

What are friends for?: The arts of making do and working out in Beijing, China

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Abstract

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Through a second look at the now twenty-five-year-old literature on *guanxi*, a form of reciprocal relationship making and using in China, I examine how the kinds of opportunities and challenges possible for young people intersect with who they know and how this has changed (with its own set of reflections on and consequences for a still-rapidly changing China) since China's rural to urban transition. My dissertation project examines how young people in contemporary urban China form and produce *guanxi* ties (resource-full relationships) through the theoretical lens of practice and possibility, inspired by de Certeau's conceptualization of practice, productive consumption, and strategies versus tactics (1984). Drawing on qualitative data gathered through participant observation and unstructured interviews, I sought to both describe and analyze when, where, and how social networks became consequential. Central to my methodology is an emphasis on people and their practices rather than the common sense categories used to describe them. The people in my field research were predominantly aged 18-30 and came from a range of ethnic, professional, and education backgrounds. In so doing, I was able to examine the moments and contexts within which some people have opportunities and others do not, as well as when some are vulnerable while others are less so. I found that social networks can be formed in a variety of spaces, and sometimes most saliently in moments of serendipity. Chance encounters in spaces of play, without the artifice of traditional and structured gift-giving practices of building *guanxi*, provided people with opportunities and potential alternatives outside of more stringent work hierarchies. Ultimately, who people knew – their

social networks – shaped the ways in which they experienced circumstances of precarity, instability, and possibility.

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Introduction: What are we to each other?

During the course of my field research (2017-2019), many people asked me to explain my research topic, or more generally, anthropology. I struggled to answer these questions succinctly. People I met through ultimate frisbee assumed that I was interested in frisbee, people I met at the gym assumed I was interested in gyms and exercise, and people I met in restaurants assumed my project was primarily focused on health. I am interested, I explained, in all of these things, but mostly, in the people who are engaged in these practices of doing. I began with a very broad net - young people in Beijing, doing and making things together. I was interested in possibilities, as well as its much more studied counterpart, limitations, for young people in China. I noticed that, compared to when I'd last been in Beijing, there seemed to be a sudden uptick in gyms, working out, and a shifting mentality towards health and dieting. Specifically, young women who had previously used acupuncture or diet pills now spoke of losing weight in terms of metabolism, restricting calories, and exercise. Change of course, is something that has been written about quite frequently in the context of socialist and post-socialist China. But when I fell ill in my first few months there, and new and old friends exhorted me to take care of myself, I was struck by this explanation, "The body is the foundation of the revolution" (身体是革命的基础). Reminiscent of Mao-era discourse that rhetorically privileges (peasant) bodies, it drew my attention to the possibilities of what happens when people come together. The 2019 protests in Hong Kong, momentarily paused, hinge their success upon the physical presence of many people; the very act of showing up, of putting the body in a space declared off-limits or to be a space of resistance, is a political act. This in turn led me to think about how people's practices are contingent upon, influenced by, or made possible by others.

Aside from the more obvious analyses of state power using the language of science and health as a means of control a la Foucault (1978) and Greenhalgh (2008), I became interested in the possibilities generated where national policies, globalizing forces vis a vis media, particularly social media, and the particularities and peculiarities (de Wolfe 2013) of individual people and bodies collide. As such, this dissertation is both about, and not about, sports and exercise. In each chapter, introduced in the next section, I highlight some of the conditions of possibility and limitation contouring people's responses and options as they pursue their various schemes. Some want to publish a research paper or start a business, while others are involved in a more long-term and semi-competitive endeavor to garner official recognition for ultimate frisbee in Mainland China. Social networks, who people know, are central to all of these efforts.

The dissertation project

Through a second look at the now twenty-five-year-old literature on *guanxi*, a form of reciprocal relationship making and using in China, I examine how the kinds of responses possible for young people intersect with who people know and how this has changed (with its own set of reflections on and consequences for a still-rapidly changing China) since China's rural to urban transition. My dissertation project looks at how young people in contemporary urban China form and produce *guanxi* ties (resource-full relationships) through the theoretical lens of practice and possibility, inspired by de Certeau's conceptualization of practice, productive consumption, and strategies versus tactics (1984). Specifically, I focus on young people involved in (producing, consuming, adamantly articulating their not-involved-ness in) fitness, exercise, and sports in Beijing as a prism through which cross-sections of Chinese society (across class, gender, and locality) can be seen concurrently. Exercise and play are accessible in variable forms to everyone.

Chapter one introduces my project through an in-depth discussion of methodology. My data, after all, begins with the presence of my person in certain spaces, building networks with certain people. In the second chapter, I look at the myriad of interactions between articulations of the state, via official documents like the Healthy China, my research group's work assessing health and fitness markers in elementary and middle school students, and generally, the ways in which policy, research, and "the market" (entrepreneurs, businesses) interact, and how people react and practice within this discursive field. In chapter three, I look at large-scale public competitions (like the Spartan Race) to examine how exercise opens up new spaces for ungendered sociality and networking in contemporary Chinese society. As China has shifted from predominantly rural and family-centered living, where young people remain in close proximity (or perhaps even residence with) parents and kin, to more urban and often dispersed locales from where they grew up, the spaces for producing (making and maintaining) consequential social relationships have also shifted. Older works on *guanxi* (Kipnis 1997; Yan 1996) describe the role of traditions, rituals, and the space of the home in forming and affirming important ties with kin and near-kin in the village. Weddings and festivals were central to this social work. In rural areas today, kin networks are maintained through the rhythms of daily life (sharing meals, giving gifts) and remain important in larger, public rituals (Steinmüller 2013). Similarly, *guanxi* in the city (Yang 1994) were formed through kin or distant-kin relationships; the importance of such relationships continue to be consequential in many ways today (see Zhang 2001, and Ma and Xiang 1998 on kin-migration and native place/fictive-kin networks). However, for many young people moving to and living in China's cities, especially aspirationally upwardly mobile young people, kin-based networks are no longer effective or even available ways to access resources, discover opportunities, and make new connections. Osburg's work on the *nouveau-riche* in

Chengdu provides an ethnographic look at one popular space for making *guanxi* - banqueting halls and karaoke rooms; however, he notes that these spaces are heavily gendered and largely restricted to male homosocial intimacies (2013). Though this remains true, there has also been a recent shift, in tandem with government policies aimed against daytime drinking and the Healthy China initiatives, away from the excessive consumption associated with banqueting practices. Fitness and health spaces, whether exclusively expensive or open to all, provide one prominent and new space for people to meet - the random, sometimes serendipitous, but nevertheless classed and gendered ways in which this happens allows for the production of consequential relationships outside of family and work.

In chapters four, five, and six, I start with de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics to investigate the possibilities and responses available to young people living in Beijing. I am interested in possibilities of all forms, though much of my data and discussion revolves around work and labor; after all, nearly all of the people who shared their time and lives with me were concerned with, to some extent, their economic and resource stability. Chapter four centers around a few important people who play ultimate frisbee in Beijing (and thus also, in China). Through their shared and separate efforts to popularize and "sportify" frisbee, I look at their "strategies" and efforts to this end in tandem with the more mundane struggles and efforts of young people trying to learn and play frisbee in Beijing. In discussing space, resources (time, money), and access, I hope to illuminate how possibility and opportunity are contoured by the various networks and resource-full or resource-less relationships people have, as well as the ways in which hobbies demand much in the way of skills and labor. This leads to chapter five, which focuses on small business owners, entrepreneurs, and scrappy go-getters, in contrast to big business chain ventures. These people involved in start-ups and new ventures in the health,

fitness, and exercise industry display much in the way of “tactics” in their use of time - serendipitous meetings, chance opportunities, new waves of popular practice - but their success, or at least, their ability to remain doing what it is they are trying to do, remained closely tied to their ability to leverage resources and important relationships (closer to “strategies”). Finally, chapter six looks at the ways in which ordinary people working in the industry - not the leaders or the go-getters, but front-desk clerks, personal trainers, and marketers - navigate industry changes as well as the other constraints that limit the possibilities available to them. From gym closures to city fires, economic and housing precarity are experienced differently by those who have the networks to respond opportunistically and those who don’t. In this way, social networks, along with with structural elements like the hukou, provide the scripts available for living and living well in the city. As a whole, these three chapters look at the ways in which *guanxi*, expanded to include traditional hierarchical exchanges of gifts and favours as well as lateral debts of obligation and friendship, or *youqing*, is both reflective and productive of gender, class, and even ethnic borders. Underpinning this are the different forms of flow that make up living in a contemporary Chinese city; foreigners, white-collar professionals, entrepreneurs, overseas returnees, and rural-to-urban laborers alike work and live in close proximity to each other and sometimes cross paths. In sum, the aim of this work is to simultaneously describe these spaces of possibility and the continued salience of *guanxi* ties and social networks in contemporary Chinese society and to argue for an ethnographic methodology of China that takes seriously the multiplicity of ways in which people are connected.

Briefly, practice in everyday life

When I refer to practice, I am writing most simply about what people do. The term is steeped in a theoretical history that has debated what practice is and what it does, beginning with

what constitutes a study-able object. Goffman's work on the presentation of the self in everyday life (1959) and Garfinkel's studies in ethnomethodology, a method of research that looks at what interactions between people reveal and leave behind (1967, 2002), privilege the specific, concrete, and visible doings of people living ordinary lives. This ordinariness is important. It is a theoretical and methodological vantage point that, rather than foregrounding an exotic or distinct Other, presumes subjects to be, at least to themselves, doing mundane, everyday things. These practices, and specifically, how these practices interact with and account for close and distant others, are productive. Paying close attention to mundane practices and moments of conflict or rupture reveals some of the underlying rules and this-ness of what those interactions and practices were (or should be) holding together. Thus, while Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, and specifically, his concept of *habitus*, is helpful (and popular) for thinking about how what people do is learned, reproduced, and shared so that it is visible, *habitus* is limited in its ability to account for how practices and their people (Varenne and McDermott 1998) change. It is a tempting catchall for the descriptive work of practice; what people do can be organized as a set of behavior and "dispositions," a *habitus* that implicitly references the explanatory power of larger cultural contexts or systems. However, by reducing human practices to sets of behavior that are in direct, unilateral relationship with their contexts (structuring structures), Bourdieu's work succeeds in explaining how systems are sustained without exploring how they are reimagined. What is missing is a theory of change, a way of making sense of the inconsistencies and possibilities that occur when people come together.

de Certeau's (1984) framework of examining and framing ordinary practice - as opposed to explicit and spectacular practices of production and resistance - as operations, or "ways of using," so that mundane consumption (cooking, reading, walking, working out) reveals

productive, creative, and generative forces is the starting point for the theoretical framework of this project. He provides a methodology that foregrounds how people operate and what they make of the “multiform labor of consumption” (30), a way to notice and privilege *la perruque* (at work) or *bricolage* (outside of work) while at the same time examining how such particular operations are necessitated or prompted by the “systems” (structures, laws, rules, regulations, parameters, borders) that impose limitations upon them. This framework allows for a way to live on different terms while not escaping that which articulates those same, assumed terms. In so doing, I can simultaneously consider what practice does (via how “using” or “operating” is also a way of making) and how it does so through different categorizations of practice. In particular, de Certeau distinguishes between different ways of doing so as strategies versus tactics (34-42), where strategies rest upon a certain degree of knowledge (how, what, where) that contributes to power (the ability to make plans from a fixed position, a place, for some future time). Strategies are not subject to the whims and contingencies of events in-the-moment, reactions while present, fleet-footedness. They are responses that can be, to some extent, calculated. In contrast, tactics have no fixed place, no position of calculation from whence to start or to which one can return. Tactics rely solely on the opportunities and cracks that appear, however suddenly and fleetingly, in situ - the “making do” that is in reaction and in response to a present moment, that cannot be quite recreated once the moment has passed. It introduces an element of historicity to practice and is a lovely argument for the method and theory of anthropology, which so carefully notices the making in addition to what is made.

For de Certeau, tactics are the weapons of the weak (used broadly to describe all who live within the system of consumption, and also specifically to describe the worker, the colonized, the silenced). This delineation between types of responses is helpful as a starting point for examining

how people live and live well, artfully even, under rigid and oppressive parameters. However, in this particular conceptualization, there is a binary between those who have the “knowledge that precedes power,” and those who do not; it is a theoretical framework that, though rooted in work that explicitly articulates the roles of interaction (Garfinkel), audiences (Goffman), and response (Schegloff, Sachs, Labov) in the production of social phenomena, imagines resistance, creativity, and ways of using as somehow extracted from the deep webs of relationship in which people live and operate.

Contributions

As part of this dissertation, I attempt to delve deeper into the nuances of practice that might be described, in de Certeau’s terms as strategies or tactics (“making do”). In framing practices as sets of statements and responses, I am interested in how the webs of relationships people are in impact the kinds of statements and responses possible, as well as not possible. de Certeau writes of time, knowledge, and power - in other words, capital - but he dwells little on the resources embedded in relationality. As I discuss in chapter six, the kinds of responses possible and the quality of making those responses can rest consequentially on a friend or a family member.

The kinds of exercise and practice central to my research are relatively mundane, in the sense that I did not look for extraordinary people participating in extraordinary instances of fitness activity. What I take to be “ordinary” or “mundane” is a theoretical vantage point that considers everyday practice to be an object of study. I encountered the people in this dissertation, certainly unordinary in their own ways, doing their “everyday life.” They were at work as employers or employees, at the gym as trainers or members, and at restaurants, as strangers or friends. In taking seriously what young people in China do every day, during times of work and

times of leisure, I am contributing to the small but growing body of literature on the Chinese middle class (or middle class living), on leisure culture and everyday struggles under the Chinese state, and on the new ways in which *guanxi* networks scaffold possibilities for work and play in China. But by including people considered to be working class and upper class, foreign and local, I seek to challenge the anthropology of China that looks at Chinese society in isolated neighborhoods affected by or distinct from distant others. Gyms bring people together - members, personal trainers, group class instructors, managers, and front-desk workers alike. Social relationships and the contours of *guanxi* continue to be salient because of the way these relationships produce, contain, and offer possibilities for escape from other gendered, classed, and ethnic histories.

Chapter 1: Walking the city and writing the ethnography

The work of ethnography, its epistemological tools and theoretical foundation, begins with methods that situate the body of the researcher in “the field” and results in a completed product - the manuscript of the dissertation or book. This chapter’s work is to examine and explore the tools I used in collecting my data, to meditate on the joys and tribulations of fieldwork, and to enunciate, in written form, the process of three years of intellectual labor. I am interested in what is made possible and available for noticing through the ways I walked the city in this particular body. Put differently, this chapter is about my methods, the theoretical underpinnings of said methods, and my writing. I conducted my fieldwork between August 2017 and July 2019, and wrote this dissertation in the fall of 2019 and spring of 2020. This situates my work and this project in a specific moment in time; when I write of rules and regulations in the present tense, I am referring to this particular moment in time, across which these rules and regulations were consistent. Through an emphasis on movement, I seek to deemphasise conventional categories used to classify people and to emphasise people’s practices in historical time.

I begin this chapter with my journey through the streets, roads, and alleys, or *hutongs*, of Beijing. It is fitting, in a dissertation that draws so much on de Certeau’s characterization of practice, to open with a walk through physical, geographical, and social space. Research, as it is summarized after the fact, often occludes the messiness and mundaneness of the stuff that makes up research days. This process erases, to an extent, the specific, peculiar, and personal *hows* of data collection, set in both spaces and places. In this meandering through morning and evening commutes, I am also drawing attention to the shared in-between time that many people living in Beijing, and other large cities in China, have while waiting to arrive at their final destination.

From there, I introduce the methods I used, the people who provided the bulk of my data, the setting of my research work, my positionality, and my approach to translation. It is my hope that this chapter serves to frame how to read the rest of this dissertation.

The space in between us

Over the course of two years, I spent much of my time traversing the city, in transit and in between places. Beijing is organized into rings; the second ring maps onto the old city wall that surrounds the “old” city, the heart of which is the Forbidden City, ancient home to China’s dynastic emperors and their families. The third ring and fourth ring are still considered, by the people I met in Beijing, to be urban; meanwhile, locations in the fifth and sixth rings are much more difficult to access and tend to be considered *jiaoqu* (suburbs). The people I got to know lived all over Beijing’s many sprawling districts and neighborhoods and utilised a wide variety of transportation options in their day to day lives - buses, subways, trains, taxis, electric scooters, bicycles, and their own two feet. I’ve experienced the roads, streets, and subways of Beijing at every hour, the most memorable of which are morning and evening rush hour. For the last leg of my commute home, I had to transfer from the subway to take a bus, but though the subway ran until a little after 11PM, the last bus came around 10PM. When I managed to make it in time to wait for a bus, there would be a large crowd of people milling about, preparing to rush for the doors. When the bus arrived, there would be a rush of bodies, swarming the door in a giant amoeba-shaped blob to try and squeeze two, three, four, five people simultaneously through the doors at once. Sometimes I stood to the side, watching and wondering why we didn’t all line up and enter two by two - it was obvious that we would all likely fit on eventually. Other times, I participated in the fray, using all of my limbs and angles to push my way through the small spaces between bodies and the bus doors - it was worth it to be able to snag a seat after a long

day, and to avoid the cramped, sardine-like experience of standing (usually while contorted in some way) to get every last person on the bus. Emotions ran high. Riders and bus drivers alike would yell for those who were not yet on the bus to wait for the next one or to push in deeper into the bus to make room for those who were still trying to get on. If I were lucky (or unlucky) enough to catch the last bus of the night, the struggle for space would be particularly desperate and the bus would often idle at the bus stop for 10 minutes or more to wait for everyone to get on and more importantly, not get pushed off when the doors closed. If I missed the last bus, I would share an unmarked, unofficial, and unlicensed “cab” with other unfortunate commuters. These were colloquially called “black” cabs or *heiche*. I had to pay 10 RMB compared to 1 RMB for the bus, but sometimes I would opt for this option regardless of the bus schedule so that I could have a seat, some more elbow room, and get home more quickly.

Morning rush hour felt similar - long lines through security, though those who were traveling without bags could bypass the longer bag check line, long lines for escalators, long lines to board the subway, and a mass rush of people in and out as the subway doors opened. Transfer stations had their own particular and predictable flurry of activity - often, someone attempting to exit would be caught unaware and positioned in the center of the aisle so that once they finally arrived at the door, they had to fight the tide of commuters trying to get onto the subway train. I frequently waited for two, three trains to pass by, before realizing that I'd have to push my way into the already jam-packed train compartments. In these moments, I found myself sharing intimate space with complete strangers unwillingly pressed up against each other and forced to contemplate the corporeality of bodies in a very visceral way. Their fleshiness, smelliness, and peculiarities aside, the collective effort made by each body to maintain an etiquette of public space in the subway nevertheless generated distance where physical distance

could not be achieved. By mutual, collective agreement, it was possible to silently and conspiratorially remain strangers sharing intimate space - eyes averted, hands and arms clutching bags, earbuds blasting music. Some stared off into the distance, while many others looked down or up or in whatever direction it was possible given the cramped space. A few looked around, as I often did, and made eye contact with me. Once, on a less crowded subway, I took a selfie to show to friends how many people were crammed into the compartment; a man beside me scolded me for taking a picture, reminding me (in Mandarin, with a smattering of English) to respect the “privacy” of others on the subway. Even in tightly enclosed public spaces, “privacy,” distance, and space, was maintained and even expected; this takes ongoing work (Lefebvre 1991). Networks - of people, their connections, and their resources - are analogously messy, easily and seamlessly occupying close proximal space while maintaining disparate borders.¹

I catalogued my commutes in my field notes - where I went, which route I took, and what I saw along the way. Yet somehow, though commuting and going from one place to another took up a significant portion of my day (two to three hours, on average), it did not provide a ready point of departure for conversation. The subway, both in everyday practice and in the varied webs of semiotics and meaning it conjures, is not a space to make friends. It is primarily instrumental, to get from one location to the next. During low-peak hours, however, there are also a number of people who traverse the subway in a different way. Occasionally, an older person might be seen walking through the aisles from compartment to compartment singing. Sometimes they are visibly disabled and are accompanied by a family member or partner, performing and asking for help as much as possible. There are also younger people who do the same walk, arms full of pencils or stickers, phone out and WeChat QR code at the ready, hoping

¹ Chapter four explores how practices of “intimacy” bridge and foster new resource-full relationships in the blurry contexts of work and play. Less explicitly, it addresses how networks fail to form or overlap.

to gather new followers for their WeChat Official Account or new WeChat contacts.² They operate small stores, dealing in nutrition milkshakes, weight-loss pills, after-school tutoring, and health food, and follow up on WeChat afterwards with invitations to visit their store and proffered discounts. I still get messages occasionally from a few, which I suspect are mass texts. These messages are friendly, asking how I've been or reminding me to be careful as the temperature changes. The women call me *qin* or "dear," evoking a certain intimacy and familiarity that feels out of place amongst strangers, though this has become increasingly common as sectors of the sales and customer service industries have adopted this more familiar way of communication. Operators and employees of stores on Taobao, the popular online shopping app/website, almost exclusively address customers by this term. What I found particularly odd about these followup messages from my new subway friends is that, though these messages appeared semi-regularly, they didn't seem to acknowledge all the previous messages above that have gone ignored. Others, based on their WeChat moments feed, have since moved on to other ventures - one is now selling lip moisturizers on WeChat. But for most people, commutes are just the beginning, the time and space in-between here and somewhere else.

All of this waiting highlights an important temporal quality to living, playing, and working in Beijing. It takes a significant amount of time and labor - if waiting can be counted as such - to cross the city. Much of Beijing is densely populated; it is not difficult to find everyday necessities, entertainment, and food a short walk or an online order away. Some lived, worked, and played in the same district; others regularly commuted long distances from Beijing's suburbs into the city for work or to meet up with friends. A geographical distance of several kilometers

² WeChat is more comprehensively introduced further along in this chapter, under the "Setting" subheading.

could translate into more than an hour's commute via public transportation or taxi, depending on traffic. Potential and actualized relationships and networks are characterized by the limiting scarcity of time and the difficulty of commuting. It similarly impacts whether and how people might exercise, pick up a new hobby, or tend to existing relationships. It can be difficult to find time to see even once close friends; traveling to a meet-up can take up to half a day of commuting, and then there's the problem of what to do once together.

Methods

I cannot claim that all of the hours I spent in-between places were also spent actively “noticing.” Nevertheless, the experiences, repeated daily, of the tediousness of waiting has certainly informed the ways in which I thought about living in and moving within Beijing. Most of the data used in this dissertation was gathered via many, many hours of participant observation, supplemented by follow-up formal and informal unstructured interviews. By participant observation, I am referring to the active and passive practices of being and doing with people - watching, listening, eating, walking, running, shopping, engaging in various forms of play, biking, taking various forms of exercise classes or training bootcamps, and all manners of other activities that made up “play” and oftentimes work. Sometimes these looked suspiciously similar. I ran around frisbee fields, explored an old abandoned hospital at the northernmost end of Line 4, and embedded myself in thick webs of reciprocal obligations that were nevertheless an enrichment to my research and my time in Beijing. In an effort to investigate the ways in which young people are connected and how their connected-ness impacts practice, I chose not to site myself in a specific place like a village (Fei 1939; Steinmüller 2013), a school (Woronov 2010), a factory (Pun 2005), or a neighborhood (Zhang 2001; Zhang 2010). Rather, I followed people where they would take me and spent time doing things that seemed, at first (or even at the end),

to have little to do with other parts of my research. This was in part inspired by the work of China anthropologists like John Osburg (2013) and non-China anthropologists like Anna Tsing (2015) and Paige West (2012). I also did not focus on an easily delineated or specified group of people, not factory workers (Pun 2005), migrant women working as domestic help (Yan 2008), students (Woronov 2015), middle-class families (Zhang 2010), or singletons (Fong 2004). The people I got to know in Beijing represent a diverse cross-section of the sorts of people one might meet in the city. They ranged in age (most important characters were between the ages of 18-30), ethnicity, country or region of origin, present area of residence, education level (intersecting with socioeconomic class), employment, hobbies, and investment in various practices of health and exercise. By follow, I am referring to physically following people through space, going to work, meals, and leisure activities with them.

When I first arrived in Beijing, I spent three months building my research network, looking for young people and their places and testing out the comforts and discomforts of how and when I felt out of place. People introduced me to their friends and friends of friends via WeChat. Friendly strangers who had seen a posting by a friend in a group chat added me as a contact. I introduced myself to strangers in subways and at events. On the subway or in between late night hours spent typing up field notes, I read HAU's then recently published special issue on ethnography and Anna Tsing's beautiful book on matsutake mushrooms (Tsing 2015). In particular, I was struck by Howell's (2017) notion of the "magic of serendipity" and the ways in which careful listening - what Tsing calls the "art of noticing" - can create opportunities for significant, consequential encounters and discoveries. During my time in the field, my life and plans were characterized by the word "yes" - I said "yes" to most everything that came my way. I visited the international department of a prestigious local high school and though I found

myself at odds with bureaucratic barriers that prevented a more longterm partnership, I spent several afternoons there chatting with teachers. Once, I even gave a short presentation on qualitative research methodology. Inspired by Laura Nader's (1972) call to study "up," I invested equal amounts of effort gaining access to and participating with people in various positions of power (my research group, owners of large franchise gyms, organizers of frisbee tournaments), people among whom I moved quite comfortably (graduate students, overseas returnees, foreigners living in Beijing), and people who have traditionally been the subjects or objects of anthropological study ("migrants," workers, villagers, children, and students). Participating and observing guided me towards better questions (while simultaneously distracting me towards infinite possibilities of rabbit holes); WeChat made it easy to follow up with clarifications and to schedule that next meeting. I extended and received invitations to meals, gatherings, events, and workspaces. But the invitation is not given or received lightly; after all, as Steinmüller (2013) notes, among others who have written about social relationships, networks, and *guanxi* in China, accepting a meal enters one into a relationship of reciprocity.

Gifts and introductions are given as part of the work that goes into expanding and investing in social networks that neoliberal logics demand. Gershon's (2011) claims that people are fractured selves, bundles of skills and qualities that they market and present to others in the way a business advertises itself for profit certainly find some ground here. I saw this in how I managed my relationships with participants; one of the most difficult aspects of fieldwork was the anxiety induced by how much the success of my research network depended on how much people liked me. I positioned myself variously as a foreigner, a scholar, and as a consumer (of various health products and exercises) in hopes that potential participants would find this marked me as attractive enough to be worth their time. This is the way that the commonsense logic of

neoliberalism, as Gershon argues, partitions and commodifies the self. This extends to both *quid pro quo* favors or exchanges and more long-term calculations of mutual benefit, whereby both parties market themselves and assess the other in terms of their value-added. My participants named this in explicit and implicit ways; they invested time, money, and emotions in relationships with people they did not necessarily consider friends because that's how building networks works. In one instance, an undergraduate sociology student at Peking University expressed chagrin that I had mentioned her name to her advisor, who I met on the recommendation of someone else. She was horrified that there might be any indication that she had facilitated our connection and that she now owed a deep debt to him, especially if my meeting with him was disappointing. My attempts to assuage her fears were ineffectual. The next time I returned to the United States, I offered to bring her something - a book for her advisor, difficult to obtain in mainland China - to repay both her debt and my own. The practice of investing in relationships - both short-lived encounters and long-lasting friendships - was integral to how I came to know this space of practice. I invested time in taking care of people when they were sick, money in purchasing or making space for items requested when I returned to the United States (books, cosmetic products, beeswax food packaging, coffee), and more abstractly, I invested myself in caring about and for the people with whom I spent so much of my time.

As a result, I cannot write about or theorize *guanxi* and social relationships without acknowledging how my thinking of this has been shaped by my experience of being in relationship with people during fieldwork. My research was made possible by several research fellowships, but these were framed as an investment in a young scholar and an expectation that I will accomplish some measurable success in the near future. But my research would not have been possible without the, at times, wildly unexpected, serendipitous, and incredible generosity

of my participants. In addition to the introductions, time, conversations, explanations and translations, and gifts rendered, many took the sudden and persistent appearance of an anthropologist in their daily lives, with pestering questions and long periods of awkward, silent following around, in stride and welcomed me as a friend. They made the lonely parts of fieldwork feel significantly less lonely.

The people I got to know

These people who I got to know, and whose lives and practices make up the bulk of my data, will be introduced in more detail in the following chapters, though there are a few important characteristics and characters I'd like to highlight here. The people who appear, as well as some who were important and influential to me and my work but did not make it into the dissertation at length, are students, itinerant workers, salesclerks, lawyers, entrepreneurs, television personalities, and personal trainers. Some work in offices, some work in gyms, and some work in co-working office spaces. Some travel extensively for work both within Beijing and around mainland China, while others rarely leave a one or two kilometer radius of their workplace and home. They range in education level from middle-school-educated to doctorate-degree holders; they range in income from 2000 RMB a month to more than people were willing to admit. For example, lawyers who work for international law firms and live in Beijing make around \$180,000 USD per year (~95,000 RMB per month), with some additional adjustments for living abroad. A manager of a small gym reported earning 10,000 RMB a month, while others who worked as managers of small teams for international businesses and brands reported making around 20,000 RMB a month. However, monthly income is not always the most consequential element of living in Beijing. Graduate students, for instance, have access to government-subsidized dormitories. Though they live four to a room, this significantly reduces the financial

and temporal limitations of rent and commuting. In the appendices, I've compiled several tables detailing costs of daily life, based on my field research, in order to provide some insight into the costs of practicing certain doings.

Most people I spent time with were aged 18-35. Few were native to Beijing, and some were not native to China. They include a range of English and Chinese speakers, as well as various other languages. English speakers included foreigners from English-speaking countries who spoke English as their native language, foreigners from non-English speaking countries who spoke English as a second or third language, Chinese nationals who had studied or traveled abroad and spoke English with varying degrees of comfort, and Chinese nationals who had limited to no experience abroad but still spoke English with varying degrees of comfort. Mandarin speakers included Chinese nationals who spoke Mandarin as their first or only language/dialect, Chinese nationals who spoke both Mandarin and a dialect equally or relatively equally comfortably, Chinese nationals who spoke Mandarin as their second or third language/dialect, foreigners who spoke Mandarin with varying degrees of fluency, and foreigners who spoke little to no Mandarin (or other forms of Chinese, for that matter). This diversity of language background and fluency was consequential and important in many ways; the sheer amount of difference indexed by this list and an earlier description of the variety of people in Beijing serves to emphasize the amount of social work that must go into the establishment of a confluence of terms. English speakers, regardless of place of origin, nearly always used the term "community" as a description of the groups in which they were a part (distinguished by gym, activity, company, and so on). For example, people who play ultimate frisbee would refer to other people who play frisbee as part of "the frisbee community." They also used "community" as an effective catchall to explain their investment in a particular space

or a particular group. Having a “community,” specifically a “good community” was desirable and advertised by gyms, restaurants, and various hobby groups alike. Someone might explain that they invested (time, money) in a particular place (gym, studio, restaurant) because of the community. In Mandarin, participants used *shetuan* (social group) in similar ways, occasionally describing “good community” in terms of *tuandui* (team, teamwork). Some form of this - *shetuan*, *tuandui*, or community - was used by nearly all of the people I spoke to, regardless of whether or not they were participating in exercise. Next to health, it was the single most cited reason or explanation for selecting a certain place to exercise and/or type of exercise. In other words, English and Mandarin-speakers alike deployed the same two to three terms, in no small part due to their interactions with each other, in reference to the ways in which their play embedded them in social connectedness.

