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Title:
Looking after the elderly, looking after the nation: Red (Xiao Hongshu) and China's biopolitical governance of ageing

Date:
2021-09-03

Citation:
Wang, W. Y. (2021). Looking after the elderly, looking after the nation: Red (Xiao Hongshu) and China's biopolitical governance of ageing. Asian Journal of Communication, 31 (5), pp.404-420. https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2021.1923766.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/284688

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Title: Looking after the elderly, looking after the nation: Red (*Xiao Hongshu*) and China's biopolitical governance of ageing

Abstract

This article examines the cultural production of ageing in China. Specifically, it studies the representation and cultural construction of ageing on Red (*xiao hongshu*), a popular e-commerce orientated social media application (app). By noting the local in-app and techno-political dynamics the ageing discourse operates in, this article argues that the representation of ageing on Red reflects Chinese platform's dual ambitions of pursuing market success and securing political support from the party-state. Drawing on data collected from a mixed-method approach of platform and document analysis, it finds that Red's representation of ageing is located within the state's official discourse that shifts the caring responsibility and duty to younger family members. By governing the ageing body, the Chinese government is also governing the general population. This article advances knowledge of digital media use in producing cultural discourses around their role in shaping biopolitical governance in China.

Keywords: Aging, biopolitics, Mainland China, mobile media application, platform governance

Introduction

By the end of 2019, more than 253 million people living in the People's Republic of China, equivalent to 18.1% of the population, were aged 60 years and above. China has become the world's largest ageing society. Compounding this trend, the birth-rate declined by about 15% in 2020 (Davison and Ferror, 2021). The demographic shift coincides with the marketization of aged and health care services and the rise of the platform economy in China (Yu and Cui, 2019). Responding to these changes, many older Chinese have taken personal health and wellbeing into their own hands by embracing the notion of *yangsheng*, a traditional Chinese approach to self-care (Sun, 2015). With the popularity of care for the self, *yangsheng* has become a vibrant industry that is estimated to be worth more than ￥RMB330 billion ($USD 48billion) (iiMedia Research,[1] 2020).

This article examines the cultural production of ageing in China. Specifically, it studies the cultural construction of ageing on Red (*xiao hongshu*), a popular social media application (app). With more than 300 million registered users by July 2019 (Xiao Hongshu, n.d.), Red mirrors the broader digital economy in China. The Alibaba Group and Tencent Holdings, two of China's largest media technology conglomerates, are big investors (Li, 2018). Red's operational system is structurally similar to that of Alibaba.com (e-commerce) and Tencent (user-generated-content, UGC). Red encourages users to produce and share content in audio-visual formats which facilitate the processes of socialization and online community building. It is also an ever-expanding online marketplace.

Red's dual platform structure offers its users the affordances of UGC and e-commerce. Its core user base (under 40 -years-old) (Liu, 2020) points to a changing social narrative of ageing in China. Instead of addressing older Chinese directly, Red's content focuses on addressing younger family members, appealing to them to take on the responsibility of looking after the elderly (normally the parents). The cultural production of ageing is therefore contingent on the younger generation's perception, practice and response to an ageing China. Interestingly and importantly, the same mode of address is also observed in official materials published by the government. The current regime places a strong emphasis on traditional family values as a way to manage society. The cultural construction of ageing identifies filial piety, a key cultural value promoted by President Xi Jinping and officially celebrated by state media (China Plus, 2019; Lin, 2010).

In 2020 China was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, the design of this study was affected. Physical fieldwork could not be conducted due to travel restrictions (the researcher lives in Australia). In light of these restrictions, I chose to adopt a smartphone centric approach (Maalsen, 2019) by combining what is known as the 'platform walkthrough method' (Light, Burgess, and Duguay, 2018) with the 'algorithm enabling method' (Seaver, 2017). The former maps the interface layout, arrangement and structure while the latter provides insights into how algorithms are located within cultural contexts: in this case the relationship with the ageing society and state governance of health. In addition, data collected from Red were compared with the official propaganda on ageing. The study examined official public service advertisings launched by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA).[2] The study also drew on relevant policy and industry documents about ageing and healthcare in China.

