ‘one child is good, the government will help take care of you when you are old.’ (...) We have seen too much in a lifetime, we should be taken into consideration!” (Video 7).⁵

“Who is actually taking care of whom?”: Redefining intergenerational expectations

Intergenerational relationships are also put forward as a key shared experience shaping the audience’s collective identification. While show hosts are indeed quite understanding of their adult only children’s difficult position, some of the latter’s expectations are strongly criticised as they prevent older parents from enjoying what is considered a well-deserved retirement after a lifetime of sacrifices. Against the common representations of the elderly as passive care recipients, *dama* like to remind their audience that Chinese retired parents still constitute the essential yet under-recognised providers of care and resources (Video 17). Show hosts regularly denounce the “tragic” financial pressure put upon their

4. The 2020 national census will certainly prove useful to better understanding the shared characteristics of these new generations of retirees (only partially represented in the 2010 national data on the elderly).
5. In another video, Peng *dama* encourages the state to raise the amount of only child parent rewards (*dusheng zinu fumu jiangli* 独生子女父母獎勵) according to the sacrifices they have made as a generation and to price inflation – these awards having been limited to 5 RMB monthly for the past ten years, at least in Beijing (Video 18).

generation when it comes to helping their child buy an apartment at a time of property inflation.⁶

Of course, everyone wishes to buy an apartment when they get married and hopes their parents can contribute a little to it. But having to shell out one or two million *yuan* at once... No one has the heart to say no, but once you pay, all your savings are gone. (...) Surely, it is reassuring to know that your kid will be there for you but giving your money to someone else is not as good as keeping it for yourself! If you sell your house to buy one for your kid, then you can only move in as three generations under the same roof: are we back in the 1960s? (Video 4)

That young adults tend to mobilise their own ageing parents – mostly mothers – to take care of their children constitutes another major criticism formulated by *dama* towards their children's generation. As shown by the 2014 China Longitudinal Ageing Social Survey, 34% of Chinese parents above 60 helped raise their grandchildren below 18 years old, with 10% of them having their complete charge – a fact that specifically applied to younger, urban, healthier, and more educated grandparents (Sun 2016: 84), reflecting the tendency towards "descending familism" described by Yan Yunxiang (2016). Surely, *dama* acknowledge that the recent decline of childcare institutions limits the affordable options available to young parents (Xu 2017: 112), whose professional and financial pressures further reduce the time they can spare for childrearing. However, while show hosts declare themselves ready and willing to help, they also don't want it to become a "full-time job," which would give their children a way to escape their responsibilities and would contribute to further "restricting elderly women's space" (Video 34). The 2015 Two-child policy is specifically considered to be another campaign disadvantaging *dama* as a generation and once again affecting their life course transitions – this time, retirement (Videos 9 and 26). Polls regularly conducted on *dama*'s WeChat groups are mobilised as proof of this shared sense of burden. In a poll presented in a video titled "Have a second child, but could you leave your parents out of it?," 60% of respondents said they were willing to help, but under conditions of being respected and acknowledged for their contribution, while 13% said they wouldn't want to take care of their grandchild at all (Video 12) – results that reflect a growing distance among the show's audience from traditional roles associating old age with grandparental duties. Numerous netizens' stories shared by show hosts describe the hardships encountered by retired grandmothers, and more specifically by the estimated 18 million "elderly drifters" (*laopiao* 老漂) who move to another city to take care of their grandchild, sometimes for several years (Video 27). In one video, Ruan *dama* defends a grandmother – criticised online for asking to be compensated for her granddaughter's care – by describing how the woman's son and daughter-in-law had completely given up on helping, leaving her to spend more than her monthly pension on her granddaughter's care (Video 15).



Figure 2. Ruan *dama* talks about the burden that grandparenting represents for some older people. Translation of the subtitles: "The elderly are feeling tired and wronged." Credit: screenshot from Beijing *Dama*'s video "給兒女帶孩子，哪幾種行為費力不討好?" (*Gei er nü dai haizi, na jizhong xingwei feili bu taohao?*, When helping children raise their own children, what sorts of strenuous activities are we not rewarded for?), 12 January 2017, <https://v.qq.com/x/page/c0365qwut7w.html> (accessed on 22 February 2022).