There was a group of young graduates from Beijing University of Chemical Technology (*beihuagong*) who had met in university, mostly through a cycling club, and who had remained in Beijing after graduation. They occasionally got together for dinners and planned sports excursions (long-distance hiking and cycling trips) during longer holidays. I met them through Jiucui, a friend of a friend, who invited me to come watch them run the Spartan Race (an obstacle course combined with a short running race) in September of 2017.³ Afterwards, we went to dinner and they added me to a WeChat group that was renamed “Beijing Welcomes You.” From then on, I referred to this group of friends as the “Beijing Welcomes You” group (here, the BUCT group). Though I didn’t know it at the time, my conversations with them - now graduate students, insurance salesmen, management consultants - laid the groundwork for how ordinary (active) people, who cycled and ran and hiked, joined the world of lifting weights, personal

³ The names of people, gyms, and companies have all been changed.

training, and eating vacuum-sealed chicken by the kilogram. They also introduced me to the Spartan Race as a phenomenon in China before it became a much bigger phenomenon, in just the short two years I lived in China. There was also a group of young women (Anna, Leah, Sarah, Zuoyi, Momo, and Fanny, among others) who I met through ultimate frisbee. Some are/were foreigners living in Beijing, while others were from other provinces but working in the city. They introduced me to the world of ultimate frisbee through introductions and provided access to behind-the-scenes workings of organizing and producing space for frisbee as captains and community organizers (through the Beijing Ultimate Community - BUC). These women have remained close friends long after I left the field. Chin and Alicia are two young women I met at a roundtable for entrepreneurs and others working in the fitness industry in Beijing. At the time, Chin worked for Active Woman, an Australian fitness apparel brand for women, and Alicia worked for MangoFit, a monthly subscription that offered users access to a variety of gyms and fitness studios across cities in Asia (including Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong). They were both the sole employees of their companies working in Beijing and were trying to get their respective programs off the ground; later, both hired second and third employees. Neither are still with those companies. They are both around my age and worked flexible hours in flexible locations and graciously allowed me to come along to their meetings with gyms and studios to discuss partnerships and collaborations. Much of Alicia's work involved finding organizations to join their network of locations to offer clients. MangoFit takes a small cut and it helps get people into gyms and studio classes that may otherwise not fill up. Chin wanted to work with "healthy" partners to advertise her fitness brand. Both had spent time abroad - Alicia in the UK and Chin in the US - and spoke English comfortably. Our conversations were predominantly in Mandarin, splattered with certain topics or words in English. They were also both comfortable switching

between Chinese and Western food, particularly “healthy” Western food like raw salads and quinoa. They are considered overseas returnees (*haiwaihuigui*) - referring specifically to young people who have completed education or some professional training abroad and have returned to mainland China for work. This group of people are cosmopolitan, comfortable in international settings, and often seek the kinds of leisure and entertainment that were accessible to them abroad; for example, most purchase VPN programs and services to be able to access Facebook and Instagram. Finally, Eric is a middle-school educated group class instructor who taught group fitness classes as a freelancer at several different fitness studios and gyms in Beijing. He has been working since he was 13 and moved to Beijing a few years ago; at the time we met, he lived in a small room with an aunt, who was really a friend of the family. He is part of the large population of mobile, flexible, and incredibly precariously employed people working in the service industry and other peripheral industries in Beijing. These are some of the important characters who feature in following chapters, but they also represent some of the variety in terms of nationality, education, and background of the people I got to know.

Setting

My research took place across broad swaths of Beijing, from the suburban outer districts of Shunyi, Tongzhou, and Daxing, to the narrow, winding *hutongs* in the heart of “old Beijing,” or what once was enclosed within the old city walls (roughly, subway Line 2). Unlike many traditional anthropological projects conceived and sited in a particular place (for example, in China, Fei 1939, Ruf 1998, and Zhang 2001), and like contemporary projects that have traced people and material objects through space (Tsing 2015; West 2012), my research followed wherever people gathered. For Tsing, this meant forests, restaurants, markets and research institutes; for me, it was gyms, parks, fields, restaurants, cafeterias, classrooms, and homes.

Over the course of building my research network, getting to know people and their practices, and conducting my research, I traversed most of Beijing. I selected Beijing for several reasons. As the capital, it has been the beneficial recipient of uneven development and investment across mainland China. The two most prestigious universities, Peking University and Qinghua University, are located in Haidian District, along with several other famous universities, including my host school, Beijing Normal University. Large development projects, including two Olympics games (2012 and 2022), require labor of all kinds. Much of the start-up and entrepreneurial scene in China is based in Beijing. Foreign ventures and students concentrate in Beijing and Shanghai. In short, people from all over China and all over the world can be found in this city. My interest in change and the doings of young people, particularly how this maps onto migration and global flows, made this city a “sensible” choice. More personally, I love Beijing. I have been part of the flow of foreigners - expatriate, study abroad student, English teacher, non-profit volunteer, tourist - to the city. I have studied it extensively in my coursework, and I feel acutely the possibilities of living there. These past experiences helped me build networks that I leveraged to meet people, pointed me to places to look for ethnographic serendipity, and provided a context within which I could notice the strange, unfamiliar, and new.

For the first year, I lived in Daxing, in a dorm room at a non-profit middle school for non-local children. The largest physical trainer (PT) training center in Beijing, Saiyan, was located four bus stops away from my dorm room in a complex that included several tall buildings with classrooms, dorm rooms, training rooms, and cafeterias. It, as well as other centers like it, took advantage of the relatively open space, readily available development, and various degrees of government support in the outer-lying districts in order to attract students who wanted to live and work in Beijing. Aspiring physical trainers came from all over China to take courses (around

ten weeks) at Saiyan, after which they would be “qualified” to find work as a personal trainer or group class instructor.⁴ The middle school was located in an urban village that, for much of the past five years, has been in various states of *chaiqian* (demolition) and was just outside of the southern fifth ring road. In Beijing, distance from the center is readily measured by rings. In some cases, one-story buildings or store-front carts were demolished only to be left alone for years, with nothing built to take its place. Most people there were not local to Beijing, and though the demolition of buildings in the village and in surrounding villages encouraged some to leave Daxing and Beijing (either to return “home” or to move elsewhere), some stayed and some more moved in to take up residence amongst the buildings still standing amidst the rubble. These urban villages that were not yet fully demolished and also not yet re-developed stood out among the increasingly common apartment complexes built in Daxing. A few of the teachers at the school bought or rented apartments in these nearby developments. All of the “far” districts were similar in this way, a hodgepodge mix of neighborhoods including clusters of tall, high-rise apartment buildings, many newly built, well-kept one or two story complexes, many newly renovated and occupied by local Beijing-ers, and temporary-looking housing often rented out to and occupied by non-local workers.⁵ As the “city” of Beijing has expanded outwards, these outer districts have become attractive places for more affordable housing, both for purchase (by young,

⁴ Qualifications in contemporary China, across a spread of sectors, is most easily assessed by coursework and the evidence of having completed a course. In addition to exam preparation, people take courses (*baoban*) for art, languages, cooking, and how to teach other people how to train in the gym. The certificate of completion awarded at the close of such courses provides a material artifact of qualification.

⁵ For reference, most of those who lived within the second and third ring roads fairly, if ever, venture outside of the third ring. Though many people who work in Beijing live beyond the fourth and fifth rings in more affordable rentals further from the city center, the common refrain to hearing where I lived was, “That’s really far!”

professional couples) and for rent. Most commute into Beijing “proper” (within the fourth ring) for work, undertaking two to three hour round-trip commutes.

When I lived in Daxing, I regularly spent 3-4 hours in transit each day, mostly on subways. My field notes are filled with descriptions of the different routes I took and obstacles I faced while en route. I took a bus (15 minutes), “bread car” (*mianbaoche*, a trolley-like car that could seat approximately 8 people), or a black cab to the Line 4 subway station. From there, I stuffed myself onto a subway car (during rush hour, cars on the lines that service the outer districts are packed tightly, with no considerations for my American sensibilities of personal space) and stood or sat until my stop or my transfer stop. There was a lot of waiting, and watching, which seems obvious in retrospect but which took me utterly by surprise in the beginning of fieldwork. Along with everywhere else, the in-between waiting I did on busses, subways, taxis, and trains were also part of my setting.

In my second year of fieldwork, I found a two-bedroom apartment right off of the Andingmen subway station on Line 2. My commute to most places and most people suddenly decreased from an hour or two to 20-30 minutes. My budget also significantly decreased, as did my time - my previous dorm room, though small, was easy to clean, and had no kitchen for me to cook in nor a bathroom for me to tidy up. In my new apartment, I had more space and privacy, as well as more responsibilities. I found myself suddenly a resident of “the city,” and less eager and willing to make hour long commutes. Proximity to the center, according to my fellow second-ring neighbors, made one loathe to leave it. In this second year, I hosted many dinners, potlucks, and parties; many of the people I got to know in the course of fieldwork came through to visit. Sometimes, we did yoga after dinner. One time, we fielded a visit from the police at two in the morning. My apartment was also part of my setting.

I spent much of my active research time in gyms, fields, restaurants, and classrooms. I visited over 70 different gyms and studios in Beijing (and a handful in Changsha, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hong Kong), four parks, eight soccer / ultimate frisbee fields, seven universities, and more restaurants than I can reliably count. In particular, I spent significant portions of time at a few locations with a few groups of people. From November 2017 to February 2018, I spent three to four days a week at a small group class-only fitness studio right next to Beijing Normal University. From December 2017 to July 2018, I spent several days a week with Alicia and Chin. At first, both rented desks in a co-working space similar to WeWork in the Central Business District and spent most days visiting gyms, studios, and restaurants to strike up potential partnerships. Later, after Chin opened the flagship showroom for her employer (an Australian fitness apparel company for women) near the Guomao subway station in the Central Business District, we spent much of our time in the office of this showroom, her apartment, and the gym downstairs (QiangFit Fitness). During this same span of time, I also followed several CrossFit gyms, called “boxes,” in Beijing and spent five to ten hours each week at various boxes taking classes, interviewing people, and hanging out in the space. From spring 2018 to spring 2019, I played and observed people play ultimate frisbee 2-3 times a week, most weeks, on the rugby fields of an international school in Shunyi, the polo club fields in Chaoyang, the turf fields within the track at Qinghua University (Zijing field), and the Capital Sports University turf soccer fields by Zhichunlu subway station. I went to tournaments in Nanjing, Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong and also spent time both online and offline with a few women from the frisbee team every week from spring 2018 to summer 2019. Finally, beginning in September 2017, I attended several Spartan Races, participated in one, and joined in Race bootcamps weekly from February 2018 to June 2018. The races were located in Fengtai district, in the west of Beijing, and the

bootcamps were located at several gyms. The one that had the most regular Spartan Race based classes was the aforementioned QiangFit.

In order to achieve being with people, a lot of the work of fieldwork occurred on WeChat, a popular messaging device in China. The anthropological field has expanded from the village in diffuse and diverse ways; Geertz's (1973) classic piece on Balinese cockfighting recalls an organization of events that relied on word of mouth. He could hear and see the event unfolding simply by nature of living in the village. In contrast, much of my work unfolded, at least in part, over WeChat. This messaging application is central to social and work organization in contemporary China and is a contributing limitation (and possibility) to how young people connect. It combines messaging functions (one-on-one conversations as well as group conversations) with personal and professional updates via "Moments," a function that allows users to post links, articles, pictures, and text to their feed, and that allows users to browse the "moments" of their "friends" on WeChat. The WeChat Official Account feature allows users and businesses to create and manage an official account with blog posts, advertisements and marketing specials, contact information, payment options, and self-service options. The latter is achieved through "mini-programs" that companies can create to allow users to pay bills, hire services, and sign up for events, among other things. In addition to chatting, I used WeChat to add money to my mobile phone, compile articles posted by various gym and fitness studios, stay abreast of ultimate frisbee news and conversations across China, lurk in large group chats where people planned hikes, cycling trips, food tours, and explorations of old abandoned buildings, send mail, and pay (via WeChat Wallet and QR code pay) for all sorts of food and goods and services. I added strangers I met on the street and other strangers I didn't meet but chatted with in large group chats as "friends" on WeChat. People in my network sometimes introduced me to

their friends or family or colleagues by sharing said person's WeChat contact card with me in-app. This platform allowed me to sit in on conversations people had online with known and unknown people on diverse topics, and also allowed me to learn of and sign up for offline events. There are even fitness programs run entirely through WeChat groups and WeChat official accounts, where organizers send meal plans, check-ins, and workouts for followers or participants' use. Other times, WeChat groups provided an additional opportunity to engage with a gym's members. Gym-goers could post pictures of workouts, ask questions, and check-in their meals; these layers of support sometimes enticed members to invite their friends or to purchase more expensive packages in order to reach their gym-going goals.

The ethnographer as subject

In the writing and conceiving of this dissertation, I was of course, not entirely a stranger - not to China, to gyms, to *guanxi* networks, nor to WeChat. I have chosen a few elements of myself to present here, as perhaps consequential to both the *how* and the *what* of my data collection. I am and I look, as my name might suggest and by various accountings of belonging, Chinese. In China, I "pass" as being local, sometimes to China, sometimes even to Beijing. Through a series of fortuitous and peculiar childhood circumstances, my spoken Mandarin is nearly unaccented and, by many accounts, indistinguishable from that of native speakers. However, in certain conversations with certain people, my not-local-ness is revealed, over time. At the same time, I was born and raised in the United States, and I have to my name, one significant American passport. This affords the necessary ease of access and travel, as well as protection from restrictions and limitations placed on local Chinese people by manner of being unable to travel, leave, or study abroad as freely. Both looking Chinese and at the same time, marking myself through speech or jovial flexibility as foreign, opened up opportunities for

meeting people. It was one of the easiest ways to initiate conversations with strangers; many hoped that I could advise them on health and fitness and the health and fitness industry in the Western world. I, in fact, knew very little actively about gyms and exercise. I discovered, over the course of my research, that I'd inadvertently "learned" much and had opinions about much that surprised me. However, as a child, I spent seven years practicing artistic gymnastics. My residual ability to complete pull-ups and do handstands marked me, wrongly I felt, as a skilled and strong body. This reputation preceded me in the latter half of my research, and also opened up conversations with people who wanted me to teach them how to flip upside down. I also appear as a young(er) woman; I found that at times, this encouraged people to teach me what they knew, and at others, made me very difficult to notice at all.

But in more than these demographic ways, my family history has shaped my research and my dissertation. My parents apprenticed me to practices of giving, receiving, and offering gifts and favors through their own example. As a child, when we returned to China to visit our hometown (my father's hometown) in Hunan province, my mother would purchase a new pair of name brand shoes for each cousin. My father prepared infant formula and ginseng. We would return to the United States with suitcases full of tea, dried and pickled vegetables, and Chinese candy. In time, I too joined this circulation of favors, obligations, and debts, as I brought things to China for friends and family, and returned laden with gifts for myself and my parents. At the start of my research, I felt both comfortable with the concept of exchange and unsure of how to navigate these different fields. Paying for a meal or a coffee seemed a proper way to initiate overtures of friendship, though some people quickly taught me that young people nowadays usually go "AA" and split the bill. The colloquial American-English equivalent would be "going dutch." WeChat even has a split bill feature that some friend groups used widely. Others

preferred to rotate who paid, sometimes unevenly depending on sources of income. I was told by several people to bring a small gift when meeting with new professors; however, upon presenting a box of chocolates during my first meeting with a professor at Peking University, he said to me quite frankly that this was not expected, and he'd hoped that being American, I would know that. It was a reminder to me that "general" expectations on practices of giving, receiving, and expecting gifts were, altogether, not so general at all. New encounters throughout fieldwork provided many opportunities to test and learn these expectations and ways of doing, before such awkward and fumbling moments passed and what I did, with each group of people or person, and what I gave and received from them, became altogether ordinary.

Finally, I was able to live and move around China relatively freely due to my funding through the China Studies Fellowship distributed through Hanban. The program falls under the larger Confucius Institute program that seeks to spread Chinese culture and encourage foreigners to study Chinese. My program provided money either for doctoral students at foreign institutes to conduct research and study in China or for foreign students to come and complete their doctoral degree at a Chinese university. Through this fellowship, in addition to a living stipend, I was also provided with the structural framework within which I could apply for and receive a student visa, which allowed me to stay in mainland China for the entirety of the year without leaving. I was required to apply to a specific university and to select a professor with whom to work; my *daoshi* (advisor) at Beijing Normal University works on education and specifically focuses on physical education and health and fitness standards. His guidance and the work of my student group, including weekly presentations on our work-in-progress, provided me a place to see the negotiations that shape research questions and their results.

Translation

In both my field research and the writing of my dissertation, the issue of translation - of words, concepts, and all the different kinds of thinginess and practices that comprise what we might begin to describe as culture(s) - has been a constant source of consternation. Both I and my participants considered myself mostly fluent in Mandarin; even so, I was constantly engaged in the process of learning new terms, new slang, new modes of expression and layers of meaning that alternated between being just at the cusp of my understanding and and completely over my head. But given that complete understanding is not possible, that we are all making do with the shared knowledge and evidence we do have, even with friends and family and intimate partners, writing about data that I gathered primarily in Mandarin is a difficult task. This is further frustrated by the number of foreign participants I had, some of whom did not speak English as their first language, and by the number of overseas returnees who chose to speak in English or regularly slipped into English to discuss certain topics. After attempts to take notes in a mix of Chinese/pinyin, as well as in English/Chinese, I settled on looser translations in my notes of general descriptive information, with more Chinese/Mandarin for concepts and terms. I noted when participants used various terms for fitness and exercise in its various permutations, as well as made note of when I needed explanations for newer concepts. In recorded interviews conducted in Mandarin, I asked participants to define terms when possible. When parts of the notes included WeChat or other online messages, it was possible to copy and paste direct excerpts from the chat to supplement my notes. However, even in this process, I was already engaged in the loose work of translation; I made conscious decisions regarding what I wrote down, what I made note of, what I translated on the spot, and what I took notes on in English versus notated in Chinese. CrossFit for example, is 交叉性运动 (*jiaochaxing yundong*) or literally “cross exercise”; however, even for Mandarin speakers, all referred to this form of

exercise by its English name, “CrossFit.” Additionally, my observation notes were primarily written in English, with the exception of making notes about Chinese-language signs, advertisements, or conversations around me. Even my initial orientation to space was in English.

It is difficult, then to pinpoint specific meanings for each of these words, but the written dissertation demands nuance, specification, and a definition of terms. I describe my research in English in terms of “fitness and health,” though in Chinese, it is perhaps better described as “fitness and exercise behaviors and habits” (*jianshen xingwei, yudongxiguan*). When I refer to fitness, I am referencing the term *jianshen* (to build the body). It is used also in the terms for gym (*jianshenfang**), gym/fitness equipment (*jianshenqicai*, often used without the fitness part, as just *qicai*), and fitness trainer or coach (*jianshenjiaolian*, also often used in context without the first portion). Though *jianshen* refers generally to fitness and gym-going activities, like cardiovascular exercises and yoga, it is also used specifically to designate weightlifting (literally, *juzhong* or colloquially *lutie*), and sometimes used in tandem with the term for bodybuilding (*jianmei*, literally translated as “building beauty,” i.e. *jianshenjianmei*). This term is also found in related terms such as *jianmeicao* - directly translated as “body building exercises” and refers to the choreographed morning exercises most commonly seen in Chinese public schools and in small squares, performed by, for the most part, older Chinese women. Other common terms for weightlifting include *lutie* (pick up iron) and *juzhong* (lift weight). Closely related, sometimes used interchangeably while other times not, is *duanlian* (practice, or exercise) or *duanlianshenti* (exercise the body). Sometimes, but not always, a separation is made between fitness (*jianshen*), exercise (*yundong*), and physical activity or sports (*tiyu*). All, according to the central government issued guidelines, the “Healthy China 2020” and “Healthy China 2030” documents,

constitute activities and practices that are programmatically encouraged in order to improve Chinese citizen's health outcomes and reduce sedentary behavior (*jiuzuo*).

Conclusion

Putting my methods to paper, contextualizations included, still makes order and sense out of much of the randomness, wandering, and serenity of being in the field. It is a necessary work of writing. Still, I want to conclude with another walk through Beijing. The ordering of data excludes many little stories. Early in my fieldwork, I followed Jiucai and Fengzi from the BUCT group into an old abandoned building, reportedly a church, north of the last stop on Line 4. It was located inexplicably on the grounds of a hospital complex. Our goal was to “explore” this old complex, and of course, photo-document this exploration to show the friends who couldn't make it later on WeChat. This building was half in ruins and in order to enter, we had to climb a rickety ladder and through a window. Armed with flashlights, long-sleeves and pants, and snacks, we wandered through this building and noted all the signs and, significantly, lack of signs of the people who'd come before us. Inside, we ran into three other groups of intrepid adventurers; one had yelled at us from an open floor above, pointing us to the aforementioned ladder-window entrance. Aside from greetings and giggles, we mostly moved around each other. Our group picked up trash when we saw it in order to preserve this space “as we found it.” Fengzi told us about the principle, shared by the members of the WeChat group that compiled abandoned places for exploration, including, amazingly enough, an abandoned amusement park somewhere in Beijing. In this way, the spaces themselves were a production of continued abandonment, through the practices of preservation of those who came through. Old trash, viewed as “originally there” was left behind, while new trash was picked up. It was an afternoon spent leisurely on subways and shared bikes and wandering through old buildings, followed by a

dinner of baked wings and noodle soup at a small shop near the subway station. It was also an affordable afternoon - 14 RMB for round trip transportation fare and less than 60 RMB for dinner and snacks. Fengzi offered to organize something in the near future, but though we often met up for dinner, frisbee, or drinking, we never went to another abandoned building. I think of this day occasionally - it was planned on short notice, with people I'd at the time just met, and reminded me of the wild possibilities available for doing. The very practice of planning an excursion to re-discover that which has been discovered, excavated, and continually preserved by an unending stream of young people inspired me to think of leisure and play in terms of serendipity and labor. There is a lot of organization that goes into the maintenance of these spaces, across diffuse groups of people. The WeChat group is filled with young people, foreigners, students, professionals - all of whom have stumbled upon this form of play and who have added it to their repertoire of leisure. It reminds me that there are many odd and creative ways for people to play. In thinking about my research and specifically this dissertation project, the "Explore Beijing" group provides a way to look at how WeChat groups bring people together online and offline. Other such groups exist as well (hiking, cycling, running), and people use them to meet each other in order to play, or work, if exercise is considered work, together. These groups transgress easy boundaries, commonly drawn along the commonsensical lines of gender, class, and race, and make possible meetings that could otherwise not come to be. This possibility, for connection in a multiplicity of spaces, the expansion of social networks, and the formation of consequential lateral *guanxi* networks (with peers rather than superiors) is the focal point of my dissertation.



Figure 1: Mobikes in Beijing, Winter 2018.

Chapter 2: The body is the foundation of the revolution

It is twilight. People bustle through the streets, ducking into shops or pausing at stalls to make their purchases before moving towards home, wherever that might be. Others, young and old, meander through the streets on a pre or post-dinner walk. Everywhere, there is noise and movement; it is the end of the day. And without fail, in a small side garden, the village square, the steps in front of the mall, or even the driveway leading up to the gate of a local school, there are people (older and female, mostly) dancing. Colloquially known as *guangchangwu* (literally, dance that occurs in the square), it is a recognizable and visible element of public life in China. This very public performance and practice prompts the question - when and how did people start dancing together in this way? I have asked the same questions about a range of public and private practices, from the Spartan Race and ultimate frisbee, to group cycling classes and personal training courses. My entry into fieldwork coincided serendipitously with what seemed to be a rather sudden uptick in public, general interest in particular forms of health and exercise - that is, health in the language and assessment measures of science, with referents such as BMI, metabolism, and oxygen, and exercise in close proximity with other people in social spaces outside the home. This popularity has also coincided with government-sponsored research and policies on the relationship between exercise and health. Just as *guangchangwu* is part of a larger, historical phenomenon of group social practices in public spaces, mostly for older women aged 45-65 (Seetoo and Zou 2016), these newer practices are a way for younger people to gather, make, and maintain relationships outside the spheres of work and family; they are also part of a set of practices that produce healthy bodies.

This second chapter is, in a sense, an exploration of beginnings. Everything, after all, has a beginning. The difficulties of grasping hold of a specific moment that constitutes a beginning

aside, I am interested in a specific kind of historically consequential beginning: that moment when health and exercise became tied together in direct relationship. From Maoist-era discourse tying the nation to peasant bodies, to sports education and assessment in public schools, to most recently, the Healthy China 2030 plan, the language of health, science, and nation mark bodies as both communal and individual entities. Policies, research findings, and even the observable practices of fitness themselves are easily abstracted, in their written forms, from the people, work, and negotiations that went into their production (Greenhalgh 2008; Latour 2005). Researchers, policy-makers, and program-implementers look at collective bodies through measurable assessments, in terms of health variables and outcomes. Meanwhile, these articulated statements become available for everyday actors to play with and respond to, providing a language and a space for legitimate participation. In this chapter, I look at research initiatives from the vantage point of my research group at Beijing Normal University and how state-articulated plans shape research initiatives and interventions that then feed back into official policies. I discuss the interaction between state policies and guidelines for fitness (like Healthy China 2030) and people's responses in order to 1) conceptualize "the state" as a network of actors, contested negotiations, and articulated (though not always implemented) statements; 2) argue that this creates a discursive field that sets the parameters and terms with which people then interact and to which they can respond; and 3) re-frame "the state" as sets of practices that make statements that elicit a response. This is important. Human beings are constantly borrowing, appropriating, making, and doing in response to the conditions they face and "thereby making themselves anew - not reproduction, but history" (Boas, via Varenne 2019). The role of "the state" in articulating and making the conditions within which people live thus makes some

of the people who comprise “the state” (local sports administrators, budgeters, health researchers, Olympic committee members) consequential to know.

The legacy of Mao Zedong, Christian missions, and SARS

One beginning is the formation (or particular events surrounding the formation) of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. In the years leading up to 1949 and immediately after, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) finished up a long, bloody civil war and began to set up a government. Some of the ideas behind this new government had been formed decades earlier; in Mao Zedong’s 1917 essay on physical education, he critiqued the custom of wearing clothing that discouraged or hindered movement and the culture that valued a “strong mind” over a “strong body” by associating strength of body with feebleness of mind (Chen 2003). Prior even to this and the wave of “new” thinking among young radicals and revolutionaries in the May Fourth movement was the introduction of sports, physical exercise, and physical education to China by Western Christian Missionaries and YMCA programs (Zhang 2015). The importance of sport - heavily influenced by the legacy of Christian missions work and several waves of radical modernizing thought that swept through China as well as the rest of the world in the 1910’s and mid-1990’s - has continued to this day. Similar threads can be found in Mao’s infamous *shangshanxiang* (up into the mountains and down into the countryside) movement during the Cultural Revolution, where young people were encouraged and later mandated to spend years in China’s vast rural countryside to learn from the ways of peasants. This included in no small part the active participation of city youth in the toiling and demanding physical labor of farming and village life. The language of the bourgeoisie versus peasant and of the importance of the body as an epistemological tool⁶ takes direct inspiration from the foreign theories of Marxism

⁶ Another example is the use of forced labor “re-education” camps for those branded as “rightists” or “capitalists.”

and Leninism. At the same time, however, sport itself was not free from the machinations of the Cultural Revolution. Lumped together with media, education, and culture, sport was framed as another political battleground for elites to assert control and dominance over the masses. The Sports Ministry was purged, sports schools were closed, sports competitions were indefinitely canceled, and Chinese teams vanished from international competitions. Aside from table tennis, sports teams were disbanded; later, sport, via table tennis, again became a focal point in Chinese and international politics via “Ping-pong Diplomacy” in 1970 (Fan and Lu 2012; Spence 1990). In recent Chinese history, sports and sport organization has often been directly politicized. It was a way for elite athletes to travel the world and escape from (or indulge in) the restrictions within Communist China, at the expense of investment in exercise for the health of ordinary people, a site of contestation and accusation by Mao and his “leftists” against perceived enemies, a way to bypass direct diplomatic channels between the United States and China after a decade of silence, and a way, broadly defined, of representing the health of the nation via a strong, robust, and “modern” body (Lu 2016). Various actors played roles in these events - Mao, of course, as well as ministry officials, athletes (both Chinese and international), foreign diplomats, and the discursive field of Communism put out into the world by the likes of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. Today, this continues in different forms.⁷

Organized sports and exercise differs from physical or sports education in that the latter is restricted to the purview of formal education and schools. Though YMCA and sports education programs were popular, they also underwent a process of “indigenization” when their administration was taken over by Nationalist government, based in Nanjing, from 1928-1937. A set amount of mandatory physical education was incorporated into the education system in 1929

⁷ For example, other articles and discourse frame China as a place with a “culturally rooted lifestyle that encourages participation in outdoor physical activity” (Lv, et al. 2015).

(Zhang, Hong, and Huang 2018), though formal education was not yet easily accessible to all. While sports (referring to the practice, either recreationally or competitively, of playing a particular sport, like basketball or soccer), exercise (referring more broadly to practices defined as exercise, such as non-competitive running and weightlifting and yoga), and physical education (generally referring to the narrow band of sport and exercise mandated in public schools) have distinct referents in English and in the West, the popular Chinese language term for much of the past 100 or so years combines all three together as *tiyu*. This has played a direct role in inefficient use and misappropriation of funds and limited the development of these three distinct spheres; for example, funds set aside for physical education have, in the past, often been allocated to sport competitions. Physical education post-reform and opening ups has undergone several waves of standardization, beginning with a series of laws, studies, and assessments in the mid to late 1990's. It has undergone continuous reform; most recently, technology has been introduced into the university and high school entrance examinations to standardize physical education test scores for students. This test includes running, sit-ups (for women), and pull-ups (for men), as well as other skill and strength based assessments. For both the high school and the university entrance exams, the physical education portion comprises part of the final score, which is measured against school cut-off scores for acceptance. In this way, specific exercises are encouraged and expected of students in the public school system. Those who discontinue their schooling or exit the public school system to enter private schools and/or study abroad, however, are exempt from this education and expectation. At the same time, an investigation into the nation's health in 2002 found that though malnutrition and poverty-related health indices had

§ Reform and opening up (*gaigekaiifang*) refers to a series of economic reforms put into place by then President Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970's. He is credited with leading China's transition from a tightly controlled socialist state to its current varying forms of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

improved, Chinese people were now increasingly suffering from health conditions like hypertension, type-2 diabetes, and obesity. All are related to high-calorie diets and sedentary lifestyles (conversely described as a decrease in physical activity). The year prior, the Chinese Ministry of Education had published national standards for all subjects, including physical education, and in the following year, it published a brief on fitness methods instructing educators on how to achieve said fitness standards, measured predominantly via biometrics and certain assessments developed to assess variables like cardiovascular fitness (Liang, Walls, and Lu 2005).

