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Self-cultivation and Sociality Among Retired Women  
in Urban China

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Anthropology

by

Chang Huang

2019

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# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

## Self-cultivation and Sociality Among Retired Women in Urban China

by

Chang Huang

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Yunxiang Yan, Chair

In recent decades, an estimated 100 million middle-aged and elderly Chinese women have organized or joined public dance groups after leaving the work force. My dissertation uses this strikingly popular collective dancing phenomenon to explain how new models of productive aging have emerged as a result of China's post-reform social transformation. It seeks to uncover the ways in which personal cultivation, kinship dynamics, and state influence can work in concert to redefine what it means to grow old in the modern world.

With roughly one-third of retirees and seven percent of the entire Chinese population participating, the collective dancing phenomenon offers an incisive view of the Chinese social landscape. On the surface, the phenomenon appears to be a direct product of economic reforms: collective dance groups exploded on the scene in the late 1990s when millions of women were laid off during the country's transition into a consumer economy.

However, I argue that collective dancing must also be understood within the context of a seismic shift in how old age is perceived and treated in urban China. My dissertation

explains how this generation of Chinese women copes with diminishing social welfare programs and related changes in family structure while at the same time investing in an activity that brings them personal fulfillment. I focus particularly on the emergence of self-reliance and self-care as core guiding principles for China's recent retirees as they assume near-total responsibility for themselves for the first time in their lives. Drawing from observation and interview data collected from two dance groups as well as community leaders and government officials over an 18-month period, my dissertation breaks down the apparent contradiction between the rise of self-reliance in Chinese society and the critical importance of collective social enterprises for personal cultivation.

The dissertation of Chang Huang is approved.

Nancy Levine

Mariko Tamanoi

Andrea Sue Goldman

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2019

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# Curriculum Vitae

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2019 **Huang, Claudia.** "Staging Harmony in China's Urban Dance Competitions." *Anthropology News* May 2019.

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2017 American Ethnological Society  
"Our Hearts are Full of Bitterness: Aging and Agency in Urban China"

2015 American Anthropological Association 114<sup>th</sup> Meeting

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- 2016 **Sichuan University Department of Sociology**  
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## Introduction

老娘在外面板命，老头在家里等死

*Old women are outside struggling for their lives, old men are inside waiting to die*

— Local saying in Chengdu

*“Some of these women haven’t worked since their 40’s. But life doesn’t end there! No, you still have energy to spend, and it has to go somewhere. So they come and they dance, and they live their life with a little flavor.”*

— A dance group participant in a Chengdu park

This dissertation offers an ethnographic account of urban China’s congregational dancing phenomenon. Though some western news outlets have taken note in recent years, congregational dance groups— otherwise known as “dancing grannies”— are nothing short of a cultural and media sensation in China. Anyone who has traveled to a Chinese city in the past fifteen years will be familiar with the sight and sound of groups of middle-aged and elderly women (as well as a few men) dancing together in synchronized motion in public areas. They appear in the early morning hours in parks, public plazas, riverbanks, and commercial squares with their portable speakers, props, and occasionally matching outfits to dance the morning away. They appear again in the evenings after dinnertime, filling the air with the sound of upbeat music, laughing and revelry. Though no one has taken an official tally, there are an estimated 100 million such dancers scattered throughout China. This is a staggering figure. To put it into context, it is roughly a third of the population of the entire United States, and seven percent of the total Chinese population. *Seven percent* of all 1.3 billion people in China are dancing in the streets every day. Who are these people? What do they want? And what exactly are they dancing for?

This dissertation is my attempt at answering some of these questions. I will argue in the following pages that in order to understand the phenomenon, one must first uncover the links between the dancers’ lives and the radical social changes that have taken place in

the People's Republic of China in the past half-century. During this time period and at break-neck speeds, China transformed from a traditional agrarian society into an authoritarian socialist state and then into the world's second-largest economy. Most dance group participants belong to China's so-called "lost generation"— people born in the years immediately before and after the founding of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. As an age cohort, they have endured some of the most significant changes of China's recent history during their lifetimes: they suffered the excesses of Mao's political campaigns during their childhoods and youths, entered adulthood during the tumultuous years of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and, just as China was on its way toward becoming an economic powerhouse, they were squeezed out of the workforce to make way for younger workers. In the following chapters, I share stories that showcase how intimate aspects of ordinary people's lives have become entangled with China's national aspirations, and explain why so many retired women of this generation have taken to dancing in the streets as a response to these experiences.

However, my goal here is not simply to examine the congregational dancing phenomenon *per se*. My investigation of the phenomenon is also a case study on how people strive to re-make their identities in the absence of stable social institutions and agreed-upon cultural values. In particular, it is an illustration of what it's like to grow older when definitions and practices of old age are in flux, and the cultural frameworks that once supported old age are undergoing transformation. The people who participate in congregational dance groups were brought up to prioritize collective needs over personal desires, but times have changed and continue to change. China's era of high socialism ended in the late 1970s, when Mao passed away and his successor, Deng Xiaoping, swept in a new era of market reforms when he took power in 1978. The Mao-era social contract that guaranteed urban workers jobs for life in exchange for sacrifices in personal autonomy was

upended, and the social safety net has been steadily shrinking ever since. This generation of people must now take responsibility for creating meaningful lives on their own as they enter the latter stages of the life course. Moreover, they must do so while trying to balance the competing demands of family obligation and personal loyalty to their friends, as well as keeping up with mercurial policy changes that can alter their realities at any moment. By placing the processes of personal cultivation, group dynamics, and state influence into reflexive dialogue with each other, my dissertation seeks to clarify the apparent contradiction between the rise of self-reliance among this cohort of post-retirement women and their exploration of this new subjectivity within a collective activity.

The dissertation focuses on congregational dancing in urban China, but its epistemological goals transcend both disciplinary and geographical boundaries. Like many millions of others, the women who participate in congregational dance groups are growing old in a world that barely resembles the one in which they were born. This has become a familiar tale in the modern world: social realities are changing at a rapid pace, and some people—by virtue of their age, class, or geographical location—are at a significant disadvantage in the race to adapt. At its core, this dissertation is about the human drive to not only survive, but to create meaningful lives even when the odds are stacked against them.

### **Personal Identity and Social Change**

In the summer of 2015, a congregational dancer whom I call Auntie Deng offered a particularly poignant summary of her motives for joining a dance group during the course of an interview:

*It used to be that I would wake up, make breakfast for everyone, go to work, pick up my son, prepare dinner for everyone, then supervise my son's schoolwork. But I don't work anymore, and neither does my husband. My son has his own family. If I don't dance, then what do I wake up for? Now, my days go like this: I get up and I come to dance in the mornings. I go home, take a nap, and by the time I get up it's time to make dinner. After dinner [my*

*husband and I] watch TV, then it's time to go to bed again. It takes work to find something to do with all this time! Coming to the dance group gives the day some purpose.*

This rather mundane synopsis of daily life actually reveals something much deeper: not only have the social-political changes that occurred over the past 30 years changed the Chinese social landscape, these changes and their consequences have also re-shaped the way people relate to their own lived experiences. For most people in urban China, the rhythm and demands of daily life bear little resemblance to the lives they were born into and perhaps the lives that they expected to live. What has not changed, however, is the desire to live purposefully. There are certainly people in China for whom survival and the maintenance of basic living standards is still very much a consideration, but the retired middle-class urbanites who are the focus of this dissertation have other preoccupations: for them, life's central concern is not how to put the next meal on the table but rather who they have become, and why they should get up each morning. In the following chapters, I present an account of how retired Chinese urbanites have come responsible for their own moral personhoods, the myriad ways that this responsibility is practiced, as well as the changing standards by which lives are judged.

#### *The loss of moral clarity*

At the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, three years after Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev delivered a report titled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences." This report, which would come to be known as the "Secret Speech," sharply condemned the crimes of his predecessor to the Party delegates in the audience. Panic immediately ensued: several cadres in attendance were reported to have had heart attacks, and several others went on to take their own lives. In his recounting of the incident, the Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes that these cadres did not receive any new information. Khrushchev had simply listed crimes that they all knew

had been committed; nothing of any practical consequence had changed (Zizek 2012). And yet, the speech had clearly deprived them of something—something immaterial—that they could not live without.

Despite the obvious differences between the Soviet Union's post-Stalin transition in the 1950s and China's tumultuous path toward reform starting in the late 1970's and despite the possibility that some of these events may be apocryphal, I recount the story about the secret speech here because it illuminates two important points that can be carried over to my discussion about the plight of retired women in post-reform China. First, it highlights the fact that ideological shifts can inflict significant psychological trauma to those undergoing the transition. Second, and more importantly, it draws a link between the loss of meaning and loss of life itself.

Scholarly conversations about China's social transformations tend to focus on the practical consequences Deng Xiaoping's economic policy reforms, which have been well-documented in the literature: policy changes that culminated in the smashing of the so-called iron rice bowl in urban areas included radical measures to privatize healthcare, education, and housing (see Tang and Parish 2000; Guthrie 2006). The role of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was scaled back to make way for increased managerial autonomy and free-market competition (Kong 2010; Whyte 2010; Li and Oi 2018;). Most urbanites experienced the effects of these reforms in multiple dimensions of their lives: public housing was replaced with a booming real estate market; urban workers were no longer guaranteed jobs or benefits for life; family structures altered as young couples began to prefer homes of their own to traditional multi-generational households. Taken together, these changes amounted to a comprehensive restructuring of the public domain and have deservedly garnered much attention from social scientists.

However, there are other dimensions of post-reform life in China that deserve further attention—namely, ordinary people's efforts to make sense of their surroundings

and remake themselves for this new reality. In *Everything was Forever Until it was No More* (2005), Alexei Yurchak's aptly titled book about life in the final years of the Soviet Union, Russian citizens reflecting on the collapse of the USSR report to have been utterly unprepared for the collapse: they had assumed that they were living in an "eternal state" until almost the moment the collapse occurred. Yurchak's work seeks to dispel the notion that citizens living under authoritarian regimes can be neatly divided into "dissidents" and "accomplices," and argues that there is no "objective" reality other than the one people and governments co-construct through everyday discourses. Today, the People's Republic of China is still a socialist state; the technical term for the PRC's current form of governance is "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which is meant to describe the current mixed economy that features a strong central government directing the forces of the market. Unlike the Soviet Union, the PRC never underwent a regime change. This does not mean, however, that people who lived through China's economic reforms experienced a sense of continuity.

In public culture, the psychological ramifications of undergoing rapid ideological transition have been explored widely in multiple genres in China since the beginning of the so-called ideological "thaw" that began with Mao's death in 1976. Though well-known artistic movements that sprung up during this period (such as "scar literature" and "fifth generation" filmmaking) did not necessarily take overtly critical stances toward socialism, the new generation of writers and artists often created plot lines without clear-cut heroes or villains and instead focused on the suffering of ordinary people. In doing so, they created art that lacked the ideological purity of its collective-era predecessors, which invariably pitted "good" forces (peasants, the CCP) against "evil" ones (landlords, capitalists, the Nationalist Party, and the Japanese). Zhang Yimou's hugely popular film *To Live*, for example, traces the tragic (and at times darkly humorous) experiences of a family from pre-revolutionary times through several decades of political campaigns and concludes without

a moralistic resolution (1994).

It is difficult to gauge the impacts of representational media on the average person's psyche, but reform policies' repercussions for private lives also manifested in clearly observable ways. Sociologist Fei Xiaotong noted in the 1930's that Chinese society is built on a set of differential social hierarchies with the individual at the center. The centrality of the individual in this model means something quite counter-intuitive to the western observer: the circles denote levels of obligation a person has toward her relations (Fei 1992). These hierarchies' power in mediating social relations cannot be overstated: under this system, all acquaintances were addressed by a kinship term according to his or her age and station, and afforded the respect (or lack thereof) commensurate with that station. This family system has not existed in its pure form (if such a thing ever existed) for quite some time: it was first replaced by communist ideologies of kinship based on Marxist-Leninist principles, which made all citizens members of a communist "brotherhood" with the state acting as the all-knowing father figure at its head. However, economic reforms produced even more significant upheavals in the Chinese kinship system (Fong 2004; Harrell and Santos 2016; Kuan 2016). For example, in *Private Life Under Socialism*, Yunxiang Yan describes the beginnings of a new mode of social organization marked by the rise of the nuclear family, diminishing patriarchal power, and greater emphasis on conjugal intimacy in marriage relations (2003).

It is important to note here that so-called modern social processes did not supplant traditional ones overnight. While Yan notes some dramatic changes—such as the all-but-disappearance of one-room family homes in a relatively short period of time—other traditions, such as dowry transfers and certain wedding rituals, either persisted in modified forms or were given new social meanings. In another study on the shifting social mores in a Chinese village, Xin Liu makes a similar observation about the interplay between "old" and "new" forms of sociality. At his field site in rural Shaanxi, there was no smooth or uni-

linear transition between the collective and reform eras. There was, instead, a loosening-up of cultural expectations around relationships and rituals (the way one ought to behave at the wedding of an acquaintance, for example) and people were often left to their own devices to weave a coherent social fabric together from a jumbled assortment of behaviors and practices (Liu 2000). In other words, there was never a clean break between “traditional” social frameworks and “modern” ones; it would be more accurate to say that a single way of life was replaced with multiple competing and at times contradictory choices.

The situation in urban areas is even more complicated since today’s urbanites frequently interact with strangers with whom they have no discernible relation. In his discussion on the worrisome trend of exhorting good Samaritans in urban areas, Yan notes that traditional distrust of out-group strangers have been exacerbated by modern living conditions (2009b). Fei Xiaotong’s “ripple effect” model of social organization can no longer accurately capture the reality of relationships in modern Chinese cities. Relations within kinship systems do not define the self any longer.

The sum of these transformations exerted profound ramifications on the Chinese psyche. While life under the collective era was oppressive and at times even brutal, it offered an ideological clarity that can no longer be found in any area of post-reform society. In *The Otherness of Self* (2002), Xin Liu argues that what was lost during the course of China’s transition into a so-called first world economy was not simply social safety nets but rather something far more fundamental: people no longer have a clear sense of a common “we”—that is, a feeling of collective directionality. Liu describes a dinner party during which an acquaintance of his—an educated businesswoman who is by all accounts successful—proclaims that “there is nothing to live for” (168). Drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre’s theories of narrative morality, Liu attributes her outburst not to boredom or even psychological alienation from her own success (he provides evidence that she is very much aware of it) but rather to the fact that she has no idea where her success is leading.

Liu uses this vignette to illustrate a widespread phenomenon in urban China in which people live out certain aspects of their lives as “characters” like “boss,” “young miss,” which interact with each other in predetermined but ultimately directionless ways in their mutual pursuit of pleasure. In the absence of a unifying direction or point on the moral horizon toward which people can aim, Liu conceives of contemporary Chinese society as a performance in which each individual actor struggles to tell her own story without a clear script.

Obviously, the suicides in the aftermath of the Secret Speech are extreme examples of the consequences such a loss of moral compass; lack of directionality can manifest in far subtler ways in daily life. The so-called moral vacuum has been blamed for a wide variety of social ills, including a supposed pervasive and intractable cynicism among Chinese citizens (see Steinmuller and Brandtstadter 2016; Osburg 2016 for a counter-point).

Ostensibly, in the absence of a set of shared beliefs, people turn inward to focusing on pursuing selfish pleasures without reference to others. As I will explain in this dissertation, my own research indicates that this is simply not the case. While it is true that the loss of ideological clarity can bring about an erosion of social trust and social disorder in general, it is also true that without the need to adhere to strict narratives of moral worth, people are now free to imagine a wide variety of possible futures and forms of happiness and meaning (see Appadurai 1996). Though there are no guarantees of success, they can now at least try to cultivate themselves, and their lives, on their own terms.

### *Self-cultivation through consumption and leisure*

Since the publication of Deborah Davis’ edited volume on the subject, “consumer revolution” has become a catchphrase for describing the explosion of private ownership and entrepreneurship that occurred in urban China starting in the 1980s. In the past two decades, countless studies have emerged analyzing Chinese consumer culture from a wide

range of theoretical perspectives (Gerth 2003; Watson 2006; Latham et al 2006; Xin and Belk 2008; Lin 2011; Li 2016). What has often been overlooked, however, is that the revolution was not supposed to have happened in the first place. In her introduction to *Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, Davis notes that Deng's economic reforms were initially implemented as a temporarily solution to jump-start the ailing economy. It was never the state's intention to allow for individuals to accrue significant amounts of personal capital, much less bring about a comprehensive restructuring of state-society relations (2000:1). But when the policies catalyzed unprecedented economic growth at break-neck speeds, it soon became clear that reversing course was out of the question. Davis' use of the word "revolution" to describe what happened next is not hyperbolic: in addition to having higher salaries and greater access to consumer goods, consumption has become, as Lisa Rofel (2007) puts it, a vehicle for "embodying a new self" in post-reform society (118). Davis' edited volume includes various illustrations of how consumer practices became increasingly tied up with identity formation as well as the creation of new kinds of social spaces that allowed for experimentation and play. For example, dance halls became places where people—in particular young people—could "try on" personality traits such as "sexiness" and "coolness," which would be entirely unacceptable in other contexts (Farrer 2000).

Though I did not meet any who were trying to be "cool" in the way that young people might understand that term, I did find that many retired women who participate in dance groups cherished their newfound ability to try out and cultivate personal identities based on their own interests and tastes. There were few opportunities and even fewer incentives to mark such distinctions when they were younger, when everyone lived in comparable work-unit or *danwei* housing blocks. In her work on the rise of the real estate market in urban China, Li Zhang (2010) astutely notes that the *danwei* system did not simply provide housing, but was rather a comprehensive mechanism of social organization

that limited personal choices and brought the bulk of daily affairs (like healthcare, recreation, and childcare) under state control (also see Walder 1983; Bray 2005; Cliff 2015). When the *danwei* system began to disappear, and as people increasingly moved into privately purchased homes, people also began to gain personal autonomy in many of these affairs for the first time (see Derleth and Koldyk 2004; Zhu 2005).

It's difficult to exaggerate the novelty of these developments for the generation of women who participate in congregational dancing. There was no area of life that did not fall under the state's ideological umbrella during the Mao era, when even leisure itself was conceptualized as a form of collective action and therefore subject to state regulation. Unsanctioned leisure activities – ranging from reading unapproved books to performing unapproved plays—were denounced as capitalist behavior. This is not to say that the state has not forfeited its control over leisure activities or consumer behaviors entirely. Pal Nyiri (2006), for example, argues that the presence of the state is very much visible in the Chinese (domestic) tourism industry in the form of educational placards and signs. Elsewhere, Judith Farquhar (2001; 2002), Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Wang (2005; 2012), and Nancy Chen (2001; 2003) have all emphasized the complex links between state policies aimed at promoting self-management as well as cultural preservation and recreational activities like *tai chi* and *qigong* that many urbanites have begun practicing in the post-reform era. China's current anti-corruption campaign, which focuses heavily on limiting conspicuous consumption of luxury goods, also comes to mind.

And yet, the salience of these developments cannot be properly understood without reference to China's recent authoritarian past, during which one's moral worth was judged based on how well one lived according to socialist ideologies of self-denial, hard work, and sacrifice. In other words, while some scholars have attempted to argue that the rise of China's consumer culture can be analyzed as yet another chapter in the greater story on the triumph of global neoliberalism (see Ngai 1999, 2005; Zhang and Ong 2008), the

consumption and enjoyment of recreational and leisurely activities carries greater—and different— semiotic valences in the Chinese context. Perhaps for the first time in Chinese history, one's own earning abilities and aesthetic judgments matter more than the situation of one's birth in determining one's place in society. In sharp contrast to the "organized sociality" of the collective era, the rise of consumer culture has placed the onus of identity formation onto the individual and in so doing opened the way for people to seek out activities and relationships outside the purview of state control.

### *Why women and what about men?*

This dissertation focuses almost exclusively on the lives and experiences of retired urban women. The reasons for this are primarily practical: though there are a small number of men who participate in the dance groups— particularly in groups that practice ballroom or Latin dance styles where people ideally dance in opposite-gendered pairs— the vast majority of congregational dancers are women between the ages of 55 and 75. This gender imbalance can be explained by a number of biological, sociological, and cultural factors. The first and perhaps most salient reason is that urban Chinese women retire at an earlier age than men. China has had a compulsory retirement program for urban workers since the 1950s. This scheme requires men to retire at age 60, while the situation for women is somewhat more complex: those in professional careers (such as medical personnel, teachers, administrators, etc.) must retire at 55 while women in all other lines of work must leave the workforce at 50. Though gender gaps in retirement age are not uncommon in places where compulsory retirement exists, there are no other countries in the world where women are forced into retirement when they are still in the prime of middle age (see Feng et al 2019).

Moreover, a significant proportion of women who participate in dance groups did not retire when they reached official retirement age but were instead cast out of the work force at even younger ages when China launched state-owned enterprise (SOE) reforms in

the late 90s and early 2000s. Women, who occupied lower paying jobs and were assumed to not have as many breadwinning responsibilities as men, were laid off in disproportionate numbers when factories and other SOEs were privatized or closed (Appleton et al 2002; Xie and Wu 2008; Ji et al 2017). Combining with the fact that women tend to live longer than men, these gender-imbalanced state policies made many urban women “socially old”—in the sense that their retirements curtailed their economic productivity and gave them no choice but to focus on leisure—long before they were biologically old. They were, in other words, old before their time and had to fill their days with something else to do. Many of them turned to congregational dancing.

Nevertheless, retired men certainly exist in large numbers in urban China, and why there has not been a comparable post-retirement phenomenon consisting mostly of older men is somewhat of a mystery. I frequently wondered about retired men during the course of my fieldwork. Where are they? What are they doing? I asked these questions to many people, especially in the early stages of my research. My interlocutors provided a range of explanations: some dance group participants openly bemoaned the fact that their husbands spent most of their time indoors and resisted their wives’ efforts to get them to go out more; some younger interlocutors expressed worry about their fathers, whom they noticed were becoming far more idle after retirement when compared to their active mothers; some retired men I spoke to told me that they had their own hobbies, but that these activities—ranging from computer games to day (stock) trading to playing mahjong—did not require them to be outdoors or visible to the public. All of them referred, at least obliquely, to a popular local Chengdu saying that I have shared in the epigraph to this chapter: “old women are outside struggling for their lives, old men are inside waiting to die.” The expression is meant to be a tongue-in-cheek comment about something widely considered to be common knowledge in Chengdu: retired women typically work hard to stay active and connected, but retired men tend to retreat into isolation once their professional lives are

over. There are, of course, people of both genders who undermine these stereotypes— I can think of several off the top of my head— but the generalizations have enough truth in them that the expression has become a cliché. Most people chuckled or smirked when they repeated the saying, but given what we know about the connection between elders’ social connections and their physical, mental, and emotional health (see Mor-Barak and Miller 1991; Kawachi and Berkman 2001; Mountain 2018) the implications of men’s comparative lack of post-retirement social engagement for their well-being could be quite serious.

That said, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss the plight of urban China’s retired men, or to explain why Chinese women are seemingly participating in collective social enterprises in greater numbers than their male counterparts. Those are important studies for another researcher, or perhaps for another time. I have chosen instead to focus on the first part of the saying— “old women are outside struggling for their lives.” What are the forces they are struggling against? What tools or resources are at their disposal? What, if anything, is the end goal of their efforts? By highlighting the ways in which women’s lives— and specifically older women’s lives— can reflect broader social issues but at the same time challenge generalizations about the state of affairs in post-reform urban China, I aim to contribute to the relative dearth of ethnographic studies that focus on the lives of middle-aged and elderly women.

## **Methods**

### *Setting and positionality*

I conducted ethnographic research in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province in China’s southwest. Though few people outside of China seem to have heard of it, Chengdu has been a culturally and geographically significant place in China for many centuries. It boasts the distinction of being the only major city in China that has remained in the same

location, and under the same name, for more than two millennia. Sitting in a well-protected plain at the base of the Tibetan plateau and at the intersection of several major trade routes, powerful people have used Chengdu's strategic location to their advantage throughout history. The city was the capital of the bronze-age Shu state in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the capital of the Kingdom of Shu during the Three Kingdoms period (AD 221-263), the capital of a short-lived rebel kingdom led by the peasant rebel leader Zhang Xianzhong from 1643-1646, and finally as the temporary capital of the embattled Nationalist government (Kuomintang) during the second world war.

This illustrious history lends the city and its inhabitants a sense of importance and pride, but few people mention these points today when talking about what makes Chengdu unique. Instead, locals might boast about giant pandas, which are bred in a well-known research center in Chengdu and live in the wild in the shady mountains surrounding the city. They might also tell you to try hot pot, or another spicy dish from the city's unique cuisine, which has earned Chengdu a "City of Gastronomy" designation by UNESCO. But Chengdu's main attraction might be something far less tangible. With its ample green space and purportedly the highest number of teahouses per capita in the world, people from all over China go to Chengdu to experience its laid-back attitude, its attention to leisure, and its slow pace of life. Some of this reputation is owed to climate and geography. The city has earned various nicknames associated with its fertile soil and ample harvests throughout the ages. Chengdu, and the fertile basin in which it is situated, has long been called the "country of heaven" [天府之国], which is also frequently translated as the "land of abundance." In contrast to other regions in China where agricultural production requires back breaking work for much of the year, growing food is a little easier on the Chengdu plain, and people could afford to take time to enjoy the finer things in life.

Very few Chengdu residents are agricultural workers these days, of course, but the

legacy of a leisurely lifestyle has remained in place. The result is that despite its 14 million inhabitants, multi-national corporations, international airport, and daily traffic congestion, Chengdu manages to feel quite different from the “first tier” mega-cities on China’s coasts. Its many parks are filled at all hours with people gossiping over a shared bag of sunflower seeds. Sales clerks regularly doze in their chairs after lunch or abandon their stations altogether to play a card game on the sidewalk with neighbors. After dark, office workers spill out of high-rise buildings and head directly to the city’s numerous barbecue vendors to enjoy a late-night snack and a cold beer.

While Chengdu is not the focus of this dissertation, I do think it is important to understand that the city’s local culture and reputation serve as a backdrop and foundation to the stories I will tell. I have been asked many times whether I thought the congregational dancing phenomenon is especially popular in Chengdu because its residents are so fun-loving and leisure-focused to begin with. I cannot say for certain whether there are more dance groups in Chengdu than there are in other places. The phenomenon enjoys natural advantages in Chengdu compared to a very hilly city like Chongqing, which has few flat spaces for dance groups to congregate, and compared to northern cities like Beijing or Shenyang, where cold winters can force groups to take annual months-long hiatuses from dancing. What I can confidently say is that Chengdu’s dance groups are numerous, enthusiastic, and seem like an almost natural addition to the city’s pre-existing *joie de vivre*. The importance of relaxation and informal sociality in Chengdu’s public culture has been the subject of several works of scholarship. In particular, historian Di Wang (2003; 2008; 2018) has written extensively about Chengdu’s teahouse culture throughout the last century, and argued that what takes place in the teahouses can reveal a lot about public urban life in China as a whole. Though this dissertation does not attempt to follow in Wang’s footsteps in the sense that it is not an examination of Chengdu’s public culture as such, it is still a portrait of everyday life in the city, and the fact that the subject of that portrait is Chengdu

is not merely incidental.

Chengdu is a special place for me. I was born in the Qingyang district near the famous People's Park and lived within a few miles of the city center until I was eight years old. Though my parents and I live in California now, all three of us still consider Chengdu to be our home. My extended family on my mother's side all live in Chengdu, and I took many trips to see them there during my childhood and adolescence. My descriptions of the city's landscape, its inhabitants, and its everyday rhythms do not only originate from my fieldwork observations. My knowledge of Chengdu has been accumulating for many years: I have known the city as a local child, as a culturally confused teenager visiting with my parents, as a curious but ambivalent young adult, and finally as an anthropologist conducting ethnographic fieldwork. My personal attachments to the city certainly factored into my choice of field site, but my reasons for choosing Chengdu were practical as well as sentimental. Because Sichuanese, the lingua franca in Chengdu, is my mother tongue, I am able to carry out conversations with Chengdu residents in their local dialect easily and without an accent. This matters a great deal when conducting research with retirees: though Mandarin is the standard language throughout China and despite the fact that it is nearly universally understood in Han-majority cities, many people over the age of 50 do not speak it comfortably or naturally if they grew up speaking a different dialect. I conducted all of my interviews in Sichuanese. More importantly, I was able to pick up the subtleties in word choice and tone in conversations between my interlocutors while conducting participant observation.

Despite all the ways I am connected to my field site and despite the commonalities I have with the people who were my interlocutors, I hesitate to call this dissertation a work of "native" or "insider" anthropology. Proponents of this concept, which has been in circulation since at least the 1970's (Hayano 1979; Narayan 1993; Kanuha 2000), contend that researchers who share cultural and linguistic similarities with the people they study

are able to offer a more nuanced and sensitive account than people who are outsiders. But like Japanese-American scholar Takeyuki Tsuda (2015), who questions this dichotomy between “native” and “non-native” anthropology because he was brought up in the liminal space between two cultures, I am also skeptical of the usefulness of such a dichotomy. For one, Chengdu— and China— has changed beyond recognition since I was a child. Roughly 10 million of its 14 million residents moved to the city in the years after I immigrated to the United States with my family. My semi- “insider” status had its pitfalls as well. Many of my interlocutors— particularly government officials— expressed surprise and confusion about my lack of intimate knowledge with local governance hierarchies, and had to be continually pressed to provide information that they assumed I already knew given my local-sounding accent.

This is not to say that my personal ties to Chengdu had no effect on my research. I undoubtedly had many advantages in conducting fieldwork in Chengdu due to my ties to the city: several relatives and family friends put me in touch with congregational dancers when I was conducting my preliminary research, I blended in with locals and was able to speak with them at ease, and I had the luxury of being able to spend some of my days off with relatives in their comfortable homes. The material point, however, is that neither the disadvantages nor advantages associated with my semi-local status could bridge the fundamental differences I had with my interlocutors in terms of age, upbringing, and experience. The retired women who participate in dance groups were overwhelmingly patient and kind with me, but also made no secret of the fact that they found my ignorance of what they considered to be basic knowledge about post-retirement urban life to be rather amusing.

### *Preliminary Research*

The congregational dancing phenomenon is massive, unwieldy, and diverse in many

ways. I conducted two stages of preliminary research in order to get a sense of the variety of dance groups and participants in Chengdu and to ensure that the groups with whom I conducted in-depth participant participation would be as representative as possible. In the first preliminary study period in summer 2014, I observed 21 groups in two different areas of the city: seven in the older neighborhoods in the Qingyang district where many people still live in low-rise apartment blocks that were built in the 1970s and 80s, and 14 in the new residential developments in the southern end of the city's Jinjiang district, which are mainly populated by middle and upper middle-class families. Given the different demographics and urban spaces available in the two districts, selecting groups from across these two locations mitigated some possible sampling biases.

The purpose of this preliminary observational phase was to familiarize myself with some of the commonalities and differences between groups. I observed the groups on a regular basis that summer and asked participants general questions like, "how often does this group meet," "what is the monthly or yearly fee" and, "did you know any of these other dancers before?" Whenever possible, I also gathered information about the group members' average age, what they did before retirement, and how many years they had been retired. Dance group participants were generally happy to answer my questions, and often elaborated about these matters or provided additional information (for example, about their reasons for participating or why they enjoyed dancing) without my pressing. Data collected from these brief survey-interviews are used throughout this dissertation.

