

# WHEN RED TURNS TO MAROON: THE RESEMIOTISATION OF POLITICAL DISCRETION IN AUDIENCES' RE-CREATIONS OF CHINESE STATE-SPONSORED DANCE DRAMAS

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*This article examines online re-creations of Chinese dance dramas (CDDs), a state-sponsored artform that over the past two decades has diluted its distinctly “red” appearance. Arguably, this transformation reflects China’s “discreet” top-down political communication approach that seeks popular consent while minimising overt, Party-based, “red” messaging. I analysed audiences’ re-creations and interviewed creators of such derivative works to understand whether/how their works sustain that political discretion. I argue that while audiences’ re-creations shift away from the original political tones to focus on individualistic expression, they nonetheless constitute China’s dominant yet discreet political discourse in a resemiotised form. CDD re-creations afford popular and disembodying qualities, inviting audiences’ neoliberalised participatory and re-creative practices that align with the state’s popular and discreet political discourse. This article offers an instance of how the depoliticising logics of neoliberalism are given a distinct national articulation by catering to people’s political (dis) taste and individualistic purposes. In this process, explicit forms of state political indoctrination become diluted while at the same time the state’s official discourse gains bottom-up popularisation.*

**KEYWORDS** Resemiotisation; modal affordance; neoliberalism; political discretion; popular political communication

## Introduction

The contemporary People’s Republic of China (hereafter, China) has, by comparison with the earlier revolutionary age of the newborn republic, revised its political communication strategies. From blatant political indoctrination polished by a touch of dazzlingly “red”<sup>1</sup> revolutionary ideology, it has shifted to a noticeably more popular approach. Here, I use “maroon” as a colour metaphor to mean a moderated form of the “red” political messaging, one that restrains its dazzling glare while still retaining a vivid “red” undertone. In this sense, the transition from “red” to “maroon” signifies China’s contemporary political

communication that operates through subtlety, with political premises remaining firmly embedded under the surface.

This strategic revision has redefined China's current political model into a market friendly and "politics-lite" popular authoritarianism that gains ruling legitimacy less from continuous ideological indoctrination than relying on a political public relations approach to earn popular support (Brady 2009, 437; Lin 2024; Wang, 2024). Therefore, a major task of China's contemporary political communication is to cater to popular taste and manufacture popular consent while maintaining the public's perception of their low exposure to overtly political content, so as to indirectly legitimize the political status quo. In this article, I coin the term "political discretion" for China's upgraded political communication approach that retreats from formulaic, sloganized messaging and instead operates more carefully to cater to popular taste and gain popular support. Although it is difficult to discern a causal relationship between the politically discreet turn and popular taste, what we can observe is that Chinese people have increasingly expressed uninterest in art and cultural works with overt political messaging, one prominent example being the China Central Television (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala (Feng 2018; Wong 2016).

Several scholars have explored how the Chinese state implements this more subtle political communication technique by employing popular aesthetics across various genres, such as computer games (Chew & Wang 2021), state-sponsored art projects like the Festival Galas (Cai 2014; Feng 2016; Liu et al. 2015), musical entertainment (Gorfinkel 2013), and news outlets (Cao & Qiaoan 2023; Li et al. 2024; Repnikova & Fang 2018; Wang 2024). While China is not alone in utilizing seemingly "apolitical" approaches to manufacture popular consent, the current literature is not yet clear about the effectiveness of such politically discreet communication strategies. Therefore, it remains unknown how people receive, respond to, or engage with this political discretion, and whether China's more restrained political discourses dilute ideological impact or enable the blazingly "red" underpaintings to surface with greater traction through people's engagement with popular formats.

To help start to fill this gap, I analyse Chinese state-sponsored art and cultural projects to explore audience engagement with politically subtle content. Specifically, I conduct a case study of 21<sup>st</sup>-century state-sponsored Chinese dance dramas (CDDs); a unique, dance-based, theatrical artform that tells stories. These CDDs, plus their extended online spaces, are quintessential examples of China's upgraded political communication strategy in public culture domains. Firstly, these productions have departed from an earlier explicitly propagandistic form and are becoming increasingly focused on presenting Chinese traditional culture and audiovisual aesthetics to cultivate nationalist appeal, such as *Confucius* (孔子) presenting the scholarly pursuit of the Chinese ancient philosopher; and *Verdant Hue* (只此青绿) portraying the story of an ancient Chinese painter and his landscape creations. However, despite their prime focus on beauty, choreography, and history, these CDDs remain highly politically relevant in contemporary China (Jiang 2024; 2025). Secondly, these state-sponsored CDDs have started to become accessible online in various adapted forms, including official short film adaptations, digital remakes, livestreamed performances, and variety shows. Online networked fan spaces and downstream audience-generated content have started to emerge, such as reviews, mashups, reenactments, and other derivative works, which can provide an important microcosm for analysis of public engagement with the state's strategically muted political narratives in CDDs.

In this article, I examine these downstream audience-made CDD derivative works to understand whether and how they sustain political discretion in their relations

with the state's popular authoritarian discourse. Specifically, I explore the overarching question of how these politically discreet CDDs are "reused" by audiences in their fan videos to understand whether the seemingly apolitical façade is diluted or consolidated. Are political undertones increasingly prominent through audiences' remakes? And what modes and affordances are in play when political discretion is sustained or disrupted?