These efforts in the 2000's correlate with the SARS epidemic, which infected more than 5,300 and killed 349 people in China (Huang 2004). In the months and years following, there was much attention, from both without and within, paid to how the country responded to the public health crisis, its impact, and how to better address future epidemics.⁹ This marked a distinct discursive shift linking the health of individual Chinese citizens with the health of the nation (Fidler 2004). The aftermath of SARS epidemic also saw an increase in the use of the language of science in discussions of health and exercise, as well as an increase in the use of scientific methods to assess and promote “healthy” behavior among Chinese people (for example, see Lv et al. 2015). Additionally, as Chinese governance methods have moved away from centralized planning post-reform and moved towards a mix of its own blend of public-private partnerships (Osburg 2013; Zhang and Ong 2008; Zhang 2010), the state rarely imposes strict top-down policies for lower bureaus and administrations to carry out. Instead, the state issues statements and goals towards which local and provincial governments, as well as businesses and organizations hoping to garner government funding and support, must work. In

⁹ I am sure that in the coming months and years, there will be much more to be said about the present COVID-19 pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China.

the context of my work, this is an open space of possibility for people to interpret, enact, employ, and respond to what the state has said, as well as a space of ambiguity that imposes unarticulated limitations.

Healthy China 2030 and the work of the “state”

Most recently, on October 25, 2016, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China passed an “Outline for the ‘Healthy China 2030’ Plan,” colloquially known as Healthy China 2030.¹⁰ An ambitious plan with 29 detailed chapters covering public health services, the environment, the medical industry, and food and drug safety, it was released to all bureaus of government at the provincial, township, and local levels, requesting them to “conscientiously implement it in light of the actual situation.” It aims to bring China’s national health standard up on par with that of “developed” nations by 2030. It was also a response to realizing the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; comprehensive indices for various assessments (including health and lifestyle outcomes) and targets for life expectancy and infant mortality rates by 2020 and 2030 are clearly articulated (Tan, Wu, and Shao 2018).¹¹ These are the stated

¹⁰ This follows an earlier plan called Healthy China 2020, published in 2009 (Hu, Liu, and Willett 2011).

¹¹ Even the article cited above by Tan, Wu, and Shao (2018) is part of this process, at least in China; as researchers situated in time and space at a Chinese university, their paper is simply a translation of the plan, introducing it to public health and policy scholars outside of China. Their overall assessment of the plan is overwhelmingly positive - the politics of censorship and academic publishing particular to China demands it to be so.

As in any place, there are institutional and social norms guiding academic publishing (and thus, in some ways, knowledge production). In China, all graduate students are required by the university to have a certain number of publications before they are eligible to graduate. This requirement is applied to all students, in all departments, and all disciplines. Some specifics of these requirements (number and prestige of journal) might vary from university to university. Master’s students at Beijing Normal University, my host university in Beijing, must have at least one published article prior to graduation. Doctoral students are required to have at least two published articles. These articles must be in a journals of a specific caliber or higher (there are several measures in China, but a common colloquial reference of “standard” is *hexinqikan* which refers to a collection of peer-reviewed journals).

goals and aims of the Healthy China 2030 plan - it can best be described as a set of guidelines, which broadly support a range of programs and activities and provides a framework within which actors in the health and fitness industry can negotiate and reference for their own goals. The government no longer directly influences the market, but it can and does issue such statements that make clear its priorities and thus lets the market know what kinds of projects would be most likely to be approved for government-backed loans.

Various anthropologists, however, have pointed out that policies and initiatives such as this cannot be taken as a congruent whole or at face-value as the machinations of “the state.” Greenhalgh (2008) investigated the people, negotiations, and historical circumstances behind the One Child Policy in China; her analysis challenges popular conceptions of and rhetorical references to “the state” as a largely monolithic and congruent entity. Her ethnography of the people, spaces, and factions behind the One Child Policy reveal the peculiar historicity of policy-making. In retrospect, it is easier to see how this policy was implemented and articulated on local levels in sometimes paradoxical ways. The ability of certain groups of people to get around the one-child restriction, for example, has been well-documented in work on rural, ethnic, and migrant families. Koyama (2010)’s work on how local and state policies impacted after-school

Given a proliferation of famous professors adding their students’ names onto their papers and scandals of graduate processes being very *shui* (watery), it has become harder both for less well known professors (and students themselves) to get published in high-ranking journals and more difficult for professors to help their students achieve their graduation requirement. One example of this is a limitation on how many authors can be on a single paper (varies from discipline to discipline). Without meeting this requirement, students are not eligible to defend their master’s or doctoral thesis. However, publication in an English language international journal bypasses the otherwise increasingly stringent Chinese-language journal parameters. These requirements have impacted academic writing practices in some important ways. If possible, research data (or summaries of policies, in this case) are published in English-language journals. Students have first or second author publications that they had relatively little hand in researching or writing. And above all else, given the weight given to higher level administrative power in Chinese universities - under which all of the largest and most prestigious are public universities and receive government subsidies - academics self-censor. These are the particular lens through which I read Chinese-language academic literature in related disciplines and additionally, English-language literature published by scholars currently living and working in Mainland China.

educational programs looked at the ways in which policies often have unintended consequences and how different actors are capable of taking advantage of their particular circumstances to exploit funding and favourable conditions in order to make students' failure "pay." In her work, she found that NCLB legitimized and normalized private educational companies' roles in public education, with dire results that did nothing to address its intended goal of eliminating school failure. Still others (Feldman 2014; Middleton 2011) have written on how the work of policy creates its own language within which people must live and respond. In this sense, policies can be seen as articulations or statements made by a governing body, statements that form a particular discursive field within which ordinary actors reside and to which they can, or must, respond.

The work of such policies or "guidelines," of course, is intimately tied to projects of nation-building and the extension of power across diffuse spaces (see Anderson 1983, Brownell 1995, Siu and McGovern 2017). As the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics looms in the horizon, various agencies, both state-run and otherwise, are caught up in the massive production of what is both a large-scale international sports competition and a public display of national resource and power.¹² The tremendous amount of labor necessary for this production also opens up conditions of possibility for those living in its wake.¹³ Aside from the construction workers required to build physical spaces, marketing associates billed to generate emotional associations with those spaces, and the assortment of vendors called upon to staff, feed, decorate, clean, and

¹² Brownell (1995) has written in the past on the ways in which public sports competitions are a platform for and articulation of the nation.

¹³ Such possibility is also fraught and uneven; the 2012 Olympics were used as reason to conduct an intensive sweep of Beijing's urban villages. Large indoor and outdoor markets were closed and some were never reopened. Possibilities generated by the Olympics were limited to certain "kinds" of people in Beijing - those who, in various ways, had a "right" (*vis a vis hukou* or employment or marriage) to be there.

produce the space, Healthy China 2030 (and its subsidiary projects) requires everyone, altogether, everywhere to join in the work required for a healthy nation. Money has been set aside for the development of parks and large exercise centers and to bolster the consumption of skiing, as well as other winter sports, as a leisure activity. Policy and programmatic efforts encourage the proliferation of gyms, studios, and regular exercise habits. Local and provincial governments have joined in the fray. Healthy China 2030, along with physical education goals, research, and healthcare reform, is simply one of the many parameters by which people can strategize and assess the things that they're trying to do. All of this allows for ordinary people, including some of the people I got to know through the course of fieldwork, to co-opt official language and resources for their own articulated and unarticulated goals, and in the process, to shape and change the landscapes within which they move.

Possible responses and consequential people to know

In broad strokes, these various historical circumstances and state responses provide the contextual backdrop against which the particularities of research and education, directly or indirectly shaped by policy, can be investigated vis a vis the lens of strategies and practice. Healthy China 2030, for example, has been the subject of evaluative academic articles and research inquiry into state actions (Tan, Wu, and Shao 2018) as well as the justification for the importance of certain research articles (Wu et al. 2019). In Beijing, as part of my fellowship through Hanban, I worked with a professor in the Collaborative Innovation Center of Assessment for Basic Education Quality; specifically, he and his research group worked on subjects falling under the broad umbrella of “physical education,” of which, for example, chess was a part. As part of this work, they occasionally referenced the Healthy China 2030 initiative, as well as other policy statements and public health programs, to highlight the importance of health in

contemporary Chinese society. This includes both the prevalence of the understanding that people living in Chinese society today are unhealthy (as measured via indices such as Body Mass Index or BMI to check for obesity, blood sugar levels to ascertain diabetes, and cardio-respiratory endurance and health to assess overall physical fitness) and the need for scientific (*kexue*) programs and practices to improve the health of Chinese people. Moreover, the research institute itself worked closely with national assessment programs piloted by the Ministry of Education. Established in 2007, the National Assessment of Education Quality is conducted annually, rotating through two of six subjects each year. In 2019, it was math and physical education (Wu et al. 2019). Members of the institute (students, professors, administrative staff) are part of the work in carrying out the assessment, providing feedback on the construction of assessment measures, visiting sites to oversee data gathering itself, and ultimately, for reporting and making sense of the copious amounts of data gathered into a national database housed at the Center. In this context, the language of the official statements made by the state is particularly important; this language provides a script for researchers, assessment coordinators, teachers, and staff to reference and deploy in the carrying out of their professional and personal duties. The language of physical health and of the importance of building a healthy nation is echoed in the assessment test, its handbook (providing detailed instructions and work parameters for staff at all levels from local assessment bureaus to specific schools), and in the research findings, policy recommendations, and programmatic outcomes resulting from the assessment data. This is a theme that threads throughout this dissertation.

Some of the important people, playing important roles, can be found here in this network of administration. People working in the Ministry of Education, local education and tourism bureaus, and adjacent offices and organizations - the ones who do and comprise the work of the

“state” - can be consequential to know, especially in the ways that knowledge precedes power. Beyond calling in a favor from a *guanxi* contact, being in relationship with some of these people affords a certain kind of knowledge - knowledge of upcoming changes, the keywords of funding organizations or projects, and the person or people to speak with in a particular situation, to name a few - that directly impact the options and opportunities available. In chapter four, I discuss Xiaohua and how he leveraged personal connections and a particularly good knowledge of “how things work” to organize an ultimate frisbee tournament in Hainan; this is just one example of how social relationships and the kinds of knowledge available to people in certain kinds of networks affords possibilities otherwise unthinkable. There are many people playing ultimate frisbee in China, and many who contribute to the development of frisbee in China/East Asia, but few participate in the organization of tournaments and the lobbying of local governments and sports/tourism bureaus for sponsorship and collaboration. Opportunities and how people consider proactive or responsive strategies cannot be divorced from material conditions, as seen in chapter six, which looks at how *hukou* status, familial networks, and economic precarity intersect with broader social networks and impact young people living under precarious conditions in Beijing.

Science in everyday life

The language of health and of a scientific way of assessing and obtaining health (discerned via the methods of science) permeates the practices of ordinary and less ordinary young people living in Beijing; specific examples and detailed examples follow in the later chapters. Science, however, is also not a thing to be taken for granted. It is a production, involving many people, often towards specific and sometimes political ends. This is not to say that science is a social construction and ought not to be taken seriously; rather, anthropology offers a method to examine the methods and framework by which we know and see the world

(Latour 1979). It is also a production in the sense that practice based upon principles or findings from scientific experiments or research can become something new and unexpected. The act of consuming knowledge is simultaneously a practice of production (de Certeau 1984). There is a vast debate amongst different groups (doctors, scientists, dietitians, consumers) regarding proper nutrition and diet. Some of these data are purported to be conclusive; others claim that there's simply much that is unknown. There is less of a debate, though still disagreement, as to the "most scientific" way to exercise. Part of this is rooted in methodology - scientists ask questions such as "how does X mode of exercise impact Y measure of the body?" and report their findings in mostly correlative results. There are large numbers of studies on the potential relationships between exercise and the health of participants (Febbraio 2017; Meredith and Dwyer 1991; Pampel, Krueger, and Denney 2010; Pederson 2019). However, though the general conclusion is that exercise is a positive contributor to overall health, ordinary people want to know which kind of exercise, in what quantity and for how long, is best. I found that people I got to know often claimed that their particular mode was the best or the healthiest in reference to some study, statistic, or even their own unique experience of pre and post-exercise health, measured in various ways, ranging from weight loss to "feeling more energetic." In other words, there is a discrepancy between the results reported in research articles and how they are deployed or practiced in everyday life by ordinary people (and perhaps by scientists and researchers themselves - after all, after taking off their professional "scientist" hat, they are also people interested, perhaps, in being "healthy").

"Healthy" is both a common-sense concept and one that can be defined in various terms that may conflict. Some people, such as fitness trainers and aficionados like Chin, for example, spoke of food in terms of carbohydrates, protein, and fats. They kept track of their

macronutrients through apps or careful planning, weighed their food, and/or simply used various targets, gathered from the internet, to roughly track their food intake. Others (and some of the same) spoke of food in terms of how it made them feel - good versus guilty, light versus heavy, energetic versus slow. Dessert or hot pot may feel “sinful” (*zuie*), while a salad “feels healthy” (*jiankang*). I met people who sold and drank diet milkshakes designed to be meal replacements or to help “clean” (purge) the body, pills that decreased hunger, and “detox” juices purported to improve metabolism and aid in weight loss. A longtime friend, Casey, signed up for a gym membership and gave up eating rice for several months prior to her wedding in order to lose weight. “Healthy” could be defined physically via weight loss, waist size, body fat percentage, self-reports of energy or in terms of mental/emotional health (feelings of happiness and positivity, positive body-image, feeling fit). The difference was often hard to distinguish, given that perceived weight loss or attainment of a particular body size or shape correlated with some of the positive feelings. Several people who used exercise as a way to combat depression and a sense of negativity about their life circumstances, whether from relationships, health, or work, spoke of feeling happier, using their time more productively, and being fitter, but also engaged in practices that required a lot of attention and concentration on their food and the way they looked. On days when they “cheated” or gained a little weight, they would note this fact, often multiple times and in a pejorative and self-critical manner. The information and knowledge that these practices of diet and exercise were based on were largely gathered from online sources (WeChat groups, specialty websites, articles) that cited or alluded to scientific sources or from expert friends (doctor, trainers, health food entrepreneurs). In this way, a certain power is concentrated in particular bodies of research and the people involved in their production; the work of

researchers, abstracted from the specific contexts within which research was conducted or observations made, permeates everyday practice.

Language, science, and the ketogenic diet

John, a CrossFit box owner and foreigner living in Beijing, recommended several authors to me during our conversations and interview, including citations. Though he personally does not do it, he highly recommended the ketogenic diet (*shengtong yinshi*) and intermittent fasting, as well as criticized several things I brought to eat before and after we met up. At the same time, he is disdainful and critical of the “bullshit” passed along in WeChat groups like Bulletproof (a group for people living in China, predominantly foreigners, pursuing or interested in the ketogenic and adjacent diets). The ketogenic diet exists in a variety of different forms but is fundamentally based on the concept of eating low-carbohydrate, high-fat diets in order to force the body to go into ketosis, a state under which ketones (byproducts of fat) rather than glucose (base component of carbohydrates) provide the body’s energy. Some common discussions center around where to get the best butter for “Bulletproof” coffee (a mix of coffee, butter, and MCT oil¹⁴), while others address more broadly, best practices in diet and health. Some people post food and recipes, which generate comments and sometimes feedback. One woman posted several images of her day’s meals and members responded with concerns about the amount of artificial sweeteners she used to “replace” sugar and carbohydrates in her diet rather than phasing them out altogether. Many in the group, John included, mention and reference “science” or “research” in order to support their statements about health. Science is used as a means of producing legitimacy; “scientific support,” “research shows,” and “studies suggest” are just a few ways in

¹⁴ Usually derived from coconut oil; the purification process eliminates other fatty acid chains found in coconut oil so the only the “best” form (medium-chain-triglycerides, which purportedly produce the best ketone to fat ratio) for ketosis remain.

which Science infiltrates ongoing debates about “best” practices. Jordan, the owner of the group, introduced me to the concept of using the sun’s ultraviolet radiation, indirectly, to heat up and lessen the tension in eye muscles, which contributes to near-sightedness (as tension contorts the shape of the eye, resulting in poor eyesight).¹⁵ He owns an online WeChat-linked shop that sells MCT oil and coffee (the “good” kind) to people in China. Jordan, in this context, is also a consequential person to know; the ketogenic diet, though technically adaptable across cultures, was formulated in the West and guides rely heavily on foods popular in the US. Grass-fed butter, purified MCT oil, heavy cream, and plant-based sugar-free sweeteners are more difficult to obtain in China. In this sense, Jordan (and others in the group who had specialty shops or contacts with people who owned specialty shops) was a consequential person to know. Aside from his willingness to teach newcomers to the group, he also provided access to the material goods necessary for maintaining the strict diets advocated by the group, either directly or indirectly, as the gatekeeper to the WeChat group that connected people with each other across China.¹⁶ It was also an immediate source of information for people to ask questions about new keto-friendly offerings in Shanghai and Beijing - the authenticity as well as quality of ketogenic offerings was important to the maintenance of the diet.

Most people in the group, foreigners and Chinese alike, lived in Beijing and Shanghai and all communication was in English. In China, there is often a correlation between socio-economic class and English-language proficiency among young people; the material conditions

¹⁵ I deliberately do not comment on the veracity of these claims; some have larger bodies of research backing them while others rely on more anecdotal or observational science. The statements themselves are productive and worthy of attention, as are the ways in which they are connected to specific practices and specific relationships.

¹⁶ The WeChat group was closed, which meant that those who wished to join were required to “request” permission to join, along with a short note explaining why. Jordan was the owner of the group (i.e. he had administrative permissions for it) and processed all of these requests.

that allow for special classes, travel, and studying abroad facilitate their encounters with opportunities to use English as well as “new” and foreign bodies of knowledge. There are, of course, Chinese-speakers who were interested in or practicing the ketogenic diet, also congregated in China’s major cities and with the income to afford grass-fed butter, which can range from 50-70 RMB for 8 oz. There were two young women in particular who were experimenting with it, one as a method for weight loss (physical measure for health) and another out of curiosity and a hope for “more energy” (*jingshen*). To prepare, they studiously read Chinese-language articles online and via WeChat which had been translated or sourced from English-language articles. These, overall, were one step further removed from the “science” references mentioned earlier. During one meal, Ash (the second young woman, a white-collar professional working in an office located in a shopping mall in the Central Business District) asked me if tomatoes and beans were ketogenic as she peered into her salad. I had to Google it, via VPN - apparently, they are not. This is the way that the knowledge produced through scientific research and presented to the world travels and changes.

From studies proposing and testing ketogenic diets as a way to monitor or address symptoms of epilepsy in children (Henderson et al. 2006; Martin, Jackson, Levy, and Cooper 2016), to its impact on other symptoms of disorders located in the human brain, such as Alzheimer’s (Taylor et al. 2018), to its role in discouraging cancer cell growth (Schmidt et al. 2011; Weber, Aminazdeh-Gohari, and Kofler 2018; Zhou et al. 2007), to addressing diabetes, blood glucose-management, and weight-loss (Freeman, Kossoff, and Hartman 2007; Vidali et al. 2015), the language and findings of specific research projects under specific research parameters (young children with particular forms of epilepsy unresponsive to drug-treatment, late-stage brain cancer patients, genetically altered mice) distills more generally into everyday life. A

complex theory about the relationship between mitochondria, metabolism, health (measured via epilepsy, glucose metabolism diseases, and cancer), and ketogenic diet translates into statements about how intermittent fasting and ketogenic diets improve mitochondrial health and increases metabolism. In the case of my research group, who are focused on best practices in China specifically, and whose work focuses on physical education and health outcomes, they play an important role in translating their research personally to people in their network. Additionally, their (and others') published work (and interactions with schools, extracurricular clubs, and organizations) expand the knowledge that is knowable through its write-up and dissemination. In the case of researchers farther away in distance, time, and subject, their work is translated by others via news articles, health and diet articles, blog posts, and social media influencers (in Chinese, *wanghong*); these people are also consequential to know or even to know of - their influence, like that of researchers, has a far-reach through the connectivity that the internet provides.

More directly, there are people in positions of research who are sought after either via their published works or directly as sources of expertise. At ClubFit, a small group fitness class studio near Beijing Normal University that was opened by a graduate of the school, their "fat-loss bootcamp" included an accountability WeChat group. Members paid a few thousand RMB (over \$300) for three weeks and in return, they received 15 hour-long group fitness classes, a nutrition guide (compiled by the manager, Xiaolu, who relied on internet resources and the advice of this "*boshi*," - a woman who had a doctorate in nutrition or nutrition adjacent field who charged for her advice), and this WeChat group. In the group, Xiaolu reminded members each day to post visuals of all of their food, for them to drink water, and hosted discussions with the aforementioned *boshi*. This person was referred to by her title or degree (doctorate or phd) rather

than her name. In this way, researchers and scientists are also experts whose knowledge, or expertise, *zhuanye*, are valuable commodities, good to know both personally and professionally.

As I mentioned in chapter one, WeChat has become a central spire through which people, goods, services, and knowledge flow. It is connected to external blogs, Weibo (the equivalent of Twitter), and other media sites. Gyms, studios, and restaurants offer discounts, specials, and customer service via their WeChat Official Account, and also use the platform as a way of generally disseminating generic health information. Individuals have also capitalized on this to create their own accounts offering lifestyle tips, fashion advice, workout programs - everything I could have imagined and more - that can be monetized through partnerships with brands and companies, big and small. It's also possible to ask doctors questions, and for a small fee, solicit simple diagnoses before heading to the hospital. In this respect, social networks and knowledge is not as tightly restricted to small nodes of power; much is available readily, freely, and in Chinese-language versions. People come together and meet more easily online than they might offline. At the same time, offline social networks and language continue to play an important (and often restrictive) role. WeChat groups require invitations and knowing someone to offer that invitation; I was sometimes surprised to find that people working in the same business space of fitness and in proximal distance to each other shared no common friends or groups. Similarly, language can be an important barrier keeping people from different educational or national backgrounds apart even online. Many of the expensive gyms, studios, and restaurants located in Beijing's Central Business District or in the Sanlitun neighborhood used predominantly English-language communications or were entirely bilingual. This extended to personal trainers at gyms like ActiveMe, FortFit, and Crossfit Radish - all owned and run by foreigners, Chinese diaspora, and overseas returnees - who led group classes or personal training sessions in English,

supplemented by some Mandarin.¹⁷ For non-English speakers or those who were less comfortable with English, WeChat group chats, fitness programs and classes, and especially gym environments that utilized English frequently were less accessible. The reverse was also true; foreigners who were uncomfortable with or did not speak Mandarin Chinese predominantly used gyms, studios, and resources in English. This resulted in certain social network boundaries that existed offline to be reproduced, to a certain extent, online. At the same time, WeChat facilitated a greater degree of serendipity; I added both Ash and the other young woman interested in the ketogenic diet to the Bulletproof group, and I was randomly added to many groups during my tenure in Beijing, which was exponentially expansive - entering one network in Sanlitun opened up nearly all of the other groups in Sanlitun to me.

Possibilities, but also limitations

These are just a few of the ways in which everyday practice is intertwined with the work of politicians, policymakers, researchers, journalists, gym owners, and online influencers, and some of the places in which particularly consequential knowledge or opportunities are centered. These are also a few ways in which people can deploy particularly consequential relationships or *guanxi* connections to support their work and play. “Science” and scientific friends are valuable resources in the debate over best practices. In this way, relationships can be strategic; in navigating everyday constraints - whether that is “how do I put together an exercise program?” or “how do I lose weight?” - social networks play a consequential role in the breadth and kinds of possibilities available. There are much more English-language self-help resources (online), but there are many more Chinese-language gyms in Beijing. And finally, possibilities are opened

¹⁷ Of course, English is also the international language of research - my research group published, when possible, in English language journals, and drew much of their literature review from English-language journals, supplemented by China-specific work in Chinese.

up through serendipitous encounters, unexpected meetings between two people in a group fitness class, at a restaurant, through a friend introduction, in a forum, or through an online WeChat group. When people gather and do things together, they bring their knowledge, practices, and networks as well, so that it's not uncommon to walk away with a new contact, idea, food to try, or way of doing an exercise.

Material conditions can privilege some groups of people over others, making certain connections more valuable strategically. However, this sometimes prompted exploration of technology and censorship that otherwise might not be an issue. VPNs, for example, often need to be purchased and set up while abroad; the ones available domestically tend not to keep up with rapidly changing and increasingly sophisticated censorship techniques. A young undergraduate at Peking University used to occasionally travel to North Korea, where there was a specific hotel that allowed her access to foreign websites. While there, she would purchase and set up a VPN to use upon her return to Beijing and Mainland China. For most people born and raised in China, there is no need to use foreign websites or news sources that are blocked by China's Great Firewall. Their friends are on QQ Messenger or WeChat. People in their twenties and early thirties might remember Renren, a Chinese equivalent of Facebook. There are many Chinese-language news sites, Baidu (and Baidu Maps) for internet searches, a large variety of online shopping options, and even Youku and other streaming sites that provide access to English-language movies and television shows, albeit censored for sex, violence, and political sensitivity. As such, some people I met who had not traveled or studied abroad were curious as to my use of a VPN - what did I need it for? And for those who did want to try or use one, the difficulty of purchasing and setting one up while in China was an additional barrier.

During my time in Beijing, I used a variety of different VPNs to access social media like Facebook and Instagram, as well as to use Gmail and access foreign-language news sites. At various points, there would be a few days where VPNs across China were not working or barely worked (ranging from inability to connect to slowed connectivity); these often coincided with weeks surrounding important events like the 19th National Congress (October 2017) or the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (October 2019). The use of VPNs came up most often in my research when foreigners were reminded of the consequences of living under censorship during times of VPN instability (the major paid-for services usually updated their programs within a few days) or when people who otherwise would not use foreign websites or applications attempt to gain access. I spent an afternoon with a trainer at a CrossFit box who showed me various videos of handstand exercises on YouTube - he had found a few people whose training and exercise programs he found particularly helpful. We tried them together and he exhorted me to follow this person on YouTube. He’d recently purchased a VPN subscription. CrossFit is still relatively new to China and both the circle of people who do CrossFit and of resources made for and by people who do CrossFit is relatively small. Among “users,” there is the belief that this newness produces spaces lacking in expertise, and unskilled or untrained people trying to train other untrained people. Some, like John from Crossfit Radish, have invested themselves in the production of training resources. This comes primarily in the form of paid-for classes at Crossfit Radish and “free” nutrition and training advice on WeChat - though “influencing” on social media platforms can and does become monetized when influencers garner enough followers. Others seek out expertise from established CrossFit boxes and the founder of CrossFit, Greg Glassman, and his students. Fitness videos are intelligible (through demonstrations) even across language barriers and increasingly, translation services like Baidu

Translate and Google Translate help make sense of tutorials, training guides, or health food recipes. In this space, I encountered several people who, prior to their engagement with fitness, particularly practices of fitness perceived to be imported from the West and scientific in nature, were uninterested in or unaware of VPN services. However, upon beginning to “work out” - specifically, to exercise in gyms, lifting weights in pursuit of some goal, often, a particular “look” in terms of muscle size and visibility - they became dissatisfied with the Chinese-language resources available to them and discovered that many blogs (Wordpress hosted, for example) and videos from Youtube that had not been skinned and reposted on Chinese streaming sites were blocked by Chinese censors. At these moments, the question and concern with finding, downloading, and using a VPN became more pressing and consequential.

I am closing with these meditations on how bodies remain caught up in particular and peculiar politics in contemporary China; aside from the obvious ways in which official discourse ties the health of Chinese citizens to the health of the nation, in a discursive attempt to encourage people to practice health in certain, scientific, and censored ways, the pursuit of better and best practices for cultivating a healthy body has led some to experience censorship for the first time. Aside from foreign friends complaining about VPNs not working, my conversations about VPNs surrounded why they were so difficult to obtain and why something as innocuous as a video on handstands or a blog post on the optimal amount of boiled chicken one should eat should be made inaccessible. The practice of exercise, or more precisely, the practices surrounding what makes up a practice of exercise or “healthy living,” sometimes leads to personal encounters with censorship. It led to other conversations about what else is censored and why. These conversations are possibilities. They are perhaps a step into the politicization of young people, or, perhaps they are simply another barrier to strategize around in the process of working out.

And conversations inevitably involve other young people. How does one bypass internet restrictions to read this blog post? How does one buy and install a VPN? Which one is the “best?” For some, I was the person who explained VPNs, what they were, and how to use them. For others, it was a different friend or a WeChat group contact or a surreptitious internet search. This learning also relies on networks, offline and online. It is a good reminder that practices of leisure (here, the consumption of food and play) cannot be divorced from their socio-political and material contexts. State (health policies, articulated statements), school (mandated and assessed physical education standards), and market (in which much is available for purchase) together offer possibilities for work and for play as well as restrictions. It is possible, after all, to fail physical education tests. In the following chapters, I further explore how *guanxi* and social networks have changed in contemporary China and how they offer opportunities in the face of barriers, challenges, and even state-imposed restrictions.

Chapter 3: New occasions for sociality

China has experienced significant changes to its social and economic organization in the past century. Though internal migration is neither a new nor recent phenomenon in China, the contours of migration in contemporary times represent major shifts in how families and society itself are organized or disorganised. For thousands of years, migration has provided a way for poor peasants to escape famine, large families to diversify revenue-generating activities, and ambitious merchants to carve out new trade routes and relationships (Cheng and Selden 1994; Skinner 1976). Geographic flow, in fact, has allowed for families and communities to survive and thrive in otherwise difficult material circumstances (see Harrison 2005). China is currently undergoing another massive wave of internal migration, oft-cited as the largest in human history, with 244 million people floating between “home” and not home (2018 National Census; Frenkel and Yu 2015; Mackenzie 2002). Popular, contemporary narratives of this migration often center around the growing divide between rich and poor, extreme and exploitative industry practices for job sectors relying heavily on migrant labor, and institutionalized exclusion from public resources, all of which is seen to be facilitated by the household registration - *hukou* - system which ties people to their places (Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2005; MacKenzie 2002; Wang 2005; Zhan 2011; Zhang and Treiman 2012).