Against these conditions, *dama* express their preference for a more distant intimacy based on communication and mutual understanding – a principle summarised in the repeated catchphrase: "Raising your children is your responsibility, relying on them is a mistake, everyone needs to lead their own life" (Video 16). As opposed to the elderly criticised by show hosts for clinging excessively to their children to find happiness (Video 2), the account's followers seem to support the idea of intergenerational autonomy: a poll conducted by Beijing *Dama* reveals that more than half of the respondents weren't willing to live with their children and favoured preserving each other's space and intimacy (Video 3) – a tendency that, according to a 2015 national survey, was rising among urban, more educated, and wealthier elderly (Dang 2018: 95), therefore giving a clearer picture of the socioeconomic backgrounds of the account's followers. Several videos also introduce the audience to alternative models of ageing emerging abroad and domestically, presented as desirable ways to imagine old age without depending on their children (Videos 8 and 13).

"Let's enjoy the golden age of our life": The birth of a Chinese "Third Age"

Such a stance echoes the development of a new discourse on ageing in China, well-articulated in Beijing *Dama*'s videos, which depicts the years following retirement as a "second spring" (*di'er ge chuntian* 第二個春天), a new "golden age of life" (*rensheng de huangjin shidai* 人生的黃金時代) (Videos 19 and 31) deserving to be enjoyed. Sociologists taking on a life course approach have observed the development of such discourse in Western countries since the late 1970s and have seen it as the emergence of a "Third Age" of life (Lenoir 1979; Laslett 1991). Indeed, the traditional division of the life course into childhood, adulthood, and old age does not reflect the plurality of thresholds individuals go

6. Recent research shows that elderly parents see helping their children gain access to property less as a pressuring obligation than an opportunity to engage with their children (Zhong and Ho 2014). *Dama*'s stances should therefore rather be seen as an attempt to change their peers' perspectives on the subject.

through in their lifetimes anymore. While compulsory schooling and the delaying of marriage and reproduction have increasingly distinguished childhood and youth and complexified the entry into adulthood (Ariès 1962; Chen 2007; Van de Velde 2008), a range of social factors have also transformed the very definition of old age and have contributed to the development of intermediate age categories. For Rémi Lenoir, the emergence of the Third Age directly results from the transfer of responsibility for old age from the family to the state through pensions, from increasingly separate living between generations, from the ageing of specific generations of the elderly, as well as from specific actors increasingly seeing “young retirees” as a commercial target (1979).

Dama’s claim to a right to enjoy retirement is the product of a similar yet contextually specific process in China. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) institutionalised retirement as early as the 1950s, its access remained limited to urban employees of SOEs and was politically discouraged during the Maoist period (Davis-Friedmann 1991: 26). The early 1980s constituted an important turning point, with the rise of a more established discourse describing retirement as a “right” after years of service, but also as a “new stage in [one’s] career” as opposed to a withdrawal from society (Manion 1993: 58). Even though such discourse initially aimed to legitimise the abolition of life tenure for revolutionary cadres, it nonetheless participated in rendering acceptable the import of an acting ageing model locally compatible with the official political line, leading to the institutionalisation of various state-led sociability spaces (senior universities, magazines for senior citizens) that in the following decades progressively opened up to a wider range of mostly urban elderly.

Since the 1990s, urban elderly have indeed been increasingly able to benefit from and rely on pensions, as opposed to rural areas where the state dramatically withdrew its social security net: in 2010, pensions constituted the main source of income for 67.5% of urban residents aged 65 and older, as against 39.1% in 1994 and 9.2% of rural elderly in 2010 (Du 2003: 42; Wang 2012: 2).⁷ At the same time, growing mobility among the working population, property development, and the reduction of family size contributed to an increase in separate living between generations in urban areas: in 2009, “empty nesters” and people living alone accounted for 49.7% of the urban elderly population, a 7.7-point increase from 2000.⁸ These trends have recently intensified⁹ with the retirement of a new generation of urban only child parents, whose socialisation under socialism also made them more desiring to remain active after retirement and enjoying one’s later years after a life of disrupted education, busy work, and intense parental care towards their only child. The continued application of varying ages of retirement according to individuals’ profession and gender, and the diffused practice of early retirement since the late 1990s, also resulted in a surprisingly low average age of retirement for urbanites, especially among women workers, making the Third Age start early and bear a distinctly gendered component in the context of Chinese society.

Population ageing, growing medical uncertainties, and state-led promotion of active ageing have also transformed retirees into favourite targets by companies such as banks, health product companies, leisure clubs, travel agencies, and also TV shows and

magazines. Since the late 2000s, these actors have increasingly developed content and activities specifically targeting young retirees – designated by unprecedented terms such as the middle-elderly (*zhonglaonianren* 中老年人), the “little elderly” (*xiao laoren* 小老人) or the “retired clan” (*tuixiu zu* 退休族) – and have contributed to further instilling the idea of a right to enjoy retirement. The development of WeChat, with its institutional and commercial accounts, further helped spread these ideas among younger cohorts of retirees. According to a Tencent report, WeChat users aged 55 to 70 rose from 7.6 million in 2016 to 50 million in 2017¹⁰ – a trend I observed during fieldwork, as a growing number of informants started using WeChat intensively to share said content with their family, friends, and retirees’ groups.