### Theorising the Study

In this article, resemiotisation and modal affordance are employed as practical analytical tools to examine how politically discreet discourse is transformed and normalized through audience-led CDD re-creations. I draw on scholarship about neoliberalism, particularly its individualism and depoliticization logics, to explain how the mode of CDD re-creations may facilitate the concealment of overt "redness" while enhancing the popular appeal of politically discreet CDDs. Post-Marxist discourse theory, especially the concept of sedimentation, is used to theorize the discursive concealment and normalization of such discourse; while the concepts of heterogeneity and rearticulation help situate neoliberalism within China's post-Socialist political context to illuminate how CDD audiences' neoliberalised re-creative engagement may become rearticulated with official political discourse.

### Resemiotisation and Modal Affordance in Popular and Discreet Political Communication

As discursive processes unfold, forms accommodating certain discourses morph through what Iedema (2003) calls resemiotisation: meaning-making that shifts across contexts, practices, or different stages of a communication practice. Across these processes, discourse evolves through shapes and forms that each involve distinct semiotic resources, modes, social actors, and practices, and their respective *affordances*. Modal affordance refers to the potential and limitations of specific modes used in meaning-making processes (Kress 2010; 2012). Affordance theory, as originally put forward by Gibson (1979), is inherently relational. This means that examining modal affordances not only includes looking at the properties of modes but also the possible *usage* these properties point to and the epistemological commitments they highlight when people encounter these modes (Kress 2005; Sánchez 2022).

As Iedema (2003) argued, as resemiotisations are achieved, constraints build up around the negotiability of outcomes. The establishment of such constraints is largely attributed to modal affordances because, once selected carefully based on their "aptness of fit", these affordances highlight preferred epistemological commitments while subduing others to normalize certain outcomes (Kress 1993; 2005). Therefore, applying modal affordances to resemiotisation allows us to examine discursive sedimentation, a concept originally put forward by Husserl and adopted by Laclau (1990) to describe the taken-for-granted dimensions of everyday life and the routinized practices that "forget" and "conceal" the conditions of their own emergence (Glynos & Howarth 2007, 34; Phelan 2014).

Modal affordance and resemiotisation are thus key components of political aesthetics as they allow us to examine how discreet political messaging, as it resemiotises into popular online domains, utilizes modal affordances and the epistemological commitments foregrounded in this process to help achieve the sedimentation of the state's popular yet discreet political discourse.

Neoliberalism in Post-Socialist China: A Heterogenous Political Discourse

China has a unique relationship with neoliberalism. On the one hand, neoliberalism’s strong inclinations towards utilitarianism, practicality, and individualism seem to be inconsistent with and even contradictory to China’s socialism and collectivism (Ren 2013; Zhai 2023; Lukes 1971; Soares 2018). This renders China’s neoliberalism a potentially heterogeneous element that escapes China’s official socialist identity (Laclau 2005; Phelan & Dahlberg 2011; Thomassen 2019). On the other hand, according to Weber (2018), China has embraced “the neoliberal critique of collectivism while simultaneously resisting a full turn towards neoliberalism” (p. 3), indicating that neoliberalism, when contextually articulated, can be conducive to China’s popular rule. For instance, China’s embrace of neoliberalised individualism can potentially be utilized as a stabilizing factor, in that neoliberalised individuals can be largely directed away from politically critical and anti-regime revolutionary consciousness to pursuit of their self-interest (Li 2015; Ren 2013; Xu 2011). China’s unique articulation of neoliberalism makes it more than an ideological anomaly, but instead tightly articulated with the state’s official discourse. Here I am following the definition of articulation offered by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (p. 105), and discourse as a structured totality resulting from such articulatory practices. Therefore, I interpret China’s neoliberalism as a heterogenous discursive element that is articulated with China’s official discourse.

By examining the cultural or communicative *modal affordances*<sup>2</sup> involved in the resemiotised spaces where state official discourse morphs and evolves through CDD recreations, we may be able to understand whether and how neoliberal logics, particularly individualizing and depoliticizing logics<sup>3</sup>, serve and sustain the popular yet discreet political discourse in CDDs. This may help further our understanding of how neoliberal logics are *rearticulated*<sup>4</sup> with socialist state discourse and shed light on how the “maroon” discourse and popularly supported authoritarian regime achieve a sedimented discursive stability (see Figure 1 below).

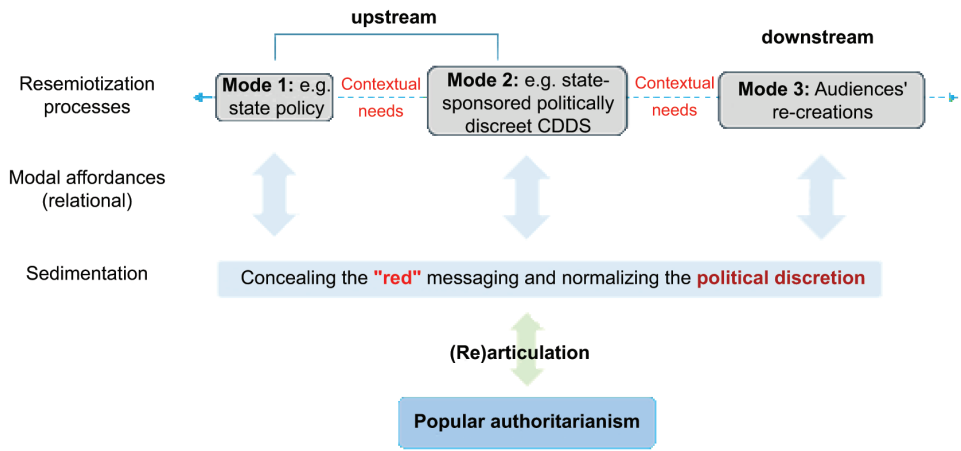


Figure 1. Resemiotization, Modal affordances, and Sedimentation.