Here, I want to highlight how, though historical migration in China has broadly included both the poor *and* the wealthy, students *and* labourers, contemporary analyses of migration largely account for only a specific group of people moving to and fro - rural-to-urban migrants, with little education, working laboring or service industry jobs¹⁸ (Bach 2010; Ling 2015; Pun

¹⁸ There is some exception. Li Zhang’s ethnography of an urban village in Beijing focused primarily on entrepreneurs - though of a similar demographic, this group of people deployed their connections, including native-kin and familial ties back home, as well as their relative economic stability to position

2005; Wang 2005; Woronov 2010; Yan 2008; Zheng 2009). However, in theorizing social organization, the changing role of the family, and the ways in which *guanxi* networks have changed, these other groups who also participate in large scale migrations cannot be left out. Additionally, unlike older forms of migration, where people left the village in search of employment, shelter, or trade, but typically returned “home” to the village, contemporary migration in China, especially for young professionals and university graduates, is characterized by how few people return to their native place. Some return to adjacent cities. Casey, for example, recently married a high school classmate and has moved to a third-tier city near the township where her parents currently live and where she grew up. Others settle in the cities where they attended school, have found work, and/or have found partners. Though much attention has been paid to those who are unable to change their *hukou*, less has focused on successful *hukou* conversions. These are, after all, more difficult to track.¹⁹

As all of this is happening in this moment in history - young students who seek to stay in Beijing (or other cities) after graduation, young professionals who plan to stay for the immediate and perhaps far future - it is unclear whether there will be a large wave of people who choose to remain in the city in spite of *hukou* difficulties. I will explore the constraints of *hukou* and its negotiations specifically and more in-depth in chapter five. In this chapter, I first discuss the

themselves as leaders of the village and neighborhood and set themselves up as managers and bosses (2001).

However, most studies have been focused on more statically bound groups of people and center in the village, the city, or the village in in the city. In my dissertation project, I look at how people from all over China and all over Beijing live and work and play together in the city. I am interested in both the here-ness of our location in Beijing, as well as the ways in which people from other places and with other histories bring that to their interactions in the city.

¹⁹ Unless the conversion happens to people, in the case of village becoming city underneath people’s feet (Chance 1991). In those circumstances, *hukou* conversion come hand in hand with city expansion, as places become renamed and reclaimed whether the people living on top of them like it or not.

ways in which migration and the labor market have changed the kinds of connections that are consequential and demand new spaces for the cultivation of consequential connections. Then, I address how support for and various debates surrounding health and exercise - the cultivation and practice of healthy bodies - has facilitated a boom in spaces of leisure that also function to bring young people together. Through an analysis of how gyms prepare for and participate in the Spartan Race, I look at how large, public, and extravagant events like this one bring people together and produce intimacy amongst relative strangers, as well as the role that gyms and fitness studios play in fostering these connections.

Then and now - how has *guanxi* changed?

It remains an important fact that many young people are leaving the villages, townships, and cities of their birth and childhood and moving to other places, predominantly cities. Most of the people living in Beijing who I met were not from Beijing. This shift from multiple generations living under the same roof with large families (Cohen 1976; Freedman 1958; Kulp 1925; Potter and Potter 1990; Ruf 1998; Yang 1959) to families living in nuclear units, often with only one child, sometimes far away from the village or city where they were born (Fong 2004; Greenhalgh 2008; Kuan 2015; Yan 2003; Zhang 2010), has had consequences on the ways in which social networks are formed. In Beijing, young people like Casey cannot rely on her family network or hierarchical *guanxi* cultivated by her parents, aunts and uncles, or other kin. She was fortunate and privileged through her partner's social network - her boyfriend's uncle knew someone at Capital Normal University and was able to help smooth her application for her master's degree in Math Education. However, these kinds of hierarchical *guanxi* connections that smoothen roads and open doors - the sort that Mayfair Yang wrote about in her seminal work on *guanxi* in the 1980's - are increasingly inaccessible or nonexistent for young people living far

away from their nuclear and extended families (1994). In the village, the township, or the city where young people are born, family ties remain an important part of how people are connected. Uncles, aunts, cousins, friends of the family - they are all important resources for young people looking for a job, seeking advice, or for that extra edge at consequential moments, such as applications for school.

As young people move further from home, these special *guanxi* become less consequential and strategic. After all, a professor is less likely to help a friend of a friend's daughter's boyfriend than he is someone closer to him. There is a long list of my own debts accrued and paid, some of which I would not have wanted to have and perhaps would not have acquired had I not felt obligated by the existence of a relationship, and the potential future favors I might need to ask. Though not directly tied to profit or value measured in monetary terms, these calculations on resource allocation play a role in how my participants navigated work and social relationships. This is similar to what several of the foundational works on *guanxi* practices in China describe as the uni-directional transfer of gifts in return for favors or favorable relations (Yang 1994). More abstractly, it relates to Osburg's (2013) description of how business practices among new entrepreneurs in Chengdu, Sichuan were intimately tied to rituals of banqueting and karaoke-bar frequenting that fosters intimacy through mandatory vulnerability. After all, it does not matter whether one wants to participate in festivities with KTV hostesses, only that one does - intimacy is cultivated through the selective invitation of guests, but also through the mutual implications of vulnerable or illicit behavior that accepting such an invitation demands.

Proximal distance and ways of making kin

The first aspect of changing social organization I address here is proximal distance. Proximity is an important factor in the production of *guanxi* connections and other consequential

social relationships. There are more opportunities to cultivate these relationships, through invitations given and received and the exchange of gifts and favors. These tight webs of reciprocity found predominantly in villages are made possible by both the physical closeness of families and individuals to each other and the histories that they share. Steinmüller (2013) and Oxfeld's (2010) more recent ethnographies of village life illustrate this; the former describes wandering along village roads, slowly becoming a familiar face, and being invited into homes for tea and meals. In their efforts to make sense of morality and ethics in village life, they cannot ignore these simple practices of making and re-making the bonds between individuals and families. Both simple acts such as offering someone a seat for a respite from the summer sun, eating rice, and sharing water, and less simple ones such as attending a wedding and offering the requisite red packets and lending money, are part and parcel of the practices that hold people together. Ring (2006) writes of this, in the context of women living in an apartment building in Karachi, as making an everyday peace. Through differences (ethnic, religious, gender) and violence, the daily labor of exchange sustains and holds tension under unexpected and difficult circumstances. These practices cannot, however, be sustained across long distances.

Such shared histories, real or imagined, also drive kinship or native-place networks for those who leave their homes and find themselves among familiar strangers in new places (Ma and Xiang 1998; Yan 2008; Zhang 2001). For those in the “floating population” (*liudongrenkou*) who have settled in Beijing, for example, “home” (*laojia* - the old or original home) is a powerful way to carve out new spaces and connections in the city. Wenzhou migrants, for example, clustered together in a famous urban village (Zhejiangcun) and formed an influential and profitable clothing venture. Zhang (2001) details how young women, specifically, are brought into the “family” business through loose kinship ties; the knowledge of a person who

knows another person, who is from the same city (Wenzhou), and who can offer a job is an alluring call to young people seeking to leave their village behind. In early 20th century Shanghai, *laojia* (native place) formed the basis for unions and facilitated people from certain places into certain industries. Place-based allegiances to gang bosses and fellow workers organized how people entered certain industries and how they experienced it. Those who sought to break into a space dominated by people from a certain place often found that they were treated differently. These allegiances and biases helped reproduce both the stereotype of native place as determinant of certain sets of skills as well as the domination of particular industries by people from the same *laojia* (Hershatter 1986; Honig 1992; Goodman 1995). Even in the case where there are no kinship ties, the language of kinship is used to justify demands made and favors requested.

Kinship terms, as structured by the language of native place that names a person as one who shares that hometown origin with you (*laoxiang*), can be a powerful way of forming networks and binding people together. Specifically, the term *laoxiang* refers to those who are from the same *laojia*, measured either specifically (by village, township, or county), or more broadly by province. Those from Hunan, for example, will exclaim “*laoxiang!*” upon hearing that my father was born and raised in Hunan, Changsha. Being “from” the same place is another way, when pressed for options, that people can begin to make connections in otherwise unfamiliar places. Additionally, kinship terms are also terms of intimacy that indicate closeness; the practice of addressing people who are not blood-related by terms such as “auntie,” “uncle,” “sister, or “brother,” in tandem with practices of gift-giving or exchanging favours, are ways of producing relationships. Under such premises, favours are rendered for close family and friends

rather than distant others. The language of family shapes the depth and breadth of what can be asked and given.

Once when I was quite late getting home, I decided to take a black cab. He was calling out that he just needed one more person and then he'd go, and when he saw me, he told me that we could go now. But when I got in the car, he left again. He was calling to people, saying "Just one more, just one more!" There was a woman already sitting in the car and we both complained that we had boarded the cab thinking we'd leave immediately, but he was still calling for one more person. After our waiting cost us the last 954 bus, we told him we were going to get out if he didn't leave immediately. He came back and told us that since all the other cars had gone and he was the last one, he thought he'd try to get a full car. With only two riders, he would only make 20 RMB on this trip; the extra two passengers would double his income. This confused me - there was a man that I've always seen around and I thought he was a black cab driver too. Our driver said, "No, he's a loafer, he's basically homeless." They don't really know much about him, but he's the *laoxiang* friend of another one of the cab drivers and that's how they all know him. He hangs around the subway station during the day and helps the drivers get people for their cabs in hopes that one of the drivers might feed him. At night, he sleeps in his friend's cab. Both my fellow passenger and our driver were very critical of this, commenting that young people can easily earn money, maybe not a lot of money, but easily 3000 RMB a month. Why would he refuse to go? The "loafer" in question is 27 or 28 years old, relatively young, and sound of body and mind. A few days ago, his *laoxiang* found him a job at a construction site and convinced him to take it, essentially threatening to stop helping him if he refused to go and work. He went and worked for a week or two and made 1000 RMB, but then spent it all in about two days. The woman and our driver both kept saying, "He isn't a real man. It's so easy to find a security job or

construction job that pays a regular salary, how can he be just content to not do anything? Of course he and his wife divorced, who would want to be with a man like that?” They were appalled by the man’s choices and full of praise for his *laoxiang*. Given that the “loafer” had returned to the black cabs area near the subway station, it seems that even after he quit the construction job, his friend was still helping him. In Beijing, and especially for those working in sectors like the service industry, petty entrepreneurship, and physical labor, having a “friend” (a *guanxi*, loosely defined) can go a long way. It can be the difference between having employment or not, or at least easy employment or not. In this case, it was also the difference between homelessness and hunger, and having a meal and place to sleep at night.

Shifting practices of “work”: Mobility and space

Those who have moved to the city for schooling or work experience similar estrangement from their family networks. Additionally, as many business and workplace contacts can be formed during school amongst classmates, those who moved away from where they went to school are also separated from their own lateral networks. At the same time, migration - for work and for school - remains a promising option for social mobility, and many seek to enroll in schools or obtain jobs (particularly jobs that might secure them a local *hukou*) in Beijing. Young people in Beijing who are not from Beijing have fewer or no local *guanxi* who might help them should their plans go awry or should they seek new opportunities (for examples, see chapter six). Additionally, a second important factor is the shift in China from the “iron rice bowl” planned economy to a more loosely regulated market. Over three decades since reform and opening up, there remain few public sector jobs that provide the kind of stability that was once a hallmark of working for the state. Public education jobs, as teachers, are one of those few remaining ways that one can obtain *bianzhi* (similar to tenure). In a deregulated market, young people are not

necessarily seeking one stable job. Something that characterized many of the people I met was their mobility, both from place to place, and from job to job. Though some still hoped for a stable position that would grant them local *hukou* or for work that was stable, most others were content, at least for the time being, to be moving around. Nicki, for example, worked an office job for a tech company prior to quitting in order to focus more on herself and her interests. She soon found work with Chin, as a shop manager at Active Woman's new showroom in the Central Business District. After a few months, she quit working at Active Woman as well. Over the span of two years, Alicia worked for WeWork in Shanghai, then MangoFit in Beijing, and towards the end of my time in Beijing, she accepted a job at Amazon in Shanghai. Though Alicia's family was from Beijing (on the west side, in Xicheng), she chose to rent an apartment on the east side to be more accessible to work and Sanlitun, as well as to better socialize and meet with friends. The connections and contacts she made at work and during her social time were more important in her line of work than any connections she could leverage through her family. This trend of job mobility extended to those working in service sector jobs; people who worked for one gym this week would turn up a few weeks later on WeChat, selling shoes in their WeChat moments, or advertising a boot-cleaning spray via private message. In these cases, where work relies less heavily on someone in a higher position bestowing favor or opportunities downward, and more so on the opportunities that arise *in situ* (chapter five), hierarchical *guanxi* are less important than networks comprised of predominantly peer groups, what I refer to as lateral *guanxi* networks. Both proximal distance (as young people move away from their family and ancestral homes to work and settle elsewhere) and changing expectations of work and labor impact the kinds of social relationships that can be leveraged.

At the same time, the “old” spaces for cultivating new relationships and networking are exclusive and heavily gendered. Whether it is golf (still salient as social capital, as the number of foreign golf coaches who train old men and young children alike in Shunyi and Changping can attest to), KTV, or banqueting, these spaces are difficult to penetrate as newcomers. Osburg’s work on new money in Chengdu is an excellent example (2013). The way for entrepreneurs who previously did not know each other to form intimate connections was through banqueting, often followed by visiting a karaoke bar (KTV). These evenings of banqueting and singing, for which Osburg himself underwent a period of assimilation into the group, were dominated by men. Female colleagues or business partners, though not overtly excluded from the activities per se, were encouraged and expected to leave earlier in the night. Under the cover of night and the buzz of the KTV bars, businessmen engaged in implied and explicit sexual acts (Zheng 2010), sometimes discreetly in other places, and other times in close proximity. The nature of this practice of cultivating *guanxi* and the trust (or possibility of mutual ruin) necessary for these connections to translate into trust in business made such spaces and such practices exclusive to women and in general, to outsiders. The KTV bar as a space for homosocial intimacy via hyper-heterosexual encounters precludes the presence of business women and colleagues. Additionally, due to policies aimed to increase health and decrease drunk driving, binge-drinking and the excessive consumption associated with banqueting culture is declining in popularity, especially among younger people. MJ, for example, was well known by the employees at Huxi Gym for coming in diligently around the same time every day; personal trainers knew to leave him alone because, in the words of Hebe, a bubbly and slight young woman who was very popular and had many members to manage, “Look at him, there’s nothing anyone can teach him!” He ran his own company from home and was in the process of applying for business schools abroad. Other than

work, he spent his time working out, learning about working out, and cooking for himself. He largely refrained from eating out with friends because he found banqueting (*yinchou*) or even dining out in general to be too unhealthy. He needed to keep to a strict sleep schedule in order to maintain his work, food, and fitness routine. Instead, he prepared simple meals of boiled or steamed chicken and vegetables and ate it in large quantities to meet the caloric targets for the weight and bulk he wanted to maintain. He abstained from excesses associated with going out, staying up late, and consuming alcohol. For the most part, his social life involved working out with the few friends who also had time during his scheduled gym time, the occasional gathering or banquet he couldn't turn down, and keeping in touch via WeChat. The increasing availability of jobs that allow flexibility in work hours or even work-from-home options, as well as the ways in which certain aspects of Western work culture (like Western startups, aka WeWork, Amazon, etc.) have infiltrated Chinese tech companies and startups, allow for young people to largely avoid the heavy drinking and eating of banquets, networking in other ways. Shared workspaces like WeWork are now available in Sanlitun and Central Business District areas, where many overseas returnees and foreigners live and work. Though this is a relatively small segment of the population, it does reflect the ways in which the theory of co-working spaces (where people working on different projects can have an office space but also opportunities to meet other people working on similar or compatible projects) is entering China (as in Beijing and Shanghai).

In this context, the spaces for fitness in particular provide one such avenue for young people to gather together and form connections that may or may not translate into their professional lives. Though different sports and exercises retain a degree of gender stereotypes and have different gender ratios (yoga is overwhelmingly female versus weight lifting, which has

more male participation), gyms and studios are not gender exclusive. Though there are more men in the weights area of the gym, for example, or more women in group fitness classes, once someone becomes familiar and recognizable, they are treated much the same. Women lifting weights are offered advice by men and other women and men in group fitness classes are included in the conversations and discussions of their female classmates. More directly, companies with professional development or team-building budgets are trying to find new ways of spending these funds outside of banquets, which their younger employees may not enjoy. Some examples are company sports days with races, competitions, and prizes. Zuoyi won several hundred RMB when she won first place in her company's wall-sit and plank competitions during their mid-year field day. These events fulfil goals set out by the Healthy China 2030 plan, encourage employees to work together, and produce good images to share on WeChat and other social media. After Zuoyi's field day, she posted in her WeChat moments showing her and the runner-up struggling to hold their plank positions for just a little longer. This shift in how development money is spent is directly encouraged by gyms. QiangFit, for example, has courted several companies whose offices are nearby or in the building where the gym is located. They encourage managers to come and tour the facilities and offer a detailed plan for how team building might happen - through a group fitness class, a seminar on working together, and a "healthy" luncheon catered by QiangFit's cafe. The owners set money for such a purpose, and drew on their relationships and connections, as well as their knowledge of the key words used within teams for development goals, to pitch QiangFit as a potential site for their next quarterly activity. Companies also plan outings at trampoline parks, outdoor paintball arenas, gyms with obstacle courses, and send teams to events like the Spartan Race. The rest of this chapter

explores how the Spartan Race itself and practices of preparation for it bring people together and provide a locus for serendipitous encounters and new opportunities.

The Spartan Race

The Spartan Race involves a running course that takes participants through a variety of obstacles, and is offered in three distances, also known as the Sprint, Super, and Beast. These range from the shortest in distance (5 kilometers) to the longest (21 kilometers). The races also increase the number of obstacles (approximately 20, 25, and 30, respectively). Sign up fees range in price, with group fees the lowest (around 300 RMB) and the three race bundle the most expensive. The race format is consistent internationally, though some courses are thought to be more difficult given their location (extreme temperatures, steep inclines, high altitudes). Completing the race grants participants a medal, a t-shirt, and occasionally other gifts, usually from sponsors. After I attended my first Spartan Race as an observer and obtained a shirt of my own, I noticed Spartan Race shirts everywhere (Tsing 2015). In several instances, this marker of what I assume to be a shared experience provided an easy entry point to talking to strangers. Each version of the race has its own medal that includes one-third of a circle. Completing all three races allows participants to “combine” the three medals to form one, also known as the Spartan Trifecta. Participants can only claim this honor if they complete the Trifecta in a set period. There is no additional prize or reward for completing the Trifecta. In the first year it was hosted, only shorter versions of the Spartan Race were offered in Mainland China, so it was impossible for those living there and unwilling or unable to participate in international races to collect all three medals. This troubled many participants. Additionally, there are both “elite” and “open” versions of the race; the former was competitive, with prizes for placement in different age and gender categories, while the latter simply recorded a finishing time for participants to

share with each other if they wished. Competing and placing in the top 10 of qualifying races around the world also granted one a spot in the World Championships; as Spartan Races were just beginning to be offered in China, a few of the Mainland races provided qualifying spots, drawing international in addition to local participation. The Spartan Beast was offered for the first time in mainland China in the fall of 2018, finally allowing those who so wished to complete all three races in China, or even in the same weekend. Races are offered in several large cities in China (including Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen), once in the spring and again in the fall.

Many gyms took advantage of the increasing interest (as shown by the number of people that I observed wearing Spartan Race shirts between 2017-2019 and the increasing signup numbers for the race and adjacent programs). The gyms did so via short-term or long-term training camps (free and for purchase) and group signups for the race (which gave the gyms opportunities to partner with a company for advertising purposes, and the participants a chance to take advantage of group prices). QiangFit and ClubFit are two places that offered such services. QiangFit offered a free weekly training camp beginning after the lunar new year celebration (usually early to mid-February) and extending until the spring Race; after their success the first year (2018), they continued the training camp through summer in preparation for the fall Race. ClubFit was a much smaller group-class only fitness studio located near Beijing Normal University. As part of their advertising, they encouraged members and potential members to sign up for the Spartan Race with ClubFit (offering the group discount), and in April 2018, hosted one free training camp the week before the Race. Both QiangFit and ClubFit already had existing programs that these training camps slotted around. ClubFit has a small space, with a street-facing entrance area with lockers and two changing cubbies, and a square-

shared classroom lined on one wall with floor to ceiling mirrors. For the Spartan Race “bootcamp,” they added a few extra hours on a weekend in between the times when classes were scheduled. The owner of the studio, Chen, lead the bootcamp based mostly on videos he’d seen and information he’d read online. It was his first participation in the Race, but he’d heard about it through friends posting photos on their WeChat moments the previous fall. Each season, more and more people knew about the Spartan Race, and more signed up and participated. The ClubFit group was comprised mostly of regular members of the studio, many of whom were undergraduate or graduate students at Beijing Normal University. ClubFit, QiangFit, and other gyms were among the many places for students to meet, such as classes, projects, extracurricular clubs, or even chance encounters in the cafeteria. ClubFit was small and only offered one class at a time, given that there was only one room. Other gyms were larger and had multiple classrooms (like SHAPE and JUNGLE TIME, both new chain studios in Beijing). The ClubFit waiting area put people in close proximity, and classes often asked people to partner up during circuit rotations or duo-exercises. At the end of every class, the instructor, owner, or manager gathered everyone for a group photo, which was then uploaded into the studio’s WeChat group. Over time, strangers became familiar faces. For the Spartan Race training camp, the trainers also had everyone introduce themselves. These practices facilitated new connections; people could be seen chatting or sharing food before and after class. In the entrance area, I often heard people remarking on someone’s absence or weight loss progress as they waited for their class to begin or for their cab to arrive.

Based in the Central Business District, QiangFit’s dedication to the Spartan Race (and other outdoor activities, such as hiking and mountain biking) was advertised through the posted group pictures and medals on the walls, as well as the Spartan Race themed red, green, and blue

equipment, such as training mats and weighted balls. In particular, there were a large number of full Trifecta medal sets. QiangFit offered its first training camp in the spring of 2018, in preparation for the May Spartan Race, and capped sessions at 30 participants (though Chin and I were often allowed to tag along without signing up, a benefit from knowing the owners). Eventually, training sessions attracted 50 people each week, and yet still there remained a waiting list. Training sessions were three hours long and consisted of general physical fitness exercises intended to increase participants' overall physical fitness, obstacle-course training, and sharing and discussion sessions. The gym primarily relied on popular exercise techniques like TABATA or HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training) to combine strength training with cardio. QiangFit's trainers led us in a series of circuits of both stationary and mobile exercises with short rests in between each circuit. They also occasionally included plyometric exercises, which were presented as helping participants' bodies prepare for the various demands of the obstacle courses. For example, one session began with a circuit - we were asked to do 30 seconds each of plank, side plank, pushups, burpees, partner squats, and mountain climbers. After a short rest, we were asked (and led) in repeating the circuit two more times. One of the owners, Tony, led the majority of the exercises. The other owner of the gym, Yu, walked around during the sessions and chatted with people, praising them for how well they were doing and encouraging them to push through the pain. Near Chin and I, there was a small cluster of mostly women. Yu joined us for parts of the circuit, especially the partnered exercises, and commented to one woman on how much she had improved since she'd first started attending these sessions. Then, we were asked to line up in three rows behind a line laid on the ground. One of the trainers, Jun, explained that the obstacle courses combined basic physical fitness (physical strength, cardiovascular strength, etc.) with an application of these to either particular skills (like spear throwing) or to difficult

circumstances (like picking up a heavy ball from the ground and walking somewhere with it). Certain obstacles required specific skills and training (the rope climb and spear throw for example) while others could be prepared for either through brute strength (deadlifting a heavy metal ball) or through a more strategic use of strength (kneeling on one knee and rolling the ball up onto the leg and into the arms). He introduced the next portion as helping us work on combining the use of muscles and skills, as well as continuing to improve cardiovascular fitness. We were asked to perform a series of exercises, including sprinting back and forth between two lines ten times, touching the line each time, carrying someone on our back to the other side and squatting at five different intervals, and running to the other side, picking up the weighted ball there while squatting, straightening and lifting the ball towards the ceiling, then placing the ball on the ground again (ten times), before running back to tag the next person in line. People in each row were encouraged to compete with each other to see who could complete the exercises faster. Before each exercise, the instructions were given verbally as well as demonstrated by a trainer. In the gathering of people together to exercise and to complete difficult exercises, visible strain and sweat were taken to be evidence of “working hard” (*nuli*). QiangFit’s staff, as well as those of other gyms, including ClubFit, used a variety of practices (from verbal encouragement, to active music, to joining in the exercise) to encourage participants to “work hard” or “push themselves.” These sessions brought people together to suffer together. Though exercise and fitness can be characterized as leisure practices, and though the Spartan Race is supposed to be “fun” and playful - and in many ways it can be - the journey to the Race, as constructed by gyms and studios, was arduous. It’s entirely possible to complete the Race (albeit slowly and perhaps skipping or being “helped” through many of the obstacles) without prior training. However, it becomes a starting point for some who attended the QiangFit and ClubFit training camps to start

working out. And doing all of these exercises together each week, in close proximity, and towards a common goal was not the sole purpose of the training camp. The sessions also provided an occasion for new encounters, which I discuss more in chapter five.

Following 20 minutes of these exercises, we were instructed to sit facing the screen that was on the wall behind the line where we had lined up and stretch while we listened to another trainer explain the basics of the rope climb. Hui began by showing images of the rope climb and describing the obstacle. Though obstacles may vary from race to race and year to year, there appear to be a few iconic obstacles or variations of obstacles that remain fairly consistent. The trainer showed us an image of a young, foreign (white) woman with short, pink hair and several tattoos. He introduced Melly as the winner of the women's division in the Spartan Super in Shanghai the previous fall. Later, I learned through John, the owner of Crossfit Radish and Melly's former trainer and boss, that though Melly had done well, she had not won the race. However, regardless of how she placed, Hui used this story of Melly to give credence to his instructions; he claimed that he had learned the technique for the rope climb from Melly and would now share it with us. Her "good" performance in the race granted her expertise in techniques of the race, and and by extension, granted him this expertise as well. First, he described to us the order of actions - we were to hold the rope slightly above head height in both hands, hang, lift our legs and twist our feet around the rope so that it formed a "ladder" that we could step on, push up, reach up, and repeat. He then demonstrated the way to hold the rope with both hands and feet on a short rope on the other side of the room. Unfortunately, QiangFit did not have a high-hanging rope that participants could practice on, but we were encouraged to ask questions, to speak with Hui more after the session, and to practice the foot twist on the low-hanging rope provided. Many of the other common obstacles could be skipped or helped

through; the rings or bars, for example, could be completed by someone holding the person on the rings or bars by the legs and supporting them as they moved their hands over the course. In the Open competition, this was allowed; such teamwork was sometimes completed by friends or couples, but sometimes by strangers.

After thanking him and applauding, we were instructed to sit in a circle on the ground. Some people continued to stretch. Yu stood in the middle of the circle and welcomed us to QiangFit, which she described as a big family (*dajiating*). Yu started by giving a general overview of her story, which she shared in varying detail each week. She had been a high-powered executive but had gotten sick. Through fitness and healthy eating, she was able to regain her health and was now cancer free. More importantly, the experience with illness and her subsequent health and vitality found through exercise and travel showed her the kind of life she wanted to lead. She and her husband, Tony, started QiangFit in order to share their vision of how fitness can transform people, and to provide people with a place where they could do this. Discussion of the gym was mostly limited to their excursions, like the Spartan Race training camps (free of charge), Chaoyang Park running group (organized by a member who was also trying to organize various fitness and sports related events), and organized hiking/biking trips. Occasionally, during this part of the training session, she would point out people who were present and introduce their work or their progress. She often highlighted Chin, who frequently came down for a lunch or post-work training session and was very strong, and her work with Active Woman upstairs. Yu exhorted the women in the room to talk to Chin if they had questions about working out or wanted to purchase very comfortable and scientific (*kexue*) workout clothing. She also pointed to Hung, a man in his early 30's from Taiwan working in media in Beijing. He organized a the running group that many QiangFit members had joined, and Yu

recommended talking to him if anyone wanted to take up running. Implicit in these advertisements (delicately presented as recommendations) were the informal but nevertheless materially consequential partnerships between particular participants and the QiangFit gym.

Yu also highlighted physical transformations. There was one regular member who attended Spartan Race training sessions in addition to regularly taking boxing classes and training with QiangFit's personal trainers. Yu used him as an example of how the community at QiangFit fosters an environment where people can make great personal and physical transformations - this man had lost a lot of weight and by his own account, was feeling stronger and healthier. She profiled me as well, describing me as the first woman she's met who could perform free-hanging pull-ups; this descriptive example of my physical fitness was divorced from history and also demanded a performance.²⁰ The public exhortation demanded that I oblige. Such introductions (and subsequent expectations of performance) were also not uncommon during the sharing portion of the training sessions. Yu then asked everyone to introduce themselves, joking that we should also include whether or not we're single and whether it was our first time at QiangFit or we were regulars. The trainers did not participate in these introductions. Sometimes Chin or another regular participant would offer to go first or Yu would select someone to start. New people were again encouraged to identify themselves as first-timers, their occupation, and their marital or relationship status (particularly young women, who were always the minority at these training sessions). Many clarified their relatively recent foray into fitness or exercise, either for the purpose of weight loss, as a new hobby, or simply as a challenge for themselves. The structure of the Spartan Race provided them with a benchmark to

²⁰ I've been able to do pull-ups since I was seven years old, when I began a gymnastics career that eventually lasted seven years, and I'd spent the prior six or seven months participant-observing fitness and health practices in Beijing, which resulted in more exercise in that time period than the 10+ years prior added together.

work towards. In my fieldwork, many of the gyms I'd visited organized members to sign up for the race as a group; it easily lent itself to the kind of community building these gyms aimed for (as an excursion that was completed together) and fostered preparation that could be used to both get people into their gym (via free or discounted training sessions) and to encourage members to set a fitness goal that was measurable via the race. Nearly all of the participants at the many training sessions I attended during the spring were newcomers to the Spartan Race and to QiangFit. Some found the training program through the gym while others were invited by friends, and several signed up for a gym membership at QiangFit within a few weeks of joining the training camp.