Drawing on recent scholarly conversations about how platform governance in China has activated the (re)imagination of values and behaviour of Chinese people (Lin, 2017; Keane and Su, 2019), this article presents two key arguments. First, the cultural construction of ageing on Red reflects the platform's dual aims of pursuing market success and securing political support (Hong, 2017a, b; Wang and Lobato, 2019). Second, the construction of ageing reminds younger Chinese of their traditional social role of caring—for parents and elderly people in general. In short, the commodification of health and wellbeing on Red operates within the state's ideological framework and market reform agenda. Looking after the elderly has entered mainstream public discourse; the elderly are reimagined; their frailty is manageable with the help of digital affordances. The support of the younger generation is crucial; this constructs the elderly as a market segment, as digital consumers. This development plays into a new narrative of concern for 'the people's health and welfare'. By governing the ageing body, the Chinese government is governing the general population through delineating the social and financial responsibilities of aged care and health to individuals (Sun, 2015).

Governing with platforms

Early understandings of platforms within the fields of media and communication studies draw on business research and computational studies. Platform media is usually perceived as a (free, neo-liberal) marketplace (Evan, 2011), an 'operating system' (Bogost and Montfort, 2007) that facilitates the formation of 'platform-mediated networks' (McIntyre and Srinivasan, 2017). Platform capitalism is thus constructed on the asymmetric power relations

between developers, operators and users; technological functionality and design are programmed with instructions to guide the users' mode of engagement and experience (Galloway, 2004; Bucher, 2013). The issue of 'power' is hence central to critical inquiry in the field of platform studies (Srnicek, 2016). Accordingly, governance has become a primary concern of scholarly conceptualization (Poell, Nieborg and van Dijck, 2019). As van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2014) note, people's social experience with platforms in liberal democratic societies is produced through the constant tension and interactions between the state, market, and civil society, which are interconnected and interdependent through the complex assemblage of a platform's network structures.

The triangulation between the state, market and civil society has developed somewhat differently in China. Many studies have interrogated the role of the state in managing the development of media and communication technologies (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; Qin, Stroemberg and Wu, 2017). Others have recognised the intriguing mix of a state-orientated market economy from which the Chinese digital economy has emerged (Keane, 2016). Although the Chinese state continues to find ways to monitor content and information flow through sophisticated tracking and detecting methods (Xu, 2018), scholars have paid equal attention to the market, the business orientation of Chinese platform and internet companies (Jia and Winseck, 2018), and their interactions tensions with the party-state (Hong, 2017a). Critical analysis has attended to the complex interactions between two questions: 'how a platform governs its users' and 'how a platform is governed by the state'. As Hong (2017) notes, the interaction between the party-state and technology corporations has been crucial to the Chinese economy. Moreover, Chinese authorities have been testing out different models that integrate digital platforms into their mode of governance (Chen and Qiu, 2019). As Schneider (2019, p.225) argues, while the Chinese authorities continue to intervene in politically sensitive issues directly, they have become more open to engage and collaborate with non-state actors and institutions. In other words, platform governance in China is no longer just about how governments regulate platforms (how a platform is governed) but how state authorities govern society *through and with* platform media. Keane and Su (2019, p.4) note the significance of algorithms in providing new resources and solutions to Chinese governments to 'mould civilized behaviour' that is centred around the idea of 'social stability'. While western media scholarship focuses on how algorithmic governance can modify human behaviour for economic gains under the rubric of 'surveillance capitalism' (see Zuboff, 2019), economic behaviour in China is managed within a market that is supervised by the party-state and coded with its preferred moral standard. As Delia Lin

(2017) puts it, China is engaging with a civilizing project in which individual citizen's behaviour and moral practices are subjected to top-down guidance and scrutiny. Such a project is primarily operating on 'conformity to certain patterns of behaviour, appearance, mind and sentiments that are posited by elites to symbolize a higher level of civilization/cultivation' (p. 60).