My findings from this preliminary research indicated that dance groups differ from each other in where they dance, number of participants, the degree of relationship between participants, as well as the cost to participate. The chart below is not meant to be a comprehensive catalogue or "typology" of dancing groups, but is rather intended to give an idea of some of the substantial variety among them. Considering that the phenomenon consists of 100 million participants scattered across the most populous country in the world,

the fact that congregational dancing is not monolithic is not surprising. However, establishing these differences was not only crucial for choosing groups for longer-term research, but also played a key part in my argument that congregational dance groups act as venues for self-cultivation, which I will set forth in the next chapter.

| Group Type             | Size    | Venue                          | Member Relationship                   | Fee          |
|------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| Outdoor Associational  | 10-40   | Small plazas, Parks, Sidewalks | Former colleagues, neighbors, friends | 100-200/year |
| Outdoor Exercise Class | 50-200  | Large public squares, parks    | No previous relationship              | 30-100/month |
| Outdoor Dance Class    | 10-40   | Small plazas, Parks, Sidewalks | Varies                                | 30-100/month |
| Public Recreation      | 100-300 | Large public squares, parks    | No previous relationship              | 2-3/ evening |
| Indoor Associational   | 10-40   | Studios, Gyms                  | Colleagues or close friends           | 100-200/year |

Figure 1: typology of congregational dance groups in Chengdu

I conducted my second round of preliminary research in the summer of 2015, when I conducted participant observation with four dance groups, two from each of the city districts. I joined these groups during their normal meeting times and danced along with whatever they were learning or practicing at the time. I will be the first to admit that I am not a proficient dancer. The full extent of my dance training, prior to conducting fieldwork, was a few ballet classes in preschool and learning some dance numbers for high school musicals. But in order to conduct ethnographic research with China's congregational dancers, I had to participate to the full extent that I was able— which meant dancing along with my interlocutors. I experienced quite a learning curve at first. I often made embarrassing mistakes like turning in the wrong direction, failing to begin dancing at the proper point in the music, or being out of sync with the rest of the group. But as I will

discuss later in this dissertation, I gained a great deal of insight about congregational dancing by going through the motions of the dances that I would have missed had I stuck to observations and interviews. This embodied knowledge, or what dance scholar Barbara Browning (1995) calls “corporeal intelligence,” was crucial for some of the arguments I make in this dissertation, particularly in the last chapter.

In addition to dancing with them on a regular basis, I also joined the groups for meals, shopping trips, and the occasional social outing. It was in these more informal settings that most of my in-depth conversations with congregational dancers occurred. I continued these activities when I conducted longer-term participant observation.

#### *Participant observation with two dance groups*

After these two summers of preliminary research getting to know as many groups as possible, I spent 11 months doing participant observation with the members of two dance groups from 2016 to 2017: the “Dancing Beauties Group,” consisting of 17 members who meet dance together once a week in a studio space, and the “Sunset Dance Group”, consisting of roughly 20 members who dance on a daily basis in a small square near a market.<sup>1</sup> Among the women I danced and spent time with, the oldest was 72 years old and the youngest was 56 years old in 2017 (see figures 3 and 4 for detailed information about each group member’s age, former profession, and age at retirement). With the exception of the 72 year old, who had her children before the single child policy was put into place, and another woman who spent her younger years in a rural village where the policy was not strictly enforced, they all have just one child. Their parents are in their 80s and 90s and are rapidly declining in both health and ability to live independently. In terms of demographics, these groups are quite representative of congregational dancing participants in Chengdu as a whole according to my preliminary research.

I chose these two groups because they contrast each other in several key respects as

outlined in the chart below.

|                                     | Dancing Beauties                                         | Sunset Dance Group                            |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Median Age</b>                   | 61                                                       | 66.5                                          |
| <b>Typical pre-retirement job</b>   | SOE white collar                                         | SOE blue collar                               |
| <b>Venue</b>                        | Indoor studio                                            | Outdoor park clearing                         |
| <b>Location</b>                     | South Chengdu                                            | Central/near People's Park                    |
| <b>Fee</b>                          | 120RMB/Ten weeks                                         | 150RMB/Year                                   |
| <b>Contact with local officials</b> | None                                                     | Frequent                                      |
| <b>Competitions</b>                 | No                                                       | Yes                                           |
| <b>Community Events</b>             | No                                                       | Yes                                           |
| <b>Preferred Dance Styles</b>       | Ethnic dance (minzu wu), ballet exercises, <i>yangge</i> | Ethnic dance, <i>yangge</i> , patriotic dance |

Figure 2: differences between the two primary congregational dance groups included in this study

Let me briefly summarize these differences before providing more detailed information about each of the groups. On the balance, the women in the Dancing Beauties group are a few years younger, financially more stable (on account of having held higher-paying jobs prior to retirement), and pay more to participate when compared with the women of the Sunset Dance group. Though musical or dance preferences do not differ much between the two groups, they dance in very different venues and have very different ways of participating in the phenomenon. While the Dancing Beauties prefer to dance indoors in a privately rented studio expressly in order to avoid the noise of outdoor spaces and to avoid the complications that may arise from dealing with local officials who may wish to regulate outdoor groups, the Sunset Dance group could not be more public and could not be more deeply enmeshed with the local politics of the community in which their venue is based. The contrasts between the two groups not only showcase the diverse nature

of the phenomenon, but also make the experiences of the women in the groups quite different from one another.

*The Dancing Beauties*

| Initials | Age in 2017 | Former occupation | Year of Retirement |
|----------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| ZH       | 62          | SOE / Worker      | 1999               |
| YY       | 67          | SOE / Secretary   | 2000               |
| YP       | 63          | SOE / Worker      | 2000               |
| HN       | 60          | SOE / Secretary   | 2001               |
| ZM       | 64          | SOE / Managerial  | 2001               |
| HY       | 60          | SOE / Worker      | 2001               |
| SH       | 63          | SOE / Accountant  | 2001               |
| CH       | 60          | SOE / Accountant  | 2002               |
| HQ       | 59          | SOE / Accountant  | 2002               |
| ZT       | 64          | Nurse / Other     | 2003               |
| JY       | 61          | SOE / Managerial  | 2004               |
| XW       | 66          | SOE / Secretary   | 2004               |
| LK       | 63          | Teacher           | 2006               |
| WY       | 61          | Secretary         | 2011               |
| ZJ       | 56          | Other             | 2016               |
| ZY       | 58          | Teacher           | Not Retired        |
| YD       | 61          | Unknown           | Unknown            |

Figure 3: Participants in the Dancing Beauties Group. Median Age in 2017= 61

The Dancing Beauties group meets every Thursday afternoon in a shared studio space that they rent by the hour. Finding a suitable studio space is a major concern for groups who prefer to dance indoors for reasons I explain below. For now, the Dancing Beauties are very satisfied with their studio space and often remark on their luck on securing it for a fair price. The group has exclusive use of one of three large and airy studios on the third floor of a four-story building from 4:20pm until 6:20pm on every Thursday afternoon. The three nearly identical studios have windows overlooking a tree-lined riverbank and full-length mirrors lining one of the walls and ballet barres<sup>2</sup> lining the three others. Besides the Dancing Beauties, Thursday afternoons on the third floor also hosted a yoga class (attended exclusively by young women) as well as two children's ballet classes. Though we never crossed paths with other middle-aged women, the studio manager told me that two other groups of *da ma*— the colloquial term for retired women who participate in congregational dancing— also held their classes on the third floor, but on Tuesdays and Fridays. The dance complex was popular. People trying to change into or out of their dancing clothes crowded the narrow hallways outside the studios before and after each class; small girls in tutus often snuck into the studio at 6:15 and giggled until the Dancing Beauties yielded the space to them.

Despite the chaos, the Dancing Beauties count themselves lucky to have found this space: this is the third dance studio that the group has occupied since they first started dancing together on Thursday afternoons in 2011. Each time, they were forced to move for reasons beyond their control. The first time, the studio building doubled their rental fees and the Dancing Beauties had to find something more affordable. They found a small studio space with bad lighting and without air conditioning, but the price was right and they were in a bind, so they took it. This is where they were meeting when I first met them in 2014. The building in which it was located was slated for demolition in the beginning of 2015, and the group scrambled for months trying to find a new home until they found an

opening in their current studio building. The building is near several bus stops and right next to a Metro station, making the location convenient for all members regardless of where they live in Chengdu.

The studio charged 100 RMB per hour of use, and the Dancing Beauties danced for two and a half hours per week from four o'clock to six-thirty in the evening. Every ten weeks, the Dancing Beauties' group leader, a woman in her mid-sixties whom everyone called Teacher Yuan, collected 120 RMB from each group member to pay for ten sessions in advance. Though there were officially over twenty group members (counting by the number of people in the Dancing Beauties WeChat group), each ten-week session had about 13-16 participants due to members taking breaks for personal or family reasons. There was invariably money left over from member dues after studio rental fees were paid. Teacher Yuan reserved these excess funds and used them to pay for group outings, meals, and parties. Teacher Yuan was the group's indisputable leader, but despite the fact that she collected dues and ran the classes, she never kept any money for herself or took payment for her work. She once explained to me that this was because she wanted the Dancing Beauties to feel like a friend group rather than a formal class: "if I took money like a regular dance teacher, then the whole feeling of the group would change. I prefer it this way."

Though there was no uniform or dress code, everyone came to class wearing very similar clothes: black stretch pants with a loose t-shirt in the summer and black stretch pants with a wool sweater in the winter. Each dancer wore leather-soled dance slippers purchased at one of the many dance supply shops that have sprung up around the city, and made sure to bring whatever props necessary.



Figure 4: Members of the Dancing Beauties group practicing a dance with prop umbrellas in their rented studio space

The two-hour long classes were split into two portions: drills and dance practices. They invariably began with drills, with everyone standing in the first balletic position (feet pointing outwards, back straight, tail tucked) with our hands on the barre and facing the walls. After turning on the music on her portable speaker set, Teacher Yuan walked around the room inspecting our postures and issued various commands: "stand up straighter!" "you-- shoulders back!" "you must make more of an effort to bring your knees together!" When she was satisfied that we were all in the best first positions that we could muster, we would continue on to other movements. For about an hour, we performed barre exercises like plies and arabesques that aimed to stretch, warm, and tone our muscles on Teacher Yuan's cues. Though I was substantially younger than everyone else and exercised on a regular basis, Teacher Yuan's dance drills were no walk in the park for me. There were

several occasions in which I wondered, as I wiped sweat from my brow in the middle of a set of 40 leg extensions, how everyone else was pulling this off.

For the first three months that I was in the class, Teacher Yuan seemed to single me out for gentle yet persistent criticism. "You must lift your chest and keep your tail down. You must control your mid-section. Only then will the flavor come out." This flavor, this *weidao*, was one of Teacher Yuan's favorite refrains. She frequently invoked it when extolling the virtues of taking a dance class that focuses on mastering foundational ballet movements, especially when compared with run-of-the-mill congregational dance groups that (in her mind) ignores bodily form altogether. "There is no point in moving around if it's done with no flavor," she told me on my first day as she disapprovingly assessed my movements. She assured me, however, that natural defects in my posture (too casual), hips (not controlled enough in their movement) and shoulders (too muscular) could all be corrected by dancing diligently.

#### *Sunset Dance Group*

| Initials | Age in 2017 | Former Occupation | Year of Retirement |
|----------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| LL       | 72          | SOE/Worker        | 1995               |
| CR       | 69          | Farmer*           | 1995               |
| CL       | 68          | SOE/Worker        | 1996               |
| ZJ       | 70          | SOE/Worker        | 1996               |
| JM       | 68          | SOE/Worker        | 1997               |
| MY       | 70          | SOE/Worker        | 1997               |
| XL       | 64          | SOE/Worker        | 1997               |
| YF       | 65          | Nurse/other       | 1997               |
| LS       | 64          | SOE/Worker        | 1998               |

|    |    |                      |      |
|----|----|----------------------|------|
| FF | 67 | SOE/Worker           | 1998 |
| ZX | 60 | SOE/Accountant       | 1998 |
| DQ | 67 | SOE/Secretary        | 1998 |
| YL | 62 | SOE/Worker           | 1999 |
| LC | 66 | SOE/Worker           | 2000 |
| TY | 65 | SOE/Secretary        | 2001 |
| LA | 70 | Government/Secretary | 2002 |
| LN | 65 | SOE/Worker           | 2002 |
| LY | 71 | Other                | 2004 |
| HL | 68 | Teacher              | 2004 |
| HX | 65 | SOE/Secretary        | 2005 |
| JJ | 62 | Teacher              | 2010 |
| XX | 61 | SOE/Accountant       | 2011 |

Figure 5: Participants in the Sunset Dance Group. Median Age in 2017= 66.5

The Sunset Dance group's stomping grounds and group setup were far more informal than that of the Dancing Beauties group. The little park where they held their practices each morning contained some rusty exercise equipment, a few wooden benches, and a tiled clearing approximately the size of a basketball court. The group danced in this clearing beginning at about 8:30 am each day, though they were far from the only people using the park at that time. On any given morning, groups of small children ran about playing on the exercise equipment, old couples sat on the wooden benches sipping on tea from their thermoses, and shoppers used the dance space as a shortcut from the street to the open-air produce market.

The dancing venue's proximity to the market made for both advantages and

disadvantages. On the one hand, the space was always rather chaotic, and at least once per morning a dance would be interrupted by a gaggle of screaming children, an absent-minded shopper too busy scrolling on her phone to notice that she had stumbled into the middle of a dance group, or a street merchant riding past with a loudspeaker affixed to his bicycle handlebars, blasting out advertisements for his wares at full volume. On the other hand, most members of the Sunset Dance group, myself included, made good use of the market by going shopping for fresh produce directly after the dancing concluded. This was a habit I picked up from my interlocutors: while most people my age in Chengdu did their shopping in the big international supermarkets, older residents often retained the older custom of shopping for the day's meals each morning in the open-air market. By going dancing each morning, we also got our meal planning out of the way.

The exposed and public nature of the group's meeting space has other implications for how the group operates. The small park also serves as a community-gathering place during holidays and special events. Over the years, the Sunset Dance group has been repeatedly called upon to perform at these events and, in the course of their interactions with local officials about the events, have also been recruited to compete in local congregational dancing competitions. By 2017, the group's daily practices practically revolved around preparing for either competitions or community performances, and the local community (*shequ*) government was so involved with the group's goings-on that four *shequ* officials were permanent members of the Sunset Dance groups' WeChat<sup>3</sup> messaging group. Given the close relationship these officials had with the group, I also spoke with them whenever possible to get their perspectives on the Sunset Dance group as well as on the congregational dancing phenomenon as a whole.



Figure 6: Members of the Sunset Dance group performing at a community holiday event

Unlike the Dancing Beauties, the Sunset Dance group does not have a regular teacher who is present for all meetings. Instead, they hire a semi-professional dancer surnamed Wang to come teach them a new dance on the first Wednesday of each month, paying her a small fee for her time. On every other day, group members collectively decide what they would like to dance each morning, usually choosing a mix of pieces that people are still learning as well as pieces that the entire group is already familiar with. More competent dancers stand at the front of the group so that others may emulate them, while beginners—like myself— and less dexterous dancers stand at the back so as to not confuse others with their movements. In general, however, people in the Sunset Dance group are not overly concerned with posture or correct movement: everyone simply showed up each day to try her best, and no one was chastised for sub-par dancing. There is no official end time to the group's daily meetings, but people generally began to disband at around 10am

in order to allow ample time to travel home and cook lunch.

The women from these two groups formed my core group of interlocutors.

### **Framework of this dissertation**

In addition to this introductory chapter, this dissertation is divided into four chapters plus a conclusion. I have organized the chapters around different themes that each speak to different aspects of congregational dancers' lives. Each chapter reveals an additional layer of complexity that belies the phenomenon's colorful and light-hearted veneer.

I begin in chapter one by contextualizing the congregational dancing phenomenon within the social changes that have taken place in China's recent history. This chapter, titled "Dancing Grannies in the Modern City," opens with an examination of how the congregational dancing phenomenon has been treated by the Chinese media and perceived by ordinary Chinese people. My arguments in this chapter aim to dispel one of the most common false assumptions about the phenomenon, namely that retired women join dance groups because they have neither the desire nor ability to participate in urban China's post-reform consumer culture. Based on media analysis and interview data, I contend here that congregational dancers have been largely misunderstood by their fellow Chinese urbanites, and that the retired women who participate in congregational dancing are simply using their groups to cultivate individualized consumer identities on their own terms.

Having the freedom to live life increasingly on one's own terms can be a double-edged sword. In addition to the rising pressures to perform one's individual identity that all Chinese urbanites are under, today's Chinese retirees must also contend with the erosion of the traditional age-based social hierarchy that used to afford elders a certain degree of guaranteed respect and deference. Chapter two confronts some of the challenges that today's Chinese elders may face as they adjust to new post-reform social values of self-

reliance and personal cultivation. Titled “the new old age,” this chapter examines the emergence of a new aging process in urban China that makes elders responsible for their own health and happiness. The chapter addresses the tension between the relative success of the receding social welfare system that encourages personal responsibility for one’s old age, on the one hand, and the profound demographic pressures that threaten the system’s continued stability, on the other. This chapter shifts the focus away from dancing *per se* and onto the social conditions that gave rise to congregational dancing in the first place.

I spend a great deal of time discussing aspects of the phenomenon that have more to do with the social context of congregational dancing rather than the dancing itself because dance group participants are people with complex, multifaceted lives. For example, many of them are also grandmothers, and being a grandmother in an increasingly youth-centered society comes with all sorts of difficulties. In chapter three, I continue exploring the tensions between personal interest, social enterprise, and state agendas by looking at changing kinship dynamics and how retired women are re-defining their roles within their families both as a result of state policies and their own shifting priorities. After beginning with a discussion about how various state policies aimed toward weaning urbanites from state support and promoting rapid development have left this particular generation of elders to fend for themselves, I present three case studies that showcase how some retired women who participate in congregational dance groups are using their groups as sources of social leverage and support in their quests to find satisfying ways to balance the competing demands on their attention.

Of course, it would be remiss to write a dissertation on congregational dancing without dealing with dance as an artistic medium and vehicle for personal expression. I return to the topic of dancing in chapter four, which focuses on the uneasy balance between state efforts to regulate and standardize the phenomenon and participants’ enjoyment of the personal, subjective dimensions of dancing.

I conclude with some predictions about how the phenomenon may fare in coming decades, as well as my thoughts on how congregational dancing has impacted Chinese society so far.

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<sup>1</sup> These group names are what they use to refer to themselves on the Chinese social media app WeChat. Though no one refers to these groups by name in real life, I have chosen to use the monikers here as a simplifying shorthand.

<sup>2</sup> A ballet barre is a hand-height horizontal bar that dancers hold onto for balance and leverage while doing exercises.

<sup>3</sup> WeChat is a Chinese social media and messaging app.

## Chapter 1

### Dancing Grannies in the Modern City

Two weeks after she added me to her “friend circle” on the popular social media platform *WeChat*, sixty-one year-old Ying<sup>1</sup> posted a dozen photographs of herself on a park outing with her congregational dance group. The photos show the friends smiling from ear to ear while posing in front of various flowering plants. Many of them are clutching plastic thermoses of tea, which they have brought from home in order to avoid spending money at the park’s tea pavilion. “I love old age,” Ying wrote in the caption. “It has given me freedom.”

Congregational dancing (more popularly known as “dancing grannies” or “public dancing”) has taken Chinese cities by storm in the last ten to fifteen years. Armed with stereos and sometimes a few props, the dancers – consisting mainly of middle-aged and elderly women— can be found virtually every hour of the day and in any flat patch of public space. They also often appear on the news, though seldom for flattering reasons: some urban residents find the dancers’ noise to be both irritating and intrusive, and reports have surfaced of frustrated apartment dwellers throwing things like water, pebbles, and in one case even a bucket of human waste onto the dancing crowd below (Branigan 2014; Yin 2014).

I met Ying while researching congregational dance groups in Chengdu. She was known for her good temperament and her easy smile among her circle of friends, but her use of the word “freedom” still gave me pause. Until 2002, Ying had a desk job in a state-operated factory on the outskirts of Chengdu that manufactured parts for farm equipment. She was laid off when the factory downsized, an event that greatly diminished her family’s income. At sixty-one, Ying can hardly be considered old, but she has already lived the life of a retiree for nearly twenty years. She and her husband live on modest pensions, and she once confided to me that they would be financially ruined if either of them ever became ill. I

met many people like Ying during the course of my research. They have suffered rather than benefited from economic reforms by most standards, yet many of them still share a strident optimism about life in post-reform urban China. What kind of freedom is possible under such constraints? What kinds of possibilities can this freedom produce?

Women who participate in congregational dancing are like other subjects of the post-reform consumer economy in that they are *obligated* to act as autonomous individuals (Rose 1999). However, I also argue that because the state limits this autonomy to the economic sphere, the coming together of such individuals can actually produce large-scale social collectives that exist beyond the scope of state control. Following in the footsteps of Saba Mahmood (2005), who argues that power is a relation of force that produces “new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses” (17), this approach also allows us to understand the seemingly effortless way in which many congregational dancers manage to integrate group alignment into their personal pursuits of self-cultivation as new strategies for negotiating life in twenty-first century China.

In what follows, I first offer some background and ethnographic detail about the phenomenon to give the reader a sense of the scope and impact of congregational dancing everyday urban life in China today. Next, I discuss how congregational dancing fits within the bigger picture of China’s recent past. I then dispel the popular narrative that people who participate in congregational dancing are still reliant on earlier collective frameworks as referents for their own identity formation. Instead, I argue that people who join dance groups do so precisely in order to participate in individualized consumer culture on their own terms. Finally, I end with a discussion on the possible implications of individual-based group formation on Chinese society as a whole.

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Groups of mostly middle-aged and elderly women dancing in sync to recorded music have existed in Chinese cities since at least the 1980s, but have multiplied

exponentially in the last ten to fifteen years. Despite widespread coverage in both domestic and international media, the English-language scholarly conversation on this subject is not yet well developed. With the notable exceptions ( see Chen 2011; Wang 2015; Seetoo and You 2016) that address the emergence of the phenomenon and the reasons behind its social stigmatization, there have been few scholarly attempts to contextualize the phenomenon within China's recent social changes.

Congregational dancing cannot be understood without reference to these changes. During the Mao era, urbanites were expected to sacrifice their access to consumer goods as well as their individual aspirations in exchange for a wide social safety net that included guaranteed jobs, housing, healthcare, and education (Tang and Parish 2000). This state-organized world largely disappeared when Deng Xiaoping led the country down a path of economic reforms beginning in 1978. In exchange for the freedom to pursue opportunities in the new market economy, people also took on a great deal of responsibility for their own wellbeing. Moreover, the new social contract offers only partial autonomy: the state allows citizens to pursue individual consumer aspirations, but it simultaneously controls self-expression in the political realm (a set of conditions that Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (2008) have identified as "socialism from afar"). Under these circumstances, consumption—of newly available products like personal cars, private apartments, and fashionable clothing—becomes the primary framework for engaging with and enacting individual identity. In the absence of alternative paths toward self-determination, consumption functions not only as an economic act, but also as a means through which the self is re-imagined and re-made. As Lisa Rofel explains in her discussion of neoliberal influences on the creation of Chinese subjectivities, people in post-reform China must be disciplined to embody new selves in order to become successful consumers and good citizens (2007:118).

The congregational dancing phenomenon is very much a part of this story. Many dancers are former employees of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) who were part of the

roughly seventy-two million workers who were laid off as result of SOE reforms that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These reforms shuttered, privatized, or restructured thousands of the most unprofitable enterprises, and disproportionately affected female workers in low-skill, low wage jobs (Du and Dong 2009; Whyte 2012). However, because most dance group participants are not avid consumers compared to some of their younger urban counterparts, and because they appear to rely on anachronistic collective ideals as their primary referent for creating social meaning, congregational dancers (and indeed, retired women in general) have been largely overlooked in an otherwise robust discourse on consumer culture in contemporary China.

### **Congregational Dancing in the Public Imagination**

At a passing glance, congregational dancers appear like a homogeneous group of people who are either unwilling or unable to cultivate individual interests. There are certainly exceptions, but most groups that one sees in public areas have repertoires consisting heavily of *yangge*, an agricultural folk dance style that proliferated during the early years of the Mao era when the Chinese Communist Party used it to foster group cooperation among workers (Gerdes 2008), in addition to dances set to patriotic musical numbers typically seen in state-sponsored televised variety shows like the Spring Festival Gala. Given these association, it is unsurprising that media outlets often portray congregational dancers as products of the collective era who are maladapted to live in modern China. For example, Guangzhou-based magazine *Time Weekly* published a lengthy article in 2013 titled “Square dancing: a collectivist nostalgia” in which the author argues that dancing offers “spiritual sustenance” to a generation of people who cannot readily adjust to modern society (Zhao 2013). In a less sympathetic piece, another online magazine quotes an “education expert” who insists that congregational dancers want to relive the “passionate” days of the Cultural Revolution. He then goes on to argue that dancers are still

guided by the “pernicious influences” of the collective era, and that true social harmony cannot be achieved until these backwards attitudes are purged from society through policy changes (Guancha.cn 2014). According to the logic presented in these articles, people join dance groups in order to recreate Mao-era collective activities because they still rely on collectivist state narratives to lend meaning to their lives.

Disapproving commentaries about congregational dancing are common. Because dances frequently take place near residential areas, participants have become notorious for disturbing the peace with their raucous music. Dancing often begins in the early morning hours before many people are awake and peaks again in the early evening when schoolchildren are trying to concentrate on their homework. Again, the same narrative that dancers lack the ability to think for themselves is often alluded to when conflicts between dancers and other urban residents are reported. For example, a commentator for the state-owned newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* quotes Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd* to level a scathing critique against the dancers’ supposed herd mentality (Yang 2015). At the center of the author’s argument is an assumption that dancers behave inappropriately because they never left the collective-era mindset behind.

I have yet to see these demographic assumptions substantiated in an official report. The widespread consensus about the dancers’ backgrounds suggests that there may be few incentives to question the dominant narrative about congregational dancing. Across the Chinese internet, a colorful vocabulary has arisen to describe various aspects of the phenomenon. In person and on the web, participants are colloquially referred to as *da ma* – literally translated as “big mother” but meaning something closer to “auntie” or “granny.” Many congregational dancers— including all of my dance group interlocutors from the Dancing Beauties and Sunset Dance groups, refer to themselves as *da ma*, though sometimes in a tongue-in-cheek manner that acknowledges the term’s less flattering connotations. Other terms that have been used to indicate the phenomenon itself include *jianmei wu*

(exercise dance), referring to the workout atmosphere prevalent among some groups, *guangchang wu* (plaza dance), referring to the public squares that are frequent hosts to these groups, and (derogatorily) *juejing wu* (menopause dance), referring to the participants' genders and ages. "Dancing granny," the most popular English term, does not manage to capture the semiotic valances of the Chinese monikers. To a Chinese speaker, however, any of the above terms is a stand-in for an imagined type.



Figure 7: A group of *da ma* posing for photographs in a local park

It's worth spending some time unpacking this type, which has coalesced into something resembling a subculture in recent years. Though the *da ma* are inextricably linked with congregational dancing in the public imagination, it has inarguably also transcended the phenomenon altogether. Typically, a *da ma* is a woman in her 50's or 60's. In Chinese, this age group is described as *zhong lao nian*, or "older middle-aged." She is retired, urban, middle-class, and belongs to a dance group. Though no two *da ma* look

exactly the same, colorful clothes, dyed (and perhaps permed) hair, and carefully penciled-in eyebrows are all hallmarks of the *da ma* aesthetic. Ostentatious dress is another external marker: many *da ma* love to wear clothing and scarves in vibrant shades of red, pink, purple, and orange. Online commentators tend to attribute these color preferences to many retired women's well-documented affinities for taking posed group photos. A recent blogger-authored poem, published with an abundance of photos showing various groups of *da ma* preparing for group photos or in mid-pose, captures this (gently mocking) assumption perfectly:

大妈拍照三大法宝  
*Da ma's three treasures for photo-taking*  
丝巾，墨镜，遮阳帽  
*Silk scarves, sunglasses, and sun hats*

However, I was once offered an even simpler explanation when I entered an elevator with some women from the Dancing Beauties group and, noticing that everyone was wearing clothes in similar bright shades of pink, remarked that it felt like the whole space had suddenly lit up with color. Perhaps thinking my comment was meant to be mocking or critical, a woman I call Auntie Guo immediately shot back that I wouldn't understand because I was young. "You— you still have a naturally rosy complexion. It fades when you get older, so you have to supplement with color on your clothing. Wait until you're our age— you'll be wearing pink too!"

As an exercise, I asked some of my cousins and friends my own age to describe their mental image of a *da ma* shortly before I concluded fieldwork in 2017. They each reported, in only slightly different words, that a *da ma* is an older woman who dresses loudly and enjoys being noisy in public with her friends. "A *da ma* is never alone," my friend Huixia told me, conveniently pointing to a large group of ladies who were hanging out in a restaurant patio adjacent to the one in which we were sitting. "They travel in packs. It's like

they get energy from each other. And good luck trying to break through when a group of them are trying to take photos!” Huixia’s remarks echo similar comments that can be found across the Chinese internet, where online commentators— colloquially called “netizens”— delight in poking fun of the *da ma*’s penchant for taking group photos in elaborately staged settings and configurations.

As much as I think stereotypes about the *da ma* oversimplify the experiences and attitudes of retired women who participate in congregational dance groups, and as amused as I was with my friends’ impressions, I do concede that some of the tropes about the *da ma* are grounded in truth. My observations in Chengdu proved that a significant majority of dancers are indeed women between the ages of 50 and 75 who grew up during the collective era. Most dancers are also indeed excluded from China’s race toward modernity by virtue of their age, unemployment, and lack of opportunity for social advancement. In the absence of more persuasive explanations, assumptions about who the dancers are have coalesced into a conventional narrative about why they dance as well as their overall place in Chinese society. Another joke that circulated across multiple social media and micro-blogging platforms between 2014 and 2016 succinctly sums up these assumptions:

一个广场舞大妈曾告诉我，如果她跳的足够快，她的孤独久追不上她  
*A congregational dancing da ma once told me, if she dances quickly enough, then her loneliness cannot catch up with her*

This chapter, and indeed this whole dissertation, works to dispel assumptions that retired women join dance groups solely because they cannot stand to be alone. It is precisely in order to avoid the semiotic baggage of the language typically associated with *da ma* that I have chosen to call the phenomenon “congregational dancing” rather than any of the pre-established terms.

That said, considering how deeply the conventional narrative about congregational dancing seems to resonate with people, my quest to re-name— and at the same time re-

imagine— the phenomenon may turn out to be quixotic. Upon learning that I was doing research on the phenomenon, it was not uncommon for urban residents to vent their frustrations about the groups. Most of these rants centered on the dancers' noisiness. "They're losing face for China," a thirty-one year-old office worker told me. "It's nice for old people to have the opportunity to gather and socialize, but why must they do it in public places? If foreigners saw them making all that noise, what would they think of Chinese people's manners?" His anxiety about congregational dancing's damage to China's national reputation reveals the importance he places on embodying cosmopolitan standards of behavior. He is careful to point out that it is not the dancers' gathering together that he minds, but rather the fact that they pay no attention to how much they are disturbing others while out in public. In other words, he finds congregational dancers inappropriate not because he takes issue with the activity itself, but rather based on the participants' supposed lack of self-awareness.

His opinion is not unique: several other interlocutors referred to the dancers as lacking *suzhi*—which roughly translates to "personal integrity" or "quality." Low *suzhi* people are thought to be uneducated, unrefined, and lacking the manners and airs befitting a civilized person (Yan 2003b; Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; 2007). By embodying these backwards traits, congregational dancers are thought to be unwilling or unable to subscribe to the new demands of urban Chinese living—in this case the ability to understand the concept of "personal" space. Such unflattering assumptions about the lower classes are hardly new to China, or anywhere for that matter. What makes them noteworthy here is that congregational dancers are not necessarily of a lower class: though they are far from being urban elite, most dancers are not poor by Chinese standards. Many receive modest pensions from their former employers as well as the support of working spouses or children. After all, they have the means to engage in a leisurely activity and often live in the same apartment complexes as those who complain about them. Designating dancers as low-

class and lacking *suzhi*, then, indicates that they are marginalized not so much based on their economic standing but rather on their perceived lack of self-awareness and self-cultivation.

Despite heavy media coverage of hostile conflict between dancers and other urban residents, most discontent seems to manifest in this type of private grumbling. In general, when asked whether they have personally requested dancers to quiet down or called the police to intervene, most people said that they should not have to because respecting others' private space should be self-evident. Ironically, however, the very notion of private property has been a product of recent housing reform: individually owned apartments are the norm now, but all urban Chinese lived in collective *danwei* units in which there was very little division between public and private until at least the late 1980s (Zhang 2010). In recent years, however, the growth of the Chinese real estate industry has been nothing short of extraordinary. This shift has substantially improved the standards of living for many urban households—most families now have private kitchens and bathrooms, in addition to being able to decorate to their own tastes—but it has also introduced novel concepts such as privacy, ownership, and property rights into the public imagination. Writing on middle-class urban living in *In Search of Paradise*, Li Zhang observes that among her research participants, those who pay more for housing are also more likely to complain of noise intrusion from “outsiders.” In other words, the privatization of residential spaces has led to a spatial and ideological re-territorialization of the city based on new class hierarchies.