These introductions sometimes were quite long and often included jokes from frequenters of the gym and training sessions about who is single. Through these discussions, training camp participants are asked to sit together, share space, and share stories. The term "family" framed these experiences as intimate spaces, asserting that one is with their own people (*zijideren*), and functioned to imbue a group with an affective component. It provided participants with an opportunity to be drawn into vulnerable, intimate relationships with their peers and into a "community," with their own inside jokes (and preoccupation with who is single and who might be set up with each other), designated times and spaces together (usually, Sunday afternoons from 2-5PM at QiangFit), and methods of communication (WeChat groups). The training sessions were open to the public and free of charge, and thus easy for participants to bring friends, family, and coworkers - even children were welcome to run around the fringes of the training with minor supervision. Called-out responses to other people's self-introductions sometimes led to extended conversations across the sharing circle, increasing the thirty or so minutes allotted to this activity to an hour or longer. I describe all of this to convey to some

extent the tedium that some people felt. Sitting through it together, making jokes, complaining under their breath, smiling awkwardly while being put on the spot - these are also practices that constitute shared experience and might bring people together. It is in these moments when the stranger might become less strange; many people have struck up conversation with me under such circumstances after making eye contact, sharing a “look,” or being a co-conspirator in the hearing of a grumbled or whispered complaint. These are serendipitous to an extent but they can also be manufactured. In order to make eye contact with a stranger, I had to look up and be aware of people next to me. For people who were willing or open to making new friends, the time in-between exercises or before and after training sessions were invaluable for striking up conversations, investing in existing connections, and adding new friends on WeChat.

Like ClubFit and many other gyms and studios in Beijing, QiangFit used WeChat groups to organize their members; they had a specific group (that later was split into multiple to reduce overcrowding) for Spartan Race members. Through the WeChat group, it was possible to find and request to add people from the training sessions or gym without doing so in person. Making a new connection could be as simple as selecting a name and clicking, “Send friend request.” People who came to QiangFit generally lived or worked near Central Business District and although the sessions were free, most if not all were employed in a certain income bracket. Most, if not all, were university educated. Some worked in offices, while others were directly employed in the fitness or fitness-adjacent industry. The gym is not set up as a place to network and people do not go to the gym to make business connections. It is this that allows for what is characterized, by many of my participants, as genuine or authentic relationships, unsullied by the expectations of material profit or personal gain. Chin and Alicia frequently noted which new contacts seemed too direct or mercenary in their overtures and which seemed to

be “good people.” In this context, *guanxi* is not used to refer to some person whose relationship to the speaker is measured by what they can offer (a connotation inherent in both the English and Chinese-language use of the term) but rather the existence of a relationship between two people, often in the form of a rhetorical question - “咱们什么关系啊?” (“What’s our relationship to each other?”). In other words, the neutral spaces and serendipitous encounters possible in the gym, the group fitness class, and the Spartan Race WeChat group (or any other number of social WeChat groups) allow for young people to form connections outside of the obligations of professional and academic networks. In practice and in language, friendship foregrounds professional collaboration; invitations given or favors requested directly were not necessarily directly rebuffed, but people were more willing to help and to give generously under the auspices of friendship/genuine relationship than under the auspices of business.²¹

Finally, the Spartan Race - and other events like it, such as the Ironman triathlon, the Beijing marathon, and the WeChat groups that surround practices of swimming, cycling, and running Beijing - provides a space for the public performance of participation. There are some, like the trainers and members of QiangFit, who seek to compete for placement and fame. But most people join “for fun” (*haowan*). On the day of the race, buses wait outside the subway station to shuttle participants and supporters to the race site, in the far reaches of Fengtai district. While waiting for the subway, it’s relatively easy to identify who might be headed toward the event. People wear “exercise clothing” (shorts, leggings, spandex, and sweat-wicking shirts) and carry relatively little on them. Sometimes people recognized each other - QiangFit handed everyone running with them free t-shirts that had QiangFit on the back and a supporting brand

²¹ I discuss this further in chapter five.

for a “fitness” energy drink on the front.²² Many other larger groups had matching shirts as well, so that those who didn’t know each other but were wearing the same shirts could identify others as part of their team. This was helpful during the race, when people needed help with an obstacle, and for relative strangers to cheer for fellow participants. Everyone started together in a big huddled mess at the starting line and many groups try to stay together, but the course isn’t wide enough for 50 people to run in a group. After the initial 10-15 minutes, people fanned out and ran in smaller groups, encouraging each other and assisting through obstacles. When people got separated, strangers helped out, usually with men carrying women through obstacles. Though the space itself is not exclusive to women or men, the ways in which they interact remain, of course, gendered. The spirit of the race encouraged all of us to call out words of encouragement and to lend a helping hand. Volunteers waited inside the course at water stations to give out high-fives and plastic cups of water. All of these practices, encouraged and spontaneous all at the same time, bring people together physically and in unity of purpose.

The race takes people through mud pits as part of the obstacle course and that is also part of the performance. When people came out of the race looking a little “too” clean, some found ways to look dirtier during the post-race photos. All around the compound, groups of people clustered around large tents selling merchandise and food and providing information, first aid, and on-site registration. On the day of the event, participants received other markers of their participation when they checked in at the start of the Race (a headband, for example); upon

²² I had actually signed up with ClubFit’s group when registration came out earlier in the spring, but ended up running the race with QiangFit (or in reality, mostly alone). Yu had asked me and a few of the other women prior to our Open race beginning (there are many time slots over the course of the day to account for crowding) to run it as it were a real race so we could see what our time would be had we competed. This included running ahead when the group slowed down and completing all obstacles by ourselves (or doing the requisite burpees asked of us when we couldn’t complete the obstacles - part of the Spartan Race rules).

completion of the race and crossing the finish line, they then received a “free” (paid for with the registration fee) t-shirt and medal. There are also large flags, painted logos, and other sections of the compound set up for people to take photos. Inside the course, there are professional photographers who took photos and uploaded them to an official site. Large groups like QiangFit also specifically asked people, including paid professionals, members, and staff, to take photos of their group. Hung, who was trying to plan a marathon in Beijing, live-streamed his entire race via a selfie stick he carried with him. He didn’t even put down the selfie stick when scaling a large and tall net - one of the last obstacles of the course. In this way, his participation in the event was only part of the fun; the subsequent social media content he produced through his running of the race was used to garner more followers for himself as well as to help brand QiangFit, with whom he had formed a partnership (for later, when his marathon race took shape). The next day, my WeChat circle was filled with photos of the race. Through sharing my photos and checking my WeChat feed, I was able to see who else had been there, catch up with people I hadn’t spoken to in a while, and field questions from people who were curious as to what I had been doing that had gotten me muddy. In the fall, some of the latter became new participants in the race, joining the group of people who’ve completed the Spartan Race in China. It’s uncertain how popular this event will be in a few years; the Color Run, which combines colourful paints and a short race, served a similar function but had become less popular or at least less “new” even in the two years I lived in Beijing. Regardless, some of the people who joined training camps will continue going to the gym, perhaps at QiangFit and ClubFit. Others will join the running groups or hiking adventures. These spaces will continue to provide a way for people to meet outside of the constraints of dedicated networking. I met the majority of the people I got to

know over the course of two years of fieldwork in this way, and they in turn, introduced me to their circles. A few moments of serendipity can open up new worlds of possibility.

Conclusion

The Spartan Race can be inaccessible to certain people due to its cost. Even for students who were members at ClubFit, for example, the 300+ RMB registration fee was a barrier that led some to hesitate and others to not sign up. The cost of attendance for races, marathons, and other events excludes certain demographics - namely students and people with less income. There is a big difference in disposable income for young men and women handing out gym fliers on the street, who make 2000-3000 RMB a month before commission, and office workers or shop managers whose salaries exceeded 10,000 RMB a month. There is also a difference between two people performing the same job at two gyms in different price-brackets. Huxi Gym charged 10,000 to over 20,000 RMB (depending on location) a month for their membership; Tuibian, a small neighborhood gym near Beijing Normal University, charged less than 3000 RMB a year. Their salaries are different and afford different opportunities, as well as bring them into contact with people who can afford one price point or the other. Even those who frequented the same gym or attended the same university varied in how much money their families provided for pocket money and how much they could earn part-time while studying. At the same time, young people with little spending money have their own forms of mobility. Through the site of the gym or the restaurant, young people working in the service sector have their own networks and spaces of serendipity. One young man who I met handing out fliers outside of Beijing Normal University worked for Tuibian. A few months later, he had moved on to a different gym, and a few months after that, he had left Beijing for a different, better opportunity. His lower income and precarious position put him in a place where he was more willing to move for the promise of

more money and more security, as well as more fun. I still occasionally receive advertisements from him on WeChat and it seems he's changed jobs a few more times since we last spoke. As "fitness" spaces - broadly encompassing sports, outdoor activities, and the gym - open up room for people to gather outside of restaurants and banquet halls, much of the barriers that kept young people from crossing social lines (wealth, education, *guanxi*) continue. It takes money and knowing someone to enter a space where other people are wealthy and know important people. But, many of the trainers at QiangFit, priced in between the two examples given above, did not have higher education or particularly distinguished credentials. Through their work at QiangFit, they were introduced to a different circle, one that includes semi-famous television actors (like Yu's husband and co-owner of QiangFit), entrepreneurs, managers, and the owners of other gyms. With their position at QiangFit, some have taken the opportunity to start their own ventures or work at more prestigious gyms. For them, work and play look very similar, but this does not detract from the sociality of gyms and spaces used for leisure. One conversation or chance encounter can be consequential in unexpected ways.

Chapter 4: Sportifying ultimate frisbee

Moving beyond the space of the gym or the studio, where sociality is possible for all who enter, and where consumption of fitness exercises is, in de Certeau's terms (1984), a productive act, there are more explicit ways in which young people must strategically create and forge new spaces for themselves. In the case of ultimate frisbee (also known as "ultimate"), a relatively unknown and new sport in China, several actors and groups of actors, often referred to as "the frisbee community," are involved in its making in China. They are sometimes in direct odds with each other, with conflicting visions. The struggles center around organization and space; there are many official and unofficial ways to organize a sporting event, with different people in charge, and different uses of space. Ultimate is played between two teams of seven people on soccer or rugby fields. Each team attempts to catch the frisbee within the boundaries of their designated end zone, which swaps at the end of each point. The end zone for a given point is the direction in which players are facing at the start of a point. The team who last scored "pulls" the frisbee to the opposing team, allowing them first possession of the frisbee disc. Players throw the frisbee to teammates, who should be in constant motion to throw off their defenders; however, the person with the disc is not allowed to move (run, step, jump) while in possession of the disc. Dropping the frisbee or intercepting it mid-pass constitutes a turnover, giving the other team an opportunity to move the frisbee closer to or into their own end zone. This sport requires little equipment outside of a frisbee and cone markers for the field, but does require large amounts of space. The specific size of the field can be easily adjusted by moving cone markers, though full tournament games tend to make use of the entire length (but not width) of the field. All of this describes what happens on a space designated the "frisbee field." They are part of the practices and the explicit rules that make an open patch of grass a field, a designated space for play. These

sports rules and practices also constrain what spaces can be made into fields of play; trees, bushes, and benches are just some of the obstacles that would render a space unsuitable.

Beyond physical space, however, there is the question of what constitutes a sport in China, with all of its accompanying privileges - public recognition, financial and organisational support for tournaments, a pool of young people to recruit from, and the administrative capacity to designate and send a national team to international tournaments. It is difficult to recruit young people to a league or to an extracurricular club when most people have not heard of ultimate frisbee (or its accompanying rules). Moreover, there are not yet any national entities that have the legal or social authority to regulate ultimate frisbee and its players in China. There are many possibilities and opportunities in this lack of regulation, but also chaos and confusion. Additionally, though many terms specific to ultimate frisbee have Mandarin-language translations, the English equivalent was more often used even among entirely Mandarin or Chinese-speaking groups. For example, though there is technically a word for “pick up” in Chinese, all frisbee players in Beijing referred to pick up games using the English term (as in, *da pick up* or “playing pick up”). Other examples include “end zone,” “defense,” and “hard cap” or “soft cap,” which refers to time caps on games. Certain terms like “cutting,” translated directly as *qie*, were often shortened to a different Mandarin word that sounded like the English term (as in, *ka* instead of cut). The field was a place where ultimate frisbee’s reputation as an international sport was overtly practiced; English terms and Chinese-sounding “translations” of English terms allowed for players from all different language backgrounds and playing experiences to communicate with each other. This chapter looks at ultimate frisbee in China, struggles surrounding space, the people who play it by varying degrees, and the strategies (or lack thereof) through which some of these people are shaping what ultimate frisbee might be in the future. At

the heart of the strategies available to people, in flashy and less flashy but still consequential ways, are how who people know - the relationships and connections they have available to them - impact what is possible and what is dream-able.

Making space

One prominent way in which different groups use and view space can be seen in the different approaches and value placed on grass versus turf fields. Beijing's oldest and most selective frisbee team (Beijing Bullets), holds tryouts at the end of every summer and greatly prefers to use grass fields. In the past, Beijing Bullets has rented out the rugby fields at Deleone International School in Shunyi district for Saturday practices or the soccer fields at a polo club in northern Chaoyang district. Fields had to be reserved and paid for in advance, and in the case of Deleone, alternative transportation needed to be arranged. Both are difficult to access by public transportation and expensive. Deleone is far from nearest subway station and located in Shunyi district, considered a "suburb" (*jiaoqu*) of Beijing. Each week, a small mini bus picked players up from either the Dongzhimen subway station (located in the northeast corner of Line 2, which closely follows the second ring) or the Agricultural Exhibition Center subway station on Line 10. A round-trip on the bus cost 30 RMB each week. If players missed the bus or did not want to make their way to one of the designated pick-up locations, they could opt to take a taxi or Didi (a ride-share service similar to Uber) directly. These trips cost around 50 RMB one-way, depending on traffic. A few players owned cars and drove themselves. The polo fields were a 15 minute bike ride or short cab trip from the nearest subway station. Transportation wasn't offered for practices there and players either took the subway and then found (or shared) a taxi, took a taxi directly (or carpooled to split expenses), scootered (since it was close enough for electric scooters to safely make a roundtrip without fear of running out of battery), or drove.

Sarah, one of the Beijing Bullets co-captains for several seasons from 2017-2019, was in charge of booking the fields, which required paying in advance. This was made possible in part through help from local donors like the Lion's Head Brewery, whose owner is personal friends with some older members of Beijing Bullets, and whose 10,000 RMB donation each year subsidizes nearly half of the cost of the fields. Sarah also collected money from players afterwards and took care of the team budget. Paying for fields in advance is just one barrier to organizing a practice, particularly for younger teams. During the time I was there, Beijing Bullets was the only frisbee team that practiced on rented fields; other teams were directly based in schools or relied on the affiliations of team captains to secure practice space on university grounds. In order to make the rather steep costs of participation more accessible for students, there was a student discount. Each week, students (including high school, university, and graduate students like myself) paid 70 RMB for the Deleone fields while working professionals paid 80 RMB. This was for the 2017-2018 season, where Beijing Bullets practiced at Deleone in the fall and two single gender teams made up predominantly of Beijing Bullets members practiced there in the spring. The polo fields cost a little more. Deleone fields cost 400-500 RMB per hour per week, while the polo fields charged 1000 RMB per hour per week, though the team negotiated to use only half the field for 500 RMB per hour. These were the "pick up" prices, for players who could only commit to coming to practice every now and then. They could also opt to pay for the full season or for a half season (in 2017, 600 or 350 for students for a full nine-week season versus a five-week season and 650 or 400 for workers). If players paid in full at the beginning of the semester, they were not refunded money if they missed practice. However, if they paid only for a half season and eventually came to more than five practices, they were asked to pay pick up fees to make up the difference. Additionally, though Beijing Bullets only brought

15-18 people to tournaments, the roster of people welcome to practice (otherwise closed to the public) was much larger. Experienced and strong players who could only attend a few practices due to work or school commitments were still welcome to compete with Beijing Bullets if the space was available; they paid pick up fees. In this way, finances varied from week to week. Team members who had the means to paid upfront for the season, ameliorating the burden of finances for the rest of the team. Donations from local connections like the Lion's Head Brewery not only helped provide initial money to book fields, but also subsidized field costs and made up for potential losses from poor practice turnout. These are just some of the ways grass fields were difficult to access, expensive, and required significant labor to achieve as a practice space.

Even though ultimate is a relatively unknown sport, those who play it are also caught up in and subject to local and national political projects. Each fall, the Beijing frisbee leadership hosts a tournament in the city that is well attended by teams from around China called Beijing Bowl. They are members of an organization titled the Beijing Ultimate Community (BUC), which organizes larger "community" wide events like Beijing Bowl and a six-week-long summer tournament. In 2019, due to preparations for the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, large organizations were prohibited from gathering in one place. The onus for enforcing this was placed on all space providers. As one of the members of this leadership group, Sarah had several conversations with the management of potential fields, particularly the polo club fields, before concluding that these new and hopefully brief restrictions would not permit a tournament. She was asked whether a certain number of people would be in a certain space at the same time, an impossible question to answer. There are always 14 people on the field during any game, but prior to fielding teams for sign-up, she could only guess how many teams would show up based on past numbers, and she could not promise the field administrators that people would

stay close to their designated fields (which were rented out as separate units) so that the overall number would stay below the legal limit. Thus, there was no 2019 Beijing Bowl.

Grass fields versus turf fields

There are not many open spaces with real grass in Beijing - even large public parks like Chaoyang Park encourage visitors to keep off certain grassy areas and are organized with smaller spaces of grass rather than a large open field. Though a number of large parks (Chaoyang Park, Ditan Park, and the Olympic Park, for example) have free admissions areas as well as portions open for a very small fee (3 or 5 RMB), these parks do not have open fields. Instead, there are small areas with exercise equipment painted in bright blue and yellow where older folks often congregate to chat and exercise. Ditan Park in particular is known for its “gymnastics grandpas” - older men who perform various feats of strength on the equipment. Young people, particularly young men, have also begun to join in this form of body-weight exercise on public equipment in public spaces. The parks are organized for walking, with signs pointing towards various points of interests (ponds, historical sites, or scenic views), and flat, paved roads. Chaoyang Park and the Olympic Park are popular running places; many groups on WeChat, specifically for running and otherwise, meet at these locations to run the park together. Frisbee players sometimes bring their discs to Chaoyang Park (or other areas with grass) to picnic and throw the frisbee around; some of the people I got to know tried to go more regularly to practice drills or practice throwing and catching in different weather conditions. Those fields that do exist tend to be attached to sports stadiums or schools, particularly private high schools and large, public universities. Access to these spaces is restricted to paying customers and registered student clubs, and not all fields are available for outsiders, non-students or non-members, to book. Beijing Bullets practices, however, were always held on grass fields. Seasoned members of the team and experienced

ultimate frisbee players cited comfort and functionality for this choice; many of the skilled offensive and defensive tactics employed by players need to be practiced on grass fields. The feeling and experience of running, cutting (changing direction sharply), and turning with cleats (spiked running shoes) was different on grass and dirt compared to turf and cement.

This is not to say that turf fields were more easily accessible. Beijing is a large sprawling city and the social and organizational logic behind the lack of grass fields in and around the city extend to the lack of turf fields. Playing sports has up until recently not been viewed as “a thing people do” outside of institutionally dictated spaces, like schools and competitive training centers. Every week there are several “pick up” games organized around the city. On Wednesdays from 8:00-10:00PM, there’s pick up at Zhichunlu, a set of turf fields right next to the Zhichunlu subway station on Line 10. It’s in Haidian district, near several universities, and belongs to Capital Sports University. Shun, another member of the small leadership board of BUC, organizes this each week. Though the fields belong to the university, the administration of rentals to outside groups like BUC is held by a separate organization. Shun told me that this organization is surely related to Capital Sports University in some way - perhaps run or initially set up by graduates of the school. The university makes the fields available for rent during certain periods and the specifics of organizing schedules, administering accessibility, and managing payment is left to this separate organization, which presumably pays the university a portion of its fees and takes a processing cut for itself. They assign an “Uncle” or “Auntie”²³ to

²³ The term “Uncle” or “Auntie” is used colloquially in several instances in contemporary China. Aside from blood-kin, the term *shushu* and *ayi* can be used to politely refer to people of roughly one’s parents age as a term of intimate respect or as part of the processes of drawing others into intimate proximal distance (see chapter three). Addresses in Mandarin Chinese often mark someone’s relationship to the speaker; for example, I referred to the professor I worked with at BNU as *daoshi* (advisor) and his other students as *shijie* (an older sister who is also a student of my advisor), *shixiong* (a brother who is also the student of my advisor), and so on. These latter terms refer to our institutional age rather than birth age. Students who were earlier in their doctoral or graduate students were “younger” and those who were

watch the fields at night, make sure people do not overstay their rental time, and lock and unlock the fields, which are surrounded by a large wire gate/wall. Before Wednesday pick up, there are often soccer clubs holding their games or small children's soccer classes using the fields.

Shun rents the fields a year in advance, paying a large sum upfront, and attends pick up each week to collect money from those who attend. Shun cannot estimate how many people will show up, and of those who do, most pay, but there are also those who do not. On days with good weather, as many as 40 people might show up, with enough participants for two side-by-side games and substitutes to swap in when players get tired. On rainy days or the week before student exams or national holidays, there may only be 12 people in all. In 2019, Shun slowly shifted to an in-WeChat program that allowed people to sign up in advance. When I was there, during the summer, he encouraged use of this program by randomly assigning people who signed up to teams ahead of time. This provided a stronger sense of teamwork rather than players changing the color of their shirts - light versus dark - every other point when they swapped in to different teams. It also allowed those who wanted to play more seriously the opportunity to practice and deploy strategic maneuvers. However, there were still people who showed up and paid via WeChat or in cash. The student fee is 30 RMB, and for workers it is 50 RMB. During the last six weeks of 2019, BUC discounted the fee to 10 RMB per week to encourage higher attendance in the cold weather. Shun also organized who would bring field markers each week, either coming early himself or delegating it to others. Most players owned their own frisbees, and people like Sarah might bring a duffel bag of team frisbees so that more people could

farther along were "older." However, *ayi* is also used generally to refer to a "helper" or a maid, again regardless of the person's age.

In this case, there was an older man and older woman who were employed by the administrators of the field to open, clean, and lock up the fields.

practice throwing before or after pick up. Announcements - in the case that pick up was canceled due to weather, for example - were made in the BUC WeChat group. In the case of over-payment, after the Beijing Bowl Tournament or from pick-up fees, BUC used those extra funds to purchase prizes for smaller events held during Wednesday pickup and promotional materials. A popular example is stickers - I ended my fieldwork with a water bottle decorated with stickers from Beijing Bullets, BUC, and various tournaments around China. These funds are useful in arranging future events. Regardless of funds, however, younger frisbee players also worked together to form school frisbee teams, organize student tournaments, and host a pick up game. The experiences of such, of planning a tournament, of renting fields and buses, and leasing with vendors, as well as the contacts made during the process, make future ventures more possible.

There are also other pick up games held each week. On Sunday afternoons from 4:00-6:00PM, there is weekly pick up at Qinghua University on the Zijing fields. These fields are free to play but cannot be reserved, so the size of the field changes from week to week. There are campus guards at the various gates leading to Qinghua University's campus; I was never stopped and asked for identification or my intended purpose there, but several people on the women's team and players who came for pick up were. To my knowledge, all were eventually let in under various explanations of "I'm here to play sports" or "I'm here for practice." Organization for these games were looser and announced each week via a WeChat group specifically for Qinghua pickup and also posted in the BUC WeChat group. Additionally, there are various campus specific practices each week. Minzu University, for example, has an ultimate frisbee club attended by both undergraduate and graduate students, and someone who worked at the American School of Beijing in Shunyi sometimes organized pick up games on Saturdays on ASB turf fields. These are sometimes publicized in various WeChat groups, but not others, depending

on who was hosting and which groups they belonged to on WeChat. I am part of six different frisbee-related WeChat groups in Beijing and several others related to frisbee tournaments or events in China. It was thus possible to play frisbee, if one were willing to travel, nearly every day of the week.

In describing and visiting the fields available in Beijing, I've traversed a large part of the city and touched upon various constraints on how people can organize and practice their sport (here, ultimate frisbee). Spatial distance, the time required to cross large distances and then spend on the field, and the costs to participate due to transportation, field fees, and clothing²⁴ all impose particular and peculiar conditions within which people live, play, organize. Whether its pay-to-play grass and turf fields or free-to-play campus turf fields, each of these spaces require significant organizing to transform them into spaces for frisbee. Loosely organized groups of people, such as the BUC leadership and students at Qinghua, deployed their institutional and strategic resources in order to claim a right to that space, at least for a little while, while others do the work of showing up - a field becomes a frisbee field when there are people on that field playing frisbee.

Gendered play

Following the previous chapter, the ways in which sport and exercise are gendered despite shifts in gatekeeping and perceptions of who is allowed or has the right to what spaces are an important debate amongst people who play ultimate in China. Men and women play ultimate frisbee together and thus, many of the teams and frisbee spaces I've written about thus far are co-ed. However, in the fall of 2017, the first single-gender tournament for Chinese teams

²⁴ I attempted to play frisbee on a grass field without cleats and I would not recommend it. When I first joined the team, Zuoyi gave me a pair of her old cleats that she'd just replaced and sent me a link to a shop where I could purchase new cleats on Taobao, a popular online shopping site.

was held in mainland China and in the spring of 2018, several single-gender tournaments were held, including the previously co-ed Shanghai Open (SHO) in June. This change was the result of years of work by many who considered themselves part of the ultimate frisbee community in China. Foreigners and local players who'd learned to play or had experience playing abroad spoke of their experience playing on single gender teams and its value in their development as players. Several in particular, including two of the 2018 captains of Beijing Bullets, Anna and Sarah, were vocal about the importance of carving out a space for young women to learn to play frisbee away from the faster pace and looser strategies of male dominated co-ed play.²⁵ They were also co-captains of the first Beijing women's team. The re-organization of SHO, the largest and most well-attended tournament in the spring season, as a single-gender tournament led to a shift in the organization of practice schedules. Specifically, Beijing Bullets shifted from practicing and competing in both spring and fall as co-ed to only in the fall. Spring 2018 was the first time that there was an organized ultimate frisbee team practicing as a single-gender team in Beijing, as well as in other parts of Mainland China. Beijing Belles - the name of this new women's team - had competed together in the previous year as a pick up team of players from various Beijing co-ed teams. Practices in the spring continued to be on the Deleone fields on Saturdays from 10AM-1PM, with the men and women's teams sharing the space by splitting it in

²⁵ This is not to suggest that the "best" players in China were all men; several of the women on Beijing Bullets and the Hong Kong and Shanghai co-ed teams were also considered excellent players and could defend male players. I am referring to the consensus, within a particular group of people playing frisbee, that much of co-ed frisbee, especially pick up co-ed frisbee, attracted young, athletic men who could run fast and jump high. This led to pace of play that was fast and fun to watch, but paid less attention to "good handling," "patient strategy," and the foundations of physical fitness. Those who held to this view were frustrated by new players trained in this way; one particular point of contention was the lack of attention paid to basic physical fitness and doing weight exercises in the gym.

half.²⁶ Women's practices looked much like Beijing Bullets practices; they began with warm up and stretching, while the bulk of practice focused on drills and some scrimmage. Anna also led the team in leadership and character building, encouraging players to voice their opinions, communicate more with teammates, and learn how to take care of the team. In one instance, she asked everyone to bring snacks to practice to share with a teammate. The men's practice was loosely the same structure, with less time spent on drills and more on scrimmage. In a three hour practice, they spent less than one hour on drills and around two hours playing scrimmage games.

In the spring 2019 season, the Beijing Belles captains moved practice to Sunday afternoons on the Qinghua fields. One of the co-captains was a graduate student there and could easily arrive early to reserve at least a small bit of field space for women's practices. Her dormitory room overlooked the fields. This change in time and location significantly increased attendance as well as encouraged new players to come to practice. Practice became more accessible in terms of both location and price; the fields were free and much more easily accessible for students living in Haidian district, as well as more accessible by subway and taxi for players living within the fourth ring of Beijing. While in the spring 2018 season, women's practices drew between 10-15 players each week, in spring 2019, practices regularly drew 15-25, averaging around 22, players each week.

In interviews and casual conversations, people noted that Sunday afternoons were a more convenient time. Aside from the above mentioned barriers, many on the women's team were undergraduate and graduate students. Some had Saturday classes or were regularly called in to work in the lab or perform some duties for their professors on the weekends. Overtime (*jiaban*) was also a common reason for busyness on Saturdays. Moreover, for students who exclusively

²⁶ In 2018, while Sarah still organized transportation to the Deleone fields, the men's team still practiced. In 2019, the men's team did not hold a single practice, though they still participated in SHO.

used public transportation to save money, the commute to Haidian was much shorter than that to Deleone or the polo fields. Whereas the latter two fields were over an hour's commute away, the Qinghua fields were a short 15-30 minute commute. One weekend prior to the 2019 SHO tournament, the three co-captains moved practice to the polo fields; in the WeChat group, they exhorted the team to make the long trip to the outer stretches of Chaoyang, pointing to the value of practicing on grass, the niceness of the fields, and the importance of squeezing in an extra practice before the last tournament of the season. Nevertheless, only a handful of women turned up, and given the extreme windy conditions, it was nearly impossible to reliably throw a frisbee further than a few feet, even for the most skilled and experienced players. Practice was cut short to a few drills, physical training exercises, and social gathering.

During the spring season, there was also co-ed play. In fact, there were distinct preferences visible through who participated in which practices and tournaments. It was a small source of consternation that some women who had competed with Beijing Bullets or Beijing Bullets members on pick up teams came to the Qinghua fields on Sundays for pick up but not for women's practice. In addition to several single-gender tournaments in the spring (one of which was cancelled due to the low turnout measured via team signups), there were many co-ed tournaments. These range from standard tournaments with team submissions, either established ones with regular practices like Beijing's Beijing Bullets or Shanghai's Huwa, or pick up teams composed of members "picked up" from various teams and locations, including players visiting or traveling from abroad, to hat tournaments, where players enter as individuals and are placed into relatively balanced teams based on a survey they filled out indicating their experience, position, and skill level. There were also several beach tournaments in various tropical locals such as Xiamen in mainland China and Boracay and Manila in the Philippines. These are also

entered as a team. The Philippines tournaments drew players and teams from all over the world and as such, offered both high level of play and social exchanges over the course of a several-day long tournament played barefoot on the beach. Most tournaments take place over the weekend on Saturday and Sunday, with a party or social event on Saturday evening, though not all attend, particularly in the mainland Chinese tournaments.