## Research Design and Methods

As an interpretive study, the analyses in this article largely draw on my own positionality as someone who grew up in China, lived in China, and was educated in the public system but is in many ways marginalized. For interpretive studies, such self-positioning is crucial, as it enables reflexive consideration of how subjectivity influences the interpretive processes, while acknowledging the complex, multiplied, and nonlinear nature of social reality (Berger 2013). Therefore, this article does not seek to establish a singular or exhaustive reading, but offers a situated analysis of CDD re-creations, their meaning shifts, and audience engagement, through my particular insider/outsider cultural lens.

### *CDD Mashups Collection and Operation*

My data collection and operation followed a netnographic approach which extracts data from “online traces, interactions, and socialities” (Kozinets 2020, 19). I collected audience-made CDD mashup videos from Chinese popular video-sharing platform Bilibili using the key search word “舞剧混剪” (dance drama mashups). Approximately 1000 results (with repetition) were displayed and ordered by Bilibili’s composite popularity metrics (e.g. view count, number of bookmarks, posting date, and bullet comment<sup>5</sup> count). Such ranking mechanisms privilege highly engaged content, allowing me to examine the most popular audience CDD re-creations. Following a purposive sampling method, I excluded irrelevant videos such as mashups of non-Chinese dance, or CDDs produced before the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or by privately-owned theatre companies, as well as videos not created or uploaded by audience members, e.g., the official videos from theatre or news outlet accounts. I then further excluded videos derived from single CDDs and collected only those combining multiple different CDD excerpts, which I call multi-CDD mashups. I stopped collecting when the results started to show a high level of repetitiveness and low relevancy, i.e., saturation. Following such criteria, nineteen videos were ultimately analysed as illustrative (rather than representative) of the most popular audience-created multi-CDD mashup work. I then mapped out the individual CDDs used in these multi-CDD mashups, highlighted the excerpted politically themed CDDs, grouped the mashups by key meanings, noted any focal shifts in relation to the originals, and interpreted the modes and affordances that contributed to these meanings. In particular, I paid close attention to how overtly political or “red” CDDs were reused and how the original overtly political meanings travelled in mashup videos.

The analysis of these 19 videos then served as a basis for further snowball sampling. Following the traces of the multi-CDD mashups, I observed that four overtly politically themed CDDs were more frequently excerpted and featured: *The Eternal Radio Waves* (永不消逝的电波, hereafter, *Radio Waves*), *Sing a Folk Song for the Party* (唱支山歌给党听), *Graceful Waters* (秀水泱泱), and *In the Prime of Youth* (恰同学少年). Therefore, I moved to a second round of data collection where I searched for audience-generated videos relating solely to these four CDDs. However, a broad landscape mapping from Bilibili showed that such videos were almost entirely absent, with the exception of *Radio Waves*. Therefore, I collected 164 videos on *Radio Waves* posted by audience-creators to Bilibili. These ranged from highlight compilations of the stage performance and audience-filmed curtain calls to amateur dance reenactments. These videos were then interpretively coded according to their thematic foci. Again, I paid close attention to meaning shifts and how these shifts were afforded by the particular modes of CDD fan video production.

In examining these collected multi-CDD mashups and audiences' *Radio Waves* derivative works, I found that no overt politically heavy meanings were carried into audience re-creations even though they frequently used clips from "red" CDDs. Instead, audience members re-created these highly political CDDs primarily into four types of "non-red" theme: a) showcasing China's cultural aesthetics; b) fandom tributes to dancers; c) audio-visually stimulating pieces that evoke sensory pleasure; and d) videos that celebrate normalized (female) gendered aesthetics. Additionally, I found that personal showcasing and commercial promotional videos make up most of the secondary works of *Radio Waves*. However, as will be discussed below, these surface thematic shifts do not necessarily mean that the audience-generated works are apolitical.

### *Interview and Data Integration*

Using the direct messaging function embedded in Bilibili, I then randomly approached fifteen CDD enthusiasts who had experience creating and posting mashups and five of them agreed to participate in online one-on-one semi-structured interviews.<sup>6</sup> I coded the interview transcripts emically to find what was there, but for the purposes of this article I am reporting relevant themes in a more etic way, highlighting instances where the interviewees provided perspectives on ideas already signalled in my analysis of the mashup video data. That is, I focus specifically in this article on understanding the motivations and intentions behind CDD audiences' shifts away from the original "red" storytelling or their continued re-creation of political discretion. Four prominent themes emerged: a) individual agency; b) willingness to participate in popularization; c) fandom; and d) pursuit of beauty and non-utilitarian pleasure.