Of course, I also found quite a few people who defended congregational dancing. A fifty-nine year-old factory manager told me that the dancers “don’t care about money like the young people these days.” When I pressed him to say more, he took it as an opportunity to present the tensions around congregational dancing as a matter of generational difference:

*They were raised in different times, when everybody had the same amount of money— no money, hah! Everyone was equal. There was such collegial spirit back then! When people got together it was because they wanted each other's company. Now when the kids get together they have to spend money. They can't just dance or talk, they don't think it's fun. Tell me, if someone invited you out to dance in a park for an afternoon, would you go? Probably not!*

This man's opinion on the phenomenon is decidedly positive. He seems to believe the dancers are untainted by the obsession with wealth and self-cultivation that defines so much of middle-class culture in China today. But even here, where someone supports the dancers and defends them against their detractors, the dominant narrative remains the main point of reference. The only difference is that rather than censuring the dancers for their supposed preference for collectivism over individualism, this man chooses to praise them for it. This narrative about the dancers is amiss based on demographic logic alone: yes, most dancers were born in the years immediately after the Communist revolution and grew up during the Mao era, but this means that they were just young women when Deng's reforms began in the late 1970s. In other words, they have also spent most of their adult lives negotiating the changes brought about by economic reforms.

Congregational dance groups have all the appearance of anachronistic state-produced collective social structures, making the misrepresentation of dancers' motivations an understandable mistake. However, it is still an error that needs to be rectified if the phenomenon is to be better understood. In the next section, I will demonstrate that many dancers join groups precisely in order to cultivate individual consumer identities.

## **Cultivating the Self**

### *Dancing for their lives*

Ying was born in Chengdu in 1957 as the second child and first daughter of a couple who immigrated to Chengdu from Hubei. Her father, a teacher, had been assigned a good job in a good work unit—a vocational school with lots of resources—in Chengdu, and he and his wife counted themselves lucky despite the fact that they had to uproot themselves

from their families and familiar surroundings. A younger brother followed a few years after Ying was born. Her early childhood was uneventful and pleasant: she spent her days playing with the children of the other teachers and staff members and later attended the primary school attached to the vocational college. Though she and her siblings are born-and-bred Sichuanese, her parents never quite adjusted to life in Chengdu. According to Ying, her mother avoids the local spicy food and speaks with a noticeable Hubei accent to this day.

Ying was nine years old when the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began, sending the country into chaos and upending Ying's insular and peaceful world. Ying does not recall the early years of the Revolution very well, other than the fact that her father's teaching colleagues— sometimes along with their families— disappeared from campus on a regular basis. "They were sent away to be re-educated, no doubt," Ying said. She told me about hearing violent fights and even gunshots in the dead of night. It was Red Guards— student-led militant groups mobilized and supported by Mao Zedong in his quest to root out counter-revolutionary elements in Chinese society— battling over competing interpretations of Maoist thought. When their outbreaks of infighting spilled over onto the vocational school campus, Ying and her siblings would have to dive for cover under their beds. Their parents were under great strain and refused to talk to their children about what was happening around them. Ying and her siblings soon learned to stop asking questions, and spent long hours wandering about the school campus and the surrounding neighborhood with a few other children. Classes ceased at both the vocational and primary schools at some point in the late 1960s— Ying does not remember when, exactly— and the children's days were filled with unsupervised play.

In 1974, Ying left her family to live and work in a farming village. She did not go willingly; she was compelled to go as a result of Mao Zedong's rustication movement, in which millions of urban youths were "sent down" to the countryside in order to be

“educated” by the peasantry. She was just seventeen years old. Fortunately, she was sent to Shuangliu, a village so close to the city that in those days then it was possible to return to Chengdu by bicycle. Of course, Ying noted wryly, no one had a bicycle because they were too expensive. And besides, you needed permission to buy one, and her family didn't have those kinds of connections. Working alongside farmers was mentally and physically grueling. Ying recalls living in a poorly constructed mud house with three other “sent down” youth. All of them were young women from urban families and none had been properly taught how to cook, much less build a fire in the house’s rustic wood-fired stove. At the end of a long day in the fields, they would return home and struggle for several more hours before managing to cook something that was edible. At night, fleas from their straw mattresses feasted on their tender skin while rats kept them awake with their noisy activities in the rafters. Ying’s hands blistered and bled from the farm work. Despite these hardships, Ying thinks fondly back to those years and smiled as she recounted these memories. “It taught me to be tough,” she explained with a laugh. “I don’t complain about being uncomfortable now. Not even in the worst hotels.”

Shuangliu now hosts the Chengdu International Airport and a satellite campus of Sichuan University. The city began clearing farmland in the 1980s, moving farming families into clusters of residential buildings, which soon formed so-called urban villages that resemble suburbs. Few vestiges of the area’s rural roots remain. Today, it takes 30 minutes to travel to downtown Chengdu via the airport expressway (barring traffic), and 12 minutes via the high-speed metro line.

In 1978, two years after Mao’s death, the winds of reform were beginning to blow. By then, many of the sent-down youth were redoubling their efforts to return to urban areas since the state had reinstated college entrance exams in 1977. Ying’s parents did not want to leave their daughter languishing in Shuangliu. They called in some favors and arranged for her to leave the village to attend a vocational school in Chengdu. Several of the

other young women in Shuangliu had already left by then, and though Ying never enjoyed school, she was glad to have the chance to return to the city. She decided to study accounting at the vocational school. It was there that she met a man who would become her husband, as well as five women whom she still sees on a regular basis because they formed a dance group upon retirement. After graduating in 1980, Ying was assigned to an accounting job at a state-owned factory that designed and produced large farm machinery. Her husband, a civil engineer, was assigned to the same factory in a different department.

Ying tells me she bore these rapid changes reasonably well. She had a strong constitution and rarely caught colds, and seemed to adjust to each transition without much fuss. "Some of the other girls," she said, "they would cry in the dormitories at the school and then in the factory because they missed home or because they had a fight with somebody. But I never let those things bother me." When Ying and her husband married in 1981, they moved out of the factory dormitories and into her husband's parents' apartment. According to Ying, the first time that her confidence was seriously shaken was in 1982, when she became seriously ill as a result of complications from pregnancy. Things took a turn for the worse when she experienced even more complications while delivering her son and lost a great quantity of blood. "Everyone thought I was going to die," she recalled. However, she was young, healthy, and recovered more quickly than anyone expected. She returned to work at the factory within months. When she began to talk about being forced into retiring from that job years later, which she describes as the second time that her confidence was tested, Ying attributed her inability to shake off the transition to her age: "You're weaker when you get older," she said. "Maybe if I had been younger I wouldn't have taken it so hard."

When I first met Ying, she had already been out of work for about 15 years. In 1999, when she was just 42 years old, her factory was swept up in the wave of State Owned Enterprise reforms that was then transforming cities throughout the country. The factory

downsized and moved from an industrial area in eastern Chengdu to a new industrial zone south of the city; while her husband kept his job, she, along with more than half the other workers, was sent home with a meager 10,000 RMB (about 1200 USD in 1999) severance pay. Her usually exuberant tone softened when she recounted the years immediately following the layoff. "Everyone else was working, and already I was useless," she recalled. "I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, or how to help." Ying felt especially helpless because her family was having a difficult time making ends meet on her husband's single relatively low salary. Having grown up in her father's work unit, then packed off to the countryside as a sent-down youth, then assigned to a job in a state-owned factory upon finishing vocational school, Ying had never known a life outside of state control. Her life, up until that point, was like a conveyor belt that transported her from one stage to the next without her input. Furthermore, she had met her husband at vocational school and then married him while they were colleagues. All of her acquaintances had been co-workers from her work unit, and her social life outside of her family revolved almost exclusively around workplace get-togethers. Being sent home was not only a serious blow to her self-confidence, but also to her sense of personal identity.

Unemployed and with no sense of purpose, Ying's health began to decline. She gained 40 pounds in a matter of months and was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes the following year. According to Ying, it was dance that saved her life. She had been a dancer in her younger years and was on her factory's dance team. When the factory reorganized and they were laid off, a few of her former co-workers decided to get together on weekday mornings to dance in a local park. The group pooled their limited funds and bought things like dancing props and a stereo, and, after a period of cajoling, Ying decided to join them. At first, she thought she was too old to dance again, but soon found herself enjoying it so much that she practiced alone outside of group dance hours. Over the years, this group added more members, increased their annual fee to 100 RMB (about 15 USD) each, and

eventually morphed into what is now known as the Sunset Dance group. Ying is now one of the group “leaders” (meaning she dances at the head of the pack) and takes studio dance classes to keep in shape and to learn new routines. Ying believes that had she not started dancing when she did, she would have withdrawn from social life and her health would have continued to deteriorate. Though she still takes diabetes medication to this day, she enjoys otherwise good health.

Though I consider Ying one of my most important interlocutors and find her extraordinary in many ways, I tell her story here not because it is remarkable but rather because it is so ordinary. Ying’s life has been marked by challenges and twists of fate that were beyond her control. And yet, it was the last change— being laid off from a job that was her tether to her social world— that caused her to stumble. It was as though she had been cast adrift after a lifetime of being tethered to a ship that dragged her from one unfamiliar port after another. Throughout the time I spent with congregational dancers in Chengdu, I heard stories like Ying’s over and over, and though they differed from each other in their details, the underlying pattern remained constant: disrupted childhood, tumultuous adolescence, time spent in work units or communes, then retirement and rupture.

With past experience and a fondness for dance, dancing was a natural post-employment choice for Ying, but there are others who had never danced a day in their lives before joining a dance group. Yilan, another woman in Ying’s group, is a rural migrant from a village several hundred kilometers south of Chengdu. Yilan spent her childhood on a farming commune. She burst out laughing during my interview with her when she recalled something her older cousin, who had become enamored with Communist ideology, told her when Yilan was about six years old: “she told me that farming was the most honorable profession a person could have!” Yilan’s laughter testifies to the irony of the statement when viewed in hindsight. Decades of economic policies favoring urban workers

over rural farmers left her village with little access to education or other resources, a situation that was exacerbated by economic reforms that further built up urban centers. Both of her children left their home village as soon as they could find jobs in Chengdu, and Yilan followed her daughter and son-in-law to the city when they had a baby girl and needed her help with childcare.

Being new to Chengdu, Yilan joined the group to participate in urban life and to meet other women her age. For a while, she was the group's de-facto "vice captain," but not on account of her dance skills. Yilan is a clumsy dancer, and she is the first to admit it. But what she lacks in grace she makes up for in memory: Yilan can remember full dance routines after seeing them one time. She confessed to me that she actually does not like dancing. "I do it to exercise my mind," she explained. "You have to keep doing things to challenge yourself, or you will regress, and become useless."

China's economic reforms impacted both women's lives in significant and challenging ways. Ying lost more than just her job during the breaking of the "iron rice bowl." So many aspects of her life were linked to state-organized employment that being laid off amounted to commensurate losses in her social network, physical health, and sense of self-worth. Yilan grew up in a rural area and never belonged to an urban work unit, but economic reforms also irrevocably changed her life when her daughter and son-in-law moved to the city to seek out economic opportunities. Instead of growing old in a village where she knows everyone at least by sight, she must take it upon herself to make new connections with strangers. The events that brought about these changes were beyond their control, but both women sought to mitigate the ensuing challenges by joining a congregational dance group. Their stories are not exceptional: of the fifty interviewees who shared aspects of their life histories with me, only a handful were *not* former SOE workers and every single dancer I spoke to reported their primary motivation for joining a group was seeking some sort of individual wellness.

Although the specifics vary from person to person (for example, some wish to lose weight, some wish to make friends, and some wish to learn a new skill), dancers consistently claim that being in a group contributes to their personal wellness in some fashion. Being in a dance group can mean very different things for different people. When I surveyed groups during my preliminary research, plenty of people told me that they joined into order to make friends, but many others listed reasons like wishing to lose weight, wanting to learn a new skill, and enjoying music as their reasons for participating. Other than Ying and Yilan, the Sunset Dance group also has Auntie Li, who loathes spending time alone and uses the group as a source of sociality. She sends all manner of affectionate messages to other group members on WeChat at all hours of the day. There is also Auntie Luo, who seems to see the group as a venue for practicing leadership. Several of the other women in the group have told me that Auntie Luo is a terrible dancer, an opinion with which I unfortunately must agree, based on my own observations. What she does excel at is taking charge. At neighborhood dance performances, it is Auntie Luo who liaises with city officials, makes sure everyone is costumed and made up, and walks around with a clipboard sign-up sheet making sure everyone's presence is noted.

Far from continuing to invest their identities in state-organized social frameworks, many people are in fact joining groups in order to practice self-management. Having lost the security and familiarity of their pre-reform lives and having taken control over of their own fates— a twin process that Nikolas Rose calls “autonomization and responsabilization” (1999)— these women identify an aspect or aspects of their lives that they wish to improve and then take action to cultivate the desired change. The groups serve as venues for this cultivation to take place, but another key indication that congregational dancers have embodied or are in the process of embodying individual consumer identities is that not just any group will do: people select a group from among a wide variety of options based on personal preferences. Groups vary in terms of dance style, degree of association between

participants, fee amount, as well as in location and venue. Many dancers speak of “shopping around” for a good group. When they are dissatisfied, dancers often “jump ship” to continue exploring until they find a group that feels right. One woman told me during my preliminary research that when she first moved into her neighborhood, she spent a month observing every group within walking distance until she found one she liked.

Not all groups are “public,” and there are varying degrees of inclusion and exclusion at play. At one extreme are open dances held in large parks where anyone can pay a flat fee for an evening’s entertainment. The atmosphere at these events is not unlike that of a roller rink: there is considerable movement and noise, but people tend to stick with their own smaller group of friends. On the other end of the spectrum are groups made up exclusively of people who are previously acquainted. Some types of groups have more social cache than others, and several women in more exclusive groups reported that they would not be caught dead dancing in a large “public” group. One’s choice of dance group takes on social significance because it is associated with personal status: belonging to a certain kind of group signals something about oneself to others.

### *Individualization and Consumer Culture*

Congregational dancers do not appear to have cultivated individual consumer identities because they engage in a collective activity that seems to have no relationship to consumption. Group fees are so nominal that paying them hardly amounts to the kind of consumption that scholars refer to when they describe consumerism in modern China. However, if we define participation in consumer culture not in terms of the products that are bought and sold but rather in terms of the embodiment of an individual subjectivity, then it becomes clear that what takes place within dance groups is indeed identity-formation via consumer choice. Many dancers elect to frame congregational dancing in terms of consumption by emphasizing the link between the personal decisions they make

about their participation and the degree of satisfaction they derive from it. For example, I once followed Liwei to her dance class, where several women told me that paying for additional lessons is worth the extra expense because congregational dancers without such training are simply “moving around without flavor.” When I asked the woman who observed groups for a whole month how she finally decided on one, she answered that she simply “had a feeling” that her group was the right one for her. Each dancer makes choices based on her instinctual knowledge of her own preferences as well as how she measures up with others. Choices like this are not obviously motivated by economic stratification, but they do rely on consumer logics that aim to set oneself apart from others via discernment and distinction (cf. Bourdieu 1979).

I contextualize congregational dancing within the scholarly conversation on Chinese consumer culture in order to demonstrate that despite appearances to the contrary, retired dancers have not been immune to the new consumer logics that altered the subject positions of young women, middle-class families, and elite men in post-reform China. In recent years, there have been numerous insightful examinations of the ways in which urban Chinese renegotiate their subjectivities through different forms of consumption. Lisa Rofel (2007) conceptualizes consumerism as the means through which young urban people channel the ineffable qualities of cosmopolitanism into themselves. Li Zhang (2010)’s work on spatial stratification in Kunming demonstrates that the success of the Chinese housing market is largely based on urban residents’ desires to prove their own self-worth through status distinction. John Osburg (2013)’s ethnography on wealthy entrepreneurs and managers in Chengdu reveals that high-stakes spending in karaoke bars and brothels can be motivated by the elite men’s desires to conform to a masculine ideal that equates virility with success. Many of these same intimate connections between consumption, status, and personal cultivation can also be found in the congregational dancing phenomenon.

Having to manage and make sense of one’s life through personal choices is precisely

what Rose (1999) means when he observes that self-governed individuals are obliged to be free: individuals are enabled to choose for themselves, but they are at the same time responsible for constructing meaning out of those choices. Whether congregational dancing resembles more conventional forms of consumer activity is rather immaterial; the crucial point here is that of all the possible ways that dancers might justify their participation—for example in terms of nostalgia or in terms of group belonging—they choose instead to emphasize personal fulfillment as their main incentive and personal taste and judgment as the main avenue toward achieving this fulfillment. In other words, people do not join dance groups because they lack the means or ability to cultivate consumer tastes, but rather because it affords them an opportunity to do it on their own terms and within their own budgets. On the one hand, they do this because they have little recourse: not only are traditional and state-organized frameworks of identity production no longer available, being able to cultivate an individual consumer identity is also tantamount to being socially connected and socially relevant in post-reform China. But on the other hand, many dancers seem to genuinely enjoy being able to make their own choices about whom to associate with and how to pass their time. Like others who are negotiating the post-reform social milieu, congregational dancers are not (as the commentator in *Ta Kung Pao* suggested) an unthinking, faceless “crowd,” but rather self-conscious and self-responsible individuals.

### **Individualized Collectivity**

So far, I have taken pains to demonstrate that people who participate in congregational dancing are individuals who choose this activity in order to practice self-cultivation and self-management. I have argued that acknowledging the personal-choice dimensions of the phenomenon is crucial for understanding both why and how people participate. If I were to conclude here, the take-away point might be that congregational dancers have overlooked the state’s earlier guarantees of social services and internalized the

premise that they, and not the state, are responsible for creating their own means of surviving and thriving post-reform life.

I do not necessarily challenge this interpretation, at least not in its entirety. By translating the subjective and personal value they find in congregational dancing into the language of consumerism, dance participants not only conceive of themselves as projects that can be shaped and molded but also reinforce consumerism as the dominant social logic of modernity. There are parallels that can be drawn between this case and Pun Ngai's work on the ways in which neoliberal markets force economically marginalized people into furthering their own disenfranchisement through internalizing consumer culture (1999; 2003). As I have noted, many dance group participants are in some senses victims of reform-era economic policies. Yet instead of mobilizing against or resisting the privatization of social services, most dancers are indeed allowing consumer values to guide their quests to become modern, self-realized people. Any "freedom" they have, then, can be regarded as both illusory and instrumental to their continued marginalization.

Despite its explanatory power, I contend that this interpretation is incomplete for two reasons. First, as Deborah Davis explains in her response to scholars working within the Frankfurt School tradition (including Pun Ngai), many Chinese citizens are still using the oppressive collectivist past as a frame of reference when forming their opinions about contemporary consumer culture (2005: 696-698). This history will not always shape current views, but until such a time comes, claims of "freedom" – like Ying's claim at the beginning of this chapter—should not be dismissed but rather engaged with critically. Second, and more importantly, I argue that people who participate in dance groups have the potential to create alternative socialities that exist outside of officially sanctioned forms of collectivity simply by coming together as individuals. I now shift gears to address the social dimensions of the phenomenon to clarify what I mean.

Participating in a congregational dance group involves far more than simply

dancing. On the first day that I spent with a group of retired middle school teachers in 2015, we met at 10 AM in a studio space and danced until noon. We then headed to lunch at a Sichuanese hot-pot restaurant where (judging by their familiarity with the wait staff) they were clearly regulars. It was an elaborate meal: everyone took turns fishing for morsels in the boiling pot of chili oil, occasionally taking breaks to chat. After this leisurely affair, the group moved on to one of the women's homes, where they played a raucous game of mahjong in the apartment complex's courtyard. Finally, at dusk, the group shared a simple dinner of congee, steamed buns, and fresh vegetables. Naively assuming that the full day get-together was staged for my benefit, I made a point to thank them for showing me a good time when I finally got up to leave at eight o'clock in the evening, at which point I was told that this is simply what they did every Saturday.

This group is an exception in some senses. They are all former colleagues, have access to a private dance space, and their spending habits eclipse that of many other groups. Their extensive social activities, however, are certainly not unique. Liwei's group, for example, consists almost solely of laid-off factory workers with modest pensions. They cannot indulge in weekly lavish lunches, but they do get together on holidays and occasional weekends for a potluck picnic, an afternoon of karaoke, or a festive dinner out. Going on sightseeing trips together is not unusual, and taking part in local recreational activities is even more commonplace. In other words, group participation involves building new bonds over shared experiences. "Just look at us," a sixty-seven year-old dancer declared when I asked for her thoughts on post-retirement life. "We are the luckiest generation of Chinese women to have ever lived. No, really! We don't have to work, we are not *so* poor, and we just have to mind our own mental and physical health. We have such freedom. It's wonderful!"

The notion that consumer culture can form the basis of new collectivities is not new, but it has tended to focus on the re-emergence of "unofficial" economic relationships such

as business partnerships and consumer rights groups (Davis 2000:3; Yan 2009). While this is certainly the case, other dimensions of consumer culture—namely the formation of individual consumer identities—can create horizontal social ties that appear to have no discernible relation to consumerism. These types of horizontal social ties, which are observed in the congregational dancing phenomenon, constitute a new kind of post-socialist collectivity that is distinguishable from earlier forms of social groups by virtue of the individualized subject positions of its participants.

In contrast with state-organized collectives (including the work-unit jobs that many of these women once had), belonging to a congregational dance group does not require a commitment or a contract. One simply shows up to dance practice (or not), pays one's monthly or yearly fee (or not), and joins the other members for social events (or not). Participation and belonging hinge strictly on one's choices. This space for self-determination is precisely what congregational dancers mean when they refer to "freedom." Having spent much of their lives in hierarchical social structures, many of them find the voluntary sociality of dance groups to be a welcome change.

The state relegates individual pursuits to the economic sphere, but it cannot guarantee that the social ties that are forged as the result of these pursuits will remain in that sphere. In this sense, analyzing the congregational dancing phenomenon solely through the lens of a critique on neoliberal governmentality would yield only a partial picture. Since neoliberal conditions are predicated on both market individualization and political liberalism, neoliberalism does not exist in China *per se* given the state's limitations on the latter (Harvey 2005; Yan 2013: 283-286). Not all scholars agree on this last point: for example, in the introduction to their edited volume on the privatization of Chinese social institutions, Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong argue that there is actually no contradiction between modern Chinese socialism and neoliberalism because the state strategically embraces certain aspects of neoliberal governance in order to create self-governing subjects who can

sustain authoritarian control without requiring constant management (2008:10). By this logic, the congregational dancers' cultivation of individual consumer identities serves to reinforce political stability. Such an analysis misses the fact that while post-reform consumer culture has indeed reshaped notions of personhood among retired women in urban China, it has also created the possibility for these women to organize a collectivity outside of (even if not in opposition to) state-sanctioned relational structures.

To be clear, the critique of neoliberalism does offer a useful framework of analysis here. I have little doubt that the proliferation of consumer culture has allowed the state to delegate some of its responsibilities to self-governing subjects. I do, however, believe that additional ways of analyzing the impacts of economic reforms on daily life are needed since the state has limited ability to control what these self-governing subjects do once they are created. After all, the ability to cultivate neoliberal subject positions is unlikely to be what some of my informants have in mind when they express happiness about their "freedom."

In order to take their own understandings of their lived experiences seriously, I refer to Ulrich Beck (1992; 2002)'s theorem of individualization to provide an alternative analytical model. According to Beck's theory, individualization occurs in three phases: liberation (or dis-embedment), loss of traditional security (or disenchantment), and ultimately reintegration (or re-embedment), all of which can occur without the presence of political liberation (1992; see Yan 2013 for a further discussion). Having been (in many cases unwillingly) liberated from state-organized professional social lives, and having lost the security of living such a life, many retired women have re-embedded themselves into social life by joining congregational dance groups. Other scholars who have used this thesis to illuminate various aspects of contemporary Chinese society have been careful to note that the Chinese individualization project is distinctive in that individual liberties have not been politically formalized into a system of law as they are in the European case (see Yan 2009; 2010; Hansen and Svarverud 2010). I posit that there is an additional distinction that has

been overlooked so far: in the Chinese case, individualization is not necessarily incompatible with some forms of social collectivity. This finding deviates from earlier works on consumerism and subjectivity. For example, Lisa Rofel's young female interviewees repeatedly contrasted their own pursuit of individual liberty through consumption with (what they deemed to be) outdated concepts like politics, kinship, and communalism (2007:123). There is a deeply imbricated relationship between the cultivation of individual subjectivities and group alignment among the middle-aged and elderly women who participate in congregational dancing. Dancers cultivate their individual consumer identities within the context of companionship and mutual support from other dancers, and are in fact eager to self-identify as part of the larger phenomenon.

To put it another way, congregational dance groups as they exist today are products of individualizing forces. Prior to the twentieth century, Chinese social structure—and an individual's place in it— was largely defined by differential sets of hierarchical relations within a paternalistic kinship network (Fei 1992). This kind of social world—along with the state-dominated collective structures of the collective era— is now beginning to be replaced by a new mode of social organization based on individual preferences and choices. (Yan 2009: 283). People who participate in congregational dancing are no exception. However, there is something exceptional about the path of individualization in the congregational dancing phenomenon: rather than seeking self-fulfillment by themselves, participants use their *groups* as the primary vehicle for exploring their individual identities. I believe this seeming contradiction to be the root of the misunderstandings about the phenomenon. Because congregational dancing has all the trappings of Mao-era collectivities— masses of people listening to identical music, making identical movements, sometimes wearing identical clothing—it is easy to assume that its participants are satisfied with “herd mentality” in other areas of their lives. This is simply not the case. Group belonging does not necessarily contradict individualization, just as individualization does not necessarily

amount to a death knell for social cohesion or group formation. As Yunxiang Yan cogently argues, the process of individualization also opens up social space for people to pursue individual choices and to seek out others like themselves (2009: 289). Many of the dancers I spent time with in Chengdu did not know each other prior to becoming congregational dancers. Some—such as Liwei and Yilan—come from such different backgrounds that they likely would have never encountered each other in another setting but have become good friends since joining the same group. Friendships like this one are a direct consequence of individualization process: it would have been inconceivable in the past for middle-aged and elderly women to congregate together in public, and in such large numbers, for no apparent reason other than personal enjoyment. Instead of being defined by kinship roles or as cogs in the revolutionary machine, they are now free to find others who share similar interests and do something that gives them personal happiness.

Despite the fact that most groups comprise of small groups of people who choose to spend time together due to shared history, common interest, or proximity, more broadly-based sociality still has the potential to emerge from the phenomenon. Even those who distance themselves from other groups (the retired middle school teachers, for example, were anxious to make their differences from “public” groups known) still self-identify as part of the same phenomenon and cheerfully (albeit sometimes self-deprecatingly) refer to themselves as *da ma*. This sense of mutual identification can create an intimate sort of conviviality between total strangers. In the summer of 2014, a group of retired women on a sightseeing tour of Moscow made international headlines when they decided to commemorate their visit of the Russian capitol by dancing in the city’s famous Red Square. They were quickly stopped by Russian police, but not before video and photographic evidence was captured and spread on the Chinese web. This incident came up in many conversations I had with congregational dancers in the weeks after it took place. What was most noteworthy throughout these conversations was the dancers’ consistent use of the

inclusive “we” pronoun to refer to the women who danced in Moscow. “We are everywhere now,” one woman enthusiastically told me. “The *da ma* are going international!” She had never traveled outside of China and knows nothing about the women who danced in Red Square beyond the fact that they also engage in congregational dancing, but nevertheless imagines a social bond with them.

Most of the estimated one hundred million congregational dancers in China do not know each other. And yet, the sense of solidarity between them is palpable. Their lack of leadership and unified goal renders the ties between them rather tenuous, but at the same time, it is difficult to imagine the Chinese state tolerating a social phenomenon of this scale if they were organized around a central figurehead or ideology. Other mass movements that ostensibly involve physical practices in public spaces— Falun Gong is the most obvious example— have been outright banned. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, the relationship between the congregational dancing phenomenon and state agendas is actually a complex and multi-faceted one. But the fact remains that congregational dancers do not have to register with any government agencies in order to join a group. They dance openly, of their own volition, and among others like themselves.

In the beginning of this chapter, I argued that the “freedom” claimed by some congregational dancers in reference to their own lives should be taken seriously. In the sections that followed, I demonstrated that contrary to the popular narrative, people who participate in the phenomenon *do* cultivate personal identities, and that the individual subject positions they cultivate can form the basis for collective groups that exist outside of official social apparatuses. While horizontal ties have always existed in China, I have argued here that the congregational dancing phenomenon is distinct from both collective-era social groups as well as the smaller-scale consumer-oriented organizations that emerged after economic reforms. It is different from the former because dance groups are comprised of individualized subjects who cultivate their identities through consumer choices. It is also

different from small-scale entrepreneurial groups and business associations due to the sheer number of participants. In other words, congregational dancing is a large-scale, non-political social collective that is born out of bonds between self-managing and self-cultivating individuals. For now, it appears to be one of the only means through which people can participate in large-scale social groups while maintaining the freedom to do so for their own personal reasons.

In this chapter, I have also tried to highlight the personal stakes that congregational dancers have in the phenomenon. For so many, it offers not only a venue for socializing and recreation, but also a place that offers a sense of belonging in the midst of a society that seemingly has little patience for retired grannies. It is safe to say that most women who participate in congregational dancing would have chosen less tumultuous lives, more of a social safety net, and perhaps even more exotic things to do in their retirement had those options been available to them. But they were born too late to avoid the traumas of Mao's political campaigns and too early to capitalize on China's breathtaking economic transformation. Instead, they have made do with the fates they were given and created a social space where they can look to the future on their own terms.

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<sup>1</sup> All personal and identifying names in this dissertation have been changed to pseudonyms.

## Chapter 2

### The New Old Age

Chengdu has a sub-tropical climate with cool, mild winters and oppressively hot summers. On the hottest of days, when the air hangs so thick that not even the cicadas seem to move, all but the most dedicated dance groups are forced to cancel practice. On such a day in July 2016, I got word from the Sunset Dance Group that practice was canceled when I was already on the bus headed toward the park. Not wanting to waste the day, I decided to visit my grandmother instead. She lived not far from the park and I simply needed to transfer to another bus to reach her apartment. I disembarked from the first bus at the next stop and boarded the second one to find that a small group of elderly men had commandeered all of the seats in the back. Judging by their casual sleeveless shirts, tea thermoses, plastic bags of sunflower seeds, and bamboo hand-held fans, they were evidently heading to a park or teahouse to while the day away. The bus was not crowded, but the men filled the space with raucous noise as they sat talking, joking, and boasting with each other with their belongings scattered about the seats around them. In both appearance and manner, they fulfilled nearly every stereotype about retired men in Chengdu right down to the sunflower seeds.<sup>1</sup> They briefly paused their conversations at each stop to look at the people coming on board to ascertain whether they needed to yield any seats, and then resumed talking when the bus drove on. At one of the stops, a woman wearing a knee-length sleeveless dress with a pearl brooch and platform espadrille sandals boarded. Her hair was permed, braided, and coifed into an elaborate design at the nape of her neck. When she scanned her bus pass, the payment machine's automated female voice, which usually announces the remaining balance on the refillable pass, instead announced "*laonian ka*," or "Senior Card." She took a seat near the front of the bus and began to make a phone call.

As is the case in many cities across China, elders in Chengdu over the age of 70 are entitled to ride public transportation for free with a so-called “Senior Card” transit pass (though in some cities the age to be considered “senior” is 65). It is a benefit provided by the municipal government intending to reduce the cost of living for retirees and to encourage them to remain active and mobile in their communities. For the men sitting in the back of the bus, however, the card offered another, more subtle benefit—a public clue about the age of their fellow bus passengers. “She’s old like us!” I heard one of them say to the others as we rolled away from the stop, “but you would have never known had it not been for her bus pass. She looks like she’s on a lunch break from her office job!” At this, all the men in the group roared in laughter. “We have to be thankful for the bus passes,” another man added. “People are so well-preserved now. You can’t tell just by looking anymore.” They each nodded and chuckled in agreement before moving on to another topic. The woman in question was sitting too far away and was too engrossed in her phone call to take note of the commotion her entrance had momentarily caused, but for me, witnessing this episode opened up many questions about how old age is understood, demarcated, and treated in China today: if the external markers of old age are no longer agreed upon or stable, then what, or whom, determines whether one is old? What can we learn about the changing role of elders in Chinese society from the fact that people can, and evidently do, choose to present themselves as younger than they are?