Other Beijing teams, like Beijing Bang, which quietly disbanded in 2016/2017 when many of their more experienced members left to start a more “competitive” team, and July Fire, a pickup team that, for the 2018-2019 season, attended several tournaments together and was more organized than a pick up team, strictly speaking, but less organized than a team with regular practices, went to co-ed tournaments in places like Dalian, Tianjin, and Xiamen, even as members of these teams also attended women’s practices and single-gender tournaments. I mention this to highlight how intertwined the politics of gender was with the institutional structures and limitations of ultimate frisbee in China; the level of play at single-gender tournaments and in women’s practices, since men’s teams, by and large, had less organized practices and suffered less from the issue of having to train new members, was not as high or as “competitive” as that of co-ed ultimate. There were few organized institutions in place to address this discrepancy in skill and experience. Many of the local, Chinese men who played on Beijing Bullets, Beijing Bang, July Fire, and so on came from sports universities (*tiyu xuexiao*) and had, in their words, the *jichu* (foundations, basics) for “run fast, jump high” that characterized much of play in China. Though some male players only played sports casually, all I met in China played some sport prior to playing frisbee. They played football (soccer, for Americans) or basketball in high school or university, participated in running or cycling clubs, or had started playing frisbee while studying abroad or in high school. On the other hand, many of the new

female players, and even some of the more experienced female players, came to ultimate as *xiaobai*. This is a term that literally translates as “little white’s” and indicates a blank slate or complete lack of previous experience. Outside of mandatory physical education classes in school, they had not previously participated in any sports or regular exercise. The Beijing Belles captains often expressed frustration with how to teach female players how to run. They could see that people were trying to run and that they thought they were running as fast as they could, but the captains - all of whom had significant international playing experience - believed that there should be a “second gear,” or a faster speed. Another common refrain was the idea that newer players didn’t know how to push themselves, whether this was in running faster or in exerting effort in drills. Regardless, the result was that practices often had a mix of players in terms of experience and skill and this affected how captains could structure practices and pace skills and strategies they wanted to introduce. This went hand in hand with how the women’s captains, particularly Sarah, felt about how many of the men relied on their “natural athletic ability” to “run fast” and “jump high” over concerted effort and hard work put into improving at ultimate in technical ways.

This divide in how various groups of actors within the ultimate frisbee community, or those who played frisbee, in some way, shape, or form, in China navigated “gendered” play was particularly evident in the organization of the Asia Oceanic Ultimate and Guts Championships (AOUGC) tournament in 2019. This was the first time that this tournament, which drew “official” teams from many countries across East and Southeast Asia, was hosted in mainland China.²⁷ There were two parallel tournaments - a women’s competition and an “open” competition, which could be single gender or co-ed. In other words, there was no male-only

²⁷ The “officialness” of teams for China is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

single-gender option for the tournament. There was one “Chinese” team participating in each division and they held tryouts in early March of 2019 in several locations across China. Players were expected to travel, at their own cost, to these tryouts. One of the tryout locations was originally planned for Beijing, but due to difficulties in reserving a field, it was moved to Tianjin. Tryouts included a mix of general fitness drills like timed running laps and observing players in scrimmage. Given the lack of an official organization or leadership for ultimate frisbee in China, judges, including Sarah, were selected from well recognized and respected unofficial leaders in the community. Dage, a well-known and highly-esteemed player, was one of organizers, as well as a judge for team selection, captain of the co-ed team, and a member of the co-ed team. Players could only join one of the two teams and selected at the time of tryouts whether they were interested in playing co-ed or in the single-gender tournament. Amongst the players who tried out and were selected, there were a few who were considered, generally, to be “very good” players. Dage and Alan, who co-coached the co-ed team as well as the single-gender team, messaged several players personally to encourage them to try out for the co-ed team instead of the women’s team, pointing to the expected “higher level of play” as an opportunity for them to develop as players. Many thought that the women’s team was less competitive and easier to be accepted into compared to the co-ed team. This, of course, makes sense given that the women’s team would be recruiting only women, while the co-ed team recruited both men and women.

Among players who participated in AOUGC there were personal reasons given for selecting single-gender play as well as practical considerations. Some, including the women’s team captain Momo, wanted to help develop women’s frisbee in China. At the same time, playing on the women’s team offered more opportunities for play; the “open” tournament meant

that other teams might have all male teams, making it less optimal to play many women on the field. Additionally, they claimed that women's frisbee was safer, less physical due to less high speed contact and more enjoyable than co-ed frisbee because they didn't feel that they were discriminated against based on their gender. At pick up and during scrimmages, certain, usually male, players preferred to "huck it" or throw the frisbee far downfield instead of using safer, short passes to move the frisbee down the field. This is one of those instances when running fast and jumping high often is enough to score, and these kinds of throws are predominantly directed toward or in the direction of another male player. This resulted in, as I personally experienced, long periods of time where possession of the frisbee turned over multiple times because both teams were hucking it. In these instances, most players on the team, including most or all of the women, did not get to touch or fight for the frisbee. "Hucking it" happened less often during tournament games, given their acknowledged low success rates. On the other hand, most men I spoke with strongly preferred co-ed frisbee, even those who exclusively played pick-up and rarely if ever threw to women on their team. When questioned, they said having women around was more fun. An additional complication to the conversation is the overall lack of "development" of frisbee in China; several groups, some of whom are discussed below, are working on improving this, but Chinese teams, regardless of how well regarded they are at Mainland Chinese tournaments, struggle to compete with international co-ed and single-gender teams from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the Philippines.

In touching upon the politics and conversations surrounding gendered play, it's important to examine the ways in which the limitations and possibilities of sport foster particular forms of sociality for young people in contemporary China. Outside of offices and classrooms, gyms and fields provide an arguably neutral and accessible space for men and women of similar ages to be

together and do things together. Most frisbee players were between the ages of 20-30, though there were certainly outliers - high school students, parents in their late thirties and forties, and an older American man named Russell who is credited by some with a large role in fostering ultimate in Beijing. Even in recent Chinese history, much of appropriate sociality was strictly gendered in very limiting ways. Osburg's work on banqueting (2013), comes to mind, as does Farrer's much earlier work on youth sex culture in Shanghai (2002), where bars and clubs were places for young people to socialize and meet, but were considered countercultural. On the other hand, though people who play frisbee often find themselves having to explain and defend this sport to those who associate frisbees with dogs fetching discs in parks, they find no derision for their practice of something that constitutes exercise, as people are commonly conscious of its importance.²⁸ Part of the sociality and strategy available to those who play frisbee surrounds partnership and dating. Though people don't play frisbee solely to find a significant other, it is one of the ways by which young people can meet other young people and spend time with them. There are many frisbee couples and there were many more - some involving the same people. Sarah met her current partner through ultimate frisbee tournaments, when they were living in two different cities. And the prospect of meeting someone - a significant someone - is part of the draw of trying something new. Frisbee tournaments (specifically the parties) are renowned, especially amongst the foreign players, as an excellent way of meeting new people. Ultimate is also an activity in which the social circles are relatively small; after spending some time in them, everyone is known by face or by name. There are a lot of foreigners who play frisbee as well as an increasing number of Chinese young people, all within roughly the same age range (20-30).

²⁸ At least part of this commonsense knowledge can be traced by to the work of projects like Healthy China 2030 and programmatic interventions and assessments designed by researchers like my advisor's group at BNU.

Most are university educated and speak some English. Playing frisbee, and other activities like it, can be a method - a strategy - for finding a particular kind of potential partner.

Influence and strategy, or official unofficial organization

There are foreigners who learned to play ultimate in their respective countries with varying degrees of social and organizational support. Some have played for over a decade, starting in middle or even elementary school teams and clubs. In Beijing and Shanghai, ultimate frisbee is only an extracurricular option in some international high schools or public high schools with international divisions - availability depends on whether someone in the school, either a teacher or a student, organizes a club team. The two captains of Beijing's first women's team, Anna and Sarah, both started playing ultimate abroad. Anna is from the US and has since returned; she left China after seeing the close of China's first single-gender season. She started playing ultimate frisbee on a whim in her first semester at university. She didn't play "seriously" at first and nearly didn't go to her first tournament. But, after a particularly fun party on the first night of the tournament that ended up with her vomiting into a bucket, cementing her university frisbee nickname as "Buckets," she felt that she had found a place, a "community," where she belonged. Her team won nationals in her senior year and though she moved to many different cities in the ensuing decade, she always sought out local ultimate teams and continued to play. When Anna moved to Nanjing for a language program, she left her cleats behind, assuming that there was no one to play frisbee with in China. She was wrong - through classmates and friends of friends who heard that she'd played, she eventually found a group of people, both foreign and Chinese, playing in Nanjing. She bought a new pair of cleats and started playing again. This history - her history - of high-level play, of single-gender play, and of captaining - was part of her motivation and her strategy for developing ultimate frisbee, but specifically, women's

ultimate frisbee, in China. As part of the development work she did, Anna focused on leadership and building confidence, designing activities and women's practices that emphasized team-building, communication, and physical strength. She encouraged team members, both men and women, to build physical strength via an accountability WeChat group and also chatted frankly with female teammates about the importance of practicing and exercising even during menstrual cycles. Sarah is Chinese-Australian and started playing frisbee in university in Australia; she played on a co-ed university team and then a single-gender development team for young women during one of her years back in Australia, in between years spent in China. She also continued playing frisbee in China, at first during her graduate studies in Hangzhou and then later, as she moved to Shanghai, and currently, Beijing for work. Other foreigners on the Beijing Bullets team, like JL and Qu, have similar stories. Still others, like Phil and myself, started playing frisbee in China, through friends.

I entered this space and met these people through Anna, who I made eye contact with in a group fitness class at FortFit, and with whom I subsequently had lunch and added on WeChat. Her recruitment efforts successfully got me into the women's team and my strategic eye-contact making opened up this world to me and my field research. Both Anna and Sarah brought their experience playing and captaining to their efforts in Beijing and with the BUC; Sarah is behind the bulk of the logistical efforts required for organizing practice, away-tournaments, and the Beijing Bowl. Their influence and strategy relied on their experience abroad, their knowledge of the game, their ability to speak Mandarin as foreigners, and their willingness to share it, whether that was links to resources, interviews, or live-streams or videos of prominent international frisbee tournaments via frisbee WeChat groups. Neither moved to China for the purpose of getting involved in ultimate and neither practiced ultimate frisbee or its organization as their

work. Though they put many hours of labor into it, it still constituted play, or in the words of young people in English, a “passion project.”

There are also overseas returnees like Xiaohua and Cam who played frisbee abroad and, upon their return to China, set out to get involved in the ultimate frisbee scene. Xiaohua, the 2018 and 2019 co-captain of Beijing Bullets, as well as the 2018 co-captain of the Beijing men’s team, spent high school and university abroad in Canada. Many in Beijing Bullets teased him for being a *fuerdai*, or a wealthy second generation child of well-connected parents. He had the characteristics of familial wealth and connections; sending children abroad, particularly for high school, requires a certain level of income as well as the connections and knowledge to make use of it. He also, at the age of 23, had his own car and frequently attended banquets. Pictures of his familial home from a time when his parents were out of town and he hosted a smaller, last-minute party for frisbee people also seemed to confirm suspicions of his perceived wealth and social connections. But in the end, it is hard to tell the difference between someone who is comfortable and someone who is very wealthy and very well connected. Xiaohua avoided answering questions about his contacts and background; at the same time, he works at a Chinese bank on Beijing’s “Wall Street” in Xicheng, and could have easily supported himself. Since his family lives in Beijing, he was able to save on rent by living at home, and he also had easier access to any and all *guanxi* and social networks his family had. Among young people of varied backgrounds in a social context like ultimate frisbee, it can be gauche to freely discuss familial wealth or to be significantly wealthier than others. It was easier to take the teasing and avoid confirming or denying. Unlike many of the other young people in Beijing and especially many of those who played frisbee, Xiaohua had an uncommonly large pool of resources and knowledge from which he could stand and strategize (de Certeau 1984).

There are ongoing debates of how to play frisbee, how to do it well, and where to do it, with several competing visions. Xiaohua was the leader of one group of young people who had a particular vision for what ultimate frisbee should be in China. Many of his views were in response to or against the other major group, Ultimate Association of China (UAC), in which Callie and her boyfriend, one of the generally acknowledged “best” ultimate players in mainland China, Dage, who has neither studied nor worked abroad, have become increasingly involved. The UAC officially represents China on certain international platforms, such as the annual U24 (Under 24) tournament. However, UAC is not an officially recognized sports organization in China. It has no legal powers or jurisdiction and thus, though it is widely accepted that players and organizers of ultimate frisbee in China play by WFDF (World Flying Disc Federation) rules, there is no official, legal consensus that these are the rules of “Chinese” ultimate frisbee. UAC gets its recognition from WFDF, but it was simply the first Chinese organization to apply for recognition; however, given the proliferation of *shehuizuzhi* (social enterprises) in China, seen by some as a recession of the state, though the state certainly remains close by, this organization was formed to fill an otherwise absent organizational role in ultimate frisbee in China. Prior to this, frisbee organization had existed more on a local club level. UAC has been quite active in the past two years in increasing visibility for the sport and recruiting younger players. Dage began working for UAC in 2018. He helped organize the U24 team that went to Germany in 2019 as well as the July 2019 AOUGC tournament in Shanghai. He also helped organize the tournament, seeking out sponsors and arranging tryouts. Such efforts were made possible both directly and indirectly by the Healthy China 2030 initiative; organized sports falls under its umbrella and thus the language of the plan can be deployed in negotiations for sponsorship and support. Local and provincial governments alike have their own bureaus and sets of discretionary

funds that can be used to make ultimate a more visible sport, provide a space for young people to meet and play, and to fulfill local obligations to the national project of a healthy China.

On the other hand, in 2018, the year prior, Xiaohua captained the U24 team and, as part of both recruitment and mentorship efforts, coached weekly training sessions at Beijing Communications University. He worked with the UAC in recruitment and organizational efforts and at the time, spoke of the importance of getting young people involved in the sport and introducing them to international tournament play. However, in 2019, the UAC took over organization and recruitment for the team and Xiaohua was no longer involved. He cited this shift from one of opt-in (“if you want to join, join”) to more “formal” (application based) as one example of how the organization, though supposedly one that represents ultimate frisbee in all of China, lacks transparency and is not working towards the kind of culture that he thinks the Chinese ultimate frisbee community needs or should have. Though he was not involved in the U24 team in 2019, in October of that year, he helped organize and plan an international frisbee tournament in Hainan - a popular tourist destination for mainland Chinese due to its scenic island views and status as part of mainland China. For Xiaohua, this was a way to achieve his goals, particularly for a sport that has been a big part of his life and for which there is a lot of space to leave his “own mark.” He worked with government officials to find space, designate sponsorships, and promote the tournament. As part of his pitch, he pointed to the ways in which an international tournament would bring people who may otherwise not vacation in Hainan to the islands, as well as to the how sports and organized sports tournaments fit the goals outlined in Healthy China 2030. But what the simple descriptive act of “working with officials” or “negotiating with the local tourism bureau” does not reveal are the many gatekeepers and barriers that prevent ordinary people from walking into an office or making a phone call. With a

sufficiently large organization, which Xiaohua does not have, it is possible to request an audience and expect to be taken seriously; however, what Xiaohua's own account of how he organized the tournament does not reveal, is how exactly he was able to command the attention and ear of the people he needed to make it happen. For Beijing Bowl, Sarah and Shun relied on their own personal connections, as well as their knowledge of the city. Sarah rented the same polo fields they used for Beijing Bullets practices, while Shun liaised with smaller "healthy" food vendors to find a caterer. They bought some equipment on Taobao, others in the supermarket, and lugged it to the fields in Shun and other frisbee teammates' cars. This is the knowledge they'd garnered having lived in Beijing, planned practices and pick-up in Beijing, and having a network of friends and colleagues to rely on. JL, another one of the 2017, 2018, and 2019 Beijing Bullets co-captains, was personally friends with the owner of the Lion's Head Brewery, a burger joint and pub in Beijing. They can rely on these networks to suggest vendors, ameliorate last minute changes through replacements, advice, or even manpower, and get discounts, perhaps, on merchandise. Several Beijing Bullets alumni have worked for ultimate frisbee or other exercise and sports manufacturers and brands. Xiaohua hasn't lived in Hainan, nor had he organized a tournament prior to October 2019. He also did not go to Hainan for the tournament. Though there were small issues with water and communication, that he was able to organize an event of this scale, in a location where he was physically not present, with local government support and funding, is a remarkable feat. It is one that relies on his networks - whatever they may be - that gave him access to people who would listen to him and agree to take a chance on the tourism and health promotion that Xiaohua's tournament had to offer.²⁹

²⁹ Foreign teams from Singapore, Taiwan, and the Philippines had their tournament fees waived or subsidized, in order to encourage more foreigners to attend the tournament and thus make it truly an international competition.

This is part of the problem with studying people in places of privilege and power; there is an opaqueness that protect them and keeps things deliberately hidden, even after having built rapport and trust. It is not seemly to expose the people who have helped you. Throughout my field research, I have found this to be true. ClubFit's owner spoke freely until we reached the subject of capital; he claimed at various times to have funded ClubFit through his own savings from working as a private tennis coach for a few years after graduation from BNU and at other times, he seemed to suggest that he had had help. From where, it is unclear. Similarly, one of the owners and managers of the Haidianhuangzhuang Huxi Gym location said that the question of capital and investment was a "personal" or a "private" (*siren*) matter and declined to answer any specific questions. It is one of the walls I hit when trying to understand how some people were able to jump into new opportunities and others weren't. Xiaolu, one of the ClubFit managers, was trying to find a new venture to invest in back in her husband's home province of Heilongjiang; she had several ideas and was prepared to use their savings, take out a loan, and borrow money from family for the initial investment. However, though she quit several times to try and set this up, she struggled to plan for a new entrepreneurial project in a city with which she was very unfamiliar. However, through her network, she was quickly hired as a manager for SHAPE and then again at ClubFit to partner with Chen in a new online-only weight-loss camp. In this latest venture, they both contributed start-up costs and would split any profits equally, while she ran only the online side of the ClubFit studio.

Xiaohua is currently in the process of going through interviews to apply to be part of the Beijing Winter Olympics planning committee. He said that he was ready to move out of banking, where he did not enjoy his job, and work in sports planning and organization. Of course, he hoped that his experience and contacts from the Winter Olympics committee would also help

him in his personal work with the Beijing and China ultimate community. For Xiaohua, planning a tournament in a distant province and shifting careers from banking to sports organization, both with no prior experience, are within the realm of what is possible. They are achievable potentials, dream-able goals - he can conceive of them at least, in part, due to his funds of knowledge, the ones that precede power, and the perhaps familiar, perhaps personal, networks he can draw on. This knowledge of what to do and how to do it allowed for strategizing. He can plan to apply for a job he knows, somehow, will be hiring. He has gathered around him a group of young, promising frisbee players in Beijing, hosting parties, driving them to practice, and organizing pickup teams to travel to competitions; having the support of people who play frisbee is also invaluable to the work of unofficial organization. Similarly, with the connections and rapport that Casey and Dage have through their personal fame as ultimate frisbee players in China, and with their work with the UAC and other frisbee-adjacent companies and projects, they were able to put together teams and a tournament that drew international participants. Their involvement with the most official unofficial frisbee organization in mainland China also allowed them to strategize and to, for example, prevent Xiaohua from leaving his mark on the U24. In both instances, they are using the networks - personal, familial, professional - available to them, and in both instances, those networks have been capable of sustaining their strategies thus far. Shun, separately though not too far away from all of this, has been doing his own work in Beijing - introducing people to ultimate through weekend lessons, both free and paid, planning pick-up games and summer leagues, and administering the budgetary and logistical work of BUC, whose members and board are constantly changing and leaving Beijing. They all want to see frisbee become more popular and to be officially recognized as a sport in mainland China; history will tell whose strategies leave the deepest mark.

Conclusion

For most people, frisbee is play. Their lives and decisions are circumscribed by space, cost, and time. As more tournaments are hosted in Beijing and there is more funding and monetary support for players to travel, their possibilities for play, at least, will also be expanded. They do not dream of changing the field or leaving a legacy; they dream of traveling to Hong Kong for their first “international” tournament or of improving their skills. Zuoyi, for example, had not considered being a team captain until others around her nominated her for the 2019 women’s team captain elections. Materiality is intimately connected to power, knowledge, strategizing, and the kinds of possibilities and potential visible.



Figure 2: People playing frisbee on a grass field, September 2019.

Chapter 5: Gifts, favors, and reciprocity (or work + play)

One evening, in the late spring of 2018, I found myself sneaking into Kerry Hotel's gym to use the hot tub and sauna with Chin, a good friend. It had been a long day, and she wanted to drop by the gym to get a quick workout before heading home. I was supposed to catch up on some fieldnotes while I waited for her, and then follow her home, where I had a standing invitation to stay in her spare bedroom. Instead, we spent half an hour talking in the lobby before moving to the changing rooms for a long soak and an even longer conversation. Chin is a young woman in her late twenties, and at the time, was responsible for the Beijing operations and expansion of Active Woman, an Australian fitness apparel company targeted towards women. I met her, along with Alicia via an invitation extended by a friend of a friend, at a roundtable meeting tangentially related to my fieldwork and to their work. Alicia was developing MangoFit, a subscription service that allows users to visit a broad selection of partner gyms and fitness studios, similar to ClassPass in major urban cities in the United States. The three of us became fast friends, and since we needed to make many new connections and invest in a broad spectrum of relationships as part of our work, we introduced each other to people we'd met and began to visit new gyms or classes together. Many of these new connections were fleeting - I have dozens of WeChat contacts who I've texted briefly or met up with once; several have simply pushed me onwards to another contact. My friendship with Chin, however, is emblematic of the deep intimacy that can form through serendipitous meetings.

For many of the people I got to know, investing in *guanxi* or accruing debt was not the express purpose of their everyday practice. While proper deference was shown to professors, prospective employers, and government officials, the old ways of giving gifts, showing respect, and currying favor have already been described and analyzed elsewhere, for both ethnographer

and ethnographic subject (Kipnis 1997; Osburg 2013; Steinmuller 2013; Yan 1996; Yang 1994). Instead, here I am interested in how friendships, or the feelings of intimate friend love (*youqing*), can forge potential alliances and new possibilities. Chin, for example, was introduced to her boss at Active Woman through someone she met at a company networking event. She was there as a lawyer, but found herself happily engaged in conversation with a stranger about one of her favorite topics - working out. Both parties left the conversation pleased with their new acquaintance and with the other's WeChat contact. This new friend had a friend who was looking for someone to help expand their operations further in China, and to spearhead the opening of a showroom and later, brick and mortar retail stores, in Beijing. Within a month, Chin found herself with a new job that allowed her more time in the gym and more freedom than her office work. There are several important elements to this happy, serendipitous event, or at least to the retelling of it. Chin was not looking for new employment - it found her. Though it depended upon relationship, or the knowing of someone consequential, her employment did not follow traditional methods of using *guanxi*; she offered no gifts, conducted no prior research, and had no prior relationship, kin or otherwise, with this network stranger. Instead, she credits her employment to the mutual enjoyment of their conversation. It was frank (*zizai*) and comfortable (*shufu*). Finally, this new job helped her move from something she found unhealthy, with its long hours and necessary late-night orderings of takeout, and dull, to employment that was more in line with her personal interests.

This example highlights how important “liking” someone can be, especially amongst peers on relatively equal standing. Being liked, and liking others, supports a host of possibilities scaffolded by the language of “friendship.” In this chapter, I explore the role of relationships, reciprocity, and the language and practices of intimacy crucial to service-providing industries in

contemporary Chinese society. I use this as an opportunity to look at relatedness, networks and their role in everyday life, as well as the increasingly blurry boundaries between work and play.

The anthropology of gift-giving and exchange

Much attention has been paid to the role of gifts, gift exchange, and reciprocity in human society (Bourdieu 1977; Levi-Strauss 1969; Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1925), including the circulation and practice of gift-giving in contemporary China (Yan 1996; Yang 1994). More specifically, the “gift” is not so much a gift as it is a debt given, one that holds its receiver in obligatory relationship, a promise of future gifts returned. Levi-Strauss, for example, writes of three levels of exchange - messages, notes, and people, specifically women as brides (1969). This can also be read as exchanges operating on three different levels of time. The first is immediate in-the-moment communications, the second is the day-to-day exchange of food and gifts, and the third is generational, the exchange of sexual partners who become kin (Arensberg 1972). One of the qualities that marks something as a “gift” in all of this work is the unspoken and unarticulated expectation of reciprocation. At a Chinese wedding, guests are expected to give red packets filled with money to the bride and groom. The name of the giver and the amount of money is carefully noted, and this amount, perhaps a little more, is expected to be returned at a later date (Yan 1996). Traditionally, this was the responsibility of families. Family A gives the children of family B money; later, when the children of Family A marries, family B gives an equivalent amount in a red packet. During my fieldwork, I attended two weddings. Both received red packets on WeChat, via the in-app “red packet” feature, from invited guests who could not attend. Wu got married in Beijing, where her husband’s family lives. Only her immediate family made the trip, and she only had three friends in Beijing. Most of her university classmates were otherwise occupied with work, husbands, or pregnancies. Casey married

someone she met in high school, whose family lives close to her own in Anhui province. Her family helped them purchase a house in nearby Ma'anshan, a third-tier city. Both the bride and groom's immediate and extended families were able attend, but only a few university and post-graduate friends traveled to Anhui for the wedding. I was assured by both that when it came my turn to be married, they would be sure to present me with a red packet as well.

Anthropologists of China have paid particularly close attention to the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, the social relationships that hold people together, entangled in webs of obligation, affection, and reciprocity (Kipnis 1997; Osburg 2013; Oxfeld 2010; Yan 1995; Yang 1994; Zhang 2001; Zheng 2009). From migrant enclaves run by migrant entrepreneurs in Beijing and students, factory workers, and office workers navigating bureaucracy in the reform era, to karaoke bars in Dalian, to the nouveau riche in Chengdu, to moral discourse in a small Chinese village in Guangdong, the concept that there is something holding people together in relationship appears over and over again. I have introduced the concept of gift-giving as one that perhaps expects reciprocity. However, while *guanxi* has “ethical, instrumental, and aesthetic” values (Yang 1994, 109), this is not to say that practices of *guanxi* are composed of tit-for-tat material exchanges, or that such exchanges of gifts, favors, and banquets would necessarily garner the desired outcome. Yang complicates this rather simplistic definition by describing instances where her participants recalled being on one end of an awkward and unsuccessful attempt at practicing *guanxi*. For example, offering money or implying that one is offering a bribe in exchange for a favor in public can place the receiver in an awkward position and force him to deny and refuse vehemently. Disguising money/bribes in the form of gifts or delivering it to someone's house personally might be more effective. Additionally, the going “rate” for what might be expected for particular services, such as a taxi ride, was constantly in flux; offering too

little or too much can cause one or both sides significant embarrassment and violate the acceptable bounds of *guanxi* relationships. Here, the “art” demanded by *guanxixue* - facilitated by what Yang describes as affective sentiment - becomes much more apparent. *Guanxi* can not be simply reduced to relationships solely predicated on material exchange. Rather, they rely on a complex web of affect that employs the language of kinship and emotion. This argument builds on anthropological work on Chinese lineages and systems of kinship, which often extend beyond the biological family; referring to strangers through the terms of kinship creates ties that are at least symbolically more powerful than the disposable relations of strangers. The concepts of *li* (correct behavior) and *liangxin* (conscience) are also part of logics of exchange and of social relationships. Oxfeld (2010) discusses how behavior towards those in one’s social network can be judged and given a moral character. How someone treats others in their web and whether it is in good conscience, is an additional element to practices of producing and cultivating *guanxi*.

In this chapter, I contribute to these complex analyses of *guanxi* and social relationships in China by discussing how practices between peers produce affective ties that become resourceful. These differ from previous works, which emphasized known spheres. There is a common sense knowledge regarding how to approach a relationship with an advisor or an employer. However, as I pointed out in chapter three, young people are increasingly living and working away from their networks of kin and even school-based *guanxi*. Even though WeChat offers immeasurable opportunities for connection, distance and busy schedules can isolate and separate even people who were once close (Woronov 2010). This has made space for new occasions for sociality and serendipitous encounters. Colleagues, family, and members of the same gym can provide introductions, exchange gifts, and bestow favors. And at the same time, the spaces and occasions for work and play, business and leisure, can become one and the same.

In my field research, where I mostly encountered people at work in a particular industry or people during times of leisure, I found that even the gym or the frisbee field was a place that could produce and sometimes demanded *guanxi* ties. I experienced this personally as part and parcel of my field research, which would not have been possible without the generosity of my participants and their willingness to connect me to and embed me within their networks. I secured some of these introductions myself, through my scholarship program, my ivy league education, or my impeccable American accent. Most of the consequential relationships I cultivated during fieldwork, however, were the result of people liking me. I often offered to do work for no pay and volunteered to go along on errands to keep people company. People told me explicitly that they appreciated that I was clear about what I wanted from them, and that they felt comfortable talking to me. More importantly, for me, they felt comfortable introducing me to their friends. Familiarity, often expressed verbally through terms of endearment or practiced through sharing and exchanging time, gifts, and stories, adds an additional layer to business relationships. People often referred to each other as *qin* (dear) or by nicknames. Chin was deeply immersed in thick entanglements of relationships with people around her; she needed them to like her, to continue to talk to her, to work with her on the things that she wanted to accomplish, and at the same time, some of the people she spent much of her days talking to and thinking about became more than “work.” Before their physical store opened in the spring of 2018, she alternated between working out of her home and a shared co-working space. Practically, she spent much of her time in various restaurants, cafes, gyms, and fitness studios in the Central Business District and Sanlitun areas of Beijing, forging connections and relationships with people with whom she could collaborate on events, sponsorships, and promotions for her company. Without these relationships, work could not be accomplished.

Gifts over long distances

In chapter one, I described my experiences traveling Beijing. It is a sprawling city, and distance is often not directly correlated with commute time. This can severely constrain Naranja, a master's student whose campus is in the east fourth ring, who often will send takeout to her good friend studying at their undergraduate campus beyond the northwest fifth ring. They'd like to get together more often, but weekends are the only time it would be feasible, and they have schoolwork to do and school friends to see as well. They might as well order separate takeout while chatting on WeChat instead. Former co-workers or classmates struggle to find the time and energy to meet up, even when everyone lives in Beijing. Physical distance is not the only issue. Student plans can be easily disrupted by their professor calling them in to do some work; professionals are just as easily subject to the whims of *jiaban* (overtime). It is difficult to find the time to see friends who live farther away or to learn something new. Additionally, space and distance were a critical concern and limitation for gathering. One younger participant complained that living in Beijing was quite boring: "There's not much to do, just shopping, eating, and maybe going to internet cafes to play video games." Alex, then in his second year of university, spent most of his time playing video games with friends online; at the time, he was playing a lot of Battleground (*juediqiusheng*) on Steam, a video game distribution platform, and *wangzherongyao*, a mobile game similar to the PC-based League of Legends. His preferred way of socializing was easily accomplished online. Outside of the classroom, where he and his friends were once required to come together, they felt awkward wandering malls. Dormitories are sometimes restricted to residents only and regardless of school, coed groups are not allowed to enter the opposite sex's dormitories. There was often simply "nowhere to go."