As digital media penetrates people's everyday lives in China, large technology corporations are providing the technological and infrastructural support required to accommodate the government's ambition of digitizing social governance (Zhang, 2020). Chinese technology firms are expected to serve the commercial interest of their shareholders and the ideological interest of the party-state (Hong, 2017b). China's three largest digital technology corporations, Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, which are collectively known as the BAT and the 'kingmakers' of the Chinese internet (Keane, 2016), have benefited from government tax incentives, interest free or low interest loans, and restrictions placed on foreign players (Plantin and de Seta, 2019). In return, these businesses are expected to support nation-building (Hong, 2017a; Wang and Lobato, 2019). Such an arrangement has transformed the notion of control from a direct, coercive mode of intervention to a model of 'co-opting' between the state and preferred market players (Chen and Qiu, 2019). As de Kloet et al. (2019, pp. 252-253) contend, platform governance is no longer simply about surveillance; it is in 'this complex interplay between datafication and affordance, between money and meaning, and between surveillance and security, where governance comes to the fore.'

With 'the people's' data having a major role in surveillance, the corporeal health of the nation now becomes more manageable. Biology meets technology. Bodily health and wellbeing promote the formation of the ethical self (Farquhar and Zhang, 2012), an essential element of bio-citizenship (Sun, 2015). According to Foucault (1975), biopolitics is a form of power that permeates the social order for the purpose of 'governing life'. Instead of relying on direct political instruments such as law and order, modern governments have developed 'indirect techniques' to lead and control individuals but 'without at the same time being responsible for them' (Lekman, 2001. p.201). Biopolitical governance does not appear as coercive but as Foucault puts, it is normalized in the name of 'freedom', which entails self-responsibility for the consequences of one's actions and decisions (Foucault, 1978). The process of normalization in biopolitics therefore relies on 'the mode of subjection', which involves two steps. First, there has to be a set of universal moral principles/codes and then, individuals are invited/guided to realize they are the subjects of these moral codes (Ci, 2014).

Platform media have assumed the role of creating and promoting moral principles in society and people are increasingly reliant on technology. Biopolitical governance operates across three critical scales: a) within the local platform (content representation and algorithm), b) corporate strategy and structure and c) the political ideology of the state. The next section explains the research approach before proceeding to reflect on the affordances, software architectures and platform structures that shape Chinese people's biopolitical understanding of ageing.

Walking through Red - a structural inquiry of the platform

This study utilized a combination of walkthrough and algorithm-enabling methods to understand the technological, social and political construction of ageing on Red. The walkthrough method examines the political economy and local representation of digital media through identifying and observing the link between the social and technical elements of the digital platform/device (Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2018). There are three aspects on which this method focuses, which in turn refer to the analytical scales mentioned above:

1. The environment of use, which pays attention to the political and commercial environment of the development and design of the medial; this includes the commercial/political vision, operating/business model, and the governance of the digital media.
2. The technical design and presentation of the media, which include the interface arrangement, functions and features and the textual content and their representations.
3. The user's experience of using the media, which include experience such as installation and registration, access, and restriction of use, and the (un)expected practices of using the digital media.

In this research I was able to examine the first two aspects by document analysis (such as Red's history, corporate reports, and business model and strategy) and close techno-textual analysis (the interface arrangements and content of Red). The third aspect, however, was not feasible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Investigating this aspect normally requires obtaining data about users through interviews, field observations and focus groups. To overcome the changing research environment and to recognize the changing nature of 'media', I followed Seaver's (2017) advice of using a researcher-immersed approach to enact the necessary algorithms and to critically reflect on the algorithmic content, operations, and

experience of using Red. In other words, the researcher was not merely a distant observer but an active 'enactor' who produced algorithms as particular kinds of objects through the research (Seaver, 2017, p. 5). By taking on the dual identities of being the researcher and user (research subject), I was thus able to self-observe and reflect on the experience of using and navigating Red, and to develop critical link with the contextual elements (the environments) and the technological affordances (the technical design and function) as suggested by the walkthrough method. Such a combined method fulfils the purpose of producing insights on how the political economy of Red's platform intersects with cultural representations, narratives and the ideological discourse of ageing.