At the heart of this puzzle is a seismic shift in the age-based social hierarchy. Elder veneration is a mainstay of traditional Confucian ethics, and respecting the elderly remains a crucial element of the Chinese moral landscape. The same automated voice on public buses that announces the fare balances, for example, also exhorts passengers to give up their seats for the elderly or infirm. However, this moral foundation, which only a few generations ago had seemed so immutable, has shifted dramatically over the last century and continues to change. This chapter examines some of the new and emerging ideas about

old age in the context of these broader social transformations. I contend that a greater emphasis on individual experience has brought about greater variation in how people perceive and inhabit old age. After all, the men and the woman sitting on opposite ends of the bus are all “old” from the perspective of the state institutions that provided them their free transit passes; their outward presentations, however, are entirely different. This latter point brings me to my second argument: even though the specific markers of old age have become increasingly influenced by individual circumstances or preferences, growing old is still not a wholly personal process. By exerting its influence through age-related benefits and by encouraging elders to take a proactive approach toward growing old, the state continues to play a major role in shaping the life course in contemporary China.

Aging—with its challenges as well as its opportunities— is a central concern for many of the dance group participants I spoke with in Chengdu. It was a frequent topic of conversation during casual group gatherings, and also came up organically on a regular basis during more structured interviews. Navigating the confusion caused by incongruities between actual (or chronological) age, subjective (or self-perceived) age, and physical appearance was a common theme. Balancing the desire to invest in personal well- eeing and the fear that personal investments would prove insufficient was another. In different words and in different contexts, my interlocutors asked the same questions again and again: am I old even if I do not identify with being old? Who gets to decide whether I am old or not? If I am not old in the same way that people in the generation preceding me were old, then what exactly does being old now entail? Underneath this line of questioning was an often-intimated yet seldom voiced concern: if I am no longer working, then what exactly is my contribution to society? For what am I valued?

This chapter attempts to answer these questions by examining the fraught relationships between aging, identity, and power. Through analyzing the ways in which *feeling* old, *looking* old, and *being* old have become differentiated from each other as a result

of re-aligning norms, I argue that this divergence has de-stabilized what was a historically fixed category in both the social hierarchy and the popular imagination. Moreover, I argue that because the Chinese state has a vested interest in re-shaping the aging process to suit the post-reform development narrative that encourages people to take responsibility for their own fates, old age— much like childhood— has become a stage on which emerging moral and social values about the life course are formed and transmitted.

I begin with a brief review of existing scholarship on shifting understandings of the life course before discussing these two points in two sections. The first section examines the impact of China's shifting age-based hierarchy on retired women's attitudes toward aging. I argue here that while many elders feel ambivalent about how uncertain the aging process has become in post-reform urban society, some retirees are in fact relishing the opportunity to grow older in ways that better suit their own interests, tastes, and self-image. The rise of urban China's "new old age" can be traced to the fact that the average person has a far longer life expectancy than in the past, as well as to economic policies that emphasize taking personal responsibility for one's own aging process. Of course, China is not the only place in the world that is contending with population aging, nor the only country aiming to mitigate the effects of the demographic transition with policies that encourage self-reliance throughout the life course. The second section of this chapter begins with an analysis of global trends that have increasingly valorized independence and self-sufficiency in old age. After offering an ethnographic vignette from an official event at the Chengdu Old Age University, I argue that these values are taken up by Chinese officials in order to promote "active aging" among Chinese retirees. Despite the elders' enjoyment of the recreational activities offered at the Old Age University and other such institutions, I contend that the state utilizes the active aging concept to absolve itself of responsibility to provide much-needed social services.

### *The Flexible Life Course in Anthropology*

Anthropologists have been concerned with variations in how societies treat different stages of the life course since the early days of the discipline. In her introduction to *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Margaret Mead tells us that the goal of her book is to answer a central question: "Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?" By "our adolescents," she meant Western ones in general and American ones in particular, whose tendencies toward psychological distress and rebellious behavior had already become taken for granted despite the fact that adolescence itself had only recently emerged as a distinct life stage in the late nineteenth century (Fasick 1994). Her finding that young Samoan women experienced an angst-free transition between childhood and adulthood was groundbreaking at the time of the book's publication. Among the vast contributions that *Coming of Age* has made to the field of anthropology, one of its enduring legacies lies in the conceit that life stages are not necessarily tethered to biological age but are rather fluid categories subject to cultural influence.

While Mead challenges previously held assumptions about what occurs during adolescence, she does not question the existence of adolescence itself-- or any other life stage-- as stable objects of inquiry. This intervention came later in the century, most notably by Lawrence Cohen in *No Aging in India* (1998). Offering a Foucauldian analysis of the emergence of the "aged person" in post-colonial India, Cohen argues that western analytical paradigms -- and in particular the field of gerontology-- created new intellectual categories that not only medicalized old age but also influenced local understandings of aging in remarkable and problematic ways. While critiquing gerontology is not my primary goal in this chapter, I do follow in Cohen's footsteps by addressing the social ramifications stemming from certain schools of thought within gerontology that promote making elders responsible for their own well-being. Cohen suggests that local understandings of the life

course altered when elders were placed into their own category and governed according to a new set of assumptions that conflated old age with weakness, forgetfulness, and backwardness. In this same vein, my aim is not to suggest that Chinese elders never had to contend with crises of identity prior to the current era. Instead, by providing examples and stories that illuminate what it is like to grow old at a time when previously agreed upon definitions of old age are being upended, I argue that aging has become a process that has become bound to—and complicated by—subjective personal choices as a result of recent economic reforms and subsequent changes in the social fabric. In what follows, I first examine the changing social status of elders in the last century as well as the increasingly subjective ways that Chinese elders inhabit old age. I then move on to a discussion about how state institutions use elders' newfound sense of individual control over the aging process to encourage models of old age that render "aging well" a matter of personal responsibility.

## **I: Personhood and the Life Course**

### *Looking Old and Feeling Old*

When I was a child growing up in Chengdu in the 1980s and 1990s, there was very little variation in how a woman over sixty looked. She invariably wore dark colored clothing in the "Mao Suit" style, consisting of cotton or woolen trousers and jacket cut generously so as to hang loosely from the body. Her shoes were black canvas with white rubber soles. Her hair -- never dyed and in various shades of gray-- was either cropped at chin-length and swept out of her face with bobby pins or pulled back into a tight coif at the base of her neck. If she wore any jewelry, they would be simple and sentimental adornments like enamel pins or a ring. She wore no makeup. High heels were out of the question.

I remember all of the older women I knew, including both of my own grandmothers,

looking like this throughout my childhood. To this day, I have never seen either of them wearing a dress or a skirt. When I was deeply concerned with my own apparel during my teenage years, I once asked my maternal grandmother why she still wore the same clothes she did in the "old times" despite there being so many more options. She replied that it was a matter of habit: women her age, she explained, spent their younger days laboring at work and at home. It was also a time during which focusing on appearances was associated with bourgeois or counter-revolutionary attitudes; wearing something eye-catching was a sure way to earn a bad reputation. Furthermore, ready-to-wear clothing was hard to come by, so women sewed their own and their family's clothes, focusing on durability and practicality over aesthetics. And when fashions began to change when China "opened up" at the onset of economic reforms in 1978 -- well, by then they were no longer interested in trying to keep up. At age eighty-nine and with her perennial woolen trousers and short hair, my maternal grandmother looks very much the part of the typical "old woman" that exists in my and other Chinese people's imaginations.

So when I met Ms. Liu at a dance group social gathering and she told me that she did not think of herself as an "old person," I knew exactly what she meant. "I just don't feel old," she said, "and I don't think I look old either."

Ms. Liu is a high school classmate of Rui, who has been a member of the Sunset Dance Team since 2012. She is also a congregational dancer, but belongs to another group in her own neighborhood in another part of the city. Like most of my dance group interlocutors, Ms. Liu is in her early sixties-- one generation younger than my grandmother. She was still a young woman when Deng Xiaoping initiated reforms in 1978. At the dinner party where we met, she was elegantly dressed in a flowing magenta calf-length dress layered over leggings and low-heeled boots. She had soft bangs that just brushed the top of her carefully penciled brows while the rest of her sleek black hair was pulled into a ponytail and fastened with an ornate hair clip. Though she was somewhat taller than the other

women at the dinner and multiple people complimented her on her figure, Ms. Liu's fashion sense is far from unusual among congregational dancers and she fit right in with the women on the Sunset Dance Team.

Despite her statement about not feeling old, Ms. Liu shared numerous thoughts and fears about the aging process with me when she learned that I researched aging and retirement: the horror of seeing your face change before your eyes, the anxiety of hearing about once-vibrant friends becoming ill, the panic that can set in when you feel your body slowing down. "Even a small cut heals so slowly now," she complained. The inherent contradiction in her attitudes on old age was not lost on her: she did not feel old, and yet experienced and contended with the symptoms of aging in her everyday life. "Getting old," she remarked about her own confusion, "is not so simple." I told her about what my grandmother had shared with me when I was a teen. Maybe, I ventured, she did not feel old because she did not resemble what she thought old women were supposed to look like.

At this, Ms. Liu emitted a literal squeal of recognition. "YES! That is exactly right! People my age looked so *old* when I was young. They also *acted* so old." She went on to paint a mental picture of old age even more vivid and certainly more geriatric than my own: a wizened crone with yellowing teeth that prevented her from chewing, a humped back that prevented her from looking up, an unsteady step that prevented her from venturing out from her familiar surroundings, and most of all an imperious, self-righteous air. This unflattering portrait did not resemble Ms. Liu in any way. "Now that I am that age myself," she concluded, "I don't know what I am."

As was the case for much of human history, people in pre-industrial China were susceptible to childhood illness, malnutrition, infectious disease, and other causes of early death. However, with advancements in nutrition, medical care, and general standards of living throughout the twentieth century, most Chinese children now survive past childhood and adults have much better odds of beating or managing diseases, whether they be

infectious or chronic. In fact, the only time period that the Chinese life expectancy declined in the 20th century was during the disastrous Great Leap Forward political campaign (1958-1961), which was meant to propel the country into full communism but instead caused widespread famine and resulted in millions of people starving to death (Becker 1998). The overall outcome of these changes is a dramatic increase in life expectancy: a person born in China in 1960, the first year that the World Bank began compiling data on life expectancy, could expect to live to age 44. A person born in 2016, on the other hand, is expected to live to age 76 (World Bank 2018).

To put this another way, people in their 60s might have seemed old to Ms. Liu and others of her generation when they were growing up because sixty year-olds were in fact among the oldest people in the population at that time. When she reached the age of 92, my paternal grandmother told me that she never expected to live to her age because she had literally never met anyone that old when she was younger. Nowadays, it is not unusual for urbanites to live into their 80's or 90's, and elderly people make up an increasingly large proportion of the overall population. To provide a concrete example, in the 20,000-person urban community (*shequ*) where most members of the Sunset Dance Group live, there were approximately 3,000 people over the age of sixty, 1,000 people over the age of eighty, and six people over the age of one hundred in 2017 (interview with *shequ* officials June 8<sup>th</sup> 2017). This means that almost a quarter of the people living in this neighborhood are in late middle-age or older. For another point of reference, *all* of my dance group interlocutors—again, the majority of whom are in their 60s—had at least one parent or parent-in-law still alive while I was in Chengdu conducting fieldwork. This is to say that people in their 60's can now be considered solidly middle-aged.

Indeed, western readers may recognize Ms. Liu's crisis of identity as a conventional case of mid-life crisis. It fits the bill in many ways: Ms. Liu is a woman in her early 60's who struggles to accept the aging process and prefers clothing and hairstyles generally

associated with youth rather than old age. Even if they are not necessarily common, such crises are deemed normal reactions to the specter of old age in the United States, where mid-life purchases of botox treatments or sporty cars have become punch lines in jokes about people struggling to come to terms with getting older. For women in particular, trepidation about aging is instilled at an early age through pervasive advertisements for anti-aging products as well as the virtual invisibility of women past middle age in the public culture. Taken together, these jokes, ads, and cultural messaging reveal an underlying conventional wisdom that aging is synonymous with loss of vitality and even of social value, since for women such value is so often linked to youth, fertility, and beauty. In this social context, people's efforts to recover their youths are easy to understand.

In China, however, these attitudes were not the conventional wisdom about aging historically, and Ms. Liu's inability to identify with her own age is more unusual when viewed in the context of this history. In the traditional Chinese social hierarchy, young women occupied the lowest social stratum and were afforded the least amount of attention, respect, and care. A young girl's parents would most likely have assumed that she would one day leave her birth family and community when she married into her husband's family, and thus may have withheld their resources accordingly: she may have been given inferior food, healthcare, and education (if any) compared to what was provided to her brothers, and may have even been given a derogatory name like "Too Many" or "Little Mistake" if the family already had daughters prior to her birth (Watson 1986). With the exception of a few communities in Southern China where economic opportunities and migration provided alternatives to marriage (Topley 1975; Stockard 1989), an adolescent girl would expect to leave her natal home as a bride to live with her husband's family, where she would perform the lion's share of domestic tasks and where loneliness and mistreatment from her mother-in-law were distinct possibilities. Things would only improve for her as she grew older, gave birth to children of her own, and rose through the ranks of the household hierarchy

(Freedman 1966; Parish and Whyte 1978). By mid-age, that is, her thirties or forties, she may have finally earned the respect of her in-laws and carved out a life of her own, possibly even with her own daughters-in-law to bully (Raybeck 1992). Margery Wolf (1972) famously noted the stark difference between the "terrified young bride" and the "confident, often lewd old woman who has outlived her mother-in-law and her husband," and argued that the happiest, most secure years of a Chinese woman's life were those at the end of her life course.

In other words, if Ms. Liu were living at a previous point in Chinese history, chances are that she would be greeting old age with a sense of relief rather than confusion or dread. To fully understand what has changed, we need to take a step back to examine how social status — that is, the standards by which lives are appraised and measured— has shifted in recent years.

One significant reason that Ms. Liu may well have preferred to be old rather than young if she were alive one or two hundred years ago is that as an elder, people younger than she would have respected her out of a sense of filial obligation. The ethic of filial piety was set forth by Confucius and his disciple Zengzi in a work called the *Xiaojing* in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and has shaped social interactions throughout much of Chinese history (Baker 1979; Freedman 1979). This text, translated as the *Classic of Filial Piety*, outlines proper behavior between fathers and sons, between husbands and wives, between younger brothers and elder brothers, and between rulers and subjects, arguing in each instance that the junior person in the relationship ought to defer to the senior one. In practical terms, this means that people venerated their ancestors and their living elders, and that younger members in kinship circles deferred to the advice and judgment of elders in all respects including in intimate matters like marriage (Hsu 1967). However, filial piety was not just meant to be a guide for domestic relations. The hierarchical roles that are outlined in the *Xiaojing* are meant to serve as the foundation for an orderly, harmonious society.

Over the centuries and through numerous political movements that strengthened and codified the influence of Confucianism on Chinese society, filial piety played a major role in shaping ordinary people's attitudes about social hierarchy and about what constitutes appropriate behavior. These attitudes were so pervasive and ran so deeply that that when twentieth century intellectuals— first during the New Culture Movement of 1911 and later during the Communist Revolution— set out to modernize Chinese culture in hopes of catching up with western powers, critiquing filial piety was among their first lines of attack. Leaders of both political movements believed that unthinking deference to elders hindered innovation and was the root cause of China's relative economic and technological stagnation. By the time Mao launched his Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966, upending the age-based social hierarchy had become a cornerstone of his efforts to transform Chinese society: young people were encouraged to rebel against the old, and people who held positions of seniority were deposed in favor of younger (and more malleable) replacements.

Though these traumatic political campaigns undoubtedly set the stage for what was to come, perhaps nothing dismantled the social status of elders more quickly or efficiently than the post-reform job market. Unlike the previous communist social contract under Mao where urban residents were promised lifetime employment, Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" allowed for corporations to compete for profit even if it meant letting go of older, less capable workers. No age discrimination law exists in the People's Republic, and the nature of the manufacturing jobs that were available during the earlier years of the economic boom meant that corporations desired young, able-bodied workers who could work long hours. Public sector workers must also contend with compulsory retirement ages that force them to leave their jobs at predetermined ages: 60 for men, and 55 and 50 for women in white and blue-collar jobs, respectively. I must point out here that some people actually benefit from compulsory retirement. For example, retired

schoolteachers often take up post-retirement tutoring “gigs” that pay much more handsomely than their jobs did, all while collecting pension benefits. However, this situation is far from the norm. For the vast majority of people, these policies, combined with the emerging market economy, created an environment that favors younger workers over older ones. As a result, employers regularly post job advertisements with explicit age limits, and open discrimination on the basis of age (not to mention on the basis of sex, height, and even physical appearance) is not uncommon in many industries throughout China. The overall effects of these economic reforms on the social landscape cannot be overstated: they transformed the social hierarchy such that those who managed to “get rich first” now occupied the top social strata rather than those with the most seniority in terms of age or rank. Though elder veneration is still a salient feature of contemporary Chinese cultural practices and filial piety remains an important part of many Chinese people’s lives, the fact remains that elders have lost considerable social stature in recent decades.

As remarkable as these changes in social attitudes toward elders have been, their impacts are further exacerbated by concurrent shifts in how personal identity is construed in post-reform China. In the rural villages in which most Chinese people lived before the last century, personhood was not something an individual was endowed with at birth but was rather something that a person earns by accomplishing a series of appropriate tasks at the appropriate time. It is through this process of *zuoren*, or what Yunxiang Yan (2017) has translated to “doing personhood,” that an individual becomes him or herself. Marriage, children, and establishing a home were prerequisites to being considered a full person. Seen in this light, filial duties and the obligation to respect elders take on an additional layer of meaning: elders were not simply revered for the sake of custom, but because they were quite literally morally superior since they had accomplished more of life’s tasks and were therefore more deserving of respect than those who were still in the process of becoming themselves.

In such a social context, elders are addressed by kinship terms like *da ye* [grandfather or elder uncle] or *da niang* [elder aunt], and addressing someone by these terms is a mark of one's respect. My own realization that I was crossing the boundary into adulthood came when, at the age of seventeen, a family friend introduced me to her toddler as *ayi* ["auntie"] rather than *jiejie* ["elder sister"]. As I progressed from my early to late twenties, I also became "auntie" to increasingly older children and am now called "auntie" by most teenagers. At the same time, people I formerly addressed as "grandmother" or "grandfather" became "aunties" and "uncles," and my adult status became ever further cemented in the process. Simply put, this means that social identity is at least in part determined not just by how people feel internally, but by how they are perceived by others.

Many aspects of these customs remain in place. One of the first pieces of advice that I ever received about conducting research on aging in China came from one of my mother's childhood friends. She invited me to her home for dinner when I first arrived in Chengdu, and listened intently as I told her about my plans to not only learn about congregational dance groups but also interview retirees from all walks of life. It was then that she offered me some guidance in jest that I nevertheless took to heart: "never ever call anyone *da ye* [elder grandfather]! If you want to talk to an old guy, call him *da ge* [elder brother] instead." Her meaning was plain: old men do not want to be seen as grandfathers by young women, and flattering them into thinking that they are still "elder brother" aged will make them more likely to answer questions. Terms of address are still inextricably linked to status and identity in China, and calling someone the wrong thing—making them feel old when you are trying to extract a favor from them, for example—can lead to disastrous results.

But the ways that people cultivate and express their identities have also changed in significant ways. As the Chinese economy has transformed, so has the way that lives are evaluated. Due to its compressed development trajectory in the past four decades, China has experienced an extreme version of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has dubbed "liquid

modernity.” This phenomenon, brought about by economic and political upheavals and defined by diminished influence of official social structures on everyday life, necessitates what Giddens (1991) calls “life politics,” a process in which identities are unmoored from traditional institutions and then reflexively reconstituted and performed through lifestyle choices and other indexes of personality. Irving Goffman (1956) argues that these social performances comprise the basis of all social interactions, but their efficacy in traditional settings would have been constrained by the rigid social hierarchy that limited the extent to which people could assert their identities as individuals. I do not wish to go so far as to suggest that people did not participate in social performances aimed at guiding others’ impressions of themselves prior to the social changes I outlined in the previous pages. I do, however, contend that these social changes made it possible for people like Auntie Liu and the smartly dressed woman on the bus to manage their outward appearance according to their own feelings rather than according to social custom. If being old no longer confers higher social status, and if it also no longer means having to ascribe to inelastic age-based identifiers such as wearing woolen trousers or withdrawing from social life, then it should not be surprising that some Chinese people are now trying out alternative ways of being old. The result, of course, is both increased freedom to assert their personal wishes about how to be old as well as increased confusion about what being old now means.

When I was doing preliminary fieldwork in the summers of 2014 and 2015, I gathered basic information about dozens of dance groups throughout Chengdu by approaching them at the end of their practices and asking a few questions about their group size, fees, and dance styles. I soon discovered that many dance group participants also had questions for me, the most common of which was “how old do you think I am?” It would be posed less as a sincere question and more as a challenge. I sensed from the start that the point of this exchange was for them to correct my guess, and I mastered this game before long: no matter how old I thought the asker was, I would reply “58.” Often, the subsequent

exchange would proceed as follows:

“How old you think I am?”

“Hmm. I’d say 58.”

“HAH. I am actually 65.”

“Wow! That’s incredible!”

I could not understand the point of this game for a long time: why bother making yourself look younger if you are going to reveal your true age anyway? But by setting up the exchange like this, these women are striking a delicate balance between managing their personal appearance to suit their own preferences, on the one hand, and acknowledging the continuing importance of external validation, on the other. In this sense, they have also mastered the game.

## II: Producing Active Elders

In a story that received international media attention in 2018, a man named Emile Ratelband from the Netherlands petitioned his government to officially change his age from 69 to 49. His reasons for wanting this change were myriad and rooted in practical desires: he told reporters that if he were 49, he could attract more employers and receive more attention from younger women on the online dating app Tinder. Besides, he said, his doctor told him that he was as healthy as a man in his 40’s. The justification he presented to the courts, however, was more philosophical in nature. “[Americans and Europeans] are free people,” he explained to a reporter from *The Washington Post*, “we can make our own decisions if we want to change our name, or if we want to change our gender. So I want to change my age. My feeling about my body and about my mind is that I’m about 40 or 45”(Quoted in Washington Post 2019). Unfortunately for Mr. Ratelband, the Dutch courts disagreed: they ruled that while Mr. Ratelband was “at liberty to *feel* 20 years younger than his real age and act accordingly,” a person’s age actually has a number of legal and social implications and therefore cannot be amended based on personal whim (quoted in NPR

2019, emphasis added.)

Few people in the PRC have the liberty to share Mr. Ratelband's sanguine attitudes about the superior power of personal choice over state authority (a fact that Mr. Ratelband himself acknowledges by specifically naming The United States and Europe in his statement to reporters). However, the Dutch man's efforts to change his age and his government's denial of these efforts speak to underlying tensions in how aging and the life course are dealt with throughout the world.

Mr. Ratelband's error lies in his inability to see the bigger picture: while he has evidently internalized the declining status of elders to a great degree, and while he has learned that he can perform an identity to suit his own preferences, he has failed to recognize the ways in which the aging process is tied to stories beyond his own. To add to the words of the Dutch court, he is free to *look* and *feel* however he likes, but the existential question, about *being* old, is an entirely different matter altogether.

### *Demographic Shifts, Productive Aging, and the Third Age*

It would be remiss to discuss the transformation of the aging process without first addressing the fact that people simply live much longer than they used to globally. Though there are significant disparities between regions as well as between ethnic groups and social classes within regions, on the whole, global life expectancy has risen steadily throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (United Nations Population Division). In 1960, the average world life expectancy at birth was 52.6. By 2016, it was 72. Many of these gains were made in the mid-century due to rapid advances in healthcare, but population longevity continues to increase across regions and is expected to maintain this trend into the twenty-first century (CIA World Factbook).

Along with prolonged life expectancies come new ideas about what constitutes old age as well as new expectations about the role that older people ought to play in society. In

the United States, for example, significant shifts in social policy and cultural discourse on aging began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s when post-war birth rates began to decline and the realities of getting older began to set in for the Baby Boomer generation. In *Why Survive*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning book published in 1975 detailing the “tragic” state of American old age due to lack of a social safety net as well as social isolation, psychiatrist Robert Butler argues that having the ability to survive into old age is meaningless unless people are able to actually enjoy these “extra” years. Butler, who is often dubbed the “father of modern gerontology,” not only coined the term “ageism” to describe the stigma experienced by elderly persons, but also promoted “productive aging”—an approach to growing old that emphasizes elders’ continued engagement in the workforce and in their communities (Butler 1985; 1991).

The productive aging concept was meant to combat entrenched attitudes in the American public that associated growing older with increasing obsolescence, and older people as deserving of pity rather than respect. Instead, Butler argued that elders have the potential to continue contributing to their communities in meaningful and productive ways. He, along with a number of other scholars on board with the productive aging idea, proposed “alternatives to retirement” that included more flexible work arrangements like part-time work and a four-day work week that would allow people to extend their working lives (Lazarus and Lauer 1985:57). What was needed to allow people to live full lives well into old age, Butler argued, were new policies that protected elders’ rights to work as well as greater “moral sensitivity” toward older people (Butler 1985: 9). For Butler and others, applying the principles of the productive aging concept would not only serve to make life better for elders, but also mitigate the economic ramifications of an aging population.

Butler’s ideas were enormously influential in the field of gerontology and reverberated into other academic disciplines and into the public discourse throughout the coming decades. It is important to note that Butler’s productive aging concept came to the

fore during a period of American history marked by contracting social safety nets and an increasing premium on individual responsibility. With its emphasis on the “right to work” throughout life and the necessity of active elders for continued economic expansion, the productive aging concept fit right into that milieu. At a lecture he gave at the International Longevity Center in Japan in 1991, Butler recounts an instance when, during the course of a 1982 congressional hearing held by the Commission on Social Security Reform, he was asked by then commission-chair Alan Greenspan why an increase in life expectancy should not bring about a “commensurate increase in work expectancy.” Butler, as it turned out, readily agreed with Greenspan’s suggestion. By 1988, the United States had all but banned mandated retirement ages in a piece of legislation signed by President Ronald Reagan. This, according to Butler, was a civil rights victory for elders. He opined that “each of us should have the opportunity to earn our own living throughout our entire life and not be denied that opportunity on the basis of age, but rather on the basis of competence or function” (1991).

It is not my intention to suggest that Butler’s interventions in the way that Americans grow old was ill-conceived or detrimental. After all, as Michelle Pannor Silver notes in *Retirement and its Discontents* (2017), many Americans find the prospect of retirement burdensome or frightening and would work until the very end of their lives if given the opportunity. Instead, I point to productive aging’s ascendance during a time of economic uncertainty and demographic change in the United States as a useful comparison for understanding how similar ideas gain traction in China today.

China is in the midst of a dramatic demographic transition. By the Chinese state’s own projections, people over 65 will outnumber those under 14 by 2030. Even more alarmingly, some demographers predict that over a quarter of China’s population will be over 65 by the year 2050. That’s roughly 500 million people. For perspective, the total population of the US is 325 million. It is difficult to overstate the potential ramifications of

this aging trend for China's continued economic expansion, for its already-precarious social harmony, and even for its national security. Of course, China is far from the first country to undergo these kinds of changes. Nordic countries, for example, started paying attention to population aging as early as the 1940s, and China's neighbor Japan has also been contending with a remarkably top-heavy population since the mid- late 20<sup>th</sup> century. What sets China's demographic transition apart is that it is taking place just as the country's economy is beginning to mature. China's emergence as an economic powerhouse was in large part made possible by its enormous supply of young, able-bodied workers. Now that supply is beginning to dwindle, and the cost of managing so many elders may well undercut China's growth trajectory. In other words, China might get old before it gets rich.

As demonstrated by the case of Mr. Ratelband, age and the aging process can serve as mediums through which the state asserts its control even in liberal democracies. Furthermore, as we have seen from how Butler's productive aging concept gained prominence in during a period of demographic change in the United States, emerging ideas about the aging process can be taken up by those in power to serve their own purposes. What happens, then, when a relatively benign concept like "productive aging" is implemented by an authoritarian state at a time when a dependent aging population poses a threat to the nation's continued development? I take a close look at how this dynamic plays out in the following section.

### *The Old Age University: Cultivating the New Old Age*

If you were to step foot into one of China's "Old-Age Universities"—that is, institutions of learning specially devoted to retirees and one of the front lines of the Chinese State's efforts to address the aging population problem, you would be hard pressed to find any hint of doom or gloom. Instead, you might find groups of seniors learning to ballroom dance, an exhibit of photography students' best work, or an exuberant choir group

rehearsal.

China's first Old-Age university opened in Beijing in 1983, and since then institutions for post-retirement learning have exploded across the nation. According to a report from the Chengdu Municipal Office of Aging published in the *Sichuan Daily*, a local newspaper, the city of Chengdu alone has over 220,000 students enrolled in 2,500 elder-education institutions. This number is likely inflated because it includes not only schools but also study stations and counseling centers. Nevertheless, it does point to tremendous state investment in elder education and recreation. The official *national* tally for the total number of Old-Age Universities is an astonishing 70,000, and plans for further expansion are underway. Why are there so many of these institutions? What goes on inside them? What exactly are they supposed to be accomplishing?

Emerging five years after the launch of economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, Old Age Universities play a very particular role in the post-reform urban social ecosystem. Built and funded by the state, they exist for the express purpose of offering urban retirees venues for recreation and socialization. Classes are cheap—about 200 RMB (about 30 USD) per class per semester. They're also accessible: to enroll, you just have to meet the state-mandated retirement age, which, in an open display of underlying attitudes about aging and gender, is 60 for men, 55 for women in white-collar jobs, and 50 for women in blue-collar jobs. For a generation of Chinese retirees—some of whom were forced out of the workforce long before they reached retirement age when State-Owned Enterprises were privatized or shuttered in the late 90's and early 2000's, Old Age Universities present a meaningful opportunity to stay active and engaged.

Take for example a woman I call Auntie Zhang. She was an accountant at a state-owned factory until 2003, when the factory privatized and she was laid off, along with hundreds of other workers. She was then only 44 years old. She was paid severance, but would not be able to collect her pension until she turned 55—the official retirement age for

female white-collar workers. In the following years, she became so bored and aimless that, in her own words, she started feeling like she was losing her mind. She was isolated. She felt sorry for herself. When the situation became untenable, she decided that she was going to spend time learning things that she did not have the time or resources (条件) to learn when she was young. The first thing she did was join the Dancing Beauties Group through a connection with a former co-worker. Soon, other dance members led her to the University, and she enthusiastically enrolled in a few classes. Before she knew it, her days were full.

Remaining active and engaged in retirement through leisure learning is neither a new idea nor a controversial one. China is not an official international member of the so-called Third Age University or U3A movement (which has its roots in France and has also been well-established in the UK and Canada), which offers continuing education and recreational courses for elders who are either retired from work or child-rearing but are still independent and active. Chinese Old Age Universities do resemble their Western counterparts, however, in that they focus on learning for learning's sake rather than, say, skill acquisition or job preparation. Anyone in their "third age"—roughly defined as the stage in life after the completion of a career and/or child rearing—can join, though again, Chinese retirees do have to meet the state-mandated retirement age in order to enroll.

What sets this approach apart from Butler's idea of productive aging is its emphasis on leisure and recreation over economic productivity. I met and spoke with dozens of middle-aged and elderly people in Chengdu who were enrolled in either the Chengdu Old Age University or the Sichuan Old Age University (both of which are located in Chengdu). The various skills they had attained at these institutions sounded like a list of accomplishments a young lady from the European upper classes might have acquired in a finishing school a couple hundred years ago: watercolor painting, singing with piano accompaniment, sewing with silk fabrics. At one point, the director of enrollment at the

Chengdu Old Age University told me that the most “practical” courses offered at the school were English conversation and English reading. “But most of our students take English so they can show off to their friends,” he joked. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the focus on leisure means that the state built these schools solely for the sake of elders’ entertainment. In the same way that Butler’s productive aging concept was meant to kill two birds (elevating the status of elders by allowing them to work for longer and mitigating the economic consequences of an aging population) with one stone, the type of personal cultivation that is promoted within Chinese Old Age Universities accomplishes something tangible for the state’s agenda. I can best explain what I mean by offering some specific examples from my observations at the Chengdu Old Age University.