Younger participants, students, and others with limited income and living in student dorms, with their families, or in the far suburbs were limited in the options they had for socializing and play. Most activities require money, even if it means paying for a coffee to have a place to sit and talk. Public spaces like free parks or government-operated parks with low entrance fees are not in short supply, but lack some of the material artifacts necessary for gathering - tables/chairs and shelter, to name a few. Spaces can bring people together, to dance, or walk, or eat, or play, but they can also keep them apart. The city is marked by both opportunity and limitations, and critically for young people, by the difficulties that its landscape and terrain pose for making and maintaining connection across distance. But colleagues pose their own sets of complex, relational expectations, and they may be more work than play; additionally, though work provides a common language and shared activity, many want to get away from the pressures of the job. Most young people in Beijing are not local to the city and rent, rather than own, their apartments; neighbors, once central to local social gatherings, are in different places of life, from different areas of China, and equally transitional in the city. My participants had friends in Beijing from university or primary/secondary school, but even a few kilometers distance makes regular gatherings impractical. Time, space, and conflicting schedules are constant constraints on leisure practices. It is within this context of disjuncture and alienation that social relationships - here described in terms of friendship or *youqing*, and the practices by which friendship is cultivated, are particularly enticing. It is also within this context that young people's work and social circles might begin to overlap.

Work + play

Where social and work relationships blur together, these networks of *guanxi* and reciprocity become more complicated. One characteristic fundamental to the lives and play of

young people is the extent to which certain relationships are central to aspects of both their work and outside-of-work lives. Work infiltrates and colonizes everyday life. This occurs in multiple ways - accessibility, the intimacy provided via social media, and the collapse in boundaries between “friend” and “colleague.”

The first way that work infiltrates play is through accessibility. On WeChat, for example, work and work tasks can be just a short message away. Though there are ways to block professors, managers, and coworkers from seeing one’s WeChat moments, there is still an expectation that if messages are sent and requests made, said messages will be read. Frequently, plans were postponed, adjusted, or cut short because one or more of our party was suddenly summoned to work over time or to perform some task for a professor. Once, I was walking out of the office building where the doctoral students in my research group at Beijing Normal University had desks with one of our post-doctoral fellows, Xiao. It was six in the evening and we were discussing whether or not to eat dinner together, when she received a phone call via WeChat from our professor. He had some last minute edits for her to review on a paper our group was submitting to an English-language international journal - could she read them now? She headed back upstairs to work on the paper, and I headed to a shared bike rental so I could make my way to the subway station and a group fitness class I had scheduled to attend later than evening. I’ve also been the recipient of such summons; as we neared the deadline for the final revisions, Xiao sent me several panicked voice messages one night asking me if I had time that evening to proofread the three papers we were submitting. It was nearly ten in the evening and she needed it within twenty four hours, if not sooner. It wasn’t difficult to find me - I was just a quick WeChat message away.

The second way is through the porous and undefined ways through which relative strangers (colleagues, for example) are allowed intimate glimpses into someone daily life through WeChat Moments. Xiao showed me one post from a Chinese professor now working in the United States. He was the former editor of the journal that our group was submitting papers to and sent many of his comments and feedback via WeChat, rather than email. He had recently shared a photo of himself shirtless and flexing, accompanied by text describing his great physical health and how he looked good for his age. She was embarrassed seeing it and asked me if this was an “American thing,” because she didn’t understand why he would feel comfortable sharing that picture. Younger WeChat users often have “groups” set up so that they can select who can see which posts and what content they share; this prevents professors or colleagues from seeing how they spent their weekend. However, regardless of these safeguards, using WeChat moments increases visibility outside of work. One of the CrossFit boxes I frequented had a few famous and very wealthy members. I tended to see them in the middle of the day, around the lunch-time sessions. They had flexible schedules and often came early or stayed later to hang out with other regulars at the box. One of the members was “the” Chinese-language commentator for NBA basketball games. I had no idea who he was, nor did I add his WeChat. We had a short and casual conversation about NCAA versus NBA basketball, mostly focused on my Alma Mater, Duke University, and one of our star players, whose time at Duke overlapped with mine, Kyrie Irving. A few days later, the owner of ClubFit messaged me a link to an article that the commentator had written about me. I was very upset and also embarrassed - I sounded silly and naive, and he also misrepresented who I said I was, identifying me as a former competitive gymnast and not at all as a doctoral student or anthropologist. I found out later that Chen had also posted this link to his WeChat moments, with some commentary on how he knew me, but

had blocked me from seeing it. Despite his best efforts, we had enough mutual friends and colleagues through Beijing Normal University that it got back to me in several different ways. Personal details I had relayed casually had been put to pen and memorialized as a representation of me by someone with whom I'd had less than fifteen minutes of conversation. This representation of me was then shared on a popular social media platform, seen and read by people who knew me and identified me in the article, as well as thousands of other internet strangers. It prompted interesting conversations with some of my research team members, particularly the men, about what exactly constituted anthropological fieldwork.

The third is also the most direct. Whether it is a work sponsored event, networking, or simply serendipity, work and leisure often collide. For a number of people working in start-up or emerging markets, the network of significant others with whom they might collaborate, discuss, or compete is small. But these are also people with whom they spend significant portions of time, engaged and participating in activities considered to be "leisure" - events, competitions, meals. Meals are perhaps the most overt form of this; in all industries, colleagues may eat together, either going out for lunch or dinner, or ordering in dinner together while *jiaban* (working overtime). In these contexts where there is a semi-clear, at least to those who are participating, purpose and script for behavior, people must make space for significant work others in an otherwise personal and intimate space. Meals, nearly always eaten outside of the space of the home, are a way to meet up with friends or classmates in a defined space, a way to situate social interaction, fix a place for contact, and to structure the interaction. Given the expansive sprawl of Beijing and high cost of housing, home gatherings are relatively few. It is easier and more efficient to meet somewhere in the middle, near places of work or school, but where there is guaranteed seating and something to do. The alternative, though not undesirable and also

incorporated into social plans, is often walking around (a shopping center, neighborhood, park). More directly, personal trainers are also gym-goers and competition participants, among their other social roles. Some of people with whom they may have a client-provider relationship may also be a teammate in next week's CrossFit competition, a romantic partner, or a former classmate. New friends could be potential collaborators in a short term marketing campaign or a long-term business venture. The people with whom they work are often also the people with whom they play. This was most visible in Chin and her working relationships and friendships with many of the people she met through work. She worked with some to put on events or pop-up shops, paid others to work out at their gym or to train her, but also considered some or all to be friends. The language of friendship, a form of relational intimacy, invoked through rhetorical questions like, "What's our relationship?" (咱们什么关系?), or explicitly through statements like "We're all friends here" (都是自己人, literally, we're all people belonging to each other), complicates relational obligations between colleagues, friends, and family. This shift draws strangers into networks similar to that of kin. I am not claiming that young people also use the language of kinship to mark or practice social relationships; after all, the use of "auntie" and "uncle" to address elders was considered polite and a term of respect for strangers. Rather, expanding beyond even the realms of kinship terms, to new acquaintances and strangers, terms of endearment and markers of intimacy, as well as material investment in these relationships, allows young people to cultivate consequential relationships outside of family or employer spheres. These relationships easily become capital but at the same time, demand reciprocal returns.

It was through Chin, her generosity of time and friendship, and following her closely through the process of renting a space, renovating it, and setting up and opening a showroom, that I met the people at QiangFit, whose gym was just downstairs from her new workplace. Both QiangFit and Active Woman's new Showroom were located in a new office building in a new development on the outskirts of the Central Business District. It was accessible by car, though taxis often struggled to find the entrance, through two winding paths that were not remotely close to the front doors of the building. It was also accessible by bike, electric scooter, and by foot, though the nearest subway stop was a 15-20 minute walk away. Most of the occupants of the building worked for companies who rented office space there, though there were several shops on the two basement levels, including a boutique wine shop and a "healthy" oat milk and weight-loss smoothie cafe. In the hundreds of hours I spent there, I never saw more than one or two people in any of the shops, with the exception of the yoga teacher training studio, which routinely ran training sessions of various lengths ranging from weeks to months. Chin and her two staff members routinely ran events both on and off-site to garner interest and traffic to the Showroom. For off-site events and partnerships, they gave out promotional materials, coupons, and larger prizes, such as a free sports bra, that could be redeemed in-store. She also partnered with QiangFit, since gym goers could easily come upstairs before or after the gym to look at clothing, and QiangFit had its own events and partnerships that benefitted from the addition of an Active Woman collaboration.

Outside of her official work collaborations with QiangFit, she spent time at the gym training, either by herself, or with some of their personal trainers. Some gave her advice in the format of a free personal training session, following her from exercise to exercise, correcting her form, and adjusting her positioning. With others, especially Paocai, a young personal trainer

from Taiwan, they simply worked out together. Chin also took boxing classes with Tony, one of the gym's owners. A celebrity cook turned MMA fighter, boxer, and trainer, he personally taught many of the classes when the gym first opened. When I was there, he still taught classes, but less often due to his increasing commitments elsewhere. Chin highly recommended his class, so I booked one through MangoFit, Alicia's company. Through QiangFit, over the course of my fieldwork, Chin and at times I, became practitioners of the Spartan Race, boxing, long-distance biking, and running. Although Chin already had a very expensive gym membership at a five-star hotel in the Central Business District, she quickly purchased a yearlong membership at QiangFit. She cited QiangFit's proximity to her new place of work, their generosity to her in opening up space for her to squeeze in a quick work out or to train with their trainers during their off hours, and her embarrassment (*buhaoyisi*) at taking further advantage of this generosity. In return, they sold her the membership at a heavily discounted rate. According to Chin, this kind of behavior - respecting their bottom line and setting an example to other frequent guests of the gym - produced good feelings of friendship. It made them feel more comfortable being generous to her, knowing that she wouldn't take advantage of their goodwill.

Practicing reciprocal gift-giving

Over her time at QiangFit, Chin began to call several of the trainers and members whom she trained, hiked, traveled, and ate with her friends. These friends also began to purchase items of clothing from her Showroom and participate in Active Woman events. When they asked favors of her, she was eager and quick to respond. Meals were sometimes split evenly, or people would take turns paying. Familiarity and intimacy was practiced through the use of endearments, jokes, and investment in big and small ways (time, money, a text, a call), and Chin, of her own volition, would speak of her friends positively to other colleagues or people in her network. She

recommended QiangFit's Spartan Race training camp to everyone she came across, from other group fitness class members, personal trainers, and colleagues, to people whom she'd just met, and was eventually made head of her own WeChat group to oversee a smaller band of participants for the Race and beyond. Both of her employees at the time also registered for the Race with QiangFit. Similarly, the people at QiangFit spoke highly of Chin as a person, and made sure to highlight Chin's work with Active Woman and the fact that her Showroom was just upstairs. These forms of reciprocal help were not explicitly requested; rather, upon spending significant time together, it was clear to both parties what their respective goals were, and the help freely given.

This is in contrast to other forms of network or relationship building. Binge-drinking and excessive consumption, whether that is in flashiness of wealth or in symbols of power, is no longer a powerful currency in the production of relationships that translated into everyday work and play. Osburg's work hinted at this in his description of how the piles of luxury brand watches and wallets that people had were gently used or circulated through again, at best. These generic gifts - ascribed value due to their cost and not even rarity or difficulty in procurement - were seen as less strategic or effective ways of initiating relationship. The awkwardness of a miscalculated gift reveals an unease or discomfort in strange spaces, and the power differential between the giver of the gift and its recipient. Knowing what gifts to give, when to give them, and how to do so is part of de Certeau's concept of the "knowledge that precedes power" (1984). Though gifts were expected - to not give a gift would certainly be far worse - and though the type of gift acceptable is considered common sense knowledge (Yan 1996; Yang 1994), going through the motions reveals a lack of the ease that Shamus Khan (2011) writes about in regards to privilege. The rich and powerful, at least in America's elite boarding schools, maintain their

privilege through a set of practices that allow them to move fluidly between social settings; they are just as comfortable in the halls of Rockefeller center as they are chatting with the housekeeper who cleans their room (Khan 2011). In this context, unease can be found in the tried and true practices of exchanging gifts for favors.

Like Yang (1994), I found myself in such a situation in the early stages of my fieldwork, when I was reaching out to anthropologists and scholars in Beijing. A young undergraduate at the prestigious Peking University admonished me for not including my resume in my introductory emails and reminded me to bring a gift to the professors I was going to meet. I did as I was so instructed, but upon attempting to present my gift of Hungarian chocolates, purchased in Hungary, I was rebuffed. It was an awkward moment - the professor told me that there was no need for such a gift. Chinese students were always trying to give him gifts and it made him uncomfortable, but given that we had both studied abroad, there was no need for such formalities. I had the chocolates in hand, arms outstretched, and I had no idea what to do. I insisted - I'd brought the chocolates anyway and he could share them with his family or his students. It was a gift freely given. Still, I felt awkward. He felt awkward. But he was so kind at a time when I, as I was starting out in my field research, felt so lost and confused. I wanted to convey my appreciation for his taking his time to meet with him through this gift. That conversation was one of the buoys that carried me through the following months. Coming out of it, I also felt more confident approaching the other professors who had been educated abroad. Most of the PKU sociology and anthropology professors had spent some time at Harvard University. I decided, for future meetings, to risk seeming rude and forgo the gift. It was a moment in which conflicting expectations about social interactions and the obligations of gifts generated tension and confusion - this professor did not want the gift because he felt it was an

obligation, and perhaps because he had no need for chocolates. On the other hand, I did not want to show up to meeting with the disrespect of not having prepared a gift, as I was told that I should. In that interaction, the gift was characterized as a relic of different times, as part of a set of practices that bound people through obligation, sullied, perhaps, by money. rather than through genuine affection or desire to help.

Among people in a certain economic bracket and/or socio-economic class, particularly among those who had lived, studied, worked, or even traveled abroad, the simple exchange of gifts was not enough to produce intimate ties. Part of the practice of friendship was to demonstrate, through personalized gifts, specific invitations, disclosing of information, etc. that the relationship was authentic and important, as opposed to a flexible and disposable tie, a commodity (Gershon 2011) to be used and discarded. Of course, not all connections or lateral *guanxi* are equal. The degree to which favors can be asked or given must be consonant with the strength or depth of the relationship. Asking for help from a new friend that requires significant work on their part can imply that one's motive is not pure. When Chin was renovating her Showroom, she had to quickly learn about construction, renovation, paint, and tiling. What she didn't know, she had to ask. At her gym in the fancy hotel, she'd gotten to know an older gentleman who had several businesses in Beijing. One day, over casual conversation, it came up that she had finally secured a location for the Showroom and needed to renovate and outfit it. He immediately volunteered to introduce her to a friend of his who had done multiple renovations for him, promising quality work and a fair price. She graciously accepted, they connected, and within the week, renovations were underway. During her initial meeting with the young man in charge of renovating the Showroom, he repeatedly emphasized that no matter what, he had to finish the job and do it well - budget and timeline aside. Since the "old gentleman" had called in

this favor on Chin's behalf, both Chin and her contractor were obligated to each other in ways that strangers and employers and employees are not. To be difficult or not work well with her friend's friend would be ungracious, and a rejection of his generous gift and help. It is important that she did not ask for this help directly; rather, through introducing it in conversation, she allowed him to offer his aid. Being in debt isn't comfortable - Chin immediately began plotting how she might return the gesture, in spirit if not in scope. To a lesser degree, many of the people who spoke with me or granted me interviews often reached out later with small requests, for some help with English, some advice on applying to graduate school, or some advice about studying abroad. I became part of the networks upon which they could draw when in need of a plan, a strategy, or a response.

For young people in contemporary China, the boundaries between work and play are now far less distinct. So much time is spent at or on the way to work, and the spatial distance of Beijing encourages people to stay more or less where they already are. In the event that people enjoy hobbies in the same industry or realm where they work, this is ever more the case. This makes social networks and the help and support they can provide even more important. However, gifts and favors cannot be explicitly asked for or demanded. In the case of lateral *guanxi* networks, going through the motions of an impersonal gift is counterproductive; it foregrounds utility over relationship. Rather, young people engage in practices that reference familiarity, intimacy, and authenticity in order to produce connections that can withstand the winds of everyday business and that can be relied upon when needed.

Chapter 6: Making do in precarious times

Networks are not determinant of success or failure, but there are many ways in which resource-full relationships can increase someone's chance of success or soften their risk of failure. In previous chapters, I looked at how people leveraged their connections in hopes of success; now, I turn to how social relationships can impact people's responses to precarious situations. With few exceptions, nearly everyone in China possesses a *hukou* (household registration) that marks them as "from" an agricultural versus non-agricultural place, and the specific place (city, township, village) in question.³⁰ *Hukou* status, one's locality, or specifically, local-ness, emerged as consequential at critical junctures - looking for employment post-graduation, marriage, and having children are three common examples. However, there are many ways of being non-local in China, and thus many different strategies for changing or not changing *hukou* status. For non-local laborers and service workers, their non-local status made them particularly vulnerable to shifts in government policies regarding housing, schooling, and employment in Beijing. Sport and exercise is here merely a prism through which I can discuss conditions of precarity. Industries like fitness are part of the service sector and employ many "floating" young people for very little pay who are particularly vulnerable to shifts in social and housing policy; in the same spaces, there are managers and owners whose own non-local status is of less immediate material consequence.

In the fall of 2017, two major fires in Daxing prompted a series of safety inspections that temporarily, and in some cases, permanently, displaced many non-local workers - black cab drivers, construction workers, cell-phone sales clerks - and recent graduates. The fires were

³⁰ Henceforth I refer to those whose *hukou* are not located in Beijing but who nevertheless reside (or resided, at the time of my fieldwork) in Beijing as "non-local."

officially categorized as accidents due to hazardous and cramped conditions. One, for example, resulted from an electric scooter catching fire while it was charging in the hallway of a large apartment building. The subsequent relocations and suspension of rentals due to inspections were seen by nearly all who were affected as simply official language occluding a convenient shuffle of “unwanted” people out of Beijing. These people lived in small apartments, often in the outskirts of distant suburbs of the city and often shared with others to reduce rent. Upon announcement of the fire safety inspections, they had to scramble in order to secure housing, effective immediately. Nin, a young woman who had graduated from a university in Beijing and worked as the marketing person for ClubFit, had been living in one such building. It was an affordable dormitory-style space with shared group toilets and showers on each floor a few blocks from her place of work. Her apartment building was shut down and its residents evacuated and barred from returning. She had two days notice to move her things and make arrangements. For the first few nights, she slept on a stack of exercise mats in the studio of ClubFit, sneaking back into her old building at odd hours to use the shower until they finally shut off the water. After a week of this, she managed to find another small shared apartment in Tongzhou, over an hour and a half’s commute away. Her new apartment was about the same price she’d paid for her old accommodations, albeit much farther away. All over the city, housing in the sub-2000 to 2500 RMB a month bracket rose by several hundred RMB due to the sudden and immediate contraction in housing options. For Nin, though sleeping on the floor of her workplace was less than ideal, it provided invaluable buffer time for her to find something more suitable. Chen gave her time off to search for apartments and Xiaolu offered to open her own home to Nin. Knowing people who had something to offer in this precarious moment was invaluable. For those who were non-local to Beijing but less financially precarious and living in

apartment complexes that could be described as more “middle-class,” these inspections and housing shortages did little if at all to touch their everyday lives.

To make sense of both the sense and thereness of wild possibility and the visible material and political limitations on how and what people can do together, I turn to de Certeau’s (1984) discussion of “making do.” For de Certeau, the study of everyday practices emphasizes how ways of doing cannot be captured by the “objective” methods of science, categorization, and abstraction. As useful as models may be, even living with the explicit and implicit rules of systems - laws, structures, impositions the totalization of consumption, the control and order of technocratic systems - does not extract human beings from the contingencies of time and place. There is an art, a resistance, and a historicity in the multiplicity of ways of doing superimposed upon existing spaces (30). de Certeau’s theory, and within this theory, a method, of popular culture and “everyday practice” hinges upon the existence of ways of using, operating, and making that exist alongside and within the dominant order; the ways of using inherent to what is conceived of as “consumption” is productive and production, the “multiform labor of consumption” (30). This is readily evident in language, folk tales, and even the explicit rules and stratagems laid out in games. Using is always a way of making. For de Certeau, strategies exist outside of time, they are not dependent on a teleological sequence of events, and rather they are able to produce, tabulate, and impose [spaces], when [operations] take place. On the other hand, tactics or the art of “making do,” is wholly dependent on time in that tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (30). In China, there is much in place - laws, norms, censorship - that constrains and imposes upon the lives and livelihoods of people living, and in some cases not living, there. Of course, these constraints are still executed and articulated by people whose everyday, mundane, common-sense work is to keep the system going. This final

chapter looks at how both hierarchical and lateral *guanxi* or conversely, the lack of suitable networks, ameliorates or exacerbates conditions of precarity for young people in Beijing. I briefly discuss what the *hukou* is, before discussing how it impacts geographical and economic mobility for (some) young people, the tactics of “making do” under less than ideal circumstances, and how social networks can protect against the dangers of living in precarious times.

Hukou and the making non-local of people

The *hukou* is the result of a state-level policy that regulates migration and the allocation of public resources. Drawing on a long history of systems designed to monitor and control population migration that goes back thousands of years, it was first conceived in its current form in the 1950’s (Cheng and Selden 1994; Huen 1996; Wang 2005). The *hukou* system as it has existed under the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a highly contentious and contended policy, and its contents and effects are continually debated and restructured today. Scholars discuss how *hukou* policies privilege urban residents and detrimentally impacts the non-local working class (Chan and Zhang 1999; Chan 2010; Zhan 2011). Meanwhile, the policies themselves have also changed, as national, provincial, and local-level officials attempt to address the issues raised by excluding non-local children from the public education system (Ling 2015; Zhou and Cheung 2017). For example, during my ten years of work at Number Twelve Middle School in Daxing, the policies impacting the school’s students changed several times. In 2015, students were told that in order to attend public schools in a specific location, they must’ve attended three years of middle school there. At the same time, non-local students were barred from most public schools and even if they could be admitted, were not allowed to take the university entrance exams in Beijing. This announcement managed to encourage several of the

graduating ninth grade students at Number Twelve Middle School to return to their home provinces. Their families hoped to leverage networks and *guanxi* to secure their children a high school spot, *hukou* policies be damned. Additionally, over 20% of students in seventh and eighth grade also began to make plans to leave Beijing. The announcement was seen as a way to encourage a large non-local exodus from Beijing; those who remained were actually able to test or pay their way into public schools in Hebei, where Number Twelve students from previous years sought secondary education.

Most fundamentally, the *hukou* system requires all residents to register as “agricultural” or “nonagricultural” at their place of birth or parents’ place of birth (Wang 2005, 23). Through this demarcation, those who have moved elsewhere from the place on their *hukou* are referred to as the “floating population” or “migrant workers” (Cai and Du 2011; Chan 2010; Zhan 2011). For “migrants” in urban cities, specifically those with rural and non-local *hukou* status, *hukou* status can limit and constrain social and educational mobility through rigid controls on who can access what resources (Chan 2010; Kwong 2004; Ling 2015). When children are born to migrant workers in urban centers, they inherit the *hukou* status of their parents and maintain the label of “migrant” status absent of physical migration, challenging the conceptualization of “migrant” as rooted in geographical movement (Chan 2010; Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2005). Moreover, “migrant” in English refers specifically to working class non-local people; the broader term *liudongrenkou* (floating population) encompasses the wider range of people portrayed in this dissertation, who have moved within China to places not strictly considered, legally, to be their home. These terms are not simply descriptive. By nature of the flexibility of the *hukou* system, not-from-here-ness can be consequential and also can be made consequential quite suddenly. In making explicit where people are from, delineated along the lines of urban and

rural, the *hukou* helped to determine who qualified for state-provided food rations, housing, and education. This continually occurred even when the particular boundary marking rural/urban was not clear (Wu 1994, 671; Zhang and Zhao 1998). Specific benefits, consequences, and enforcement could then be adjusted based on need.

In the 1950's and 1960's, when rural labor was desired and actively recruited for, migration to the cities was sanctioned. When such surplus population again became a burden, the state could tighten measures of restricting services to the extent that many of those who had migrated into the cities were forced to leave. Then, as it is now, such measures were only partially successful in reducing the urban population and maintaining order. Indeed, much of the present-day aspects and mechanisms of the *hukou* can be traced to differential prioritizing of urban and rural areas (Cheng and Selden 1994). This is the context within which the contemporary *hukou* took shape in national-level policies. The state took on the responsibility of feeding, housing, and providing jobs for urban residents, assuming and anticipating that rural peasants could rely on their collectivized land, and began a practice of resettling its surplus urban population to the countryside (Cheng and Selden 1994, 650). Most resettled migrants left Beijing and other urban centers voluntarily and many received financial assistance to do so; only criminals and class enemies, including former KMT officials, were forced to leave. Migrants also typically received land allocations and short-term food allowances, further encouraging and facilitating resettlement. This exodus reduced the burden on the state by reducing the total number of urban residents.

However, it quickly became clear that this practice would not be enough to reduce the urban population. Since the state had taken on the burden of feeding, housing, and educating urban residents - even during periods of famine - it was much more desirable to be considered an

urban resident than it had been previously. On the other hand, rural residents were responsible for feeding themselves, except in times of great duress. For instance, in 1954, rural households were required to sell a certain and substantial part of their harvest to the state at fixed prices, often leaving very little for household consumption (Cheng and Selden 1994).

After the 1980s, when there were significant reforms to the *hukou* system, numbers of migrants to urban centers increased. While *hukou* continued to tie non-local people and the services they were and were not provided to the place where they were registered, these reforms allowed much more flexibility. In conjunction with the opening up of markets and increased opportunities for income-generating activities in urban centers, rural-to-urban migration resumed with only brief interruptions (Chan and Zhang 1999, 819-821). In 2008, Kam Wing Chan and Will Buckingham published a paper with the hopeful title, “Is China Abolishing the Hukou System?” This paper is reflective of a trend in *hukou* scholarship that saw this policy as a form of class-making that demarcates rural and urban populations and that also saw abolishing the *hukou* as a way to move away from this type of structural inequity. Even with more recent reforms to the *hukou*, the responsibility for enforcement of the *hukou* and the particular importance of where people are from was relegated to provincial and local governments. This often resulted in even more difficult barriers to migration and access to supposedly public services (Chan and Buckingham 2008). Other scholars have also begun to argue against the rhetoric of *hukou* as determinant of migrant opportunities and life chances. Zhan (2011) and Zhang and Treiman (2013) found that instances of *hukou* conversions had mixed outcomes for new urban residents and that social exclusion and the job markets serve as much more resilient barriers to mobility than *hukou* itself, which can often be circumvented in a variety of ways. While *hukou* does structure institutional exclusion through public schooling, healthcare, and access to certain

employment, it is not simply a prescriptive constraint. The non-localness that *hukou* status currently describes also reflects qualitative elements of people's lives that can limit opportunities or constrain choices. One study looking at migrant youth in Shanghai found that even when *hukou* status was no longer prohibitive of entry to public schools, many other factors continued to block social mobility and funneled migrant youth into vocational schools and occupations (Ling 2015). In other words, even in the absence of legal or administrative barriers to public education in Shanghai, the kinds of opportunities and networks made possible through lateral networks, not least of which are made in classrooms and schoolyards, detailed in this project were not available to young non-local people.

***Hukou* and forms of mobility**

Hukou status is linked to other conditions of precarity, including social and familial support (financial, emotional, logistical, homework), family income, and hierarchical and lateral *guanxi* networks. Non-locality, in addition to inherently going hand in hand with looser and more diffuse networks, though rather common in Beijing, exposes some people to the instability of political change. For this reason, local *hukou*, particularly local Beijing *hukou* is very valuable. There are monetary values placed on it - ever changing, it is possible to be wealthy enough or to invest enough money in Beijing, to be made local. Beijing is home to some of the best hospitals and universities in the country, and it is also considered its own provincial-level entity. Thus, in the assessment of *gaokao* (university entrance exam) scores, students in Beijing only compete against other students in Beijing for a seat in prestigious schools like Peking or Qinghua University. It is far better to be in this pool of applicants than it is to be from, say, Henan or Hebei, two of the most populous provinces in China. Given the historical significance of *hukou* and the emphasis in both law and family of how people are from a place, local-ness also offers a

sense of stability that is intangible and immeasurable by wealth or status. Casey, for example, eventually chose to return home, where her familial networks could be better deployed. Upon graduation from Capital Normal University in the spring of 2019, her family bought her and her fiancé an apartment in Ma'anshan, a third-tier city in Anhui province. She grew up in Dangtu, a township roughly 30 minutes away, while her fiancé's family lived closer to Ma'anshan. He works in the public sector, as a manager of public subway systems across China; he spent much of their engagement in Nanning, far away in southern China. She had moved to Beijing to be with him when he was finishing up his graduate degree in 2013. When he found a job, again through family *guanxi*, they planned for him to spend some time away from Beijing while she applied for and completed her Master's degree. Then, they hoped that he'd be able to secure a position in the Beijing office, perhaps with occasional travel, after a few years "in the field," and that through company sponsored *hukou* conversion, they would settle and raise their family in Beijing. However, due to both the positions available and to his lack of *guanxi* in securing him a job in Beijing, they've reconsidered. He negotiated a transfer to Hangzhou, while she returned to Anhui to plan their wedding and look for a position in a public school. Both of them are "from" this place; by returning, they've rendered the problem of *hukou* moot.

Another young woman, who graduated from Peking University with a degree in law and was at the top of her class, took a position in an unrelated field at a state-operated enterprise (SOE) upon graduation. She turned down offers from prestigious and better-paying law firms to do so. Being not from Beijing, she had, through a family *guanxi*, secured a position that promised her a resolution of her *hukou* "problem" (*jiejuehukou*). It would be resolved at the end of her first or second year of employment, and then she would be free, she thought, to pursue a career in law. She had kept in touch with recruiters and worked freelance on consulting projects

with her old intern firm. However, near the close of her first year, her company changed in management and the *guanxi* who had promised her a *hukou* no longer had official say. Her *hukou* slot was promised to someone else in the interim; she was, the last time I checked, still at that same company in hopes that sooner rather than later, it would be her turn. In the meanwhile, her classmates have spent the same time working at law firms. For this young woman, the prospect of becoming local - and the stability that it promised - came above her career and other goals. In this sense, young people who have not considered the possibility - for whom it is not possible to call in a *guanxi* or favour such as she did - of becoming local in Beijing were able to move places and jobs with much more freedom. When a local *hukou* was not considered an attainable end, young people were more open to opportunities that arose in other cities or in other sectors. Their strategies less resembled plans and strategies than going along with what was available. Their precarity did not allow them to plan for the future in confident ways, but it did free them to take advantage of opportunities that came across their path.