Developed and launched by Wenchao Mao (Red's current CEO) and Fang Qu at Shanghai in 2013, Red began as a cross-border e-commerce space. However, unlike conventional e-commerce marketplaces, Red uses a community information sharing and communication structure that has many qualities of social media. Red received two significant rounds of financial injections. In 2016, a Tencent-led consortium invested more than $USD100 million. In 2018, an Alibaba-led consortium including Tencent, invested a further $USD 300million, which increased Red's corporate value to over $USD3 billion. (Li, 2018). These two rounds of investment established the platform and its operational structure: its dual-platform consists of a UGCs-driven social media site and an e-commerce marketplace, both operating within the digital ecosystems of Tencent and Alibaba. These two corporations have defined the experience of using Red from the beginning: one can only log in Red with WeChat, Sina Weibo, QQ accounts or a mobile phone number. There is no other way to register and create a Red account. In other words, one cannot use Red unless one has a mobile phone number (telecommunication) or an existing account with one of the mentioned social media, owned respectively by Tencent (QQ and WeChat) and Alibaba (17% stake in Sina Weibo). It is fair to say therefore that Red is not a standalone app. Likewise, UGC in Red's social media site can be shared to one's contact in Red, WeChat, Moments (WeChat's timeline), QQ, and QQ Zone, and Sina Weibo: all but Weibo is owned by Tencent. The payment systems in Red's e-marketplace are limited to Alipay (owned by Alibaba), WeChat Pay and the Huabei Instalment Plan (associated with Alibaba). Evidently the two technology giants have neatly enfolded Red's interface designs, structures, and operational systems into their respective core business areas.

The structure of the interface determines possible social and consumer practices among users. The fact that Red has such a close inter-platform linkage with WeChat is significant to the discussion of ageing and elderly. WeChat is increasingly popular among

older users, who rely on the platform to access information and forge their own communicative networks (Guo, 2018). According to Tencent, there were more than 61 million WeChat users in China aged between 55 and 70. More importantly, the older demography is the fastest growth age segment for mobile internet use in China. According to QuestMobile (2020), more than 60% of the newly added active mobile internet users in March 2020 (15.71 million) in China were aged 41 or above. By contrast, there was no growth among the 25-40 years old age group. It is worth noting the period of growth took place during the most severe period of China's COVID-19 outbreaks, that is, under strict lockdown. WeChat and mobile internet in general penetrated older Chinese peoples' everyday lives during a time when physical interactions were heavily restricted.

With the marketing slogan 'Inspire Lives', Red offers audio-visual content creation, interactive social functions (Liking, Commenting, Sharing and Following), and an in-app search engine. It encourages users to 'share and explore the excitement of the world' (Red's marketing slogan, Xiaohongshu.com, n.d.). Red's marketing and business strategy is similar to many digital platforms in China, that is, they are repurposing their objective to provide a 'good life' for Chinese people (see Zhang, 2020). The social media aspect of Red does not just bring people together but reconstructs a collective sense of wellness. Red's e-marketplace, the Welfare Centre (*fuli she*), materializes health and wellness. The Welfare Centre allows both independent sellers and established brands to promote and sell their products. The social and commercial components fuse as both independent and corporate sellers use the social media section to embed marketing content to refer Red users to their stores. Users can utilize the indigenous search engine to look for a specific topic and product. Red's operational logic hence follows the conventional algorithmic driven platform by 'learning about' its users and 'pushing' (recommending) content to the users once they log into the app.