The Chengdu Old Age University is located on a tree-lined street in a quaint neighborhood known for its bars and nightlife. After dark and especially on weekends, the area fills with groups of young people looking for a fun time. During the day, however, the neighborhood is pleasant and tranquil. People emerge from apartment buildings to walk their dogs or visit the nearby market for dinner ingredients. There are a few noodle shops, a hardware store, a hair salon, and a convenience store. A humble restaurant serving home-style Sichuanese food fills up with groups of retirees from the University at lunchtime, but is relatively empty for the rest of the day. Tucked among a row of small, non-rescript storefronts, the University entrance is rather easy to miss.

Like most urban Chinese schools (from preschools to high schools), the Old Age University is gated. Security guards stand sentry during all hours of operation, and only permit entry to students, teachers, administrators, and those who have official business on campus. Once through the gate, a first-time visitor may realize that gate is deceptively inconspicuous: after walking through a short passageway, the space opens up into a large recreational field bordered by a running track. With its neat appearance, the campus of the Old Age University can easily be mistaken for a typical Chinese primary or secondary

school. The University's classroom and administrative buildings are all clustered around the perimeter of the field, which acts as both the spatial and programmatic heart of campus, at least in the months when the weather is pleasant. A friend of mine who lives in a high-rise apartment building directly adjacent to the University with a balcony that overlooks the field told me that activities such as tai chi and dance practices begin on the field at eight o'clock on most mornings and do not conclude until mid-afternoon.

Like other institutions for elder education throughout China, the Chengdu Old Age University has a major problem: overcrowding. In an interview, the vice-principal smiled wanly as she told me a joke that she had undoubtedly told dozens if not hundreds of times before: "we get new students every year, but no one ever graduates." People routinely line up outside the university gates at midnight on the first day of the enrollment period to get their first picks of classes. The most popular classes like piano and tai chi, I was told, have hundreds of people on their waitlists. In an effort to serve more students, the University instituted new rules in 2017 that limit each person to two courses per semester and kicks people out after they have completed a three-course series on the same subject. But still, the lines persist and there are never enough classes to go around.

If accessing the university is tough for retirees, things are not much easier for ethnographers. Other than occasional exhibitions and lectures that are open to the public, entry through the gates of the Old Age University requires either a student identification card or a prior appointment with one of the administrators. Such appointments were hard to come by: the administration seemed perpetually overworked and understaffed, something that each person I spoke to readily admitted, usually by way of explanation upon canceling or rescheduling an appointment. The exhibitions, too, are not announced to the public and knowledge of them is only spread through word-of-mouth.<sup>2</sup> So when Auntie Zhang invited me to join her at the University's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition in the fall of 2016, I eagerly accepted.

The event was held in a two-story building on the far end of the athletic field. I arrived early in order to check out the downstairs art displays before heading up to meet Auntie Zhang in the large auditorium on the second floor, where the performances were set to take place.

The display room was large, and nearly every inch of wall space was full. Along with photos and calligraphy, nearly every technique of drawing and painting was represented: ink drawings, charcoals, oil paintings, watercolors. The subjects depicted were quite conservative, consisting of mostly portraits, landscapes, traditional Chinese bird-and-flower drawings, and even one extremely patriotic ink drawing of a Youth Pioneer saluting a large red Chinese Communist Party flag. The environment was boisterous and jovial: though there were a few others surveying the artwork, the vast majority of the people in the room were Old Age University students using the space to get ready for their upcoming performances. There were two older gentlemen wearing silky robes who took turns walking down the center of the room while the other watched and critiqued his posture and stride. A group of men wearing matching white tuxedos stood talking loudly in a large circle in one corner. In another corner, a dozen women wearing arm and shoulder-baring *qipao*-style evening gowns adjusted one another's headdresses, which appeared to be made of red construction paper cut carefully into delicate shapes. Nearby, another group of women took selfies on their mobile phones while wearing identical blue tennis dresses, complete with short pleated skirts.

Just as I was admiring a group of women wearing long velvet fuchsia gowns, one of the women in the group began waving and gesturing at me. It was Auntie Tan, a woman I knew from the Dancing Beauties group. "You've come!" she exclaimed. Since this was the beginning of my fieldwork and I was quite new in the dance class, I was surprised that she recognized me. In truth, I barely recognized her. Auntie Tan is a tall woman with a naturally imposing air, but I was accustomed to seeing her in casual exercise apparel. The

performance costume, including the aforementioned velvet gown, had utterly transformed her into a vision of glamour. Her hair was pinned up in a complicated bun and set with a jeweled pin. She wore a full face of makeup, including very prominent fake eyelashes and sparkling lip-gloss. After we posed together for a selfie on her mobile phone at her insistence, she was called back to her group by another velvet-gowned woman who wanted to organize a group photo. It was clear that they enjoyed being dressed up like this: they teasingly admired each other's good looks and youthful appearance while making adjustments to each other's hair and makeup. They were still taking photos of each other when I glanced back at them as I made my way upstairs some minutes later.

I found Auntie Zhang waiting for me at the top of the stairs. We made our way into the auditorium together to the seats she had saved for us in the very back row. The room was packed and was becoming even fuller by the minute. The noise from so many different simultaneous conversations was deafening. As we sat together taking in the surroundings, I remarked on the boisterous atmosphere. Auntie Zhang agreed, and quipped that "old people" [老年人] were energized by each other's company. She told me that she was taking no less than four classes per week— two dance classes (one Latin, one Ballet), photography on Thursday mornings, and calligraphy on Tuesday afternoons. On Saturdays, she went on to explain, she goes walking in the countryside with a walking group formed from among her classmates at the University. "And so now the only days that are empty are Wednesdays and Sundays," she said. "All in all," she finished smiling, "I feel quite busy!"

The performances began with speeches by university administrators, who extolled the virtues of seeking recreation and further learning after retirement. The final keynote speech was given by a woman in her 30s dressed in a serious-looking black suit. She was from the Municipal Office of Aging, and everything about her speech—her tone, the content—made it clear that she was a government representative. The speech was in pure

political jargon, mentioned President Xi Jinping no less than four times, and focused on how the University was fulfilling the Party's obligations to the people as well as how elders have a responsibility to age well in order to contribute to the greater social good. It was unclear if anyone took issue with these sentiments because I seemed to be one of only a few in the auditorium who was paying attention. As I looked around to gauge the reactions of the audience, I saw that the vast majority of people had their faces buried in their phones or busy chatting with others sitting in the near vicinity. As the speech progressed, the sound from these side conversations rose from a soft murmur to a palpable din. The speaker, however, took no notice of this and continued on with her prepared remarks, which she read from papers in front of her.

Even after the student performances began, administrators periodically ascended the stage to deliver the same message. The exhibition's finale performance was introduced by the university's senior administrator, a woman in her 40's who gave a rousing speech about "文化养老" or "civilized aging." A large electronic banner that hung over the stage displayed a message in digital red characters as she spoke: "大力推进文化养老，为积极老龄化作出新贡献"--- "Vigorously advance civilized retirement, make new contributions to activated old age." The speaker did not take time to define these concepts, but she did point to several elders in the university community who were ostensibly living exemplars of civilized aging. She spoke of one woman who had traveled throughout Southeast Asia and documented the whole experience on an internet blog. She also spoke of a group of men who had started a weekend photography club, each getting their driver's licenses then taking turns driving into the countryside in search of new and exciting views. In each example, she praised the individuals' curiosity, ability to take initiative, and willingness to adapt to new technologies and circumstances. By the time the speech entered into its tenth minute, it had become abundantly clear that civilized aging was defined in opposition to an imagined earlier form

of growing old characterized by passivity and reliance on others. As the musical accompaniment to the finale performance began, she gushed, "We use cell phones, we make online purchases, and we spend our days on our iPads and laptops. Together, we will march into the future and live an even more cool (潇洒) and complete (完美) old age!"

On this cue, a group of 18 remarkably youthful-looking women dressed in matching slacks, blouses, and vests somewhat reminiscent of the outfits worn by Chinese air hostesses took to the stage, each of them holding a step stool adorned with letter or number in her hands. Standing together, the group resembled an oversized keyboard. After setting aside their keyboard pieces, the women performed an upbeat dance set to a poppy, futuristic tune consisting mostly of mechanic beeps and boops. At one point, the women arranged themselves into a single-file line at the front of the stage, each holding an invisible smartphone in her extended left hand. With their right hands, they performed scrolling and clicking motions on the invisible screen, all the while their feet and hips moved in sync with the rhythm of the music.

The audience was enraptured. Looking to the stage from the back row, I saw rows upon rows of people holding up their mobile phones to record the performance. As the song neared its conclusion, the music faded and a voiceover exchange came on over the speakers that signaled the song's dramatic finale. It began with the sound of a ringing telephone. A woman's voice answered. On the other end of the line, a young man who identified himself as the woman's grandson asks after her health. She replied in a sing-song voice,

"孙子，姥姥身体溢满着" - *"Grandson, grandmother's health is overflowing!"*

The song then cut away to a different phone call, where another young man wished his mother a happy birthday. She replied in the same tone as the grandmother in the

previous bit,

“快乐快乐，妈妈很快乐！” - *Happy, happy, mother is very happy!*

Meanwhile onstage, the women performed graceful balletic movements in clusters of three and four. The dance, and the entire exhibition, came to an end when the female voice over the speakers told her son to focus on his own life, and that he need not worry about her at all. “Mother is joyful”, she exclaimed, “mother lives a blessed life!” At this, the audience burst into thunderous applause.

By casting the retired women in the roles of tech-savvy, independent mothers, the performance clearly linked technological competence, physical vigor, and self-reliance with successful aging. The hyperbolic message of the final dance piece only amplified what had been intimated or spoken about in earlier speeches and performances: retirees can continue to contribute to society by cultivating self-reliance through the active consumption of recreational activities and technological goods. If Butler’s notion of “productive aging” directly equates elders’ social contributions with economic productivity, then the notion of “civilized aging” that was being promoted at the Chengdu Old Age University does something a bit subtler. Here, retirees are encouraged to focus on recreation and self-fulfillment so that their children can be freed from the burden of worrying about them and, in turn, focus on their own careers. While the retirees are not expected to continue working (after all, many of them were forced out of the workforce to make way for younger workers), they *are* expected to remain plugged in to China’s development narrative by keeping up with the technologies, pursuing personal hobbies, and staying helpfully out of the way. In other words, by making themselves “civilized” or “cultured” through cultivating hobbies and learning recreational skills, these retirees are also fashioning themselves into extensions of the modern Chinese economy.

Everyone I spoke to who has ever taken a class at an Old Age University— which

includes a plurality of my dance group interlocutors as well as many others I met at Old Age University events, think that they are a great resource for elders. I happen to agree with them. The classes are enjoyable, affordable, and offer a chance for people to socialize around common interests. What is at stake here, however, is not whether the universities make a positive contribution to the experience of old age, but rather the broader implications of an aging ideology that puts the onus on elders to continue cultivating themselves well into old age for the sake of the nation. This is a new old age that comes with the pressure to live “joyful, blessed” lives on one’s own, without complaining and without demanding anything from others. No one I spoke to had anything bad to say about Old Age Universities, but they did share plenty of grievances about the whole concept of “civilized” or “activated” aging.

If the goal of the pageantry at the Chengdu Old Age University’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary event was to convince the late middle-aged and elderly students in attendance that their own well being can be secured by cultivating hobbies and learning to make their own online purchases, it does not seem to have entirely worked. As we gathered our things to leave the auditorium, Auntie Zhang laughed when I (teasingly) asked if she enjoyed making contributions to activated old age. “This is all just for fun. Of course it looks like we’re having fun! We have nothing else to do!” But she went on to say that she was going to have as much fun as she can, while she can. Auntie Zhang, like so many of my dance group interlocutors, worries a lot about what will become of her when she gets older and her health begins to fail. Her tone usually changes when she begins talking about getting older. In the auditorium that day, she told me that she does not think that her own old age will be “cool” or “complete”: “The thing is,” she concluded, “when you get old what you need to do is let go of any hope you had for the future.”

I admit that the bleakness of this last statement surprised me in the moment. It was so dark, and so different from the light banter that was the norm in spaces like the Old Age

University. But when I went home that night and reflected on Auntie Zhang's words in the quiet of my own apartment, with my notes gathered around me in one place, I came to realize that conversations like this had come up repeatedly during the course of my research. People told me on a regular basis that while they enjoy being able to access to recreational resources, they also understood that there were limits to what these resources could accomplish. Many said things like “玩一天，算一天”— “live a day, play a day,” referring to their attitudes about how to eke out as much pleasure from their lives while they still can. Many others spoke of living off of “稀饭钱”— “porridge money,” referring to their limited pensions that could fund their daily meals and recreational activities but not much else. Some were even more frank than Auntie Zhang about what they saw to be the relationship between the state's promotion of recreational activities for elders and the actual fate that awaited aging people. “They say that if you don't dance and if you don't play mahjong then you'll start paying attention to politics,” an interlocutor I call Auntie Li once told me, laughing. She went on to say that though she comfortably affords her current lifestyle, she's actually only one illness away from financial ruin. “They keep us dancing and playing! But our hearts are actually full of bitterness.”

All this is to say that while retirees do take advantage of the resources offered by initiatives promoting “active” or “civilized” aging, many of them also know that it comes at a price. These new notions about what old age ought to be has replaced the traditional Confucian ethics and moral hierarchies, under which the superiority of elders was taken for granted. If Auntie Zhang or Auntie Li had been born a century earlier, their moral obligations to obey and serve their own elders would have already been fulfilled by this point in their lives. Since they have both also managed to marry off their children, and those children have continued the family line by having more children, there would have

been nothing more they need to do to deserve the respect and service of those younger than they. However, in contemporary China, that is no longer enough. Under the new Chinese social order driven by market reforms and an insatiable hunger to modernize, no one— not even elders— has the luxury of being able to rest on their laurels. Everyone must continue striving until the end.

This was made particularly clear to me in an interview with a Chengdu city official who, by way of answering my question about what the municipal government is doing to help elders remain active, replied that elders actually need to take responsibility for their own “精神生活,” or “internal spiritual life”. Jabbing her finger into her desk for emphasis, she exclaimed, “they need to keep active and keep sane! If they will not do this, then there is nothing I can do to help them.” Under the new status quo, elders are now responsible for their own senses of well being, for creating their own sense of meaning, and to make a place for themselves in this new moral framework where elders are not superior by virtue of their places in the social hierarchy. The new assumption is that elders are burdens to their children and to the state unless they strive to be otherwise. It is no wonder, then, that their hearts are full of bitterness.

### *Conclusion*

People are no longer sure what it means to be old in the People’s Republic of China. The state certainly has some ideas in mind, but it is unclear whether these new calls for elders to remain active and self-sufficient in old age can calm people’s natural fears about aging amidst so much uncertainty. Of course, the picture is not entirely gloomy: in this chapter, I detailed some of the ways in which de-stabilized expectations of old age have allowed people to try on novel ways of aging that deviate from historical precedents. Having neither the option nor the constraints of following in their mothers’ or

grandmothers' footsteps, some retired women I met are figuring out how to grow old on their own terms. However, there are limits to this freedom: in this chapter, I have also described how previously agreed upon social hierarchies have become upended in China, leaving people who would have otherwise occupied the top of the moral hierarchy due to their seniority confused about how to assess their own significance. The historical precedent is that people had no choice about whether or not to get old— you were lucky to make it into old age, and once you arrived, you knew exactly what it entailed. But when the moral framework that made this certainty possible disappeared, *who gets to decide which part of the life course you are in?* In this chapter, I have shown that for some retirees and elders in urban China, attempts to answer this existential question requires a performance of vitality and self-sufficiency that serves as a thin veil for the distress about the future that bubbles just under the surface.

Beneath these two threads, I have pointed to the role of the state in managing and promoting a new kind of old age that places the onus on the elders to provide for themselves both materially and psychologically. Scholars of China have been noting the rise of official discourse encouraging self-reliance in post-Reform China for many years (cf. Farquhar and Zhang 2005; Thogerson and Ni 2008). The changes in how people experience old age that I point to in this chapter are very much part of this larger story. However, new ways of imagining and inhabiting a stage of the life course is a significant development that merits more attention. I contend that it is necessary to examine the current sea change in how stages of the life course are defined and treated in the years going forward, as well as what is expected out of people in each life stage. Especially in a world with so many aging populations, we must look to how societies remake and reimagine old age if we are to understand transformations in the moral landscape.

Radical transformations in the way that people understand and practice old age occurring in the span of a single generation are not limited to China. While conducting

research on dementia and the social lives of elders in rural Japan in the 1990s, John Traphagan encountered similar sentiments from retirees who had grown old in the midst of the demographic transition. In fact, one of his interlocutors shares an insight remarkably similar to that of Ms. Liu's. "At sixty-six," a male interviewee said, "I don't feel at all like I am an old person (*toshiyori*). It used to be when I was younger that if you made it to fifty, you were really an old person, but it is totally different now because the life expectancy has gone up so much. It feels strange to me to be in the Old Persons Club, and I didn't want to join it at all" (Traphagan 2000: 95). Joining the "Old Persons Club" meant fully embracing the fact that one is old. Moreover, fully identifying as an "old person" meant accepting and embodying culturally accepted markers of old age, which included wearing clothing made of darker fabrics and cut in roomier silhouettes and, for women, adopting shorter hairstyles (112). In other words, growing old was not only a biological inevitability but also crossing a very clear-cut boundary into a phase of life meaningfully differentiated from others through specific and socially agreed upon markers. This is precisely what Margaret Mead argued when she pointed out the link between phases of the life course with cultural practices.

The trouble, of course, is that culture itself is also fluid. Writing in 1928, Mead attributes Samoan girls' relatively smooth adolescence to the fact that their social world offers a relatively stable moral landscape: there is no doubt about what adulthood entails and no available alternatives. By contrast, their American counterparts must choose from a plethora of conflicting ideals and role models during their journeys to adulthood, resulting in years of confusion and tumult as they experiment with different possible identities. Yet, as Mead herself notes in the 1973 foreword to *Coming of Age*, the Samoan society she described in 1928 no longer exists. Changes swept through the South Pacific throughout the twentieth century and rendered many elements of Samoan society unrecognizable. The same global forces that transformed the way that Samoans conduct their daily lives also

changed the way that young women move through the life course. Seeking to admonish her western readers against drawing too many generalizations from her earlier work, she writes, “do not confuse yourselves and the Samoan people by expecting to find life in the Mau’an Islands of American Samoa as I found it (xxiv). This warning also serves as a relevant lesson here. This chapter provides a snapshot of how contemporary urban Chinese retirees— and in particular retired women—contend with shifting definitions and practices of old age. I have paid particular attention to how China’s tumultuous political changes have paved the way for commensurate changes in how ordinary people navigate life course transitions. However, like these political and social circumstances that serve as the backdrop to this story, the ways that people engage with the aging process will continue to change over time.

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<sup>1</sup>Sunflower seeds are a traditional snack in China, especially when accompanied by tea. They are a lot of work to eat because Chinese people do not usually put handfuls of them into their mouths and spit out the shells afterwards, but rather crack open the shells one by one to eat the flesh inside. Eating them is considered a way to pass idle time— for example while watching television or having a long chat with a friend. Perhaps because retirees are thought to be the only people at leisure to indulge in such activities on a regular basis, they are stereotyped to be an “old people’s snack.”

<sup>2</sup>To be fair, this is likely due to the (correct) assessment that the public doesn’t much care about the goings-on at the Old Age University.

### Chapter 3

#### Families under (peer) pressure

##### I. On their own, together

Retired women living in urban China contend with a fundamental tension in their lives: on the one hand, they are more free than ever before to live life on their own terms; on the other, expectations that older women devote themselves to their families remain salient in Chinese society, and can become especially intense as these women become grandmothers. For women who participate in common-interest social groups like congregational dance groups, an additional layer of complication may arise as they struggle to balance these two diametrically opposed forces. Dance groups are made up of people who come together of their own volition in order to pursue personal interests. With the exception of some groups that are formed by *shequ* officials, urban dance groups are almost entirely self-organized. The groups are, in essence, held together by participants' desires to engage in self-cultivation, and to spend time on relationships and hobbies of their own choosing. This means that when any one person chooses to honor her family obligations over her own interests, including dancing, others in the dance group are also affected. And yet, creating a life of one's own outside of family obligations is easier wished for than done. In a society where putting one's family before one's own interests is still considered the morally righteous course of action, choosing to honor one's own concerns over that of one's family requires the support, validation, and in some cases forceful persuasion from one's friends. In other words, in order for these women to live lives of their own, they must stick together.

This chapter examines the uneasy balance that retired women try to strike when confronted with tensions between self-interest and morally-laden family obligations in post-reform China, as well as how friendships figure into this fraught calculus.

I begin with a discussion about an internet meme that went viral among retired

women's WeChat groups while I was conducting research. This meme, and the conversations it elicited, clarifies why women of this generation feel they can no longer rely on either the state or their own children for security. It also reveals why friendships have become an increasingly crucial means of social support for China's baby-boomer generation. I then present three cases that showcase just how tensions between family duties and individual interests can collide for retired women who are grandmothers, focusing on how their friendships interweave into these already complex situations. The first case demonstrates the ways in which congregational dancers use social pressure to bully a group member who, according to the group's estimation, spends too much time and energy tending to family duties. The second case further illuminates how much dance groups rely on participants' continued commitment to the group and how group dynamics can be threatened when participants choose other priorities. In the third case, I zero in on two friends whose very different styles of managing these aforementioned tensions between self-interest and family duty threatens to come between them. I conclude by analyzing these findings in the context of the concept of neo-familism (Yan 2018) and broader discussions of kinship and friendship in anthropology.

### *Self-reliance and mutual care*

In early summer 2017, one of my interlocutors from the Dancing Beauties dance group posted an internet meme in group's WeChat forum. It was a photo of four People's Daily newspapers stacked one on top of another so that only the headlines were visible. Together, the headlines and their accompanying dates--circled in red-- told the story of China's rapidly evolving state-society relations with succinct and almost poetic clarity:

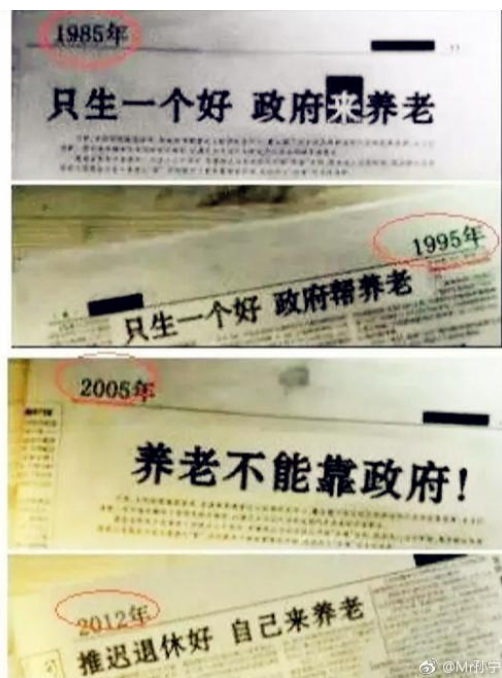


Figure 8: The People's Daily Meme

1985: Having one child is good; the state will provide eldercare  
 1995: Having one child is good; the state will help provide eldercare  
 2005: Do not rely on the state for eldercare  
 2012: Delaying retirement is good; provide your own eldercare

I discovered very early on in my fieldwork that I would not be able to carry out research on congregational dancers without WeChat, China's most popular social media and messaging app. Resolutely defying the conventional wisdom about retirees' aversions to the internet and social media, my interlocutors spent an incredible amount of time attending to WeChat— hanging out in large group chats with each other, taking and posting photos, and scrolling through friends' posts to find photos to "like." When I finally downloaded the app and joined the group chats, I ended up quickly shutting off notifications and message alerts on my phone because it turned out that the women sent hundreds of messages a day to each other. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I often drove myself to distraction trying to mine these WeChat conversations for deeper layers of meaning before accepting the futility of such an endeavor.

Sending funny photos and other viral internet content is common practice in the dancers' WeChat groups. Most of the time, however, everyone allows these posts to pass by without comment; long stretches of chat histories entail nothing more than continuous non-sequiturs. For example, directly before the eldercare meme appeared, someone had posted an article about foods to avoid in hot weather, which was followed by a video of a golden retriever wearing overalls, to which someone else responded with a gif of Vladimir Putin waving to a pigeon. This meme was elicited a different reaction. Within minutes of its appearance, several people chimed in with snarky one-liners and laughing face emojis. Several others added slightly more serious commentary: "They really fooled us!" wrote Jun, who was laid off in 1999, one year after her husband divorced her. "Delay retirement? As if anyone had a choice!" wrote Ruiqing, who was laid off from her job in 2002 and now works part-time as an accountant for an auto repairs company. The group sustained this discussion for over thirty minutes before the chat resumed its usual rhythm of silly gifs, web links, and posed photos.

By virtue of their ages, the late-middle aged and elderly women who participate in collective dance groups have endured some of the brunt of China's dramatic social changes. Most people who participate in collective dance groups belong to China's baby-boom generation, born in the years between 1949 and 1965. Many came of age during the Cultural Revolution and never completed their formal educations. They were assigned jobs in State-Owned Enterprises or other urban work units upon completing vocational training, but faced layoffs and forced retirements when the state launched SOE reforms in the late 1990s and 2000s. These women are now in their fifties to seventies, their children are grown, and they are facing old age in circumstances radically different from what they anticipated when they were younger.

A few days after the initial appearance of the People's Daily meme in the Dancing Beauties' WeChat group, the image appeared again in my own WeChat inbox accompanied

by a note: “we should to talk about this when you come over later.” The message was from a woman I call Auntie Yu. She was not a member of either of the dance groups that I primarily worked with during the course of my dissertation fieldwork, but I had kept in touch with her off and on for a few years about her participation in an all-female choir group, and I had an appointment for a follow-up interview with her later that day.

When I arrived at Auntie Yu’s apartment in a quiet residential suburb in the afternoon, she wasted no time before getting to the point. The meme had evidently spread like wildfire through retirees’ WeChat accounts and group chat rooms. Auntie Yu said that the image had been circulated among her friends in both her choir group as well as her prayer group (she converted to Christianity shortly after retiring), and from what she described, it sounded like it had caused as much of a commotion in those group chats as it had in the Dancing Beauties’ group. Auntie Yu explained that the meme had resonated with her deeply. “They told us that they would take care of it,” she said, in a voice layered with anger and defiance. “That’s why they told us all to have one child. And now that we’re actually old they’re backing down from their promises. They can’t take care of us, we’ve got to take care of ourselves [靠自己].” If we’re lucky enough to have friends,” she concluded, “maybe we can take care of each other [互相靠].”

Auntie Yu has one adult son who was born in 1985, six years after the one-child policy was implemented. He displayed tremendous athletic abilities as a child, so she and her husband poured all their resources into cultivating his talents. Their efforts seemed to pay off when he was signed by a team in Europe and moved abroad, but then he aged out of the sport and returned to China with no college education and unpromising job prospects. He eventually found work as a children’s coach at a school near the city center. He went on to marry a woman with a stable if not lucrative career, and the couple now lives

with the wife's parents, who take care of their toddler son while they work long hours. Auntie Yu is not disappointed in how her son turned out. He is hard working and kind, and he visits whenever he can. In an ideal world, she would spend more time with him and her grandchild, but understands that he cannot be in two places at once. Instead, her resentment is reserved for the state—or as she calls it—“them.” When I asked her whether she thought the newspaper headlines were real or rather photo-shopped by a someone hoping to make a point, she waved her hand impatiently in front of my face and told me that it did not matter: regardless of its provenance, the image captured an essential truth about her personal experience of the past forty years. “We were the generation that got the worst of it,” she said. “When we were young they demanded so many sacrifices from us, and in return they promised us that they would educate our children, make sure we have jobs, and then take care of us when we are old. Now they have done nothing.”

“Nothing” is a bit of an exaggeration in this case. Auntie Yu and her husband both have solid pensions from their former public sector jobs. They own their home and have above-average healthcare plans as part of their pension packages. Since I have known them, they have taken two domestic vacations per year and at the time of this interview were planning an expensive trip to Spain and England with their friends. When I tried to point this out, Auntie Yu cackled and explained that the only way they can afford the trips is because one of their travel buddies is a part owner of a tour company and can get them special deals.

I brought the conversation back to eldercare and asked Auntie Yu what she plans to do now that the state can no longer be relied upon. She told me that she and her husband intend to co-invest in a large property outside the city with a number of their old friends, and eventually move there when they get older. The idea is that they will keep each other company and take care of each other as they physically decline. From the perspective of someone who lives in the United States or any other place where self-funded retirements

are the norm, the source of Auntie Yu's discontent may be somewhat of a puzzle. She faces no immediate financial hardship and is even among the lucky few who retired with a pension. She has an active social life and gets on well with her adult son and daughter-in-law. In other words, she is well supported and will likely continue to be well supported even if she becomes ill or disabled in her old age— by all measures, she has much to be grateful for and very little to complain about.

To understand why Auntie Yu is unhappy with her state of affairs despite having many resources at her disposal, one needs to simply return to the People's Daily newspaper meme. The key here is how each policy change is presented as a matter of fact and without reference to earlier realities. When it comes to the business of aging, Auntie Yu and her husband— along with millions of others— did not know that they were on their own until the ground had already shifted underneath them. In its relentless pursuit of modernity and development over the past few decades, the state has implemented numerous whiplash-inducing policies that have left this particular generation of people scrambling to come up with ways to take care of themselves. Auntie Yu has focused her ire on the one-child policy, which forced her to put all her eggs in one basket, so to speak, and invest heavily in one son who may not be able to repay her in the form of eldercare due to the many competing claims on his time and money. But the adverse effects of this policy were unquestionably exacerbated by the economic reforms that broke the state's earlier promise to take care of urban residents from the cradle to the grave.

As I have addressed in previous chapters, China is undergoing a major demographic transition. The population is becoming older and older, and at the same time, the state is shrinking the social safety net further and further. The most high profile solution that the state has offered to China's oncoming eldercare crisis is to promote the Confucian ethic of filial piety in order to guilt families into taking care of their own elders. Posters, commercials, and public service announcements promoting filial piety have also sprung up

in Chinese cities in recent years. I saw them on a daily basis in Chengdu, where they would appear on buildings, fencing, and bus stops. In 2013, the state even passed a “filial piety” law that made it illegal for adult children to neglect their elderly parents. The law is vague—children are required to visit their parents “often” and “occasionally” send greetings, which makes it difficult to enforce.

In a heartbreaking case that perfectly captures how kinship ideologies on the aging process collide with new post-reform realities, in the winter of 2017, a widower in his 80s named Mr. Han placed himself for adoption. One of his sons had immigrated to Canada about fifteen years ago. He is estranged from his other son. Mr. Han told his neighbors that he was terrified of dying alone. Feeling like he had no recourse, he posted the adoption ad at a busy bus stop. It read, “searching for a caring family to adopt me until my death.”

Mr. Han indeed died alone later that same year. His neighbors found his body a few days after he had already passed away. When Mr. Han’s story went viral on the Chinese internet, commentators were quick to blame his sons. “The two sons do not support their father because of their modern education,” one wrote. “China’s five thousand years of tradition has been ruined by modern times.” This may be an understandable conclusion to draw, but the evidence does not support it. In fact, scholarly research has found that filial piety is not necessarily declining. Sociologist Becky Hsu’s three-year project on Chinese definitions of happiness found that young people frequently refer to their ability (or lack thereof) to perform their filial duties to their parents as a primary metric of personal happiness. In other words, if people are truly unable to take care of their elderly parents, it is unlikely due to the younger generation’s weak moral fiber or lack of respect for Chinese cultural traditions. Instead, filial duties are neglected because circumstances render such acts of care financially or geographically impossible. The result is that even someone with enviable personal resources like Auntie Yu still has to find her own way to make up for the care that the state promised her in exchange for her reproductive sacrifices. Having made

these sacrifices to no avail, she has to find other sources of support since she also cannot rely on her only son. At least for now, Auntie Yu has decided that her best bet is to continue cultivating her friendships in hope that these bonds will pay off in the future.