“We represent elderly’s interests”: Empowering retirees, defending their rights

The relationship between the emergence of a Third Age and that of seniors’ interest groups has been identified by numerous researchers. Arnold Rose considered from a Marxist perspective that institutionalised elderly sociability spaces constituted infrastructures linking the elderly together and helping them develop a collective consciousness of their shared condition (1962). More recently, Jean-Philippe Viriot Durandal further argued that the increase of public policies targeting old age, by delimiting new categories of interests, has fostered the emergence of elderly pressure groups (2003: 14). Even though Beijing *Dama* doesn’t take the usual forms of an interest group, it can be said to take part in a similar process of collective-making. Its existence was facilitated by retirees’ use of WeChat (an infrastructure connecting them nationally in an unprecedented manner), by their pre-existing sense of generational belonging, and also by their objective existence as an age category constructed through public policies: wider access to pensions; formalised rights since the 1996 Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly; development of “high profile campaigns attempting to revive Confucian virtues of filial piety” in the early 2000s (Zhang 2017: 238); granting of age-based benefits, such as free access to public parks for people over 60, etc. As such, Beijing *Dama* does aim to defend their material and immaterial interests as a public policy category – elements that correspond to Viriot Durandal’s definition of a “pressure group” (2003).

7. “The pension system was extended to all types of enterprise employees in 1997 and further to all workers including the self-employed in urban areas in 2005” through the 2005 State Council Decision on Improving the Basic Pension Insurance System for Enterprise Employees and the development of a new pension scheme aimed at providing basic non-contributory pension insurance for citizens not covered by the urban employees’ pension scheme (Zhu and Walker 2018: 1412).
8. “中國老齡化情勢嚴峻 社會化養老服務亟待提高” (*Zhongguo laolinghua qingshi yanjun, shehuihua yanglao fuwu jidai tigao*, China’s population ageing is getting worst, the socialisation of elder care services needs to rise), *People’s Daily* (人民日報), 3 March 2009, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2009/09-03/1847369.shtml> (accessed on 22 February 2022).
9. In 2020, about 60% of urban only child parents were considered empty nesters (Feng 2020: 125).
10. Celia Chen, “Grandparents and their Private WeChat Accounts: What Are They up to?,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-gaming/article/2156947/grandparents-and-their-private-wechat-accounts-what-are-they> (accessed on 10 June 2021).

Numerous videos start with show hosts saying bluntly: “We represent the elderly’s interests, we are a front serving and speaking for all the elderly of the country,” “We are the voice of the middle-elderly.” The main subjects driving *dama* to speak up are related to the sensitive topics of pensions and social security. The unequal pension and healthcare benefits separating retired enterprise employees (*qiye tuixiu ren yuan* 企業退休人員), public institution retirees (*jiguan shiye danwei tuixiu ren yuan* 機關事業單位退休人員), and retired cadres (*lituixiu ganbu* 離退休幹部)¹¹ are the object of much criticism, especially in the show’s earliest videos, which regularly denounce the numerous benefits granted to retired cadres. For example, when Lou Jiwei (then minister of finance) mentioned in a 2015 article that the government was “considering implementing a policy making retired employees contribute to social security,”¹² Sun *dama* published one of her most critical videos¹³:

Our pensions as enterprise employees are already way more meagre than public servants’! (...) We understand it is not easy to manage the country’s finances, but is demanding money from the lowest classes of ordinary people a correct attitude from a public servant? Moreover, the law clearly states that retirees shouldn’t have to contribute to social security! (...) Enterprise employees already see their salaries go down by 40% to 60% when they retire, and our average monthly pension of 2,250 *yuan* is barely enough to get by, and too little to withstand even one single illness (...). Now, even for a small flu, one needs to spend almost 1,000 *yuan* for medicine: does the minister, who benefits from free medical care, even know that? (...) Let’s finish, as usual, with a small poem: “The Social Security fund is empty; retired employees are in difficulty; we have devoted our life to the country; we are old, we are old, and yet back in poverty.” (Video 1)