Ageing on Red – the platform's representation of *yangsheng*

The notion of *yangsheng* is indispensable to the popular imagination of ageing in China. Literally 'nurturing life', *yangsheng* is a traditional philosophy of cultivation that emphasizes self-care and self-help (Farquhar and Zhang 2005; Dear, 2012). Y*angsheng* is practiced outside the mainstream health systems and is compatible with Chinese traditional medicine (Zhang and Qu 2005). Wanning Sun (2015; with Lei, 2016) has written about how *yangsheng* television programs invite older Chinese to learn to make choices about their body and health and to live with the consequences. Sun (2015, p.289) believes that media has become

instrumental in shaping the social perception of ageing: '*yangsheng* is no longer just what people do in everyday lives; it is also what media teaches people what to do'.

The development of digital media has changed the way that *yangsheng* is performed Information related to *yangsheng* and its practice has made its way into people's private, domestic spaces. Algorithms provide a highly personalized and at the same time, somewhat selective experience of ageing. Wang and Lo's study (2020) of Chinese retirees' use of short video sharing platforms Miaopai and Douyin (TikTok) to obtain information about *yangsheng* diet and cooking finds that the platforms' high visuality and accessibility enable their informants to engage with health specific information more frequently and intensely. Although not everyone can follow *yangsheng* practices strictly, the authors note a strong desire and proactive attitude among older Chinese to become the modern *yangsheng* subject. Digital technologies have hence afforded new modes of portability, connectedness and sociality and expanded the scope, modality and frequency of subjecting individuals to moral codes and principles imposed by mainstream institutions (Hille, 2016).

The present study utilized the in-app search engine to inquire into the representation of ageing on Red. By typing the key term 'older people' (*laonian ren*) into the search bar, a list of suggested search terms appears, such as 'Gift for older people', 'Cooking recipe for older people', 'Calcium supplement for older people', 'Health care products for older people' (see Image 1). One could either continue with the results of the general search term (older people) or select one of the recommended terms. Red's recommendations illustrate how the platform's algorithms are actively constructing ageing through the discourses of health and care provision. According to the search result of August 2020 (Image 1), more than 110,000 UGC posts and 566 products were associated with the search term 'older people', which allowed users to click into their preferred section (UGC or marketplace).

Insert Image 1

Results are classified in three sections: Posts, Store and Users. 'Posts' refer to UGC and content accessible in Red's social media interface; 'store' is the e-commerce marketplace; while 'Users' refer to user accounts that contain the searched keyword in their account names (Image 2). This present study only focused on search results in the social media (Posts) and marketplace (Store) sections. Throughout the research period in August 2020, over 120,000 'diary entries' (UGC) were aggregated in the Posts section. UGC posts produced and shared

as audio-visual stories were arranged and presented in a vertical, listicle format. Users can click into each story and react to (like) and engage with (comment and share) the content. Further, Red also categorizes searched results and displays these categories horizontally on top of the first listicle story: users can click on these categories as 'filters' to find specific content. There were 15 categories generated by Red for the search of 'older people', and they were: Gift, profile image, calcium supplement, health supplement, cooking recipe, milk powder, confectionery, cake, increase calcium intake, clothing, online nickname, food and medicine supplements, mobile phone and hairstyle.

Insert Image 2

These categories reflect two interconnected themes: ageing is associated with fragility, and nurturing health *should* be a part of older Chinese people's lifestyle. I emphasise 'should' to draw attention to the use of language and expression. Most UGC stories for instance were centred around health and nutrition and promoting an active lifestyle as if these are the only characteristics of elderly persons' life. It is worth pointing out that the first category on the interface is 'gift (for older people)' and the first video content to appear at the very top of the research result page was about a young doctor discussing how to prevent older people from falling and having bone fractures, as well as how to attend to such incidents (see Image 2). It is interesting to note the linguistic choice of this video: every family has an older person and bone fractures can have serious consequences if not attended to properly. Likewise, the other video in Image 2, which features a man in medical gown, introduces some simple home exercises. The video's short description reads: these exercises are suitable for the elderly and people approaching old age, simple and easy to learn, maybe let your parents to have a try?' The use of third-person pronoun (*tamen*, they and them) to address older people implies that this content is intended to address young people (adult children, carer and other family members) rather than older people themselves.