This chapter examines the bonds that are both threatened and forged in the wake of the state's broken promises. It traces the consequences of some of the reform era's signature policy changes through the mundane misunderstandings and heartaches that occur in the private lives of retired women and their families. It is also a chapter about the complex links between kinship and friendship-- and more specifically about how new forms of intra-generational solidarities can render old assumptions about Chinese families suspect. While the study of kinship has a long tradition in anthropology, the literature on friendship is considerably thinner. According to scholars like Pitt-Rivers (1973) and Carrier (1999), this relative oversight can be attributed to an often-held assumption that kinship ties are permanent, universal, and compulsory while friendships are ephemeral, idiosyncratic and voluntary. By assuming that "instrumental" relationships and "emotional" ones are mutually exclusive, researchers have not only underestimated friendship's social power but also overlooked how personal, affective relationships can be used as a means for self-preservation.

In what follows, I break down the apparent contradiction between the rise of self-reliance in Chinese society and the critical importance of collective social enterprises for personal cultivation. I present three cases that illustrate the ways in which retired women who participate in congregational dance groups use friendship as a way to test out new norms and new solutions for their troubles at home.

## II. Three Case Studies

### *Case one: Bullying Qiu*

The Dancing Beauties group held its annual end-of-year party at an upscale karaoke bar in one of Chengdu's poshest neighborhoods. Karaoke in China is perhaps best known as an evening activity for groups of young professionals and businessmen; deals are negotiated between rounds of singing and young female hostesses lubricate the conversation with ample amounts of liquor. But at two o'clock in the afternoon, when private rooms are available at an early bird discount, karaoke bars are havens for retirees who wish to belt out songs from revolutionary-era films and pop singles from the 1980s and 1990s. On this occasion, the Dancing Beauties group's intrepid leader Teacher Yuan booked a room several weeks in advance with money left over from the group's monthly dues and built up anticipation for the event with frequent WeChat reminders. On the appointed day and time, the group met in the lobby and made its way upstairs to the second floor, where private rooms lined both sides of a long, brightly lit corridor.

Everyone was settling in to the usual greetings, snacks, and song selections when a woman I had never seen before walked into the room. She was short statured, auburn-haired, and looked to be in her late fifties. She glanced around a little nervously before someone spotted her and ran toward the door where she stood, shouting greetings along the way. Soon, she was mobbed by nearly the entire room. Someone asked her if she had lost weight. Someone else complimented her purple sweater. Everyone wanted to know how the baby was. I was left sitting alone in the far corner, utterly confused by the fact that this seeming stranger was being treated like an old friend. By this time I had been a member of the Dancing Beauties group for four months. Though some people attended dance practices only sporadically, it did not seem possible that I could have overlooked someone entirely. The mystery was short-lived. I soon learned that the newcomer was

actually a four-year veteran of the group named Qiu. Her son and daughter-in-law had welcomed their first child less than two weeks before my arrival in Chengdu, and Qiu had been away because she had taken on full-time caregiving duties for the infant boy.

I was far from the only one who found Qiu's seemingly abrupt re-appearance onto the dance group social scene noteworthy. As the afternoon wore on and people took turns singing their karaoke selections, Qiu fielded a number of questions--some of them quite pointed-- about why she had failed to keep in touch during her absence and why she had been away for so long. She demurred on most of the questions, claiming that she was simply too busy to keep up with the WeChat group and was too tired to come to dance classes. Her friends did not let her off the hook so easily. As the karaoke session concluded and as we walked to a nearby restaurant for dinner, people continued to harangue her about how she was handling her transition into grandmother-hood.

It was clear that Qiu prioritized maintaining good relations with her son and daughter-in-law. It was even clearer that most of the other women interpreted Qiu's devotion to her son's nuclear family as weakness or even capitulation. "When is your daughter-in-law going to let you have your next night off?" a group member named Jiaming asked as we sat down to eat. Her thinly veiled suggestion that Qiu was at the mercy of her daughter-in-law—a direct reversal of the customary hierarchy in traditional Chinese families—caused quite a stir around the table. Several of the women chuckled and even clapped, and everyone directed her glances at Qiu to see how she would respond. Qiu laughed along but did not answer. The teasing reached its peak when, at the end of the meal, Qiu ordered extra portions of food to bring home for the young couple. "Oh you are such an obedient mother-in-law!" exclaimed a normally soft-spoken group member named Yun. Again, the whole table burst into laughter. Perhaps because it had come from the gentle-tempered Yun, or perhaps because the comment was particularly barbed, Qiu's shoulders dropped and a deep blush crept over her cheeks. The word Yun had used for

“obedient” was *ting hua*, literally translated to “listen to orders.” It is a term that is often used when praising children for good behavior but is never applied to an adult without some irony or deprecation in the subtext. For the first time that day, Qiu attempted to defend herself: she explained that her son and daughter-in-law loved the type of food served at the restaurant but had not had the chance to enjoy it since the baby’s arrival. Unfortunately, this explanation only added fuel to the fire. Several people laughed, and someone pointedly jeered, “look at you being so filial!” Again, by “praising” Qiu in a manner usually reserved for children (after all, filial piety is defined as respect for one’s *elders*), the women in the group aimed to draw attention to Qiu’s (in their esteem) transgressive behavior and to shame her for it.

It is crucial to note that while the women of the Dancing Beauties group invoke the language and norms of the traditional family hierarchy and use them as rhetorical weapons, they are actually not trying to enforce those norms. On the contrary, by taunting and insulting Qiu for her devotion to her family, they are building solidarity in an effort to establish new norms—ones that do not take a grandmother’s financial and emotional resources for granted. This is a feat that they cannot accomplish as individuals. The group’s overt cruelty toward Qiu can be explained by the fact that Qiu is crossing the picket line, so to speak, by continuing to make sacrifices on her adult children’s behalf. As the women’s reactions to Qiu’s decision to prioritize her grandmotherly duties over her commitment to the group demonstrate, there is significant social pressure to perform one’s ability to remain true to one’s extra-familial responsibilities.

At the end of the evening, Teacher Yuan suggested that Qiu and I catch the bus together since we happened to live in the same part of town. Under the increase scrutiny of her friends and group-mates, Qiu had been good-natured but rather cagey, rarely adding more than a few words to any exchange for fear the conversation might turn on her. It was only after we had sat down on the vinyl-covered seats in the back of the bus that Qiu

started to speak candidly about her situation. At my gentle urging, she revealed that she longed to return to the group and that though she adores her grandson, she resents that his presence keeps her from seeing her friends. She even admitted that she was glad that the end was in sight: her daughter-in-law's six months of maternity leave would soon be over, after which the baby would be sent to live with the daughter-in-law's parents in another city, thus releasing Qiu from her grandmother duties.

Qiu is hardly alone in her ambivalence: confusion and doubt seem to be the primary emotions for many women I spoke to when it comes to the choice (or rather the dichotomy, as they often do not have a choice) between taking care of their grandchildren full-time and getting to do what they want to do on a daily basis. They are all-too-aware that the power lies with their children, and that they must make the most out of whatever their kids decide. While Qiu made major social sacrifices in order to take care of her grandson, there would have been even greater repercussions had she refused: since he will soon be sent away, this might be her only chance to spend uninterrupted time with her grandson. Throughout our thirty-minute conversation, Qiu alternated between saying that she looking forward to having her own life back and that she was dreading the day when she would be separated from her grandchild.

Despite the relentless onslaught of not entirely good-humored taunting, the women in the Dancing Beauties dance group stopped short of asking Qiu to abdicate her grandmotherly responsibilities in favor of spending more time with the group. Though every woman asked her at some point when she would be able to come dance again, no one actually pressed her to take time off from her childcare duties or offered any practical suggestions for how to get away. Nevertheless, their bullying was clearly meant to send the message that Qiu's behavior was unacceptable to the group. Moreover, by casting Qiu in a child's role in their pointed jokes about filial piety and obedience, group members also sought to undermine Qiu's sense of personal autonomy and impress upon her that she

would not receive the group's support until she demonstrated that she could assert her independence from her son, his wife, and her grandchild. The result was that at the end of the evening, Qiu was more conflicted than ever about how to balance her duties to her family, to her dance group, and to herself.

#### *Case Two: Committing to Teacher Yuan*

A few weeks after the end-of-year karaoke party mentioned above, Teacher Yuan told the Dancing Beauties group that her son was expecting a child with his wife, due in late spring. The announcement immediately threw everyone into a panic. Young Chinese couples often require help after the birth of a child, and since Teacher Yuan had frequently mentioned her desire for a grandchild, people assumed that Teacher Yuan would wish to become a full-time grandmother and cancel dance classes for an indefinite amount of time after the baby's arrival. Teacher Yuan took great joy in correcting this assumption. "Not only will I keep teaching classes," she proclaimed, "I have also signed up for both the singing class *and* the African drums class at the Old Age University during the summer term!" When incredulous group members asked how she planned to balance these activities with caregiving duties, Teacher Yuan replied that the two sets of grandparents (meaning herself and her daughter-in-law's parents) would take turns caring for the baby. "It's unreasonable to expect me to drop everything," she explained. "I have my own life to live, you know!" At this, the group enthusiastically praised Teacher Yuan for her independent attitude and a few women who did not yet have grandchildren vowed to emulate her when their time came.

Teacher Yuan is intensely dedicated to the Dancing Beauties group and leads it with the precision and iron will of a military commander. Not only does she teach the group's weekly dance classes, but also single-handedly manages the group's finances, sets agendas, and makes announcements via WeChat. Her classes are technically free: though members

pay a 200RMB fee every ten weeks, this money is used to pay studio rental fees and any surplus amounts are placed into a slash fund that pays for group outings such as the karaoke party that Qiu attended. I will admit I was skeptical that Teacher Yuan would be able to follow through on her intentions when the baby arrived, but she proved me wrong. Her granddaughter was born in early May, and dance classes resumed after a brief two-week hiatus. She attended her Old Age University courses as planned and even organized a group day trip to the countryside to pick peaches in early July.

As it turned out, the group would be threatened not by Teacher Yuan's family commitments but rather by her disappointment in other group members' lack of commitment to the group. In late September, a few hours before the afternoon dance class was scheduled to begin, the Dancing Beauties' WeChat group became flooded with messages from people needing to excuse themselves due to various scheduling conflicts and illnesses. A few people usually excuse themselves each week, but this week had an unusual number of absences. By three o'clock, it was apparent that a majority of the class would be absent. Teacher Yuan had stayed silent while people were sending their regrets and excuses, but just a few minutes prior to the start of class she finally replied: "it looks like everyone is quite busy. After this semester is over, we will no longer hold this dance class."

When I arrived a few minutes late to the third-floor dance studio where classes are held, I saw that there were only five people present. This was the lowest turnout I had ever witnessed. Teacher Yuan made no mention of the absences and carried on with leading barre exercises and teaching new segments of choreography as usual. The class was interesting and challenging, and since there were so few people present, Teacher Yuan went out of her way to correct mistakes and provide individual feedback.

No one spoke of the ominous WeChat announcement until class was over. As we filed out of the studio building and into the parking lot, Jiaming gently approached Teacher

Yuan, who had headed straight for her electric scooter and was busy stuffing her belongings into the front basket. "Please give us another chance," Jiaming began. "I'll go home and tell the others that they need to stop taking breaks for no good reason." The rest of us gathered around. "I'll tell them to respect your time more," Jiaming continued as Teacher Yuan fussed with her scooter, pretending not to hear. "You take such pains with us and don't even charge us a fee! It's not right that they don't come." At this, Teacher Yuan finally looked up and began airing some of her long-held grievances. "It's not that I don't want to teach the class anymore," she complained. "It's that people really don't seem to have time. Though I don't know why they don't have time! I mean, I personally bathed my granddaughter before I came here! I handed her off to my daughter-in-law and told her to take the baby away quickly so that I could make it here on time!"

All of us gathered around her scooter agreed that it should not be so difficult to commit to something for just a few hours per week. Someone else added that she would tell the others to take the class more seriously and to prioritize it more, but Teacher Yuan was not finished. "I have never taken a break, you know! I have missed class, ever! In all these years!" It was true that for entire duration of my fieldwork, Teacher Yuan never once canceled or postponed a class despite the fact that no one else displayed such steadfast commitment. "Yes, Sister Yuan, Jiaming agreed, switching to an affectionate term of address. "*Ni zheng xingku le*" [you have worked so hard / suffered so much.] And in the future if you need to take a break just let us know! We can be flexible to your schedule too! Just tell us that we need to practice by ourselves for the week." But this evidently was not the solution that Teacher Yuan was looking for. "I just don't understand how people can't be disciplined enough to come to a class just once a week!" she complained. "I never schedule anything for class days. People ask me to go on vacation, go out of town, and I tell them that if it conflicts with class then I can't go. I've missed so many chances to go on trips because of this!" To further demonstrate her own commitment to dancing and the bonds

that form in dance groups, Teacher Yuan also shared that she attends another weekly class on Saturdays (in which she is a student and is taught by a higher-level teacher) and that she has missed only three classes in ten years. This prompted several people to blurt out, “we hope that we will have the chance to follow you for ten years as well, Sister Yuan!”

Teacher Yuan, however, was entirely immune to entreaties. “We can still be friends,” she said with an air of finality, at which everyone appeared stricken. To soften the blow, she told the group that she would still organize get-togethers once in a while so that everyone can stay in touch. The others immediately protested. “Oh no that won’t do Sister Yuan! We depend on this class! It’s so important to us! We must keep going, please have faith in us!” Someone admitted that our behavior has not been good as a class. “Of course you are losing faith in us!” Another person added that we depend on the class for the exercise, and that just getting together once in a while would be a poor substitute. After an additional fifteen minutes of abject pleading and pledges to be better in the future, Teacher Yuan finally seemed somewhat placated, but still would not promise anything.

Later in the evening, Jiaming wrote a long message in the WeChat group thanking Teacher Yuan for her generosity and her guidance, pledging that everyone will work harder and with more dedication in the future, and begging her to continue leading the dance classes. Others, including those who had been absent, soon chimed in. Most people offered similar apologies and assurances that things would be different going forward, but a few went even further. Someone posted a screenshot of an appointment confirmation page for an eye exam. Someone else posted a thermometer showing a feverish temperature. Yun, who is tall and willowy, wrote a lengthy explanation that she had been recruited to model for a *qipao* (a type of traditional Chinese dress that is very figure-revealing) competition and that the organizers had scheduled the dress rehearsal to take place on the same day as the dance class against her wishes. She also provided a screenshot of the rehearsal schedule, emphatically adding that she was very upset about having to miss class

and that she would never do favors for anyone again. It was only when Ying, one of the group's most dedicated attendees, wrote to say that her husband was in the hospital with appendicitis and expressed her regrets for missing class that Teacher Yuan finally broke her silence: "I know about your husband, Ying! You take care of yourself too!"

In the end, Teacher Yuan relented and the Dancing Beauties group continued to hold weekly classes at the dance studio. However, this episode revealed how dance groups can demand loyalty and commitment from their members, and in some sense, operate according to their own internal moral logics. It is significant that Teacher Yuan made such a big deal about not allowing her new granddaughter to take precedence over the group, and that she only broke her pouting silence upon hearing of Ying's husband's illness. Over the course of the year that I spent with them, I slowly learned that there was a hierarchy of excuses for missing class among the women in the Dancing Beauties group: taking care of grandchildren was seen as the least legitimate reason, choosing to honor another personal commitment (like Yun's *qipao* competition) was somewhere in the middle, and skipping class for a spouse or parent's illness was almost universally accepted and supported. For example, though the group bullied Qiu for dropping out of the group for several months to attend to her newborn grandson, people were actually quite supportive when another group member had to take a similar-length leave the following year to help her father recover from a stroke.

The Dancing Beauties are not the only group to have these sorts of unspoken rules. In the weeks leading up to a major dance competition, Auntie Wang, the de-facto leader of the Sunset Dance group, sent the group a very serious WeChat message explicitly stating that the only acceptable reasons for missing practice were medical issues with one self or one's parents. Then, when Auntie Wang's pregnant daughter went into labor several weeks earlier than expected, Auntie Wang took the time to send continuous apologetic messages from the hospital maternity ward asking everyone for their understanding. I mentioned this

story to Auntie Yu (who, again, is not in either of the dance groups I worked with but participates in other common-interest social groups with women her age) in a later conversation, expecting that she would share my surprise and amusement at Auntie Wang's behavior. Instead, she told me that such behavior was par for the course: "in my choir group," she said, "we don't ever talk about our kids. You leave those things behind when you come in."

According to the internal moral logic of these groups, participants are duty-bound to tend to their parents and to their spouses in times of need, but extending this same care to one's children and grandchildren is seen as a personal choice somehow different to or outside of family obligations. The difference likely comes down to how these relationships map onto the rapidly changing social contract laid out by the People's Daily meme: while the traditional moral frameworks of filial piety and family duty apply when dealing with the older generations, these women know very well that their only children may never be able to reciprocate these acts of care, and thus approach these relationships with a shrewder, more calculating attitude.

Having established that retired women participating in congregational dance groups experience a great deal of pressure in their efforts to navigate emerging moral logics concerning the tensions between family, self, and friendship, I turn now to discussing how different backgrounds and different personalities may lead individuals to handle these pressures.

### *Case 3: Putting a price on care*

My final example centers on a dispute between two women in the Sunset Dance group named Wenxie and Liwei. Though they share a close friendship and generally get along well, their different approaches to grandmother-hood is a source of continuous tension. They had apparently already been fighting about it for years, but I first learned of

these conflicts in the winter of 2016, when Wenxie, Liwei, and I decided to go shopping together one day after dance practice. There was a seasonal mall on the outskirts of the city that specialized in food and decorations for the upcoming Spring Festival, and our plan was to each go to our respective homes after practice, change clothes, eat lunch, then meet at a nearby bus station where we could catch a direct bus to the shopping center. The New Year festival was just a few weeks away and all three of us wanted to buy snacks and gifts for our families. Liwei and I met at the appointed time and sat down at the bus stop to wait for Wenxie. Five minutes passed. Liwei sent a message to Wenxie on WeChat. No response. After another five minutes, Liwei called Wenxie to demand to know her whereabouts. From overhearing Liwei's half of the conversation, I gathered that Wenxie was held up at home because her three year-old grandson was eating his lunch very slowly and Wenxie could not leave until the boy was properly fed. She would be at least another fifteen minutes late. This infuriated Liwei. When she hung up the phone, she immediately turned to me to complain. "The boy has parents!" she began. "Why does she have to feed him when she knows there are people waiting for her?" Liwei has two grandchildren of her own and takes pride in the fact that she does not let them interfere with her own social life. Over the next ten minutes, she continued to send angry messages to Wenxie on WeChat telling her to hurry up. Again turning to me, she explained that Wenxie was a very good friend of hers, or she would not be rushing her so aggressively. "You can only yell at people you know well," she declared as she composed yet another message on her phone, not even bothering to glance up to gauge my reaction. Liwei has an authoritative air and rarely solicits others' opinions. Many of the other women in the Sunset Dance group look up to her and follow her lead for this reason.

This was only one of the ways that she differs from Wenxie, who is known in the Sunset Dance group for being accommodating and deferential. Despite having very little in common on the surface, Liwei and Wenxie are indeed good friends. Whereas Liwei grew

up in Chengdu and has educated relatives who are government officials and university professors, Wenxie is from the countryside and moved to Chengdu about ten years ago to accompany her daughter, a self-made entrepreneur who now makes about one million RMB per year.<sup>2</sup> They speak with different accents: Liwei in her standard Chengdu dialect and Wenxie with a melodic provincial drawl. Liwei prefers long dresses in floral patterns and is nearly ten inches taller than Wenxie, who is under five feet and likes to wear branded athletic gear. Their different backgrounds are so readily apparent and their friendship so unlikely that they sometimes draw curious looks from strangers. Had they not been brought together by joining the same congregational dance group, it is unlikely that they would have ever met at all.

On separate occasions, they each told me that they enjoyed the other's company because they can be at ease around each other. "She understands me so I don't have to explain myself so much" Wenxie said, before cracking a joke about the fact that many people in Chengdu do not even understand her accent. But as this scene at the bus stop clearly demonstrated, their unlikely pairing of personalities came with some challenges. I frequently heard them bickering during dance practices, and they also frequently complained about each other to me and to the other dance group members. A recurring fight is over Wenxie's wardrobe. Wenxie's daughter showers her with expensive gifts like clothes, shoes, bags, and jewelry, which Wenxie loves to show off to the dance group. Liwei seems to resent this, and unlike the other women in the group who effusively compliment Wenxie on her expensive fashions, Liwei takes every opportunity to express her contempt for them. She returned to the topic again while we stood at the bus stop: "She's always asking me, 'guess what brand my coat is!' and I always tell her that I can't tell because I don't care about brands." A few summers before, when everyone in Chengdu was wearing off-brand Croc sandals, Wenxie had wanted a pair like her friends' but her daughter presented her with an authentic pair that cost over 400RMB instead. At the bus stop, Liwei

recalled the shoes with disdain: "what a waste!" "In any case," she said. "Wenxie can't carry off most of the expensive clothes she wears because she is so short."

When Wenxie finally arrived some thirty minutes after our agreed-upon time, Liwei greeted her by venting her frustrations about having to wait. Wenxie tried to defend herself by explaining that she was delayed because her grandson wanted second helpings and the food needed to be re-heated. Liwei, however, became even angrier upon hearing this. "Well then his parents can take care of it! You could have just gotten up and left and let somebody else feed him more food! Why do you have to be the one to give him seconds? We were waiting for you!" Wenxie offered a placating smile, but did not answer. Liwei tried again, this time even more forcefully: "there were other people to take care of your grandson, but we were waiting for you!" Wenxie laughed and shrugged but again did not answer. She seemed to know that there was nothing she could say to smooth over the differences in outlook she and Liwei had on the subject: while Liwei believed that honoring appointments with friends should take precedent over a toddler's whims, Wenxie prioritized her grandchild's needs even if it meant making friends wait in the cold. I stayed out of it. This was clearly an old disagreement and neither woman was likely to be moved by the thoughts of a young interloper.

We boarded the bus after a few moments of rather awkward silence. Thankfully, normal conversation resumed well before we reached our destination and Liwei did not raise the issue again for the rest of the afternoon. We all headed home at the end of the night with full shopping bags and in good spirits. I left with the impression that Wenxie simply had more traditional ideas about family obligations than Liwei did. What I did not learn until later was that Wenxie had already taken actions regarding her childcare duties that could not be considered "traditional" by any stretch of the imagination.

Wenxie lives with her son, his second wife, and her young grandson. Her son moved to Chengdu soon after his wedding to his first wife in hopes of replicating his sister's

phenomenal success. Instead, he found a middling sales job that required frequent travel. Tired of being left alone so much, his wife left him for another man and took their daughter-- Wenxie's only grandchild at the time-- with her to her new husband's home in Mianyang, a city about two hours north of Chengdu. Wenxie's second daughter-in-law is a woman from a rural village in eastern Sichuan, not far from where Wenxie herself was raised. Wenxie disapproved of this relationship from the outset, mostly because she believed her son should not settle for a rural woman now that he had a stable job in the city. However, the woman became pregnant and a wedding was quickly arranged. Wenxie, still stung by the loss of her first grandchild, seemed to have a total change of heart when she learned that she would have a chance to dote on another baby. She invited her son and new daughter-in-law to move into her own apartment, which was paid for by her wealthy daughter. After the child— a boy named Wei Wei— was born, Wenxie fed and clothed him from her own modest income of 3000 RMB (about 450USD) per month, 2000RMB of which is given to her by her daughter as an allowance. The whole family lived together for a year and a half until the daughter-in-law grew tired of the living arrangement and convinced her husband to move their nuclear family into their own apartment. Wenxie was devastated. By both her own and Liwei's accounts, Wenxie was inconsolable that another daughter-in-law had denied her the chance to be a doting grandmother. Liwei told me that she used every tactic she could think of to convince Wenxie to stop dwelling on the matter: "I told her, 'if they won't let you take care of the baby then there's nothing you can do about it. Crying about it certainly won't help.'" Liwei invited Wenxie out for evening walks on a daily basis, and told her to try to forget about her troubles with her family and to focus on her own life instead.

After several months of cajoling from Liwei and other members of the Sunset Dance team, Wenxie finally took this advice to heart and began devoting more of her energy to her social life. Whereas before she would frequently skip dance practices when her presence

was needed at home, she began attending daily morning practices religiously. Her dancing improved, and she was took on additional responsibilities by making WeChat group announcements, collecting dues, and re-scheduling rehearsals when the weather prompted cancellations. She began to socialize more with Liwei and a few other friends, and even participated on sightseeing trip to Laos that was organized by one of the other dance group members.

Just as Wenxie had begun to become accustomed to her new life, her son and daughter-in-law suddenly asked to move back in with her. Like many young couples, they were finding it too difficult to work and raise a child at the same time; they wanted the round-the-clock childcare that only Wenxie could provide. Against Liwei's and other group members' urgings, Wenxie agreed to let them move back in. ("I told her to never complain to me about them again!" Liwei grumbled as she recounted this story to me.) Wenxie did, however, surprise her friends by placing the living arrangement under new conditions that required her son and daughter-in-law to compensate her for her efforts. She had previously performed all duties related to Wei Wei's care, including shopping for and preparing his meals, for free, but she now demanded monthly payments in exchange for this work.

Wenxie asks for— and receives— 300 RMB (about 45 USD) from her son each month, an amount so nominal that it hardly even covers Wei Wei's room and board, not to mention the fact that live-in nannies who provide the same type of care cost at least ten times more. Moreover, Wenxie confided to me that she does not actually need the money; she has no need to save for the future because she knows her daughter will provide for her. Instead, she charges this fee in order to regain a sense of control and dignity over a situation that had previously left her feeling humiliated. "What did they think?" she wondered aloud as we chatted about it after dance practice one day. "That they could just drop me and then pick back up when it was convenient for them? I won't be taken for granted again."

It is quite unusual for a Chinese grandmother to charge her own son for childcare.

While exchanging cash, favors, and other things of value between extended family members is a common and indeed foundational feature of Chinese social life (Yang 1994; Yan 1996), putting a price on the everyday acts of care that occurs within a domestic unit—much less for one's own grandson—is such an affront to established norms that Wenxie has told only a few of her closest friends about the arrangement for fear of judgment. All the women in the group would have empathized with Wenxie in so far as her need to obtain recognition and gratitude from her son and daughter in law, of course, but Wenxie did not know how they would react to the fee itself. For Wenxie, the money acted as a simplifying proxy for a complicated array of impulses. She wanted to convey her pain at having been cast aside, to mete out punishment to her son for mistreating her, and above all, to make sure that it never happened again. Rather than communicating these fraught emotions directly—an endeavor that offered no guarantee of a satisfactory outcome—Wenxie instead chose a symbolic stand-in that was both easier to ask for and could also serve as a monthly reminder that the terms of the family arrangement were now under her control.

Despite the unorthodox nature of Wenxie's conflict-resolution strategies, scholars have noted elsewhere that blurring the boundaries between care and resources has become commonplace in matters of kinship in the post-reform era. For example, Zhang Hong (2016) has argued that filial piety itself has been "re-calibrated" in order to adhere to post-reform realities, and that paying for a nurse for one's ill parent now "counts" as a filial act, even if one is not actually doing the nursing. In Wenxie's case, she was not up to the task of asking her son to be more attentive to her feelings outright. She was, however, able to extract something that counts as more or less the same thing.

When she was in a similar situation with her own family, Liwei handled things rather differently. Like Wenxie, Liwei's son has two children—a boy and a girl. When the boy was born, Liwei's son, his wife, and the newborn moved into Liwei and her husband's

spacious apartment. The idea was that Liwei would help her daughter-in-law with the baby during her six-month maternity leave, and then take on full-time childcare responsibilities after her daughter-law returned to work. According to Liwei, this arrangement lasted for two years and was ideal for everyone during that time. So when her son and daughter-in-law announced that they were moving to their own apartment, and told Liwei that their wish to get their son away from her “old-fashioned” child-rearing techniques were the reason behind the move, Liwei was both hurt and furious. Rather than trying to reach a detente and finding an acceptable outcome like Wenxie did, Liwei chose the scorched-earth method: she told her son and daughter-in-law that once they left they would never be welcomed back. To this day, Liwei told me, she remains on shaky terms with her son and even worse terms with her daughter-in-law, but she stubbornly maintains that she does not care. “I have lots of other things to occupy my time!” she insisted. She is certainly correct in this regard: Liwei is extremely active in the Sunset Dance group and is seemingly always flitting between one social outing and the next. And as is obvious in how she reacted to Wenxie’s plight, Liwei is also now a staunch evangelist for living life on one’s own terms.

Confronted with similar challenges, the friends reacted according to their temperaments and priorities. But in both cases, the Sunset Dance group— or the friendships between the women in the group, to be more precise, played a key role in how the women made their decisions and how they carried out their strategies. For Wenxie, the group provided social support and diversion when she was feeling abandoned by her son and wife. It also provided constant pressure to stand up to her son and daughter-in-law and advocate for her own needs in the form of her friend Liwei, whom she likely would have never met had they not both been members of the same dance group. For Liwei, the group offers consistent social connection, many opportunities for recreation, and, because the others treat her as something of a leader, a sense of self-importance.

Wenxie and Liwei have different personalities and different approaches. The same

can be said of Teacher Yuan, Qiu, Auntie Yu, and every other retired grandmother who participates in congregational dance groups. What they have in common is that they are all in the unfamiliar territory of trying to juggle grandmother-hood, friendship, and self-interest at the same time. There is no playbook for maintaining this delicate balance. However, the common-interest social groups in which they take part are certainly fertile places for new strategies and norms to develop, marinate, and circulate.

### **III. Beyond Family**

In “Neo-familism and the state in contemporary China” (2018), Yunxiang Yan quotes a villager named Mr. Yang who, in the course of a conversation about family members migrating to cities for work, goes on at length about what he calls “family problems, family solutions.” I cannot do justice to what the man says here, but the upshot of his speech is that people do what is best for their families because they have no choice: family is their only source of support after de-collectivization and market reforms. “No one outside the family can help you,” he asserts at one point. For Mr. Yang and his fellow villagers whose family members are dependent on one another for remittances from urban areas and care of children and the elderly at home, this assertion is undoubtedly true.

The situation for retired urban women with pensions and bountiful social lives is slightly more complicated. On the one hand, the state has made clear that they are largely on their own when it comes to planning for eldercare and that they had better rely on their own families. On the other, they have more choices than ever before: they can choose with whom they spend time, they can choose to prioritize their own needs over that of certain family members with little material consequence, and they can choose to be influenced by their friends, who may have a vested interest in enforcing new sets of norms that de-emphasize certain family ties in favor of shared personal interests. If the conditions that brought about neo-familism compels people like Mr. Yang to circle the wagons and focus

on the family, for Teacher Yuan, Liwei, and others I have mentioned in this chapter, these same conditions compels them to manage an ever-shifting set of competing priorities.

One of these priorities is grandparenthood. In recent years, Chinese families have re-oriented away from ancestors and elders and toward children and grandchildren, a phenomenon Yunxiang Yan (2016) has called “descending familism.” Retirees with young children are a common sight in Chinese cities. In Chengdu, I often saw clusters of middle-aged and elderly women chatting on park benches while toddlers played underfoot and infants napped in the shade of their strollers. People with gray hair lined the sidewalks outside preschools and primary schools in the afternoons, and when the bell finally rang and hundreds of pairs of little feet carrying hundreds of little faces came streaming out of the gates, the elders craned their necks anxiously until the children found their way to each of their waiting caregivers. Book bags would soon be transferred onto the elders’ backs, and small hands would be gripped firmly by large ones before they began the journey home together. Sometimes I would be moved by these acts of intergenerational care and devotion, like the time I saw a frail grandfather struggling against the push-and-pull forces of a moving subway car because he had given his grandson the last seat. Other times I would simply be amused, like the time I witnessed a young boy pull off a masterful feat of manipulation against his unwitting grandmother in a local KFC restaurant: “I know mama said I can’t have any more french fries”, he declared, “but potato wedges are a different, healthier food, and she would not mind.”