The normative repertoires mobilised here are particularly interesting as they reflect both the sense of (in)justice shared by young retirees socialised under Maoism, but also rhetorical strategies allowing them, despite the topic’s sensitivity, to render their grievances acceptable by the state – a form of “rightful resistance” (O’Brien and Li 2016). Most videos on pensions indeed start by praising the government’s effort and the progress made since *dama*’s childhood, or by thanking the Party for preventing China from ending up like Iraq (Video 11). When the government started to merge pensions funds’ administration between enterprise and public institution retirees, Ruan *dama* pointed out that “even though the idea [was] positive,” inequalities were still maintained, and that the reform should be pushed further: “It doesn’t mean that we should go back to the iron rice bowl (...). What we have to think about is how to implement real justice (*zhen gongping* 真公平)” (Video 10). Other countries’ pension schemes are also regularly explained and praised as examples allowing *dama* to implicitly put forward their equalitarian agenda without it sounding like a direct criticism of China’s unequal pension regime. “New Zealand’s elderly care system guarantees the equality of all (...), whatever the profession you had, whatever your contribution to the nation (...). They don’t have bureaus for retired cadres over there” explains Ruan Yaqing (Video 14).



Figure 3. Translation of the subtitles: “Forever for the elderly;” “Forever speaking out for the elderly’s interests.” Credit: screenshot from Beijing *Dama*’s video “中國第一家老年電商要開業啦!” (Zhongguo diyi jia laonian dianshang yao kaiye la!, China’s first e-commerce for the elderly is about to open!), 9 August 2016, <https://v.qq.com/x/page/p0319z4o2wy.html> (accessed on 9 February 2022).

Dama also condemn a wider variety of discrimination and symbolic prejudice negatively impacting older people. Elderly’s digital exclusion generated by the spread of mobile payments and applications, for example, is regularly criticised¹⁴: “We don’t have anything against technological progress (...) but could you think of us, who learn much more slowly, and let the 200 million elderly in this country live a normal life?” complains Ruan Yaqing (Video 28). In another video, she explains how the term “dependency rate” (*fuyang lv* 撫養率) embarrasses her – as it conveys the idea that people over 60 years old all represent a burden – and encourages demographers to adopt less stigmatising wording (Videos 21 and 29).

Finally, the platform also empowers retirees with tools to face an increasingly uncertain and changing society – as illustrated by the numerous videos dealing with the subjects of scams, rumours, corruption, or mutual trust. Ruan Yaqing’s video series “*Dama* debunking rumours” (*Dama piyao* 大媽闢謠) often focuses on helping older people avoid the proliferating online scams targeting them for their gullibility – an experience shared by 67.3% of middle-elderly Chinese according to a report quoted in a video (Video 33). Medical professionals are also regularly invited as guests to provide the audience with tips to improve their sleep, adopt healthy habits, or prevent heart attacks: widely viewed, these videos respond to shared anxieties regarding the cost and perceived unreliability of medical care, the growing prevalence of chronic diseases, and elderly’s fear of having no one to rely on if they were to lose their autonomy. Some videos explain to the elderly legal

11. While two other pension categories exist (urban resident pensions and rural pensions), they are largely ignored by show hosts (only one video addresses the fate of rural elderly).

12. “樓繼偉: 建立更加公平更可持續的社會保障制度” (Lou Jiwei: Jianli gengjia gongping geng kechixu de shehui baozhang zhidu, Lou Jiwei: Let’s build a fairer, more sustainable social security system,” *People’s Government Online* (中央政府門戶網站), 16 December 2015, http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/vom/2015-12/16/content_5024566.htm (accessed on 15 January 2021).

13. The video echoes a regularly censored text that intensively circulated among elderly WeChat groups, called “一個退休工人的吶喊” (*Yige tuixiu gongren de nahan*, The cry of despair of a retired worker). One of its versions: <https://weibo.com/p/1001603930826801830004> (accessed on 9 June 2021).

14. Neglected before, this topic was reinvested during Covid-19 as the use of digital health codes forced the government to reconsider its importance. Even if younger elderly have appropriated WeChat in the past years, their use of smartphone indeed remains largely limited to this application and to simple activities such as posting pictures and emojis, sharing articles or sending voice messages.

rights and benefits they are entitled to, while some online classes provide the audience with banking knowledge, or teach them to correctly use their smartphones (Video 30). Simple as they may seem, these initiatives reflect the emergence of collective ways to assert their rights and empower themselves as an age category in a fast-changing and uncertain environment.

Conclusion: What does the future hold for Beijing Dama?