Having obtained two sets of analytical perspectives, I carried out what Kozinets (2020) called "integration" in netnography; a collision of analytical and interpretative perspectives that produces something new, and an ongoing process of cross-translating and code-switching between parts and data fragments. I integrated what I noticed in the analysis of audience-created works with what fan video makers said about their intentions, content, and meaning (re)making in our interviews (see Figure 2 below). What stood out most was that these re-creators have largely moved away from the original "redness" to serve their various, often neoliberalised, individual purposes and political tastes or, more commonly, distastes. They particularly created this shift through strategic and creative uses of disembodiment—an important affordance of CDD mashups that allows audience-creators to detach the characters' political identities from the dancers who play them and decontextualize the original political storytelling.

Although my close examination of fandom and beauty revealed distinct qualities and interpretations in terms of how they potentially contribute to the sustaining of political discretion, there is not enough space in a single article to explore them in depth. So, I focus here closely on individualism—a prime epistemological commitment afforded by CDD re-creations and the major motivation underpinning these CDD re-creators as demonstrated in my data integration—to unpack how political discretion is re-created and further sustained and how the state's discreet political messaging gets popularized in CDDs' downstream resemitisations.

### **The Affordances of CDD Re-creations**

As CDDs and their underlying state official discourse become resemitised to fan-made secondary works, their changing materiality generates distinct affordances:

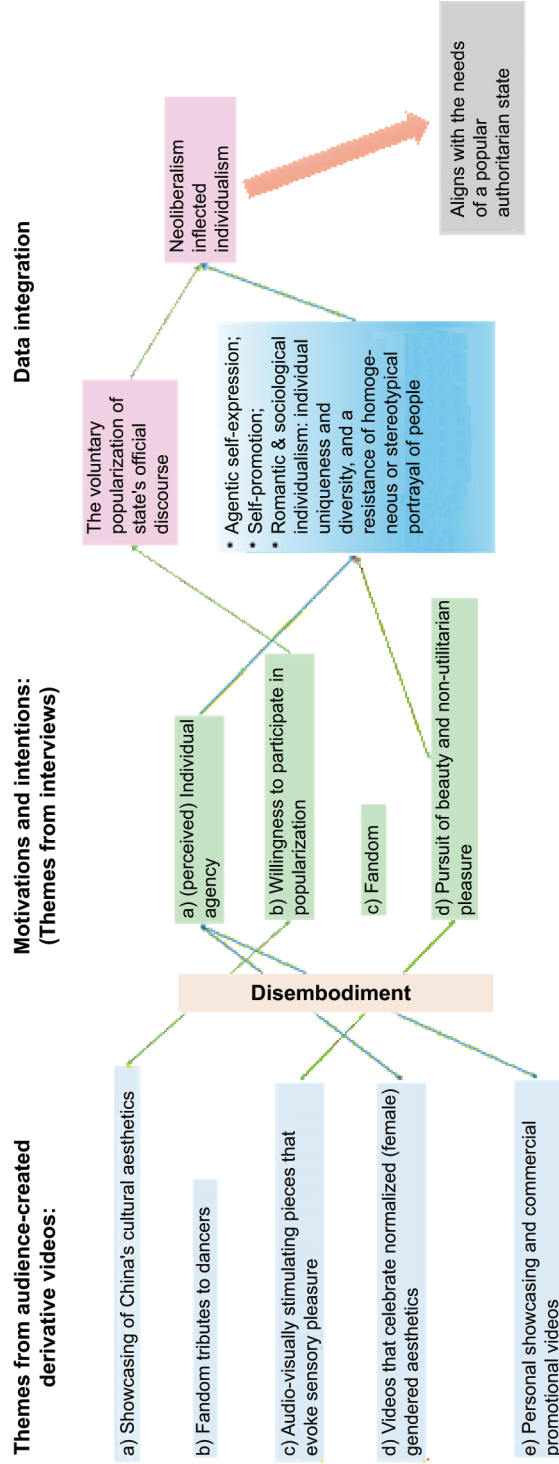


Figure 2. Data Integration.



popular potential and disembodiment. These affordances invite audiences' neoliberalised epistemological commitment such as a strong will for self-promotion and a perceived individualist agency which may reproduce political discretion and contribute to the popularization of the state's official discourse.

### Afforded Popularity and Self-promotion

CDD re-creations afford popular potential due to their compact and concentrated qualities, as well as the nature of the accommodating online networked space. CDD stage performances usually last for approximately ninety minutes, whereas the re-creation videos collected for this study had an average duration of only three minutes. Such compact shape offers more agility in online circulation and more condensed thematic foci, potentially generating more intensive affective resonance, heightened dramatic focus and, therefore, a sense of community and popular engagement (Dutton 2005). Additionally, the creation of these works relies heavily on online sampling and sourcing, and the videos' dissemination requires an active online networked space. Boyd (2011) summarized digital and networked affordances as persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. CDD re-creations, cradled in online networked spaces, link the traditional dance/theatre stage with the "audience-led" popular online domain, offering a pathway for state-sponsored cultural productions to be more visible, accessible, and linked into popular culture. For example, the fan-made video "*A Journey into Aesthetic Splendor*" that mashed up fifteen CDDs including ones with overt "red" themes has gained 25,000 views over the three years following its initial posting. The chosen soundtrack, *Bi Shang Guan* (壁上观), after being used as the background music in fan-made videos of a Chinese computer game and then performed by Chinese popular celebrities, has attracted millions of plays. This mashup video was tagged with this song upon posting and, therefore, was recommended by platform algorithm to users whose viewing interests lie beyond the dance category.