Adorable anecdotes aside, being a grandparent in urban China today can be a thankless task. Having had children in the 1980’s and 1990’s during the height of the one-child policy, China’s recent retirees are now beginning to welcome grandchildren— as well as an assortment of related troubles— into their lives. The post-80’s and post-90’s generations, as Chinese young adults are often called, were the first cohort of children born in the reform era. They were raised to focus on academic performance above all else and

were seldom asked to do chores or pitch in around the household. Now, as young parents, many are unable or unwilling to perform the mundane tasks associated with raising children, these young couples frequently turn to their parents for help. The late-middle aged women who participate in congregational dancing are in the middle of this story. Of the 48 total women who participated in either the Sunset Dance Group or the Dancing Beauties Group at the end of 2017 when I left the field, no less than 39 were new grandparents, meaning that they had a grandchild or grandchildren under the age of 6. Five women were not (yet) grandmothers, and four women had grandchildren who were already in primary school or older.

These grandparents— and grandmothers in particular— are called upon to provide day-to-day childcare and to help ease housekeeping burdens for their singleton children. In other words, the tide has shifted against Chinese elders. They hold few of the cards and have few resources at their disposal to wage a counter insurgency against this seismic shift. The only piece of leverage they have is childcare. I hardly need to state that for the grandmothers, navigating these new kinships norms— where they find themselves at the bottom of the family hierarchy when their own grandmothers were near the top— can bring about a great deal of emotional ambivalence. It should come as no surprise, then, that some grandmothers have begun staging a quiet rebellion.

Another priority is personal self-interest. As I argue in chapter one, women who participate in congregational dance groups use these groups as vehicles of self-expression and as places where they can carve out meaningful lives on their own terms. Simply by virtue of choosing an activity solely for their personal enjoyment, retired women who participate in dance groups are practicing self-cultivation in ways that would have been unthinkable several generations ago when they would have been expected to devote their lives to either their families or, later, to the state. But because this self-cultivation takes place within a collective enterprise, the demands of personal interest and friendship are closely

interlinked. Due to their marginal roles in traditional kinship systems, Chinese women have long had more freedom than men to pursue intimate friendships outside of the official kinship apparatus (Wolf 1972; Hershatter 2011), but “women’s networks” in the traditional social context were often extensions of the women’s husbands’ kinship networks. The friendships forged in congregational dance groups, on the other hand, are of the women’s own choosing and are based on common interest rather than common kin.

Widespread changes in kin relations as a whole have made these extra-familial friendships more common and more significant. Economic development and political reforms have brought about diminished parental authority and more individual autonomy in families throughout the world (Goode 1964). As a result, kinship ties have become increasingly defined and sustained by personal sentiment rather than assumed duties based on blood relations (Stacey 1990; Carsten 2004). The so-called transformation of intimacy between marriage partners that has been both theorized (Giddens 1992) and substantiated in ethnographic studies (Collier 1997; Yan 2003; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006) can be regarded as just one component of a much larger trend: shared commonalities between individuals are now more salient in every kind of family relationship. These observations all apply here: facing their latter years with diminishing government and family support but armed with greater degrees of personal choice in cultivating their own relationships, retired women in China have increasingly turned to relying on what Kath Weston calls “fictive” kin groups (1991). Taken together, the implications of these developments reverberate beyond matters of Chinese kinship and into the realm of moral transformation.

Since the Chinese state began its modernization project in the early twentieth century, traditional family structure based on patriarchy and elder veneration has consistently been a target for its various efforts to free the Chinese person from the so-called four ropes of tradition.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of China have noted numerous changes in the traditional family structure since the mid-century, attributing these changes chiefly to the dual forces

of CCP policies that destabilized the previous status quo as well as the pressures of the market economy that render traditional family structures untenable. Examples include the waning of patriarchal power and increasingly powerful daughters-in-law, the decline of the multigenerational household, as well as the rise of the conjugal pair as the basis of the family (Davis and Harrell 1993; Ikels 2006; Harrell and Santos 2017). None of these changes have rendered the bonds of kinship insignificant, of course, but they have brought about new ways of conceptualizing the family as well as practical shifts in the power dynamics within kin groups.

The women I write about in this chapter are all, in their own ways, finding new ways of relating to their families that makes more space for the things that matter to them most. In his influential work on practical kinship in rural China, Charles Stafford (2000) uses two cultural concepts, *yang* and *laiwang*— meaning “nurture” and “social intercourse, respectively” – to challenge old assumptions about the centrality of patrilineal descent groups in Chinese social life and to argue that even in strictly patrilineal societies, the relationships that matter most to people are the ones that they work to cultivate. In this chapter, I aimed to combat the assumption that because the elder generation has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo-- that is, filial piety, elder-veneration, and the continuation of multi-generational families-- they also need to be dragged or coerced into accepting new realities. In all of my examples, I examined how retired women take initiative to cultivate friendships outside of their family circles in order to make up for what may be missing in their family relationships. However, these friendships are not without their pitfalls: because they are venues where people can test out emotional intimacies, they are also, like family, a place where conflict can arise and disappointments are rife. It remains to be seen whether these friendships can prove to be the bulwarks of support against the retreating social safety net and unreliable kin-based eldercare system, as Auntie Yu hopes.

## *Conclusion*

Months after I left the field and years after I first started receiving WeChat messages from my dance group interlocutors, I finally began to make sense of those seemingly random messages numbering in the hundreds. The insight came to me one morning as I began to miss some of my friends in the Dancing Beauties group, and, not knowing how to express these feelings without awkwardness, I decided to send a WeChat sticker into the group chat. The one I chose was a gif of a plump cartoon raccoon hugging a plump cartoon panda bear captioned “*baozhu*” — “hug.” Hours later, when the Dancing Beauties woke up on the other side of the world, I received dozens of messages including various cartoon gifs captioned “good morning,” a photo of someone’s porch garden, and a link to a webpage containing a list of the best soybean-and-fried cruller shops in Chengdu. It was unclear if any of these were specifically intended for me, but it didn’t really matter. Receiving them reminded me that they were all still there, which is what I wanted, and what I realized they were intended for in the first place. The messages provided unceasing and continuous social connection and built community over shared interests, affection, and humor. There was no secret code or hidden pattern; it was the connections themselves that held the meaning.

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<sup>1</sup>In 2019, one million RMB converts to approximately 150,000 USD. A person with such an income in Chengdu is considered very wealthy and would have access to all the luxuries the city has to offer.

<sup>2</sup>The “four thick ropes” of tradition that Mao described as the forces that dominate Chinese peasants are: patriarchy, family authority, religious authority, and political authority

## Chapter 4

### The Audience is Always the State

In the preceding two chapters, I have focused my attentions on aspects of post-reform urban life that are shared by, and in many ways particular to, the retired women who participate in congregational dance groups. By highlighting how dance groups figure into retired women's efforts to make sense of the rapidly changing social landscape and carve out spaces where their own needs can be met, I have shown that congregational dancing is not only a symptom of or reaction to these broader social changes. Instead, I have argued that congregational dance groups are venues where retired women can learn, grapple with, and even challenge emerging social norms on their own terms. What still needs to be addressed is the question of why dancing is the medium through which these efforts occur. Why have millions of retired women formed dance groups and not, say, knitting groups, book clubs, or walking meet ups? What qualities are inherent to groups organized around dancing that are not present in social organizations of other kinds? If retired women are using these groups as tools with which to navigate post-reform realities, as I have argued, then how are these realities reflected and refracted by dance as a practice, as a discipline, and as an instrument through which social meaning is created and conveyed? In this chapter, I return to the topic of dancing to confront these questions head-on, and to clarify the stakes of what I have described so far.

During the course of my fieldwork, I was repeatedly struck by how differently congregational dancers and their observers—that is, other urban residents—framed the dancing phenomenon. While urban residents tended to believe that retired women join congregational dance groups to socialize and exercise, which is true, dance group participants also emphasized how much they enjoyed being able to express themselves through the act of dancing. In fact, many people told me that the opportunity to engage in self-expression was what compelled them to join a dance group in the first place. “If it

weren't for how I feel when I move to music," a 58 year-old dance group participant surnamed Zheng told me, "I would just join my husband when he takes his after-dinner walks. That's also exercise. But walking has no flavor." This "flavor," or "*weidao*," came up so many times in the course of interviews with congregational dancers concerning their reasons for joining groups that I can confidently assert that for participants, *weidao* is what distinguishes dancing from other available pastimes like playing mahjong or even practicing tai chi.

The concept is difficult to translate into English. Though a dictionary might define *weidao* as taste, flavor, or odor, the word can take on many other meanings when used in different contexts. When used in the course of appraising a film or musical performance, it might refer to feeling or passion, as in "the pianist played with much *weidao*." It might also mean beauty when used to describe a place, a painting, or a human being, especially when this beauty has a *je ne sais quois* quality to it. For example, during a conversation about the British royal family, a friend of mine in Chengdu declared that while he did not find the Duchess of Cambridge to be particularly pretty, he did think her "*weidao*" was exceptional. Finally, it can refer to significance or meaning, such as the time I read a famous Chinese poem in a stone carving at a local park and was forced to admit to my companion that though I understood each individual word, my language skills were too poor for me to get any *weidao* out of the verses.

All this is to say that when congregational dancers profess to enjoy dancing because it has *weidao*, they are referring to a kind of affective valence that is as powerful as it is ineffable. Along with *duanlian* or *jiansheng* [exercise], *pailian* [rehearse], and *fuzhuang* [costume or outfit], the word is a key part of the vocabulary that forms the everyday language of congregational dancing: teachers admonish students to pay attention to the nuances of certain movements lest they get the *weidao* of the dance wrong; members of dance groups disparage other groups for dancing without *weidao*, pieces are chosen for

practice or performance for their favorable *weidao*. At a certain point in my research, I began to think of *weidao* as the “substance” of life — that is, an emergent property, particular to each individual object, activity, or situation, that lends interest and meaning to otherwise mundane happenings. Though I met very few dance group participants who were truly proficient dancers in an objective sense, their pursuit and enjoyment of the *weidao* of dance tells me that many congregational dancers savor dancing as a form of creativity. And therein lies the problem.

Creative expression of all kinds— including dance—has occupied an uneasy and at times outright contentious place in Chinese society for hundreds of years, but especially since Mao Zedong took power at the helm of the People’s Republic in 1949. It’s important to note that the tension between art and politics is not a mere side effect of other policies but rather an intentional feature of the modern nation state that can be traced to the inception of the Chinese Communist Party itself. Speaking to an audience of literati, artists, and intellectuals at the Yan’an Forum on Literature on Art in 1942, Mao asserted that there is “in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above the classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics” (1942:86). The Forum played a major role in the consolidation of the Chinese communist movement under Maoism (as distinguished from Marxism and Leninism), and by using it as a platform, Mao intended to not only clarify the role of artists and literati in the ongoing revolution but also to lay the foundation for a new reality in which political ideals superseded artistic freedom. The influence of these words reached its peak when, during the Cultural Revolution, excerpts from the Yan’an speech were quoted in the Little Red Book of Mao’s works and used as justification for widespread censorship. Only a few films, books, and so-called Revolutionary operas staged by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing were deemed to be politically acceptable during this period; all works deemed “bourgeois” — that is, everything not on that very short list—were banned altogether.

The Chinese Communist Party formally revisited the Yan'an Forum and declared Mao's assertion that the only legitimate function of art is in service of socialist political goals to be an "incorrect formulation" in 1982 (Gladston 2014). However, the idea that art does not and cannot exist for art's sake continues to cast a long shadow over artistic enterprises— from fine art to literature to cinema— in the People's Republic to this day. There are few who would seriously characterize congregational dancing as an art form; I also never met a single congregational dancer who described herself as an artist or even a *wudaojia* — "dancer." And yet, dance group participants' repeated emphasis of their enjoyment of the expressive dimensions of the activity cannot be ignored.

This enjoyment of personal expression interacts with governmental frameworks that seek to regulate such expression in public and sometimes surprising ways, creating a fundamental tension that is the focus of this chapter. In what follows, I examine some of the strategies that the state has employed to turn congregational dancing into, to quote Mao at the Yan'an Forum again, a "powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy... [one that helps] people fight the enemy with *one heart and one mind*" (ibid, emphasis added). I pursue several threads of inquiry that showcase how various state institutions have attempted to co-opt congregational dancing to serve its own agenda of promoting social harmony and of maintaining forward progress. At the same time, I also present evidence that dancers have exploited those same agendas for their own benefit, and that the *weidao* of congregational dancing is somehow preserved despite multi-faceted efforts to tame the phenomenon. Though dancers and the state actors that seek to regulate them have different agendas, the congregational dancing phenomenon offers both parties a platform from which to assert their interests and to broadcast their respective messages to a broad audience. For now, these disparate and at times opposing agendas hang in a delicate balance.

What is really worth thinking about here, I contend, is not whether the state plays a

role in directing how congregational dance groups make their dance selections or perform their pieces. Though I do spend some time in this chapter analyzing the ways that state actors have inserted themselves into the day-to-day goings-on of dance groups, the fact that a social phenomenon comprising of millions of participants throughout the country is subject to state regulation should not come as a surprise. Rather, my goal is to examine how authoritarian tendencies interact with social enterprises that serve as platforms of self-expression for ordinary people. How can congregational dancers extract *weidao* from their participation in dance groups when the value of their efforts is ultimately arbitrated by the state? What do they find fulfilling about an activity that is dictated, in so many ways, by people and organizations that have priorities so different from their own? In other words, why dance at all?

#### *Case 1: The Twelve Model Routines*

On March 23rd 2015, the state-run Xinhua news agency announced a set of new regulations for congregational dancing. Given the scale and disruptiveness of congregational dancing in some public spaces throughout the country, this was hardly surprising. During the course of my preliminary research in Chengdu, I heard repeatedly from both dancers and non-dancers alike that some consistent guidelines would be helpful for ameliorating conflict. It might have made a great deal of sense, then, for the central government to set national ordinances on the hours or locations that congregational dancing is permitted, as well as a reliable complaint-reporting mechanism to replace the confusing jumble of police, residential, and commercial security forces that handled conflicts.

In an unanticipated twist, the regulations turned out to address none of these concerns. Instead, the State General Administration of Sports (GAS), sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, hired then-29 year-old national dance competition champion Wang

Guangcheng to produce 12 standardized dance routines for all congregational dancing groups to follow (Xu Junqian, China Daily 2018). The model routines posted to the web on March 23<sup>rd</sup> show Wang and two backup dancers demonstrating synchronized aerobic dance movements set to contemporary Chinese pop songs. These included the then-tremendously popular "Little Apple," an upbeat love song with saccharine-sweet lyrics, a patriotic and catchy number called "Chinese Flavor" by the husband-wife folk-pop duo Phoenix Legend, and the Mongolian-style pop tune "Looking to Beijing from the Grassland." Though Wang does incorporate some stylistic elements into some of the pieces-- for example a galloping-horse motion meant to call pastoral lifestyles to mind in "Looking to Beijing from the Grassland"-- for the most part his choreography is simple, streamlined, and easy-to-learn. Liu Guoyang, the chief of GAS's mass-fitness department, said in a joint press conference with officials from the Ministry of Culture that public dancing "represents the collective aspect of Chinese culture, but now it seems the over-enthusiasm of participants has dealt it a harmful blow with disputes over noise and venues. So we have to guide it with national standards and regulations" (Sun Xiaochen, China Daily March 24<sup>th</sup> 2015).

GAS announced on its own website that the standardization of dance routines would take place in three phases over the course of five months, which would ensure "the orderly and scientific development of aerobic dancing" in all 31 provinces (GAS March 25<sup>th</sup> 2015). The plan was to send 600 dance instructors personally trained by Wang Guangcheng to regional centers and delegated with the task of teaching the routines to lower-ranked dance teachers, who in turn would teach local teachers, and so on and so forth until all dancers were familiar with the official routines. In case there was any confusion about the intent of the model routines, the press release included a statement that read, "From this day forward there will no longer be different dance routines for each community, but instead unified national routines" (ibid).

At first glance, these efforts to control the dancers' bodily movements rather than

managing the intersection of congregational dancing with other aspects of public life is difficult to understand. The model routines and their proposed implementation resemble something out of a Foucauldian nightmare, with the physical body being disciplined in the service of the body politic. Indeed, the swift and relentless media backlash to the announcement signaled that the state had overplayed its hand. Commentators ranging from anonymous netizens to university professors derided the 12 model routines as having missed the point, with many pointing out that no one had complained about the quality or content of the dancing (Peter Ford, CS Monitor March 24 2015; Peng Xuwen, Op-ed in People's Daily March 27 2015). A dancer in Beijing told a reporter from the New York Times that the regulations would defeat the whole point of congregational dancing, which was that it was "voluntary" and "free," adding that she could not understand why the government needed to get involved at all (Jacobs, NYTimes, March 24 2015). Across the Chinese web, commentators began lampooning the government efforts to manage the dancers, with many insisting that what was really needed to address the dancing "problem" was more alternative recreational activities for retirees to choose from.

In response to this media firestorm, GAS and the Ministry of Culture backtracked from their statements a mere three days after the announcement. In a press release posted on the GAS website and in statements to The People's Daily (the official newspaper of the CCP), Liu Guoyang stressed that the 12 model routines were only meant to be suggestions and were in no way intended to replace congregational dancers' own choreography choices. He argued that the concerns voiced by dancers and others on social media were unfounded, and that the whole thing had just been a big misunderstanding (People's Daily March 26th 2015). Xinhua also published an announcement clarifying that the model routines were not "mandatory" (Xinhua March 26 2015<sup>th</sup>), even going as far as to say, "The era where all people are forced to follow only one orthodox [standard] is long gone and people now require more individualism." To actually enact and enforce standardized dancing on 100

million congregational dancers, Liu Guoyang insisted, would have been “impossible.”

Significantly, the timeline of events suggests that the state was learning just then that this was actually impossible. There is simply no way to interpret the March 23rd press releases as anything other than an attempt to standardize congregational dancing throughout China. By the time the backlash gained momentum, however, the cat was too far out of the bag for the state to revise its intentions without losing some face. Nevertheless, the fervor blew over as quickly as it began. When it became apparent that the model routines would have no material impact on anyone’s lives, people moved on, and the story all but disappeared from media platforms.

The account I have presented so far is an indisputable case of the triumph of self-determination and creative expression over state overreach. As is often the case, however, media narratives become far more complicated when corroborated with ethnographic data. Three months after these events unfolded, in late June 2015, I returned to Chengdu to ask the members of four different dance groups – a total of approximately 60 people—about their thoughts on the model routines and the fallout that followed. To my great surprise, only a handful of dancers from each group had even heard of the story. Even more striking was what happened after some discussion amongst themselves. When everyone was briefed with a synopsis of the March events, the dancers invariably rejected the idea that they were ever in any danger of having their dances standardized by the state. Instead, they suggested that GAS and the Ministry of Culture simply wanted to help them dance in a more attractive manner.

When I asked what they thought of a young state-hired dancer in Beijing determining their dance moves in their own parks and residential complexes, many of my interlocutors expressed some exasperation at the premise of the question. “Of course it’s a good thing,” a 59 year-old dance group participant I called Auntie Cai exclaimed. “It means that we have access to higher quality dancing. It means that the government is taking notice

of us!” In her eyes, this form of government interference is not a burden or a method of bodily discipline, but rather a sign that congregational dancing is something worthy of official attention. Once congregational dancing captured the attention of the Beijing Dance Academy, several of my more patient interlocutors explained to me, it became something different altogether: it meant that “they”—presumably the state—did not dismiss the phenomenon because it was dominated by retirees, but rather recognized it as something that is currently relevant and in need of continuing development. It became something officially approved of, thought about, and discussed rather than just a bunch of old women moving around on the street.

In order to make sense of why dance participants would so unceremoniously dismiss such credible threats to curtail their creative expression from the central government, it is necessary to first understand that congregational dancing was never a grassroots phenomenon to begin with. A major misunderstanding about congregational dance groups that I often encountered during my research—even among locals who knew someone who participated in a group—was that the dancers choreograph their own routines. This mistake may be explained by significant variations in congregational dancers’ technical abilities; it can be difficult to spot similarities or patterns between groups when amateur dancers are just trying to do their best to keep up, especially if the observer is not paying special attention. The truth is that congregational dance groups seldom, if ever, engage in choreography. Some follow along to videos on portable DVD players, while others are guided by a teacher who learned the moves from either another (more skilled) teacher or from online videos. While teachers often modify dances in order to match the ability of the participants, dance routines still often look remarkably similar across groups even if they do not share a teacher or any members. Certain pieces also come into vogue, and on an evening walk around the city one can get a distinct sense of *deja vu* as one hears the same songs and sees the same routines over and over.

Several dancers I interviewed compared the release of the 12 model routines to a continuing series of official choreography released by the Beijing Dance Academy called the *yangge tao*, or “folk dance sets.” Like the 12 model routines, *yangge tao* are choreographed by “expert” dancers expressly for wide distribution and are disseminated to the populace from the center to the peripheries of society. Top teachers from each province are selected to go to Beijing to be taught by the Academy choreographer, and the skills trickle down from there. In other words, the proposed mechanisms for spreading the 12 model routines were modeled after processes that were already in place.

In more recent years, this path of dissemination has become even more simplified and streamlined with the rise of online videos and smartphone apps. When I joined the Dancing Beauties group in 2016 and asked Teacher Yuan whether she ever looked to the *yangge tao* when making decisions about which dances to teach to the group, she enthusiastically replied in the affirmative. She then pulled up a video on her smartphone and asked, “look familiar?” The video showed four young women performing a Chinese folk dance with traditional silk fans as hand-held props; it was the same dance that Teacher Yuan had been teaching to our group for the last few weeks. The title of the video indicated that the dance was from the seventh *yangge tao*. It was unclear whether the four women were from the Beijing Dance Academy or just especially proficient amateurs; in either case, the video had been watched over 600,000 times and it was evident that the *yangge tao* had a new avenue through which to reach an even wider audience. “I watch these videos all the time!” Teacher Yuan explained. “They’re easy to follow and you can pause them whenever you want if you missed something.”

Teacher Yuan is not alone in her proclivity toward online dance videos that originate with the Beijing Dance Academy. Nearly every dance group participant I spoke to on this subject— particularly teachers, group leaders, or even people who tend to dance at the front of the pack— reported watching online dance videos on a regular basis. Some of them

mentioned the *yangge tao* directly, while others said they did not pay attention to where the videos originated but rather focused on choosing videos that showcased superior dancing—the more *biaozhun* (meaning standard or correct) the better. To put this all another way, dance groups had been looking to “official” dance sources for inspiration and instruction for years prior to the release of the 12 model routines. It made no sense, then, for them to suddenly become up in arms over something that so closely resembled what they were already used to.

What some observers failed to understand about the March 2015 events was that the state was not taking attempting to gain control of a situation over which they previously had no influence. In fact, by hiring a skilled professional to choreograph routines for dances that were popular with congregational dancers, the Ministry of Culture and GAS were merely trying to reform and codify something that was already within its purview. The fact is, many congregational dancers find plenty to enjoy about the activity despite—and in some ways because of—the fact that their routines are choreographed by so-called experts in Beijing. If anything, they welcome the attention from the central government since such attention lends their activity a sense of legitimacy and official acceptance. It is in the act of dancing itself, of recalling and performing movement, of aligning one’s body with the music, that they get the *weidao* of dance.

This brings me to an additional point I wish to make about the rollout of the model routines. Prior to my June 2015 visit to Chengdu, I also assumed that congregational dancers would be put off by the fact that the Ministry of Culture only provided 12 routines for them to emulate. Considering that they dance on a nearly daily basis, I was certain that people would exhaust 12 routines in a very short time. This also turned out to be a misplaced concern. As I learned more about congregational dancing, I discovered that dance groups are generally not concerned with developing extensive repertoires of dance routines. In the year I spent as a full-time member of the Dancing Beauties and Sunset

Dance groups, for example, I learned a grand total of two new dances from start to finish—one in each group. The vast majority of practice time was instead spent on revisiting routines that the group has already learned and mastered at some point. With each practice, people discovered that they had forgotten some bits and needed to brush up, or that they were finally able to get through a difficult part of the dance for the first time. This process was iterative, and though my time as a participant was relatively short, even I began to savor those moments when my feet landed in just the right way after weeks and weeks of missing the mark. Once everyone could dance the whole routine with few enough mistakes, the group moved on to another number— something that had not been revisited for a few months— and the process started over again.

Perhaps where the GAS and the Ministry of Culture went wrong was in attempting to use anachronistic language and procedures to produce its desired results. In the context of the last seventy years of Chinese politics, especially if we recall Mao Zedong's admonition that art needed to help people fight errant ideologies with one heart and one mind, the proposed standardization project was not at all remarkable. During the collective era in general and the Cultural Revolution in particular, group exercise was used as a means to produce healthy, disciplined workers. Revolutionary songs and dancers were popular pastimes, as were soviet style calisthenics that were often practiced by whole factories and communes before beginning the workday. When congregational dancing began to incite public disorder and complaints on a massive scale, it seems clear that GAS and the Ministry of Culture believed the first step in reasserting control over a massive public phenomenon was to drive it back into this earlier framework of officially sanctioned, officially choreographed collective exercise. However, as I shown, the ethnographic data suggests that the mechanisms of this control regulation are actually incredibly mundane, and often occurs with the full consent of the people being regulated because they get something out of it: a guiding path, a north star to aim for. The mistake that Liu Guoyang et

al made was calling it for what it is: he pulled back the curtain. And even then, many people the policies were aiming at simply shrugged.

### *Case 2: Dance Competitions and Staging Harmony*

In the end, the 12 model routines failed to standardize congregational dancing throughout China. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this failure as anything other than a minor public relations mishap for the Ministry of Culture and GAS. The 12 model routines were neither the first nor sole strategy the state has employed to co-opt the congregational dancing phenomenon, and there are other ways that congregational dancers' bodily movements had already been subject to evaluation, critique, and regulation from local governing officials well before the March 2015 incident. Though there have always been those who prefer to participate in a version of the phenomenon that precludes state interference (the woman interviewed by the New York Times about the 12 model routines comes to mind), the fact remains that efforts to institutionalize congregational dancing have been in place with little fanfare or pushback for years.

Due to the self-organized nature of the phenomenon and due to the grassroots, scrappy appearance of many groups, the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between dancers' desire for recognition and state efforts to impose its own will on the phenomenon is easily overlooked. Nowhere are these entanglements more apparent than at local congregational dance competitions (*guangchang wu bisai*), which have been held on a regular basis throughout Chinese cities, including Chengdu, since at least 2009. Their organizational structures resemble those of beauty pageants or chess competitions for schoolchildren: the strongest performers at the neighborhood (*shequ*) level represent the neighborhood at the sub-district (*jiedao*) level, the leaders in that competition then advance to the district (*qu*) level, until one group is crowned the winner in an annual city competition drawing contestants from all over the city.

For organizers, such competitions offer opportunities for publicity and for scoring some political points with the governing body to which they report. The competitions are frequently co-sponsored by real estate development corporations and hosted on corporation property. For example, a city district (*qu*) level competition I attended in 2017 was held on the grounds of a newly opened shopping center owned by the real estate corporation Longfor Properties, and the corporation's logo was conspicuously displayed on all official competition materials. Other sponsors included the China Sports Lottery, the municipal district government, the district elderly sports association, and the local district's social work organization. The events are televised (though aired on peripheral channels and at odd times; I rarely managed to catch them on TV despite my best efforts) and usually hosted by a sharply dressed young person with standard mandarin pronunciation and a knack for riling up the crowd. The competitions are invariably judged by a panel of government officials, sometimes with input from a professional dancer or choreographer. At the event at the Longfor mall, the most senior official present was the district deputy party secretary, a man in his 50s whose miserably bored expression never abated.

For dancers, these competitions are rare occasions to dance for an audience and to showcase the skills they worked so hard to build. If one attends such events in hopes of enjoying a colorful variety of dance styles and performances, however, one would be sorely disappointed. Every group performs a routine that is pre-selected by competition organizers and given roughly three months to prepare. At the Longfor mall where groups from all over the district were competing for a chance to advance to the city-wide level, the audience was treated to 23 incredibly similar renditions of a dance routine set to the popular Tibetan-style Chinese folk song "Kangding Love Song" [*kangding qingge*].

When I arrived at the competition on a summer morning, I saw hundreds of middle-aged and elderly women— along with a few men—sitting together in what looked like a rainbow sea of lustrous polyester. I first approached a group of women all dressed in

flamingo pink robes with yellow and green embroidered trim. They were helping each other put on complicated headpieces consisting of plaited ribbons with beading directly over the forehead and long, thin, black braids flowing from the back. They each wore red satin stockings over their shoes to mimic knee-high boots when seen from afar. Directly next to these flamingo-hued dancers sat another group in nearly identical getups, save the fact that theirs were sky-blue instead of pink. Still another group rehearsed nearby. Their costumes consisted of red robes with detachable long sleeves that extended more than twelve inches past their fingertips, as well as a slightly different version of the same headpiece. As each of the groups ascended the stage to perform the same routine in succession, these sleeves and the ubiquitous black braids created graceful shapes in the air as the women danced.



Figure 9: Women put on Tibetan-style costumes while waiting for their turn to perform

Like the song Kangding Qingge itself, the costumes that participants wore to the

competition are not so much Tibetan as they are Tibetan-esque: though some elements like the long sleeves and the thin braids do appear in traditional Tibetan dress, the outfits are haphazard amalgamations of customary attire from different Tibetan regions and different social classes. When I asked the dancers—all of whom belonged to the majority Han ethnic group—about the origins of what they were wearing, they invariably answered that they had been purchased online. Indeed, dance costumes like these can all be found on China's mega online-retailers like Taobao for less than 100 RMB (about 15USD). Amongst the striped tracksuits used for aerobics-style dances, the People's Liberation Army uniforms worn in nostalgic performances set to revolutionary era music, the red crepe pant suits with mandarin collars and floral embroidery used in traditional Chinese *yangge* dances, one can also find an entire sub-category of outfits designated for *minzu wu*, or "ethnic dance." From here, the categories become even more specific: Tibetan, Mongolian, Miao, Uighur, the list goes on. Each of the categories contains costumes that reference key elements of traditional dress from each minority nationality, such as elaborate silver headdresses for Miao outfits and cowboy hats for Mongolian ones.

Noticeably, the vast majority of women who participate in dance groups belong to China's so-called lost generation: many of them spent their youths surviving the brutal excesses of Mao's political campaigns, and then, just as China was transforming into the world's second largest economy, they were squeezed out of their jobs to make way for younger workers. For them, performing onstage while wearing these costumes—with their bright colors and attention-grabbing details— can offer a chance to be noticed again after a seeming lifetime of being overlooked. Despite their shoddy construction and cheap materials, the costumes have an ostentatious beauty that is normally deemed immodest for retired women but is sanctioned during performance events such as these dance competitions. Though I personally never participated in a competition, many of my friends and interlocutors did. When I asked my 61-year-old friend Qiu, whom I called Auntie Tan

and whom I met through the Dancing Beauties Group, what she enjoyed most about the competitions, she immediately named the outfits—she loved them for their brightness, and for the way they popped in photographs. “At our age,” she explained, “the only way to add color to our appearance is with clothing.”

Preserving photographic records of these costumes is a requisite feature of dance competitions and the Kangding Qingge competition was no exception. After the event concluded, groups of women gathered on the stage to pose for photos in their outfits, taking care to arrange their bodies so as to display the colorful skirts and bright embroidery. For these retirees, dance competitions are performances of visibility. If the cultural insensitivity of the costumes ever gave them pause, they did not voice it. After all, they would be just as happy performing a folk Chinese dance in traditional Han clothing, but that simply is not what the organizers chose.

The fact that organizers chose Kangding Qingge is neither an accident nor an anomaly. I do not have access to a comprehensive list of competition pieces in Chengdu, but I attended over twenty competitions from 2015-2017 and “ethnic minority” dances featured in more than half of them. Tibetan dances were by far the most common, but there were also two Miao dances and a wintertime competition where groups performed a Uighur dance while wearing costumes trimmed with faux fur. For the government agencies that organize them, the dance competitions are public events where ideals—about active aging, about preserving cultural traditions, and in this case, about a unified multi-ethnic Chinese nation—can be communicated to the masses.