This paper offered a comprehensive overview of the topics, identities, and repertoires mobilised by Beijing Dama in their videos. Indeed, each of these elements results from various social processes leading these Chinese retired women to speak out in their own name and defend their collective interests through an online platform. The group consciousness they express relies on multiple factors: (1) the social stigma imposed on Chinese ageing women in recent years; (2) their extremely distinct generational consciousness as urban only child parents born under Maoism and repeatedly targeted as cohorts by state policies during their life course; (3) the pressure they experience after retirement as ageing parents and grandparents in an era of Two-child policy, rising real estate prices and medical costs, and shrinking childcare options; (4) the progressive diffusion of a Chinese third age of life, promoting the right to enjoy one's retirement; (5) their unprecedented technological savviness and connectivity; (6) their delimitation as a public policy category, itself divided into different groups of beneficiaries.

While show hosts claim to address all Chinese elderly, the topics and types of “we” they mobilise actually give us a more precise image of their audience and of the lines along which their collective identity is defined: that of an urban “post-1950s and 1960s” generation of only child parents and mostly mothers, essentially retired from the enterprise and public institution sectors, and whose grievances are enlightened both by their equalitarian agenda inherited from their socialisation under Maoism and by the current unequal pension and healthcare regimes separating them from privileged retired cadres and deprived rural elderly. The show therefore reveals the formulation of new norms, expectations, and collective identities among specific and younger fringes of the elderly population – privileged in the sense that most benefit from pensions and have access to digital means of communication, but far less well-off when it comes to their life course, to the grandparental pressure put upon them, and to their feeling of insecurity towards the future as ageing parents of only children.

The platform's recent developments deserve to be mentioned to point out the need to continue observing such initiatives in the coming years. Since the summer of 2019, the show has indeed benefitted from greater recognition. Mr Bian managed to secure partnerships with some large companies, widening the show's audience and increasing its advertising revenues. WeChat's “rumour filter” team (*yaoyan guolüqi* 謠言過濾器) collaborated with Ruan dama on her “anti-rumour” videos, and in January 2020, Alipay sponsored Beijing Dama in organising their first “Dama spring festival gala” (*Dama chunwan* 大媽春晚), which featured dozens of elderly dance shows, singing and crosstalk performances, and elderly guest stars (Video 32). In the front row sat members of the

Beijing Committee on Ageing Affairs (*Beijing shi laoling gongzuo weiyuanhui* 北京市老齡工作委員會): a few months before, Beijing Dama had launched an offline project with the municipal government to create its own “propaganda team” (*Beijing Dama xuanchuan dui* 北京大媽宣傳隊). Composed of 1,200 WeChat account followers based in the capital and aged between 50 to 70 years old, the team aims to promote a discourse of “civility” (*wenming* 文明) and foster “positive energy” (*zhengnengliang* 正能量) in accordance with the official guidelines, making it yet another state-sponsored team of elderly volunteers mobilised to maintain social stability, like the Xicheng Dama created a few years before: “We don't cross on red light, we don't litter, we don't speak loudly, we don't destroy public facilities,” said the badges pinned onto dama's coats during the ceremony in a public park.¹⁵

What used to be a platform where dama could voice their viewpoints as retirees and members of a generation has quite obviously changed: since 2019, the most sensitive videos I viewed have been deleted; more young people appear as show hosts to assume a position whereby they *explain* things to the elderly, now seen as a “vulnerable group” rather than individuals capable of voicing their own points of view; videos tackling pension reforms have also become limited to very plain descriptions of the content of new laws, carefully leaving out any implications for the elderly's rights. What future then lies ahead for these spaces of expression in China's increasingly constrained political environment? These elements corroborate similar tendencies observed among environmental NGOs and labour organisations, whose political co-optation and supervision have allowed the state to “discourage civil society from participating in contention, in part by regulating and channelling organizations into social services delivery” (Fu 2016: 3). Further observation of the Beijing Dama will let us know if such statement remains true.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for Scholarly Exchange for its financial support. A first version of this paper was presented during the conference “Aspects of Politics in Contemporary Sinophone World” organised at Academia Sinica in 2020: I am grateful to the organisers, Chen I-chung and Alvin Chen, as well as to Chen Yin-fang and Hsiao A-chin for generously agreeing to discuss my paper. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their appreciation and constructive comments.

■ Justine Rochot is a Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation postdoctoral fellow based at the Research Center on Modern and Contemporary China (CECMC) in Paris and associated with the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC) in Hong Kong. CECMC, Campus Condorcet, Bâtiment EHES, 2 cours des Humanités, 93300 Aubervilliers, France (justine.rochot@ehess.fr).

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