The popular potential afforded by CDD re-creations also invites audiences' neoliberalised engagement that treats selves as brands and pursues private (commercial) interests. This is particularly evident in the derivative videos related to *Radio Waves*, which in the original has a patriotic storyline of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) victory over the opposing party in the 1940s Chinese Civil War. In the collected audience-made *Radio Waves* re-creations, amateur reenactment videos make up the majority, and they largely shift from the original antagonistic storyline to serving personal purposes such as showcasing dance skills or promoting private dance studios. For the realisation and justification of these purposes, these reenactment creators seem to have cognitively renounced the original "redness" they built on by choosing to reenact the least "red" segment, *Song of the Fishermen* (渔光曲), so as not to conceivably suffer from the guilt or criticism of taking advantage of patriotism and nationalism or disrespecting the martyrs the show originally depicts or provoking sensitive debates around party leadership. The obviousness of the original political messaging becomes sidelined in these re-creations and, therefore, the political discretion sustains. Yet at the same time, they raise the profile of *Radio Waves* and implicitly endorse (by not contradicting) its original content.

This above instance shows one of the ways in which CDD resemiotisation and the resemiotised modal affordances may contribute to the discursive sedimentation of political discretion. Some CDD re-creators overlooked the antagonistic political messaging and used the popular affordances of re-creation formats for self-promotion, an exemplary neoliberalised mode of engagement. In this resemiotisation process, these reenactment



creators have not invoked any noticeable “red” component and, therefore, they have largely sustained the performance’s politically discreet appearance. But due to China’s distinct contextual articulation of neoliberalism, as captured in the normalisation of an entrepreneurial way of life (Ren 2013), these audiences’ self-promoting engagement with CDDs may still cohere with the state’s official discourse.

### CDD Mashups Afford Justified Disembodiment

The recombinant nature of CDD mashups affords separation of characters from dancers, i.e. disembodiment, and, therefore, the resultant decontextualised reconstruction of mashup works. In the collected mashup videos, all the original obvious political symbols and storytelling were, on the surface at least, silenced through disembodiment. For instance, in the mashup videos of the highly “red” *Radio Waves*, the original “red” content is often silenced by audience-creators’ reimagined romanticism that features extensive mashups of duet dance scenes, romantic soundtracks, romantic captions, and sentimental slow-motion editing. In some cases, the two leading characters’ duet dance was mashed up with their other stage or screen collaborations. These creators stripped the characters’ original political identities from the dancers to express a sense of personal fandom and fantasising about the dancers having a (fictional) real-life romance. Similarly disembodied re-creations based on other “red” CDDs, such as *The Prime of Youth* which tells the story of China’s political leader Mao Zedong, can also be observed, and the interviewed re-creators explicitly acknowledged such disembodiment as an important mashing up technique in enabling the seamless reconstruction of alternative themes. Additionally, in many mashups that curate compilations of dancers’ virtuosic dance movements or dramatic acting, the original characters become more thoroughly disembodied. In these collage-like reconstructions, the original characters’ identities are naturally stripped away, rendering dancers semiotically void—free to be redeployed across different thematic, aesthetic, or affective contexts according to the creators’ intentions.

The disembodiment and de/reconstructive qualities of mashups offer grassroots creators some degrees of agency for their alternative expressions and “freer” imaginations which, interestingly, rarely reinstated the original politically heavy tones. Instead, they are primarily redirected towards what Soares (2018) termed romantic and sociological individualism, emphasising the incommensurable value of individuals and their emancipation from prescribed or normalised social roles. This can, firstly, be seen in these creators’ discontent with the loss of individuality in the nationalistic grand narratives of the original CDDs. For example, in a two-out-of-five-stars online review of the CDD *Sing a Folk Song to the Party* a viewer stated: “This performance is filled with formulas typical of propaganda art. The story is simplistic and clichéd, and the characters are reduced to mere symbols...it erases individuality and leaves behind nothing but tasteless political correctness and didactic messaging”. This chimed with the views of interviewed mashup creators, for example, one said “we do need more different voices—those hidden voices ignored in this age of homogeneity... I wanted to make a mashup because I felt in this CDD with so many characters, there were relationships that people paid less attention to”. The interviewee further noted that a unified mindset is unlikely and unrealistic:

The world would be a boring place with only one voice. And it is not real either. Under the grand narratives, everyone seems to be taking on a positive energy and unified mindset and actions, but I think this is doubtful...I think different voices make the world more realistic.

This sense of romantic individualism has in turn prompted CDD audiences' constructions of alternative discourses that amplify individual uniqueness and diversity. This can be observed from the mashups that show a turn towards individual feelings. For example, in a top-ranked video, closeup shots of dancers' emotive acting were mashed up, highlighting the complex emotions of human beings. Also, romantic love stories are often excerpted from "red" CDDs and given a prime re-creative focus (see Figure 3 below). This can be interpreted as these CDD re-creators' attempts to free politically symbolised characters from the didactic political narratives and acknowledge their identities as human beings with real emotions rather than political tools. One interviewee mentioned that if they were to create a CDD, they would portray the "other" side of a person: "more three-dimensional, and more like a real person...richer and more diverse". They cannot control the original CDDs, but they do use the online space as an opportunity to exercise these different emphases in resemiotised storytelling. This sense of agency has led to some grassroots creators developing high levels of commitment or devotion to their re-creation practices. For example, one interview participant mentioned that it normally takes them a half or full day to make a CDD mashup video from scratch and sometimes can take up to three months due to lack of inspiration or pursuit of high-quality creations.