The third-person mode of address also reveals the identities of content creators (posters). There are mainly four types of creator in the first 100 UGC posts in the search results that I categorized. Posts created and shared by self-proclaimed medical and health experts dominate the UGC section; while only 17% of the posts were created by personal accounts (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1

Focusing on the first 100 posts was important. They were the recommendations of Red's algorithms, that is, they were more visible and accessible to Red users. Red does not indicate the way it filters and displays search results. Moreover, the order of displaying these results seems to be unrelated to the post's popularity: some promoted posts received fewer than ten Likes and Comments. Promoting and recommending content appears to be arbitrarily determined. While medical and health related posts are elevated to a prominent place in the search results, content posted by ecommerce accounts appear after every 9 posts. Such an arrangement follows Red's dual-platform mentality on the one hand, and its cultural construction of linking old age with health and *yangsheng* discourse on the other. The social media section of Red seems to have very little interest in forging social network building but rather linking UGC and ecommerce products.

Not surprisingly, the emphasis on health care is obvious in Red's own e-market space (Store, see Image 3). I conducted several searches with the phrase 'older people' in the Store section. Red's indigenous search function generated 432 product results. 104 of these were vitamin supplements, spreading across subcategories such as calcium, probiotic and essence supplements. 66 were knee and back protection and supports, 16 were adult milk formula, 10 were items of thermal clothing, and 6 were massage chairs or beds. In other words, more than half of the products recommended by Red for older people were health related. Healthy living and nurturing health (i.e. *yangsheng*) are framed through the practices of 'gift giving' (to parents); it is significant that the expression of filial piety occupies the centre of '*yangsheng*' practice. Several major in-app stores' promotional phrases affirm these two observations. An advertisement of Centrum, a calcium supplement product, for example, reads: 'for mum's healthy body and mental wellness.' Blackmores, a health supplement company's advertising slogan reads: 'protects joint, shows filial piety to parents. (Image 3). A store that sells probiotic product reads, 'love your parents and help them become younger'. While acknowledging the marketing imperative of these slogans, the notion of looking after the elderly suggest that *yangsheng* is not just self-awareness but being aware of others.

Insert Image 3

It is interesting to note the highly similar mode of address in Red's UGC section and its marketplace. In contrast to previous literature on *yangsheng* in China (Sun and Lei, 2018;

Zeng and Hesketh 2016; Wang and Lo, 2020), Red has less emphasis on older Chinese' self-responsibility. The broader notion of health care has been redefined as a shared responsibility between older parents and their younger family members. Red presents itself as a hub that provides information and knowledge. To contextualise Red's platform operation, the next section draws on public service advertising (PSA) promoted by the NRTA (National Radio and Television Administration) to ascertain the official imaginaries of old age in China and to better understand the connection between the state and the social and commercial aspects of Red. As the regulatory body of Chinese media, the NRTA propagates ideological values and state development narratives. PSAs are used as a mean to shape public beliefs (Esarey, Stockman, and Zhang, 2016). Studying PSAs can provide rich insights into the Chinese government's preferred ideological narrative of ageing and its governance when dealing with a rapidly ageing population.