Echo, a fourth year student at Beijing Normal University (BNU), spent the better part of a semester interviewing for jobs as a physical education teacher in Beijing. Beijing's public schools are one of the few vestiges of the iron rice bowl system under China's collectivist era; they are able, over time, to resolve *hukou* for non-local teachers, and they provide a stable albeit moderate income for the remainder of a teacher's tenure. It is a stable job; teachers are rarely let go. It is difficult to secure a position, even as a graduate from Beijing Normal University, the top normal university in China. Public schools in Beijing nearly exclusively hire graduates with Beijing *hukou*, reserving their few allowed Beijing *hukou* spots for applications with Master's degrees from prestigious schools and doctoral degree holders. Additionally, there is some stigma. Other teachers and public school staff commented that a young woman might not be able to keep

up with the demands of physical education. Echo was born and raised in Xinjiang, though she is still Han Chinese and attended BNU on a scholarship program for students from less well-off provinces. She was supposed to go back to Xinjiang and work there for a requisite number of years, but for much of her undergraduate career, she's been looking for ways to subvert that. Her two main options were to pay back the scholarship or to postpone her obligation by applying to graduate school. That there are scholarship programs encouraging young people to return to some places and not others speaks to how differential investment between certain cities and in general, the rural countryside has led to sharply uneven development across China. Once Echo broadened her search to outside of Beijing, she quickly received several offers; after graduation, she moved south to Qingdao, a second-tier coastal city, to take up a job in the public education system there. Paying back the cost of her higher education was preferable to returning "home." Echo was in a less prestigious field at a less prestigious though still excellent school, but as a result she was not set on remaining in Beijing and obtaining a Beijing *hukou*. Her position in Qingdao fulfilled her desire to not return to Xinjiang, to live in a large city, and to remain a physical education teacher. Those working in the fitness industry or who possess international passports can be prone to even more frequent and distant moves, though most were loathe to leave Beijing once there. A young aspiring CrossFit trainer from Xi'An came to Beijing to intern with John at Crossfit Radish for a few months, before moving on to another city. She'd met him several years prior before he had even opened Crossfit Radish and came back specifically to train under him. In the intervening years, she'd worked in three different cities. A young man who moved to Beijing from India to study Mandarin and Business several years ago found a job and a new career in fitness at ActiveMe. He had intended to move to Germany for a marketing job two years prior to our meeting but stayed. He's still pondering a move to Germany.

Different ways to live under conditions of precarity

But what does it mean to live in Beijing and not have a Beijing *hukou*? It often means, most directly, to be drifting. Those who are “from” Beijing own their homes or live in homes their family owns. They may still live with their parents, as many young people do, or they may have been gifted an apartment. Or, young people may rent an apartment in Beijing to live separate from their parents, like Alicia, but still have their family home to return to in between leases or should something go awry. Home ownership is a large part of the future planning that young people do. Even the least economically well off young people, working part-time or itinerantly employed, have a place to which they can return should they need to leave Beijing. It is one of the major goals, if not the major goal, young people work towards for the near or distant future. Aside from students who live in their school dormitories, young people rent apartments in Beijing. It can be expensive, costing between 25-50% of most people’s monthly rent, or in time, for those are willing to commute over an hour to work in exchange for more affordable rent in China’s far-flung districts, like Changping, Tongzhou, and Daxing. These districts provide more affordable housing for rent or for purchase as they are still developing. Some of these areas have more recently become part of the city, as Beijing sprawls outwards. Having a home in Beijing becomes relevant at critical junctures, such as the aftermath of the 2017 Daxing fires. All business and restaurants in urban villages in Daxing were closed for three days for inspection. Over the years, amid whispers and rumors and the small rumbling of *chaiqian* (demolition), people had begun to move away to more remote villages, other cities, or to return to their hometowns. The once-bustling streets of Laosanyu and Shoubaozhuang, the two villages flanking Number Twelve Middle School, were already wider and emptier in the fall of 2017. Each year, when I returned, there was more space, opened up by the demolition of street

carts and the absence of vendors. After the three-day closure, which many feared would be indefinite, even more people packed up to go home early for the lunar new year. Some did not return. Yet, those who remained found ways of making do. A few restaurants were allowed to reopen quickly, so that the safety inspectors would have somewhere to eat. And after three days, when all the buildings had been checked and the people living inside them admonished, the inspectors left, businesses reopened, and the people remaining in the village carried on. Most of the buildings were not up to code, but life in the urban village went on. Not everyone had left, so there were people to buy food, eat at restaurants, and pay for public showers. There was work to be done still, and money to be made.

And what of all those who left? Official numbers vary, but much like the sweeps of Beijing's streets before the 2008 Olympics, the 2017 ASEAN conference, and most recently, the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China - when many eyes were on China - the Daxing fires were understood locally as a state method of *ganren* or herding people. As in Zhang's work in Zhejiangcun (2001), where the village that was demolished was relocated and rebuilt, people came back after the new year. Of those who returned home for good, some were older with children long grown, relatively happy to retire to the home that they owned, while others were younger couples who took the opportunity to relocate closer to their families or to another city with more tolerance for non-local people. From street food vendors to English teachers - their substantive work can be transferred relatively easily. The couple who ran a popular barbecue place across the street from Number Twelve Middle School closed up shop in 2016 and returned to their home province of Heilongjiang. Their son had already returned there to finish high school and apply for university, due to some of the changes in education policy affecting those with non-local *hukou* in the preceding years. Another younger couple who lived

in Beijing and worked at Number Twelve for many years returned to their home province in Shaanxi in 2017; after many years in the city and still little permanent prospects, they wanted to settle down and start their family closer to their extended family. Since having their first child, they've set up an English tutoring center in Sela's hometown. The original Number Twelve Middle School teachers who were hired when the school first opened are luckier; by signing multiple-year contracts with the school, several were able to purchase an apartment in Caiyu, a neighborhood outside the sixth ring, with the school's help. Most of them are couples who both worked at the school; though their incomes are relatively low and their hours long, housing stability ameliorates these issues. Most of the other teachers also survived the inspections and subsequent lack of housing options unscathed - they boarded at the school in small, cramped dormitory rooms, three men or women to a room. Though it wasn't ideal, even those who had rented in the the urban villages nearby moved back into the school dormitories after the Daxing fires. Their job afforded them access to a dormitory option.

Aside from the people who lived and made their livings in Shoubaozhuang, Laosanyu, and other urban villages in the outskirts of Beijing, there are also many young people, like me, who rented housing and commuted into the city for work. "Housing" is a curious term - it encompasses basement apartments where 10 young men sleep in one room, as was the case for Shou, a young man who was interning for a gym in Haidian District, single rooms with a small sink and toilet, shared apartments in old buildings, and new apartments in shiny high rises. For those who lived in more precarious conditions such as old apartments and in cramped quarters, the fires and inspections suddenly displaced them. Many of the black cab drivers who worked in the area, for example, had day jobs. They worked in offices or in shops, and because they had a car, they picked up extra work as black cab drivers at the end of the day. They lived, either with

their families or with other bachelor men in shared-rooms, in old buildings nearby that were closed down. As a result, they were forced to make a choice in the few days given to them to move out: pay increasingly expensive rent for a smaller space due to the sudden increase in renters and the limited number of open apartments in December and January or leave Beijing. It was a difficult choice and the imposition of forced evictions, or evacuations, depending on the perspective, left little room for tactics or response. Nin relied on her workplace to provide her with a place to spend the night while looking for new housing, but not all had this option, especially when their social networks in Beijing consisted entirely of people in the exact same predicament. Eric, a group fitness class instructor who taught classes in several gyms across Beijing, lived with his mother's friend, someone he called "auntie." Though in other respects, he also struggled like Nin and other fitness instructors working in the gyms, he had access to job opportunities in more expensive, higher paying, or more stable positions, and his familial networks protected him from the prospect of being homeless. His auntie also lent him money when he was unable to get enough classes in the month to pay his bills or when he wanted to enroll in a new training program that required an upfront fee. A few months after the fires, Syntinen, a former manager at FortFit who had quit and was hoping to move into management consulting, had just moved into her new apartment when it flooded. While dealing with this crisis, she moved in with a friend she'd met while working Beijing; her mother then flew in from out of town to help her pack up her things, negotiate with her landlord, and find a new place. Family, kin-networks, and friends helped Syntinen and Eric respond to crises more easily. Nin was able to stay in Beijing, but her long commute and work hours made it even more difficult than before to see friends or meet people. Though she was university educated and stably employed, her social networks during her time at ClubFit remained limited to those she'd met

while still in school, Chen, Xiaolu, the small group of group fitness class instructors ClubFit employed, and ClubFit members. It took her months longer than Xiaolu to find a new job. In these ways, locality - and the ways *hukou* status can shape practices surrounding work, play, and the networks people have access to - continue to constrain the possibilities available to young people, even those who are middle-class and university educated.

For others, like the BUCT group - a number of recent graduates from Beijing University of Chemical Technology - though *hukou* shaped their plans and restricted certain futures for them, they were able to avoid the brunt of precarious non-locality by enrolling in graduate programs, which also enhanced their Beijing employability upon graduation, or by finding shared apartments together. Several of the group had lived together at various points. Although it's possible to find shared apartments via real estate agents, friends, or online services like Ziroom, those who room with complete strangers prefer certain room layouts, which restricts options. Ziroom has options to rent furnished apartments in this way, including individual locks for bedroom doors, with minimal to no shared living space. Some rooms even have a sofa and television in the bedroom itself. However, Ziroom's options tend to be more expensive, averaging 3000-4000 RMB per person a month in Dongcheng and Chaoyang districts, and they charge a yearly service fee that amounts to a little less than one month's rent. The BUCT group found several options for two or three bedroom apartments within the east third ring that would cost 2000-3000 RMB a month per person. Additionally, Yeye and Cheche found their original apartment through a classmate, who passed the apartment along once he and his roommate were ready to move out. This can save around one month's rent on agent fees. WeChat also helps expand people's networks via dedicated WeChat groups; there are groups for finding an apartment, adopting a dog, planning weekend hikes, and discussing science fiction. Through

these groups, it's possible to meet otherwise strangers, but also to seek advice or offer help. Momo, a frisbee friend, used apartment groups and the frisbee network to navigate apartment searching in Beijing and price compare; she was able to find an apartment in Sanlitun with a roommate she'd connected with ahead of time over WeChat for a little over 3000 RMB a month.

Of course, there are also those for whom issues of *hukou* and the price of rent are of little to no concern. Xiaolu, the ClubFit manager who left briefly to work for the SHAPE chain, isn't planning on staying in Beijing at all. Her work in Beijing revolves around accumulating knowledge, resources, and networks through which she can "be her own boss" and open her own studio, weight-loss program, or healthy restaurant in her husband's hometown. They live in Tongzhou and save much of their money with this in mind; though there are inconveniences to being not-local, these are largely worked around. For Xiaolu, when it seemed that there might be more difficult barriers in her way, she would state that it was ok, she could move to Heilongjiang earlier than originally planned. To leave the place in which one is not local and return to one's home is also a proactive response to precarious times. Financial stability or the ability to escape the system for another via foreign passports, foreign marriages, or foreign schools were also potential possibilities for dealing with *hukou* related constraints. Chin's husband worked for an international law firm and received compensation at a rate set internationally, converted to RMB. He and Chin both graduated from Peking University's law school. They then moved to the US so that he could attend a top law school there. They lived abroad for five years - three for law school and then two more when Figgy worked at his firm's office in Washington, D.C.. Through his firm, they both have international health insurance. Additionally, as single children from relatively well-off and stable families, they were not obligated to send money home. Both sets of parents supported in their international and cross-China adventures. They moved back to Beijing

in 2016 in order to be closer to family and after much discussion, they put down a deposit to purchase an apartment in Tongzhou in 2018. For them, *hukou* is not a concern. Both are in their late twenties, but Chin was not yet ready to have children. They were financially stable and well-off, they didn't need to access Beijing's public healthcare system, and should they have children one day, they were open to the idea of sending them to international school. The Daxing fires registered for Chin as a disaster she read about in the news, a glancing thought or a caution against charging mobile scooter batteries in inappropriate places, before moving on with her everyday life. Zuoyi met her fiancé through playing ultimate frisbee in Fuzhou, where she is "from" and where he was then working. They moved together to Beijing, where he found a position teaching computer science at an international school, and where she has worked in marketing for various pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. His school provided a housing allowance that covers most of the rent for their one bedroom apartment near Taiyanggong subway station on Line 10. He has international health insurance through work and she has also purchased an international plan. When they are married and have children, they will be able to bypass the *hukou* system by registering said children as UK citizens. Or, they can remain in Beijing, continue to use international health insurance, and send their children to international schools. As long as her fiancé works at an international school, their children would receive at least some tuition benefits. Neither are particularly bothered with purchasing a house, though it is a possibility. Foreign citizenship and the ability to leave - China, the Chinese *hukou* system, the rules and regulations within China - provides insulation against the precarity and insecurity that the lack of a permanent home might generate. It is just as important, perhaps, as the peace that certain privileges - foreign partners, financial security - grant. Contrary to those who have to expend significant resources to circumnavigate, foil, or resolve issues surrounding

hukou, some people rarely if ever have to respond. For them, *hukou* or non-localness is not consequential in their everyday or extraordinary lives - it is an identification card, a marker of there-ness that has no material impact on what they do. This distinction between how different people can and do respond to problems generated by or surrounding *hukou*, locality, and precarity, is a large part of the mundane ways in which consequential differences are produced.

Conclusion

For much of this dissertation, the state has largely remained distant. Aside from creating a discursive field for relevant actors and thus creating certain conditions of possibility, “the state” and its power has played a distant supporting role in the drama of people’s lives. *Guanxi* connections, economic wealth, and local *hukou* status protects against some of this, absorbing the ways in which precarity can destabilise plans or become a barrier to social and economic mobility. A look at *hukou* is a reminder that the state is not so far away. For most people in most places, *hukou* is not consequential most of the time. But in the times that it is consequential - when applying to schools, when getting married, when moving, when planning a family - a look at *hukou* highlights the ways in which a lack of resources makes people vulnerable. Locality and local-status in and of itself is simply a category, a way of assessing and labeling people. However, at certain times, it is also a way of differentiating between certain kinds of people, of producing class, gender, and ethnic differences. This is occluded by discussion of the *hukou* that focuses on public services and the limitations of policy. There are different ways to be not be local. For some people, locality can be manufactured - through marriage or the “right” job - and for others, the problems generated by being not-from-here can be waved aside. Their stability in other (economic, social) ways insulated them from the precarity that being out of place can generate or exacerbate. All other things equal, having one or more networks, from whence one

can call in a favor, provide advice, or offer a temporary solution to housing, ameliorated conditions of instability. It impacts opportunities both within and without the city and shapes what people consider possible. The practices surrounding possibility divide people, and only sometimes along *hukou* and socioeconomic lines. It allows for social mobility for some people and hinders it for others. This is necessary. If *hukou* became irrelevant at these critical junctures, the state loses one of its most effective ways of differentiating people and keeping some of them in their places. Contrary to de Certeau's analysis, it is possible for some to escape the system by renouncing it à la Dumont (1966), either by leaving China or rejecting the public service sector (education, healthcare) altogether. This is easier said than done and introduces other, alternative difficulties. What happens if the few private international schools accepting Chinese passport holders are unable to adequately provide children, or a specific child, a Western higher education? And of course, it is even more difficult to escape the webs of *guanxi* and reciprocity in which someone is bound; favors have a way of coming back.

Conclusion

From the abstract ambitions of government plans and the lofty halls of academic research, to sprawling public competitions, to frisbee fields, to gyms big and small, to finally, the home, the order of the six chapters in this project reflect a directional shift from large to small, state to individual, public to private. I move from policies and research and large public competitions, to club sports, small gyms, and individual housing precarity, all through the lens of ordinary, everyday practice. It is people and the things that they do that constitute these policies; individual people conduct research and publish their findings, plans events and train for them, strive for legitimacy and legal status, open up businesses, seek employment, and strategize for local *hukou*. But they can not do these things alone. Xiaohua's efforts to legitimize ultimate frisbee as a sport in mainland China, under his terms, drew on several aspects of his personal resources. His knowledge and ideas about frisbee, the frisbee community, and the organization of frisbee were in no small part inspired by his history studying abroad and playing frisbee in Canada. His coaches, teammates, and classmates are part of his network. In Beijing, he can draw on his family's connections; in his work planning the Hainan tournament in October 2019, he deployed the language of the Healthy China 2030 plan in negotiations with local officials. His knowledge of who to talk to and apt reference to a national-level guideline for elevating health helped secure some sponsorship and support for the competition. The presence of the state, explicit and implicit, is interwoven throughout this dissertation. As I argued in the the second chapter - state policies and plans set a discursive field within which actors move and to which actors can and must respond. However, even within "closed" systems, there are possibilities and spaces for creating, imagining, and even resistance. There are always ways, for some, to escape into alternative systems with their own sets of constraints and struggles and possibilities.

In this sense, this project could have taken place outside of Beijing and even China. The subjects of my study are not exclusively Chinese, or middle-class, or working in a particular industry; my methods emphasized people and their practices as they moved through the city at a particular moment in Chinese history, and this focus on movement and temporality serves to deemphasize commonsensical social categories. This dissertation's primary contribution is this methodological focus on people as they move through categories, rather than the categories themselves. Additionally, my work challenges de Certeau's singular walk through the city (and accompanying shenanigans in places of work), conceptualized as a solo journey or rebellion, by arguing that "making do" is necessarily a collaborative practice. People's potential responses rely on other people, and their movement through the city hinges upon their relationships. People do not make their lives or traverse space alone; they are always leaving someone, moving towards someone, or simply accompanied by some persons considered familiar or strange. Inspired by the work of Anna Tsing (2015) and Paige West (2012), both of whom eschewed place-based ethnography in favor of tracing material objects (matsutake mushrooms and coffee beans respectively) as they moved around the world, I followed people as they moved through and around Beijing. In my research design, I extended this further by expanding what constitutes a subject. Their work focused on practice by looking at how people engaged with particular material objects in and through time and place; mine emphasized people as they engaged with a broad set of practices, even if engagement looked like purchasing a gym membership without actually using it, without categorizing them by class, gender, profession, or *hukou* status. I looked at where people gathered and when they did things together, as part of and in between all of the other doings that constitute everyday life. This included playing frisbee, going to work, eating dinner, and working out at the gym, in spaces of both work and play.

In my dissertation, I am making a few thematic arguments. First, I focused heavily on mobility and the ways in which mobility creates spaces of possibility. People moved homes and across the Beijing cityscape. They changed jobs, they left, and came back. Mobility is a strategy, a response when all that's available is responding in a way that makes do, a way of living in the city that captures both its limitations and possibilities. I am referring to many different kinds of mobility - from place to place, from job to job, from one income bracket to the next. People at QiangFit traveled across China, and when they could, the world in order to compete in the Spartan Race. Chin and Alicia moved around Beijing to find new partnerships. Many, like Eric, worked freelance and taught classes at multiple studios and gyms. Shou switched industries, from handing out fliers for Tuibian Gym to selling things on WeChat. Xiaolu also switched jobs several times, before she returned to ClubFit. When I met her, she made close to 10,000 RMB a month as a manager. Her previous job was managing a nail salon. After working at a few other gyms, she returned to help Chen set up an online weight-loss program. She moved from being a salaried employee to a co-entrepreneur, sharing, with Chen, both the risks and the profits of an online fitness venture. For her, moving jobs eventually helped her transition into a position where she could be, to an extent, her own boss. Mobility, migration, and the physical movement of people around, through, into, and out of Beijing is central to how new practices are introduced, taken up, and reimagined. CrossFit and ultimate frisbee are both examples of this. Mobility is also crucial to how new networks can be formed, as people enter new friend groups, join new clubs and gyms, and move to new places. However, with people moving around and away, mobility also can isolate some people from each other in geographical place even as it brings other people together, to run, jump, work, and play. And it is a barrier, straining existing relationships as people move across and away from Beijing. I chose to foreground movement

rather than categories of locality vis-a-vis *hukou* status or labor in order to highlight transitions, liminality, precarity, and the spaces and roles people move between.

These interactions must have a space, which provides other limitations even as it opens up possibilities. This is the second theme I touched upon in this dissertation. I used spaces as a way to introduce multiplicity; in looking at Beijing in its multitude of parts, I attempted to show threads of commonality across various spaces well as consequential differences. Beijing is a large, sprawling city. It can take more than two hours to travel from one end to another. Time, expense, and scheduling can prevent people from meeting, from continuing existing connections, and from making new ones. Once scheduled, there is a problem of deciding where to meet. In chapter three, I discuss how networking has moved away from banquet halls and KTV rooms as young people increasingly move away from their familial homes; meeting people can be less structured and is simultaneously more important, not just for negotiating deals in the moment, but for building new *guanxi* networks. The Spartan Race (chapter three), frisbee fields (chapter four), and gyms (chapter five) are just some of those spaces. Beyond eating and shopping, these spaces provide a space of activity, where strangers and friends can come together, play, and forge new social relationships, building and adding to their networks. It is one that is supposedly separate from the work place, and as young people shun the strictures and performative scripts of cultivating *guanxi*, one that ostensibly allows people to form genuine friendships built on mutual interests. These relationships, of course, can then naturally move into the workplace and into the realm of reciprocity and gift-giving. The difference is that these gifts are given “freely,” and these relationships built “naturally,” without the overt and explicit expectation of something in return.

As increased mobility brings people together in new ways and new spaces, there are increased opportunities for work and play to converge. I paid close attention to social networks and how these relationships came together, fell apart, and cut across sometimes ambiguous boundaries. Chin's relationship with me and Alicia, as well as with Yu, Paocai, and others at QiangFit blurred the boundaries between what constituted "work" and what was for her own personal "play." Once the showroom opened, she often spent the entire day in her office building, arriving at 8:30 or 9:00 in the morning and not returning home until nearly 11:00 in the evening. She'd often spend her lunch hour working out at QiangFit or eating in their cafe, or join a group fitness class after the showroom closed, and stay chatting until later into the evening. Those relationships, however, provided opportunities for her to sell clothing, as well as introduced her to other people who might prove to be consequential in the future. For others, a chance encounter in a yoga class might lead to a consequential dinner, an invitation, or an interview. In these private spheres of play, it is still important for people to present themselves well; the logics of neoliberalism encourage the presentation of self as a bundle of flexible skills (Gershon 2011). Being liked has positive consequences. However, it is equally important to not appear to be doing so - authenticity and the lack of artifice is invaluable to cultivating intimate and resource-full connections in these spaces of play. Ways of giving gifts, of investing in social networks, and of seeking help have become more enmeshed in the quality or strength of the relationship. The lack of networks, in certain conditions, can make someone much more vulnerable to conditions of precarity and instability.

Mobility, space, and social networks are focal points that foreground both the transience and stability of everyday practice. Throughout this dissertation, there is also an undercurrent of inequality. Some people live in safe, guarded apartment complexes while others live in cramped

quarters. Some move from job to job with ease while others depend on freelance positions or struggle to set up next steps. I deliberately emphasized conditions of inequality, precarity, and opportunity in lieu of explicitly drawing attention to categories of class and gender in order to avoid slipping into easy commonsensical categories. This was an explicit choice informed by theories and methodologies of relationality and connectedness (Garfinkel 2002; Latour 2005). However, elements of what can be read as gendered practice and socioeconomic class pervade my work. In chapter four, I discussed the dynamics of gendered play in ultimate frisbee in the explicit terms used by the people I got to know. Gender shapes social interactions in big and small ways, but in this analysis, I have chosen to focus more on spaces and opportunities where men and women can come together, in contrast to historically gendered networking spaces. I cannot speak to what men do when women are not around, as I have not been able to see it nor did I seek to do so. But men and women liked to play together, on coed teams in ultimate frisbee and the Spartan Race, at parties, and at the gym. Furthermore, I did not address the sexed body, though this is an important element to bodies and to what bodies can do together. This is something for future investigation. I am interested in inequality, and as such, I've tried very much to not specifically look at class. Differences - in the kinds of people in someone's social network, in familial wealth, in education level, in income, and in *hukou* status - become consequential at different moments. Categories of class and income do not easily explain how some people circumnavigate precarious moments while others suffer in their vulnerability. Instead, used the concept of social networks, broadly defined as friends, kin, and *guanxi*, in tandem with de Certeau's (1984) "making do" to explore some of the multiplicity of ways in which people can make do in precarious times.

I made these methodological choices so that I could investigate more broadly the variety of elements that shape and constrain young people's opportunities. Much of these constraints are relational and made visible through moments of interaction (Garfinkel 2002); or rather, it was through the contrast, in specific moments, between how some people navigated opportunity and precarity versus others that revealed consequential differences in wealth, knowledge, and their accompanying social capital. I did not want to study just "the poor" or the "wealthy," "local" versus "not-local" people as if either can exist as materially consequential categories without the other (Varenne and McDermott 1998). I also wanted to avoid explanations relying on capitalist analyses of extraction and exploitation. Instead, I designed my field research and subsequent writing to capture both movement and temporality in a specific moment in Chinese history. I have discussed the particularities of this time period elsewhere in the dissertation, though there would be plenty of rationale for conducting similar fieldwork at other points in time or in other places. Eschewing common categories allowed me to focus on people as they moved through the categories, especially in China where "middle class" is still ambiguously defined (Ren 2013). I am arguing that this method and framework provides an important way to uncover and analyze complex social changes and conditions as people go about making their lives under particular circumstances.

Afterward

At the time of writing, in early February of 2020, I was in Boracay, a resort island in the Philippines. I was there for Zuoyi and Daniel's wedding ceremony. It had been two weeks since the coronavirus epidemic and panic started in Wuhan, China. Originally, they'd planned for 50 guests. Most of their international friends and family were able to arrive before travel restrictions derailed plans. However, on February 2, 2020, after the first death in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte announced a ban on all foreign nationals who were traveling from or had been in Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macau within the past 14 days. Flights to and from Mainland China had already been suspended a few days prior. Sarah was mid-air from Hong Kong when the announcement was made; when she landed, she spent 8 hours sitting on her plane while management and immigration officials debated what to do with the planes who had arrived in such a manner. At 9:00 PM, her plane was loaded onto a bus, carted to another plane, and sent back to Hong Kong. After 13 hours of travel, she was right back where she'd started. Various international travel restrictions, airline cancellations, and measures set in place by the Chinese government have stranded people everywhere. Wuhan has been under lockdown for nearly two weeks; last week, my hometown city of Changsha received a notice that it was being shut down as well. Except for supermarkets, hospitals, and other essential businesses, all work was suspended, operations ceased, and travel in and out was prohibited. In the far north, people in Beijing were on self-imposed lockdown. Those who had planned to come to Boracay stayed home, leaving their homes only when desperate for groceries. Everyone wore masks and avoided each other, though the streets were largely empty. Because it coincided with the annual lunar new year holiday, many people were out of place and unable to return home. Zuoyi's Chinese coworkers canceled their flights and plans. Her parents tried to come up until February 2, when it

became clear that they would not be able to make it from any of the airports reasonably available to them; after their flights from Fuzhou were canceled, Zuoyi booked them flights to Beijing so that they could catch the same flight as some of the other wedding guests. With the restrictions on Hong Kong and Macau, there were no more accessible options on such short notice. Sarah had crossed into Hong Kong on February 1 and chosen to fly from Hong Kong for this purpose, assuming that flights would still be available. Momo, who works for an outdoor education company in Beijing, arrived on February 1, simply decided to return “home” after the wedding. Her American passport makes this an option; her family’s support allows her to make this decision even while grappling with income and job security. My American passport allows me to fly through other countries to return to Hong Kong, where I was visiting my partner, since I do not need to apply for travel visas to most countries in East and Southeast Asia. Finally, though working from home or remotely is possible for people like Sarah and Zuoyi, who work in marketing, and even for teachers like Daniel, who can Zoom with students and assess assignments online, this health crisis has been devastating for people employed in the service and tourism industry. The halt in travel and drastic reduction in who goes outside has made most major cities in China, including Beijing, look like ghost towns. Most gyms and studios were closed for the lunar new year, but cannot yet reopen. Their staff are stuck in their respective home towns and the gym is not an essential business. Even where there aren’t official restrictions, the overwhelming majority of gyms and studios remain closed and will do so for the foreseeable future. For the people who worked there, it is a loss of income and stability to which they have little they can do to respond or adjust. Some have moved operations online; others have leveraged their networks to find employment that allows them to stay home. For some, the loss in income is dire. A good friend, Tom, is in his second year at university. At the moment,

only his sister is able to work, and their family is close to living pay check to pay check. They moved back to their hometown from Beijing right before the lunar new year, and his father has attempted to leverage their network there. However, there isn't much suitable work to be done. Tom's father used to manage a coal factory and more recently, has run his own, small supermarket. Because it is very difficult for non-local people to get approved for small, private retail leases, they had to shut their operations down. Tom's family is part of the group of non-local people who have been slowly but surely encouraged out of Beijing. Zuoyi, on the other hand, is stuck in Boracay, and will work remotely once her scheduled leave in mid-February ends. It's really not a terrible place to wait and see what happens next.

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Appendix A: The costs of living and playing in Beijing

In the following tables, I present a sampling of the variation in costs and expenses associated with living, working, and playing in Beijing. I do this in lieu of presenting an RMB to dollar conversion rate or directly converting the currency in order to show how much costs can vary and to demonstrate the purchasing power parity of the RMB. These prices and fees are approximations. For gyms, the costs of gym memberships and group classes can often be negotiated. There are usually discounts for purchasing more upfront, whether that's a larger group class bundle or a longer membership (two to three years versus one year, for example). There are also common sale periods, such as after the New Year's or during the Spring Festival.

Annual gym membership fees (RMB)	
Huxi Gym (Haidianhuangzhuang)	9000
Huxi Gym (Central Business District)	20,000
Neighborhood Gym (Daxing)	2200
Neighborhood Gym (Haidian)	3000
Neighborhood Gym (Central Business District)	15,000
QiangFit	8,000

Group fitness class fees, per class (RMB)	
ClubFit	65
Active Club	100
CrossFit Radish	150
District CrossFit	120
JUNGLE TIME	70
QiangFit	100
Cost of group dinner, split evenly (RMB)	
Grandma's Kitchen	70
Noodles (Daxing)	12
Noodles (Dongcheng)	30
Pizza Hut	80
McDonald's	60
Mala Time	100
Cost of foods I purchased often, total (RMB)	
Bottled water (Daxing)	1.5
Bottled water (Dongcheng)	2
Bottled water (Central Business District)	3

Peking duck (cheap)	50
Peking duck (medium)	150
Peking duck (expensive)	350
Yellow Tail wine (Daxing)	120
Yellow Tail wine (Dongcheng)	70
Yellow Tail wine (Shunyi and Central Business District)	50
Transportation from Daxing to Central Business District (RMB)	
Bus and subway	7
Bread car and subway	9
Taxi and subway	16
Taxi	60
Rent, non-random sample, per person (RMB)	
Daxing	300, 500, 1000, 2000
Dongcheng	3000, 4500, 7000
Chaoyang	2500, 3000, 3500, 5000, 6000, 8000, 10,000, 12,000
Tongzhou	1000, 2000, 2500
Haidian (subsidized dormitories)	200, 300, 500, 1000
Haidian	2000, 2500