These creators have picked up a strong sense of agency afforded by the disembodied quality of mashups, but in the process have largely normalised an individualist discourse, which can be understood as their attempt at constructing a seemingly dissonant discourse in relation to, and in circumscribed resistance to, the state's official grandiose narratives. These creators see their mashups as transcending the frontier of the state's mainstream narratives and hegemonic identity as originally presented in CDDs. The idea that audience-generated re-creations are partially resistant to structural orders has been endorsed by many scholars (Bruns 2010; Jenkins 2010; Häkkinen & Leppänen 2013). However, I would argue that CDD audiences' neoliberalised individualism embodies a circumscribed form of individualist agency that may simultaneously further the state's politically discreet messaging.

### **An Individualised and Aestheticised Turn**

The neoliberalised individualism upheld by CDD audience-creators remains individualised and aestheticised rather than politically transformative. Their sense of individualist agency is largely redirected to re-creations centered on gendered, cultural, and sensory aesthetic expressions. These audience members' articulation of individualism with broader national missions points to a more circumscribed individualism that in turn becomes its own form of political stability.

For instance, re-creators' agentic attempt to divest from treating individuals as mere tools that serve homogenous state narratives can be observed in their mashups that shifted to a feminist focus (see Figure 4 below). These videos often select clips of dance performances featuring female dancers and disembody them from the original characters and context, aiming to foreground the power of women and reclaim their visibility from depiction as self-effacing helpers of the grand narratives in "red" CDDs. These mashups have seemingly departed from any "red" messaging originally associated with these female characters, and given them a sense of identity outside their role of state service, but at the same time have largely reproduced narrow and conventional feminine aesthetics. For example, these videos tend to use "beauty" in the titles and captions, but all the included female dancers are tall, slender, pale-skinned, and move in a particularly gentle



Note: This screenshot is retrieved from video "16部舞剧混剪 | 用什么留住这苦涩而璀璨的每一刻" on Bilibili. Title translates to "Mashup of 16 Dance Dramas: Preserving every bittersweet moment". [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV19FrDYgExr/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd\\_source=6338e95b65fbb-031502c866dcf064e28](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV19FrDYgExr/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=6338e95b65fbb-031502c866dcf064e28). In public domain.

**Figure 3.** Mashup video shifting to a focus on romantic love.

【女生群舞】“这就是女性编导笔下，中国女性的千万种美。”

5.6万 27 2023-01-02 21:01:01 未经授权转载，禁止转载



Note: Screenshot retrieved from video “【女生群舞】这就是女性编导笔下，中国女性的千万种美。” on Bilibili. The title translates to “Female Group Dance: The diversified beauty of Chinese women presented by female choreographers”. [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1v3411U7Xq/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd\\_source=6338e95b65fbb031502c866dcf064e28](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1v3411U7Xq/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=6338e95b65fbb031502c866dcf064e28). In public domain.

**Figure 4.** Mashup video showcasing feminine aesthetics.

artistic style, largely conforming to a traditionally held, unified, gendered beauty standard. As a user critiqued in the comment section of one of such videos, “better replace ‘beauty’ with ‘Feng Gu’ (风骨, which roughly translates to vigour and moral integrity), because however extensive the definition of beauty is, the word only limitedly and stereotypically denotes a beautiful appearance when applied to a human”. One could argue that these mashup creators are limited by the visual materials available in CDDs, and this limitation is itself revealing of the circumscribed nature of CDD mashup creators’ individualism-driven agency. These re-creators rarely transcend dominant gendered aesthetic norms, let alone challenge the broader sociopolitical structures where these norms are embedded.

Similarly, CDD re-creators’ circumscribed individualist agency can be observed in their mashup videos that primarily showcase China’s unique cultural aesthetics. For example, in a top-ranked mashup video, the mashup creator explicitly used the term “cultural confidence” (文化自信) in the video title, a concept drawn directly from the state’s contemporary cultural policy discourse such as the cultural Five-year Plans (Jiang, 2024). The mashup creator silenced the “red” political narratives in service of an aesthetic presentation which is, in turn, largely articulated with a nationalist discourse. This further indicates the alignment between CDD re-creators’ individualised aesthetic production and dominant political discourse. This circumscribed individualistic agency comes through in the inherent conflict at the heart of their mashup work, which takes works of deeply “red” collectivism, fractures them into segments, then recombines those segments into aestheticised themes that emphasise their agentic and seemingly incongruous individualistic discourse yet still yokes those fragments under the name and ethos of the original “red” works.

These instances indicate a circumscribed individualism that might be more discursively stabilising than politically incoherent. Individualism in the Chinese context is historically intertwined with a shared consciousness of social and domestic relations (Xiang 2019). This relational nature of individualism is more prominently utilised in the framing of the “Chinese Dream”, the achievement of which is dependent on the collective realisation of individual dreams (Wang 2014). In neoliberal-influenced China, CDD audiences’ senses of individuality are still largely related to and aligned with the broader nationalistic mission. As mentioned by an interviewee, “The rise and fall of the nation are intertwined with the fate of individuals...an individual’s fate is inseparable from that of the nation. Everyone’s choices are bound up with their nationality and beliefs”.