Imagining ageing, a state perspective

The NRTA maintains a 'exemplary' *(youxiu*) PSAs video database on its official website (http://gy.nrta.gov.cn/). There are twenty PSAs categories ranging from COVID-19 control, Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), to Traditional Culture and National Strategy. The topic of ageing features prominently in the category of 'Social Governance' (*shehui zhili*). There are 42 PSA videos in the Social Governance category and 18 are about ageing, aged care and the relationship between adult children and their older parents. The next most featured theme in this category is Poverty Alleviation (11 videos). Some common representations about ageing and older people in China can be discerned from the 18 videos. First, being old is presented as physically frail, vulnerable, mentally disorientated and often socially disadvantaged. Further, all but four videos portrait older people as parents. The titles of 6 videos make explicit references to the notion of filial piety: 'Filial piety is above all else', 'Do not let mother cry', 'Father's white lie', 'Mother's eyesight' and, 'Share the most beautiful moment with parents.' These expressions proscribe that old age is about being highly dependent on younger family members (adult children) for emotional care such as phone calls and visiting, and mental support such as visiting and gifting. Importantly, there is a dominant narrative that appears in most of the videos: to repay parents' love and care. One of the video series is titled, 'Being kind to older people is being kind to yourself'; the subtext is that looking after older people is like looking at yourself into the future because everyone will age. Another subtext is not only

that everyone will age but everyone will become frail, disorientated, and vulnerable. The older people in the videos require assistance from others.

The explicit emphasis on adult children's and, to a greater extent, society's role in looking after the ageing population can be interpreted as the new biopolitics of ageing in China. The family and young people-centric representation of ageing effectively allows the government to retreat from its responsibility to provide the appropriate care, protection, and safeguards to older Chinese. According to its own statement, the State Council of China had indicated that market will lead the provision of aged and health care services (the State Council of China, 2013). In other words, individual consumption and market mechanisms will become the dominant force in China's aged care and support services, not the state-led welfare system model of the past. Of course, one needs to be cautious here of not overstating such a transformation. The retreat of governments from social service provision (health, transportation, education, and utilities) has happened across the world, and the common strategy is to let the market to take over these responsibilities (Sharon, 2020). The Chinese case is different in the sense that the state continues to maintain a significant level of control in the market for ideological purposes.

In a neoclassical account of the market economy, individuals are consumers who are expected to look after themselves and their families. This self-caring discourse is relevant to contemporary China due to the now abolished One Child policy (1980 - 2015), which limited most families to one child as a mean to control over-sizing of the Chinese population in light of economic resource distribution. The policy, however, has had profound implications for the traditional structure of the family as a self-sufficient unit in society (Zeng and Hesketh 2016). There are fewer adult children to look after older parents and there are no siblings to share social and financial burdens. It is interesting to note that most, if not all young people, portrayed in the NRTA's video collections are busy working middle-class citizens. While the videos collectively promote the idea that adult children should take care of their older parents, none suggest that adult children should provide financial support to their parents in a traditional sense. All older parents in the videos seem to be financially independent (owning their own home); however, they require frequent emotional support from their children and grandchildren. Mediated connections such as phone and video calls via social media, and the practice of gifting and celebrating special events such as parents' birthday are frequently promoted in the videos selected by the NRTA. The market is the ultimate point of reference and is framed as the 'solution' to individual experience with ageing and the family's collective responsibility of aged care (Gong, 2017).

Of course, the logic of market economy and hence, consuming ethically has become an integral part of becoming a good citizen. Chinese studies scholars have argued that the process of marketization and the rise of market economy in China are closely aligned with political governance and the ideological control of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Chen 2008). As Sun (2015, p. 287) notes, being an active consumer does not contradict with one also being a good (political) citizen. The videos reinforce Sun's observation, and we can go further by saying that being a good citizen in China now also includes sharing and even, removing the financial burden from the government. As Sun (2016 p. 922) writes elsewhere, 'while individuals have been encouraged to exercise a multiplicity of private choices within a space, the limits of such space are set by the socialist state and regulated by the state power'.

Both the family-centricity of *yangsheng* and the official state narratives are refashioning aged care as driven by the market and individual consumer behaviour. Biopolitical governance is essentially non-coercive (Foucault, 1975). Yet despite this more neoliberal flavouring, China's technological giants need to accept political guidance and the ideological preferences of the socialist commodity economy. Both Tencent and Alibaba have learned and are still learning this the hard way. The central government has been heavy handed in regulating their core businesses (Arsene, 2018; Wang and Lobato, 2019). While there is no hard evidence to suggest Red is working hard to please the party-state, it would be more useful to consider how Red is actively responding to and exploiting the state's preferred ideology into its business strategy and operational logic. Red's platform mechanism of social media content creation and sharing, and its connectivity with e-commerce outlets and the payment systems have effectively materialized the vision of a family-centric aged care system. Red has become an important messenger of the narratives of self-care and personal responsibility in an ageing China,

In return, the government and the CCP have endorsed Red's business model. Several top national political leaders such as Premier Li Keqiang, Vice-Premier Wang Yang, and the then Party Secretary of Shanghai (now a Vice-Premier) Han Zheng visited Red's logistic factory in Zhengzhou and headquarter in Shanghai between 2015 and 2016. These political leaders all hailed Red's business success. Wang Yang described Red as the model to lead China's transition into a digital economy. Li Keqiang praised Red's rapid growth in the State Council's executive meeting in late September 2015 (*Dahe Daily*, 2015). And Red featured prominently in *The People's Daily* and China Central Television (CCTV) during 2017 and

2018 (Red, n.d.). *The People's Daily* even named Red as one of the most prominent 'Chinese brands' of 2018 alongside Huawei and BAT. (Red, n.d.). Red was named as the 'most trusted brand among Chinese youth' in the same year by the *Liberation Daily*, a newspaper directly under the Shanghai Committee of the CCP (Liberation Daily, 2018). Having state media's endorsement is essential.

Conclusion

By examining the digital representation of ageing through the narrative of *yangsheng* on Red, this article has found that the cultural imaginary of ageing is produced across three different but interrelated techno-political scales:

1. the local in-app construction and Red's algorithmic architecture.
2. the dual-corporate and platform structure of Alibaba and Tencent.
3. the broader ideological and governance approach of the party-state.

The examination of the representation and ideological construction of ageing on Red departs from previous research on ageing and media, which mainly draw on non-digital, broadcasting media. The inquiry has led us to identify the shifting meanings of *yangsheng* and hence ageing discourses in China, moving away from a self-care and health management narrative found in western democracies to one that emphasizes collective care and shared responsibility with the family structure. Such an observation affirms established knowledge of the state's moral governance, which has been exemplified during the Xi Jinping era (Lin, 2017; 2019), and the corpus of works that note the growing relations between the party-state and digital technology conglomerates (Plantin and de Seta, 2019; Chen and Qu, 2019; Keane and Su, 2019; Zhang, 2020). Instead of a manifestation of self-expression and free choice, UGC and consumerism have become integral parts of the ideological framework of nation-building, economic growth governance.

The conceptual significance of this article goes beyond China. The notion of platform governance has evolved rapidly over the years from implying 'how platforms govern their users' and 'how platforms are being governed', to 'how political and market institutions govern the social everyday life'. As Tamar Sharon (2020) puts, health (hence, biopolitics) has become a resource for big tech to exert and expand their influence beyond the market and penetrate the terrain of social everyday lives. While Sharon's analysis of the western, neoliberal digital market throws more emphasis on the power of large tech companies, it is evident that the Chinese government has re-established its power over the management of the

nation's emergent technology companies. As discussed throughout this article, the government and the CCP's endorsement are indispensable to the success of digital companies and even the entire digital technology sector in China. Digital media has hence become an integral part of the state's political institutions and machinery of power.

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[1] iiMedia research is a major big data mining and analysis organization based in Guangzhou, China. It has cooperated with the local Guangdong governments and major telecommunication networks, and technological corporations (such as BAT) in China and abroad, to deliver data research services (https://www.iimedia.com.cn/en/about.jsp).

[2] Formerly known as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, 1998–2013) and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 2013–2018).