By making limited concessions to individualist values and taste in the cultural policy guidelines issued to the creators of the original state-sanctioned CDDs (for example, encouraging the portrayal of people as emotionally complex and realistic individuals), the state is able to frame its political agendas in ways that appear more discreet and compatible with people’s desires for personal agency and self-expression. When CDD audiences’ longings for individual agency obtain official acknowledgement and justification, some “red” content can become more palatable than it might be otherwise. It can be observed that people tend to speak highly of those CDDs whose storytelling reflects, even slightly, modernised, humanistic, and individualistic spirits—often to the point of overlooking a production’s overt political messaging. As one interviewee noted of *Radio Waves*, “I think it’s fine to use new forms to convey genuine humanistic spirits, but it would be boring if it’s just pure propaganda”. CDDs like *Radio Waves* that nod to a more individualised representation may loosen up the performances’ underpinning political didacticism and highlight the epistemological commitment to discursive de/reconstruction rather than to the



subjection of the “redness”. Hence my titular suggestion that these works are not “red” but “maroon”: still a strong shade of red, but with the appearance of deniability as to being *precisely* red.

Some studies have framed Chinese people’s expressions of individualist creative or critical agency as forms of implicit, passive, or carnivalesque sociopolitical resistance (Cui 2024; Zeng 2024). Such interpretations are helpful in understanding the complex and negotiated nature of popular participation under state censorship. However, other scholars argue that such forms of resistance may function less as substantive political intervention than as forms of emotional catharsis (Ding 2022) or re-signified modes of mass persuasion compatible with state propaganda (Zhang & Kang 2021). From this perspective, CDD re-creators’ shifts away from the original “red” content to individualised expressions, fandom tribute, or aesthetic expressions should not necessarily be understood as politically oppositional. Rather, the depoliticised and individualised modes of participation observed in these secondary videos may coexist with, or indirectly reinforce, the state’s official discourse. As Goehr (2005) argued, aesthetic practices can become “disenfranchised” from politics when detached from the “order of effectiveness” associated with political intervention (pp.1-2). In this sense, even while the aesthetic shift might be seen as a passive form of sociopolitical activism by these CDD re-creators, their mashup-afforded agency may remain largely circumscribed, functioning less as a direct challenge to the state’s official discourse than as a mechanism that softens the didacticism of CDD political communication, sustains its political discretion, and adds to its popularisation.

### Neoliberalised Popularisation of Politically Discreet Communication

The entrepreneurial self-promotion and celebrations of individuality afforded by the distinct qualities of CDD re-creations suggest that these audience-creators’ interactions with CDDs reflect neoliberalism’s exemplary qualities, particularly the privileging of economic logics over political ones, which Davies (2016) described as the “pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics” (p. 6). As this final section shows, audiences’ neoliberalised forms of participation can facilitate the popular circulation of state-sponsored CDDs and their associated official narratives while simultaneously masking their propagandistic dimensions.

Neoliberalism, by virtue of its economic logic, affords the qualities that the state needs to sediment its political purposes while discreetly popularising official discourses. An interview participant attributed the original CDD artists’ lack of creative freedom to market preferences, saying that “it is hard for CDD playwrights to create at their own will on the market because ‘creating for whom and what themes to create’ are all very practical issues to consider”. By highlighting the practical constraints brought about by neoliberalism, the economic logics attract criticism for stifling individual agency and freedom, overshadowing the role of political constraints, when in fact these CDDs are state-funded, subject to official cultural policies (the Five-Year Plans), and closely monitored for their adherence to those plans. Yet, by not voicing these political constraints, these audiences are actually endorsing the political discretion under which contemporary CDDs operate.

Neoliberalism’s depoliticising logics become capable of providing the structures of collective experience and action that resonate with people (Davies 2016), co-opting the public into participating in the popularisation of the state-sponsored CDDs (and their discreet political messaging). As mentioned above, aesthetics becomes a zone

where CDD re-creators tend to retreat in face of heavy political messaging. Despite the inherently politicised nature of their aesthetic expressions, the seemingly neutral look has invited these re-creators' active participation in popularisation. For example, multiple interview participants expressed the intentions behind their mashup practices as efforts to promote and showcase the beauty of Chinese culture. This active participation in CDD popularisation can also be seen in audiences' willingness to participate in physical and financial promotion: more than one interview participant noted that some CDD fans pay for advertising slots and play promotional videos or put up posters at transportation hubs or city advertising screens and even make CDD introductory flyers for distribution in theatres before the shows start. These bottom-up promotional practices, grounded by neoliberalism's generalised antipolitics, are perceived by audiences as a form of "free" market-driven, cultural, and aesthetic consumption instead of recognised as a form of participation in political propaganda, leading the public to self-identify as patrons or CDD "sales representatives" rather than complicit state propagandists.

Overall, neoliberalism's economic and depoliticising logics have been quite successfully rearticulated in CDDs' downstream resemiotisation, repressing criticisms against overt political agendas, helping mitigate resistance to overt "red" political indoctrination, and facilitating the sedimentation of political discretion and bottom-up popularisation. Therefore, I argue here that audiences' neoliberalised engagement with CDDs constitutes a dual paradox of being simultaneously both inside and outside the state's dominant political discourse.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have used terms such as "red" and "maroon", neoliberalism, and resemiotisation to illuminate a key concept—political discretion—that points to China's nuanced, covert political communication style as exemplified by CDDs. My use of this term not only references a subtler form of state political messaging but also suggests that the state is cautious when communicating with the public so as not to further trigger their "red" aversion. Political discretion does not signify an absence of "politics" but is instead a tactic in the state's ongoing endeavours to render itself popularly accepted.

A major aim of this article has been to examine how the politically discreet status of the state's messaging in CDDs interacts with people and becomes further sustained by audience behaviours. My study shows the ways in which political messaging can be contested and conflictual, power multidirectional, and audience involvement multilayered. It contributes to an understanding of CDD re-creators' intentional and unintentional involvements with the state's political messaging as illustrative of the challenges for Chinese netizens in engaging with state-sponsored content in their own creative endeavours. The analysis suggests that, in the case examined here, state-sponsored cultural circulation in China may increasingly rely on audiences' participatory engagement in shaping the popular articulation of official agendas, rendering them not merely complicit propagandists but, at times, active contributors to and joint designers of the cultural mediation of state discourse. Furthermore, I argued that neoliberal logics can help amplify the politically discreet efficacy and may become rearticulated with post-Socialist China's official discourse in ways that function as a popularising rather than politically incoherent factor.

Using the example of CDDs, I have shown that the official discourse is resemiotised to incorporate downstream popular domains and audience-generated formats.



This resemiotisation provides the apt modal affordances that engage CDD audiences' re-creation behaviours that are themselves neoliberalised. These re-creations, due to their afforded popular potential and disembodied qualities, invite audiences to respond in a more individualised and neoliberalised way. However, this individualised agency is largely circumscribed and easily incorporated into the state's mainstream discourse. Due to the economic and antipolitical logics of neoliberalism, it potentially contributes to the sedimentation of the state's politically discreet discourse and turns the public into co-popularisers—a mechanism that largely aligns with the state's need to gain popular consent under its popular political communication model.

My study scrutinises China's unique position with respect to neoliberalism, and contributes to current literature on authoritarian neoliberalism (Yesil 2016) by showing one instance of "how the state remains authoritative [once] heavily disenchanted by economic rationality" (Davies 2016, 12). Specifically, I show how a culture of popular authoritarianism is achieved through catering to popular and often neoliberalised tastes and how the public is co-opted into spreading and endorsing the state's official discourse in a more politically indirect and disenchanted form.

As the degree of popularisation deepens and the medium of the state's political communication is constantly resemiotised, the politically discreet status may require further consolidation, prompting the next stage of popularisation in an even more normalised "apolitical" appearance. This indicates that discursive sedimentation is far from static: the sedimentation of the politically discreet status is never finalised as any contextual shifts might potentially stir up and make visible the "red" glitters and in turn compromise the apolitical appearance. Although China's political communication approach is undergoing a discreet and popular turn, it is worth noting that sloganised and doctrinaire messaging is still dominantly prevalent in China. So, there is a perpetual need for the state to sediment political discretion under its popular authoritarianism model. Therefore, it is important for future research to keep tracking the potential directions of resemiotisation to better understand where and how the state official discourses travel. Additionally, my future work will seek to unravel certain degrees of causality of the Chinese people's aversion to overt "red" content in art and cultural artefacts, which forms an important precondition of my analysis. I will also investigate in detail the remaining themes emerging from this study that cannot be fully addressed in this article, to examine the different ways in which CDD audiences' engagement may contribute to the discursive sedimentation of political discretion.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has obtained research ethics approval from Massey University Human Ethics Committee on 02/02/2024. Approval No. OM2 23/47.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available (excluding interview transcripts) following the anonymous OSF link: [https://osf.io/86g2k/overview?view\\_only=7544c0325c39408c81ceed86ac656d35](https://osf.io/86g2k/overview?view_only=7544c0325c39408c81ceed86ac656d35).

## NOTES

1. Since revolutionary China, “red” has carried connotations of Communism (Tomaselli 2016). However, negative connotations have emerged especially in people’s responses to popular art and cultural artefacts in contemporary China. In such instances, the connotations of “red” have been semantically reclaimed by Chinese people to refer to the types of works that wholeheartedly embody and sing the praises of China’s mainstream political ideology in a purposeful, yet clumsy and unpolished, way.
2. It is not possible to map out an exhaustive list of all the affordances of the re-creation formats. Instead, my study adopts a situated approach (Bezemer 2024) that examines modal affordances in the specific context of CDD resemitizations where the overt “red” messaging is silenced and popularized.
3. Laclau (1990) conceptualized “the political” as signifying the contestable and dislocatable nature of all social practice. My use of ‘political logics’ in this article departs from this macro conceptualization and instead considers “political logics” as being constituted by and primarily manifested as a variety of overt Party ideology-based and “red” messaging that serves the state’s political agendas yet does not immediately articulate with the economic logics of neoliberalism.
4. In this article, I use *rearticulation* to differentiate between the articulatory practices directly carried out by the state, such as in state policies, and the ones occurring in the downstream, resemitized domain where the official discourse is articulated *again* in the hands of CDD audiences.
5. A real-time commenting function that enables comments to appear on top of videos.
6. All the interview quotes and online comments were translated by me. All the data collected are publicly available except for the interview transcripts for the protection of anonymity. Informed consent was given by all interview participants, and this study has obtained ethics approval.

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