Identifying, categorizing, and codifying ethnic groups was one of the first projects of the new Communist government after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, and China now officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups including the majority Han. Since 1949, displays of national unity have prominently featured popular understandings of minority groups’ cultural heritage. While the state exerts tight controls over minority populations’

expressions of their own cultural practices, performances of minority songs and dances make regular appearances on state-run television programs, and the idea that China is comprised of 56 distinct but harmoniously co-existing ethnic groups remains a foundational tenet of the modern state. Nowhere was this more prominently displayed than during the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics, when 56 schoolchildren representing the 56 ethnic groups carried the Chinese flag into the stadium while wearing versions of traditional attire. In other words, dance competitions that showcase happy elders dancing in Tibetan dress must be understood in the context of this broader tradition of staging national and ethnic harmony. Art, including performance art, in the PRC is always instructive, and one of the enduring lessons of the modern nation state concerns the inscription and re-inscription of the state's borders. On the dance competition stage, the boundaries of the modern Chinese state are asserted through this most visible and, on the balance, most popular officially sanctioned cultural phenomenon to emerge in recent years.

Kangding Qingge is commonly performed as a romantic ballad that is sung with minimal accompaniment, but the "dance remix" version begins with two slow, dramatic bars prominently featuring a man's voice chanting "Kangding" over the supporting voices of the back-up singers. An upbeat baseline then takes over abruptly, and the rest of the song is performed as a fast-paced and high-energy number with multiple drum interludes. When the first group took to the stage, they used the musical introduction to arrange themselves into a clustered formation at the center of the stage, smiling steadily while holding the skirts of their Tibetan-style costumes outward so as to display their colorful patterns. They quickly spread out into two parallel lines facing the audience when the faster portion of the song started. Once in this new formation, they lifted their crossed arms in front of them and swung their hips from side to side to the rhythm of the music. They then added synchronized arm tosses coordinated with leg kicks that consisted of bringing the right foot in front of the body at a forty-five degree angle. At various points in the routine, the group

split into three small inward-facing circles and stepped in and out of the circle while twirling their skirts. Though the full song is about six minutes long with a brief moment of silence following a climatic denouement in the middle, the dance ended at this midway point (in order to save time since there were so many groups participating) to enthusiastic applause. The group descended from the stage, the host announced the next group, which ascended the stairs and took position in the same manner as the first group before giving a nearly identical performance.

For over two hours, the twenty-three participating groups performed this shortened version of Kangding Qingge with minimal variation. Instead of beginning the piece in a clustered formation, some groups chose to start in two parallel lines from the get-go. In the rare cases where groups had male members, the men appeared onstage donning costumes resembling the traditional garb of Tibetan herders and holding hand-held drums. They stood to the sides drumming rhythmically while the women danced. Two groups performed in matching spandex bodysuits instead of Tibetan costumes. For the most part, however, any one of the groups' performances could have easily been mistaken for another's. Such repetition failed to sustain the attentions of the audience, which was made up almost entirely of women of all ages (mothers, grandmothers, nannies) with young children, who had all probably wandered by the mall on their morning walks and stopped to check out the commotion. By the 10<sup>th</sup> performance or so, people had stopped applauding altogether despite increasingly plaintive pleas for enthusiasm from the host.

What did vary significantly was technical ability: each performance received a score between 1-10-- averaged between the five judges-- the lowest being 8 and the highest being 9.4. In this sense, the dance competition was treated in a similar manner as sports with compulsory routines, such as gymnastics or ice-skating. Directly after the conclusion of the performances, the director of a local professional dance academy-- a woman in her 40s surnamed Zhou-- took to the stage to offer detailed feedback and critique. She explained

that points were deducted for improper movements, for non-matching costumes, for allowing one dancer to take center stage while the rest of the group performed limited movements, and for not doing certain movements with enough energy. The most significant point deductions, however, were reserved for deviations from the standard [*biaozhun*] routine. She pointed out discrepancies so minor that they had barely registered in my (admittedly untrained) notice during the performances: substituting straight-legged kicks for ones slightly bent at the knee; throwing one arm over one's head instead of both arms; twirling the skirts too much; concluding the dance with acrobatic poses; the list went on. She gestured to the banner bearing the event's name behind her and reiterated that this was a dance competition, not a choreography competition: the groups, she emphasized, are judged on their ability to faithfully reproduce the official choreography. In her concluding remarks, Ms. Zhou extolled everyone to put more effort into practices and to aim for perfection.

Echoing what happened earlier with the 12 model routines, the dancers I interviewed after Ms. Zhou's remarks at the Longfor dance competition were entirely sympathetic to the judging system and thought that they had gotten the score they deserved. One dancer, whose team had received a score of 8.4, told me, "we got such a low score because two of our dancers wore different-colored costumes, and because there were two spots in the song where we had a solo dancer while the rest of us stood in the back barely moving. Zhou said that you can't do this. So we lost points. It's a shame." When I asked the members of another team if they thought it was fair that they were judged according to these criteria, they answered that it would not be a real competition if there were no criteria. It was only disappointing that they were not informed of the criteria beforehand. "But now we know," a woman surnamed Wei said. "So we won't make the same mistakes again." Like the women who had no qualms with the 12 model routines, Ms. Wei and the others I interviewed all seemed to believe that the competitions officials were simply trying to help them become

better dancers. Again, the presence of criteria or standards did not bother them. On the contrary, they understood these standards to be sources of legitimacy and recognition: after all, what would be the point of competing if there were no criteria, and what would be the point of performing if there were no audience?

Congregational dancing has all the trappings of a grassroots phenomenon. It occurs in public, is by in large self-organized by participants, and has no discernible official agenda. But in many ways, congregational dancing is simply another facet of the norm, rather than an exception to, the mainstream dance culture in China. In her dissertation on dance in the PRC, Emily Wilcox (2011) traces the unusually centralized nature of dance culture and practice in China to the fact that professional dance simply did not exist prior to the formation of the party-state and was created from scratch under the auspices of the newly-formed CCP-led People's Republic. When the Beijing dance academy was created in 1954, its curricula and practices became the standard for both provincial dance schools and for dance troupes throughout the country (20). Through the *yangge tao*, the New Year's Gala performances, and the dance DVDs, the Beijing-based and state-run Beijing dance academy was already the primary if not sole referent for congregational dancers throughout China.

### *Case 3: Nanchun Village*

The relationship between the congregational dancing phenomenon and the state (at all levels) is far more complex than it first appears. Both of the cases I have discussed so far reveal a dialectical relationship between dancers and the state policies that try to contain them: at the same time that the state attempts to curtail or co-opt the impacts of the phenomenon on daily life, dancers also use the state attention as leverage for more social visibility as well as recognition and resources. In each of these cases, people were already participating in dance groups when the state began its efforts to steer the phenomenon in a certain direction. But what happens when government officials can manage congregational

dancing from the ground up? I had the unexpected opportunity to see for myself when my family took a trip to my grandmother's natal village.

Nanchun village is a mid-sized agricultural community with about 200 household located on the southern edge of the fertile Chengdu plain. It produces fruits, vegetables, and Sichuan peppercorn on a rolling basis throughout the year, meaning there is hardly any downtime between harvests. Though there are plenty of women in the “dancing grannies” age range, there was no group dancing in Nanchun village outside of special holidays for decades. This makes sense when considering the economic underpinnings of congregational dancing. The urban phenomenon is a byproduct of economic policies that put millions of people out of work while they were still able-bodied, but the women in Nanchun can hardly be considered “retired” because they typically work until injury or illness prevents them from continuing. Because congregational dancing provides an alternative to idleness—a problem people in agricultural communities seldom have—it never really caught on in the village.

But in the spring of 2012, local party cadres decided that it was high time for Nanchun women to start dancing like their urban counterparts. They approached two women who were well known and respected in the village, handed them 2000 RMB, and instructed them to use the money to begin a dance group. The money was to be spent on a stereo, a portable DVD player, instructional dance videos, and costumes for inter-village dance competitions—which are organized and put on by Party leaders in each respective village. The cadres even went so far as to secure the local primary school courtyard as the dance venue. Other villagers were quickly recruited, and nightly dancing commenced soon after. By the time I visited the village in the summer of 2014, the dance group had become a salient social force. When I visited again in 2016 and 2017, even more dancers had joined the group, and heading down to the schoolyard to watch the dancers had become a popular after-dinner activity for many villagers.

I have so far been unable to determine the original source of the order to start a dance group in Nanchun, but judging by the level of organization that goes into the inter-village competitions, designs to insert organized dancing back into rural life arise from at least the county, if not provincial level of government. When I asked one of the village women why she thought the cadres had initiated dancing when they did, she repeated what the cadres had told her when she asked them the same question: “we have a good society now, we can afford to have a little fun.”

Though they favor some of the same music and dancing that is popular in Chengdu and throughout China (I was treated to a particularly spirited performance of Little Apple during my 2017 visit. By then I had learned the moves with the Sunset Dance group so I danced along), the impetus behind the formation of these dance groups is diametrically opposite to those in the city. Community-level (shequ) officials have begun organizing dance groups in more recent years, but groups were almost entirely formed on a voluntary basis at the phenomenon’s inception and a majority of groups remain self-organized. Even if there is a paid teacher, she (and it is almost always a she) is usually a fellow retiree who dances as a hobby and is treated as a friend or perhaps a mentor, but not necessarily social superior. In Nanchun village, however, two elderly male cadres—whom the dancers call “teachers” out of deference – supervise the dance sessions on a frequent basis but never participate in the dancing itself. The dancers select the routines they want to learn from their DVD collection most of the time, but when it comes time to prepare for the inter-village competitions, it is the male “teachers” who choose which dances are performed.

In other words, while the dance group in Nanchun village looks a lot like any group one might see in a park in Chengdu, down to their outfits and their choreography, everything else about the congregational dance phenomenon have been co-opted and re-imagined by the hands of the state. By all accounts, however, the village women are thrilled to have an evening activity planning for their benefit and at no cost to themselves. This is

not at all to say that dancers are mere puppets of the state, or even that they are passive recipients of state directives. In the case of the village dance group, it is true that the local government reimagined and redeployed congregational dancing as a surrogate for the post-reform “good society,” —a shorthand for development, modernity, and cosmopolitanism—in a feat of small-scale social engineering. But it is also true that the dancers themselves have wholeheartedly embraced congregational dancing as their own. In other words, just as the state attempts to control the phenomenon by manipulating its semiotic valences, so do dance participants manipulate the state’s intentions by re- interpreting them to their own ends.

### **Instructing Art, Creating Weidao**

In an early study on art education in post-reform China published in the late 1980s, psychologist Ellen Winner makes several observations about how Chinese children are taught various types of visual art ranging from Chinese ink drawing to western-style painting to calligraphy. First, she notes that classes are teacher-oriented, with students learning by emulating the teacher rather than by working together or by relying on trial-and-error on their own. Teachers demonstrate certain techniques and students strive to copy that technique as perfectly as possible. Instead of discovering for themselves how certain brush strokes create shapes, students strive to “learn what the masters have already discovered” (1989: 48). Second, Winner writes that Chinese art education was heavily uniform, with art teachers across the country using the same textbooks, which in turn contained the same schemas and models for students to copy. Third, children are not taught to solve “visual problems” on their own. While students are praised for linking discrete skills together—for example, a child is commended for drawing a chicken standing under some grapes after a lesson on how to draw chickens and grapes separately—any further deviation from the taught standard is understood to be incorrect rather than creative. “The

goal,” Winner writes, “is to master the tradition, not to start a new one.” (Ibid: 61). In her analysis, Winner argues that Chinese art education focuses almost exclusively on the aesthetic and moral dimensions of art. Under this framework, art is both something beautiful and pleasant that can be appreciated as well as a medium through which moral values can be communicated. It is not, however, understood as a form of emotional expression or as a vehicle for cognitive development.

At first glance, these observations seem to be deeply rooted in western stereotypes about Chinese approaches to both education and to art. It is all here: Chinese students are taught to memorize but not to think critically; Chinese people excel at replication but not innovation. However, Winner’s arguments have less to do with Chinese students’ inherent abilities and more to do with how teachers — guided and constrained by state agendas— emphasize and cultivate certain skills over others. Winner situates these observations within the larger context of Chinese society at the time, and notes that what happens within the walls of the art classrooms seems to mirror the general social milieu. Chinese society has changed dramatically in the years since Winner conducted her study, and indeed, art education has changed as well. In *Creativity Class*, Lily Chumley (2016) notes that contemporary Chinese art students are very much preoccupied with cultivating personal styles, and that teaching students to “solve visual problems,” so to speak, is now a top priority in art education curriculums.

While it would be tempting to attribute these changes to a gradual withdrawal of state influence from art instruction as a result of opening and reform, Chumley asserts that the exact opposite has occurred. In its efforts to transition the Chinese economy away from manufacturing and toward an information economy in the 2000s, the state began to value innovation and entrepreneurship in workers. Rather than making sure that students come away with a mastery of traditional techniques, arts educators and art schools began to cultivate a new class of “culture workers” who could become the movers-and-shakers of

China's new entrepreneurial economy. What remains the same, however, is the fact that these priorities were set by the state. In other words, it is not that standardization was pushed to the wayside to make way for creativity, but rather that creativity itself has become the standard.

The co-option of artistic practices for a political agenda is not limited to the visual arts (cf. Anagnost 1997; Bryant 2005; Law and Ho 2011). It is also nothing new, and certainly not a novel invention by the Chinese Communist Party; in fact, we risk losing sight of the broader context of how politics and art intersect in Chinese society if we only look to CCP attitudes and policies as a baseline for comparison. In *Opera and the City* (2012), historian Andrea Goldman argues that in late imperial China, members of the Qing court and other elites transformed Beijing opera from the bawdy, chaotic affairs they once were into orderly and moralistic stagings of Confucian values. These efforts to co-opt the genre—to turn opera performances into mediums for disseminating moral values—were so successful that by the end of the Qing dynasty, enforcement was no longer necessary (242). The tastes of the Qing court had become the tastes of the people. Without knowing the history of how these tastes were cultivated and the enforcement that occurred to bring them about, latter-day observers of Beijing opera may well mistake the Confucian moralism often seen in opera performances for “*description* rather than *prescription*” (246; emphasis in original).

There are two main parallels I wish to draw between the historical co-option of Beijing opera and contemporary state efforts to regulate congregational dancing. The first is that in both cases, the state relied on sponsorship and patronage of favored performance pieces rather than outright censorship of unacceptable ones. The second is that despite these efforts to co-opt the genre as a whole, there remains room for complexity and nuance in individual performances. This all leads me to the material point concerning the relationship between how art forms are instructed or prescribed and how they are practiced or interpreted: in the same way that congregational dance groups are not entirely

“grassroots” or “voluntary,” the Chinese state — with the Cultural Revolution period being a probable exception— is also not entirely hegemonic in how it exerts its will. For example, Goldman explains that even as the Qing court attempted to rid Beijing opera of lewd or sexual themes, certain plays with sexual content were nevertheless permitted so long as the sexual content appeared in the context of a moral narrative that fell in line with the court’s moral stance. Whether audiences paid closer attention to the sexual content or to the moral narrative is another question altogether.

Similarly, the Ministry of Culture-sponsored 12 model routines may have been intended to foster the “orderly and scientific” development of congregational dancing, but dance group participants paid little attention to the standardization effort and simply appreciated the routines for their attractive choreography. At congregational dance competitions, state organizers may have selected minority nationality dance forms in order to re-assert the boundaries of the nation-state to include contested territories, but again, the participants paid no mind and instead focused on the attractive costumes and dance moves. In Nanchun village, local cadres started congregational dance groups for the sake of adhering to a post-reform development narrative, but the participants themselves mostly enjoy the dancing as a social pastime. In other words, standardizing the way that an art form is taught or replicated does not prevent people from having divergent experiences while practicing or observing that art form.

Let me further clarify this point by speaking to my own personal experiences with art education in China. Like many parents who wished to make the most of new opportunities and to give their children every advantage possible in the increasingly competitive economy of the post-reform era, my parents enrolled me in piano lessons before I began primary school. I remember having an unpleasant time at these lessons: my stern, though not unkind teacher taught me two classical pieces— exclusively composed by Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, or Mozart— at a time, and I practiced these pieces for hours and

hours each day. My teacher assessed my mastery of these pieces at our weekly lessons and either taught me two more pieces if she thought I was ready to move on or sent me home to practice for another week. I was not taught scales, chords, or any kind of musical theory. I was never asked what type of music I preferred or whether I enjoyed certain kinds of pieces over others. At least at that level, the goal was never to train me to develop musical taste or to improvise—much less compose—anything on my own. Once a year, my parents took me to a city-wide piano-credential testing event to determine my playing “level.” Like the congregational dance competitions, piano examination participants were given pieces to prepare well in advance, and played in front of a panel of judges who determined whether the examinee has passed based on a points system. I was much, much older when I even realized that different pianists could have different “interpretations” of the same piece.

As I aged into adulthood, however, I discovered that this highly standardized and uninspirational learning experience taught me more than I had previously believed. As an adult, I developed an appreciation for classical piano music that was undoubtedly informed by my earlier exposure. I found that I could fill in the gaps in my musical education with some personal effort, and that the technical skills I learned as a child served as a foundation for other kinds of knowledge. In other words, the standardized education I received did not ultimately prevent me from developing a different and more nuanced relationship with piano.

Learning to dance with congregational dancers offered a parallel experience. In the Sunset Dance group weekly class led by Teacher Yuan, I initially felt confused about formal structure of the class and awkward about the many corrections Teacher Yuan gave about my posture, movements, and comportment. I especially disliked the stretches and exercises that opened each class because it seemed like their goal was to mold my body into specific shapes without consideration for my (or anyone else’s) natural strengths or weaknesses. We practiced the same dance routines week after week, often focusing on a single phrase of

choreography for hours at a time. I did not grasp the significance Teacher Yuan's avid consumption of professional dance videos from the *yangge tao* and other officially sanctioned choreographers until I was her dance pupil. She settled for nothing less than the standard version of the routines we practiced: every movement was scrutinized for its accuracy, and each error was dissected and broken down until it was well understood by each of us. At the end of each class, Teacher Yuan exhorted us to watch videos of professional dancers performing the same routine so that we may internalize their movements.

The first few months were admittedly difficult: the class felt staid, uninteresting, and uninspiring. I repeatedly wondered why the class did not make room for more self-expression, especially considering the fact that none of its participants were hoping to put their dancing skills to any kind of official use, and were only there for personal enjoyment. But with each passing week, my friendships with the other women in the group became deeper, I became more comfortable and familiar with the structure of the class, and though I never truly mastered any of the dances, my body became accustomed to making those movements and shapes and I performed them with more ease. As the class made more sense to me, it also became more enjoyable. It began to dawn on me that the others in the group loved Teacher Yuan's class precisely because she held them to high expectations and expected them to aim for professional-quality dancing.

By the end of my time in Chengdu, I had begun to look forward to the dance class each week and even found myself defending it to some of my same-generation peers. When a new acquaintance at a group outing among friends asked me what I thought about the "old fashioned, boring dances" that congregational dancers favored, I replied, to my own surprise, that "I actually think the dances have a lot of *weidao*!" The acquaintance seemed puzzled, and pressed me to clarify, but I could not come up with a satisfactory answer at the time. In retrospect, I believe what I meant was that the dance classes offered me so

much by way of exercise and friendship that these enjoyable elements had become melded together with the dance routines themselves. In my mind, they were no longer discrete elements but rather parts of the same flavorful whole.

### *Conclusion*

Most ordinary people I spoke to in Chengdu about the congregational dancing phenomenon agreed that retirees needed something to do to fill their ample time. For them, the fact that so many retired women have chosen to dance is merely incidental, or else simply due to the fact that people of their generation enjoy collective activities. What many observers who do not participate in congregational dancing overlook is the fact that even recreational activities are not really meaningful unless something is at stake. Women who participate in congregational dancing emphasize repeatedly that they are not simply looking to waste time; they are also working to cultivate meaning, interest, and *weidao* in the remaining years of their lives, and dancing is one of the ways they are accomplishing this goal.

In this chapter, I have laid out the ways in which state actors have attempted to co-opt the congregational dancing phenomenon from the top down, as well as the ways in which the phenomenon's participants have re-interpreted re-framed the state's efforts to suit their own interests. I have also argued that a dance group need not be wholly "voluntary" for it to become a venue for self-cultivation and for exploring individual identities: because the state remains the arbiter of legitimacy for ordinary people living in China today, it makes sense that participants pay attention to the standards set by state officials concerning what dances ought to look like. Striving for and meeting official standards is not solely what they get out of their participation, of course, but standardization and regulation are so much part of the normal fabric of everyday life in China that they are not necessarily roadblocks to other ways of relating to the activity. For

now, the two diametrically opposed forces acting on the phenomenon have struck a delicate balance.

One question remains unanswered: “so what?” Even if the dancers are able to enjoy congregational dancing on their own terms as long as they do so within the confines of state-sanctioned frameworks, the facts remain that congregational dancers in the People’s Republic of China are not unified, have no leadership, and have certainly made no political demands. It is an identifiable social phenomenon by outside observers and by the participants’ own estimation, but it is also not a cohesive collective in any practical sense. What, then, are the implications of its existence for Chinese society as a whole?

One way to begin to make sense of this question is through the lens of the revival of civil society in the People’s Republic. Robert Weller (1999) has written extensively on this subject in his comparisons between Taiwanese and Chinese societies. In this chapter, I have been primarily concerned with highlighting the tensions between the state’s efforts to re-make the phenomenon into a useful social tool for promoting various agendas and participants’ efforts to use dance groups as vehicles of individual expression, as well as highlighting how these two forces interact in the everyday goings-on of the phenomenon. I am aware, however, that another issue lurks beneath the surface: in Weller’s prescient words, the real question is not whether large-scale social movements outside of the official state apparatus are possible in post-reform China (I contend that the existence of the congregational dancing phenomenon clearly indicates that they are), but rather “when those alternatives can coalesce into something able to exert political pressure” (58). It is beyond the scope of my dissertation to answer this question in full, but I nevertheless offer it as a provocation for thinking about the possible implications of congregational dancing. The state has not tolerated large-scale civil organizations after 1989 (Weller 1999:57), but has seemed to tolerate congregational dancing so far because it does not present a threat.

It is difficult to say how long this tolerance will last. In this chapter, I have

demonstrated that the state is already eager to harness congregational dancing as a tool for its own agenda. There are also signs that as the phenomenon matures, it will become an increasingly regulated and ritualized part of the social landscape. When I was in Chengdu interviewing congregational dance group members about the 12 model routines in the summer of 2015, for example, I also spoke with a mid-level municipal bureaucrat who told me that new housing developments in the city often include specially demarcated space for congregational dance groups, and that in his opinion, “dancing is better than protesting.” This ostensibly captures the official government stance on congregational dancing. It suggests that the state is willing to tolerate dancing—even on the scale of 100 million participants throughout the country—as long as it does not threaten social harmony.

There is also evidence that the state is prepared to take drastic measures to regulate the phenomenon at the first sign of serious unrest. Though the proposed 12 model routines never became standard following severe media backlash in 2015, the nature of these regulations reveals that it is the individualized character of congregational dancing that the state has identified as a threat: what it seeks to control is not the groups’ size or public behavior, but rather the bodily comportment and expression of each individual dancer. In other words, the *weidao* of dance—the very thing that dancers cite as the distinguishing characteristic of the activity—is also what threatens the phenomenon’s continued proliferation in the future. The fact that the Ministry of Culture attempted to standardize dance routines across all groups across the nation at all indicates that the relative autonomy enjoyed by congregational dancers cannot be taken for granted.

Finally, as the Nanchun village case shows, the state will not hesitate to reclaim pre-existing forms of sociality to serve its own agenda. It remains to be seen whether the state will attempt similar tactics to manipulate the semiotic valences of the phenomenon in urban settings. If and when such a time does come, the present balance between dancers’ subjective enjoyment and pursuit of dance’s *weidao* and state attempts to regulate the

phenomenon from the top down will be disturbed. How such a disturbance will affect congregational dancing— and the relationship between its participants and the state— remains an open question.

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<sup>1</sup>Kangding is a Tibetan-majority city that lies on the border between the Tibetan and Han Chinese regions of Sichuan Province. Historically, it was called Dartsedo and was the capital of the Chakla Kingdom in the Kham region of Tibet. Today, Kangding is the seat of the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. It is approximately 350 kilometers west of Chengdu.

## Conclusion

The congregational dancing phenomenon is not simply about how retired people dance. In this dissertation, I have tried to make the case that it is also about how people live. Congregational dancing has become an increasingly significant cultural touchstone in China since I began this project nearly six years ago. By the end of my fieldwork, nearly everyone I met knew somebody who dances in a group, and even those who did not had something to say about the phenomenon. Congregational dancers and the subculture they have created amongst and for themselves now appear to be a permanent fixture in the Chinese urban social landscape. On television and the internet, the *da ma* are prominently featured in social commentary and comedy sketches poking fun at retirees' habits and behaviors. Shops, online retailers, and beauty salons have begun to cater to the dancers' tastes, hawking colorful wares labeled as *da ma* shoes, *da ma* clothes, and even *da ma* haircuts. Yet despite its visibility and notoriety, I have intentionally avoided treating the phenomenon as a spectacle, choosing instead to highlight the ways in which congregational dancing has been woven into the fabric of everyday life in post-reform China.

In chapter one, I made the case that congregational dancing is very much a product and feature of contemporary Chinese social conditions. My aim was to dispel the conventional narrative that has formed about the phenomenon in the Chinese media and among ordinary Chinese urbanites. I argued that this narrative—which paints congregational dancers as relics of the past who cling to collective groups because they cannot think or act for themselves—is based on shallow observations of the phenomenon and mistaken assumptions about the dancers' reasons for participating. I demonstrated that retirees use congregational dance groups as venues for personal cultivation and as places where they can experience China's emerging individualized consumer culture on their own terms. I also emphasized the ways in which the phenomenon is a product of China's

tumultuous past half-century, a theme that I continued to explore in the following chapters.

I delved further into the connections between broader socio-economic changes and urban retirees' experiences in chapter two, where I pointed to the opportunities and challenges that elders face as they face the rise of a "new old age" in urban China. This chapter investigated the de-stabilization of traditional understandings and practices of old age, focusing on some retirees' inability to identify as "old" because their lives as retirees so little resembled the aging experiences of previous generations. The chapter also examined the emergence of the notion of "productive," or "active" aging in state efforts to address China's rapidly aging population. Zeroing in on the Chengdu Old Age University's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition as an example, I argued that the many recreational activities made available to retirees are not merely for the sake of entertainment, but rather part of a strategy to encourage elders to cultivate independence and take responsibility for their own lives. Although this chapter does not directly deal with the congregational dancing phenomenon, it does provide context into how seemingly benign recreational activities like collective dancing can be co-opted by state agendas.

I ended chapter two by pointing to the disillusionment that many of my interlocutors have expressed about growing old in contemporary China. Their chief frustrations have to do with their perceptions that cultural changes and state policies alike have given people in their generation a raw deal. The social safety net has receded and retirees must increasingly rely on themselves for financial and social support. At the same time, traditional regard for elders has become diluted as large segments of Chinese society shift toward a youth-oriented, market-driven culture. I picked up on this theme again in the beginning of chapter three, which focused on the consequences of these socio-political trends on Chinese family structures as well as retired women's strategies for coping with the changes. To set the stage, I began with a discussion about how many retired women lost their trust in the post-reform social contract, which asked them to have only one child in

exchange for state-guaranteed eldercare in their old age. When these guarantees were rescinded in the aftermath of market reforms, people in this generation were left on their own. Contending with the loss of a robust social safety net as well as assurances that their children will fulfill their filial duties, retirees are left with few strategies at their disposal for getting their needs met.

For those who participate, congregational dance groups play an essential role in retired women's efforts to make sense of new norms and stake their own claim in emerging social frameworks. In chapter three, I presented three case studies that showcased how dance groups figure into retired women's mental calculus as they grapple with competing demands of family, friendship, and personal interest. These stories pointed to an emerging trend among retired women to prioritize their own needs over that of their children's or grandchildren's. I presented evidence that some women who participate in congregational dance groups are beginning to pressure one another to withhold childcare if providing such care takes their attentions away from the dance group or if the grandchild's parents are judged to be insufficiently grateful for the free childcare from the group's perspective. The first case put the tensions between self-interest, family duties, and friendship into sharp relief as the teacher-leader of a dance group threatened to disband the group because other members were insufficiently committed to putting the group above other commitments, including grand-parenting. In the second case, dance group members bullied a fellow member for spending too much of her time tending to her newborn grandchild. Finally, in the last case, a grandmother demanded financial reimbursement from her son as compensation for perceived slights or inadequate recognition for her efforts. I argued that these are not acts of resistance against grand-parenting duties *per se*, but rather symptoms of a broader shift toward self-centeredness (in the most neutral sense of the term) among China's older generation.

In the last chapter, chapter four, I returned to the dimensions of congregational

dancing that have to do with dancing itself. Though the previous chapters never strayed far from discussions about China's evolving state-society relations, this chapter placed that discussion at its center. Here, I examined two diametrically opposed forces acting on congregational dancing. The first is participants' enjoyment and cultivation of *weidao*, which I defined as the substance that lends the activity its shape and meaning. The second is state efforts to regulate and standardize the phenomenon through programs like compulsory model routines and dance competitions that reward conformity to official choreography. In my analysis, I contended that congregational dancers not only do not mind being subjected to state regulations but actually appreciate the state's attention because it lends them legitimacy. I argued that for now, the opposing forces of personal creativity in the form of *weidao* and state attempts to impose its own agenda onto the phenomenon are in an uneasy balance: as long as dancers' individual pursuits do not interfere with social harmony and as long as they do not actively resist regulations, they remain free to do as they please. I ended the chapter with some provocations about how the phenomenon will fare in the coming years as it becomes increasingly enmeshed with the everyday routines of urban life— and, by extension, increasingly regulated by state actors.

In each of the chapters, I chose to focus on stories that showcase how the congregational dancing phenomenon figures into retired women's daily lives rather than its sensational and at times disruptive dimensions. I did not, for example, dwell too long on the conflicts between dance groups and other urban residents over noise or use of public space. Nor did I go into great detail about the props, music, and dance movements of the groups. This is not because I find the conflicts between dancers and other urban residents to be unremarkable, nor is it because I am uninterested in props and music. A group of retirees dancing in sync while wearing matching outfits and holding fans or scarves or even tennis rackets is an undeniably memorable sight. However, what made the deepest impression on me as I conducted research on congregational dancing is not the dancers'

colorful accessories or the sight of hundreds of retired women filling a city square, but rather the fact that ordinary people are trying to make sense of rather extraordinary circumstances through the act of coming together and dancing.

I began this project because I, like so many others who have observed them with a passing glance, was charmed and bemused by the so-called “dancing grannies.” I expected to find that the dance groups function as a source of camaraderie for people who lack access to official sources of sociality like jobs or civil associations. These predictions turned out to be true in many ways, but they did not capture a complete picture. As the dancers invited me into their groups and into their world, I also bore witness to their frustrations with state policies that by turns patronized and neglected them, as well as their bewilderment with their children’s changing priorities. I did not expect to find that dance groups would play a central role in helping people navigate these shifting post-reform realities: dance groups are simultaneously venues where retirees can practice self-cultivation, spaces for living out a new form of old age that emphasizes individual responsibility, incubators where new ideas about what it means to be a grandparent can emerge, and a testing ground for the state’s ambitions to provide all citizens with the “good life” while maintaining social harmony.

I also did not expect to find dance group participants to be, for the most part, so utterly enchanted with this new phase of their lives. In the empty spaces where their careers, childcare responsibilities, and solid expectations about the future used to reside, China’s congregational dancers have created a place where they can enjoy their remaining years with people of their choosing and doing what they wish. Though they have lost the security and guaranteed high status in old age that would have been afforded them had they been born a century earlier as a result of social change, they have also gained the freedom and resources to find alternative sources of support and meaning-making. Armed with no blueprints for how to proceed and few resources other than camaraderie and a sense of adventure, they have somehow managed to find a new way of growing old that breaks

previous molds. I did not expect to be amazed by the congregational dancers when I began this research; I did not expect to admire them. Yet during my time in Chengdu, I repeatedly found myself in awe of my interlocutors' displays of resilience, humor, and flexibility when confronted with unfamiliar or challenging situations. Though I am not sure that I can or will join a dance group when I retire, I can only hope that I will have the same enthusiasm for life when I am their age.

I say that I am unsure whether I will join a group when I am older not only because I do not live in China, where this phenomenon is based, but also because this dissertation has provided a snapshot into the experiences of a particular generation in a particular moment in time. I asked all of my interlocutors— from congregational dancers to *shequ* officials to ordinary Chengdu residents— to weigh in on whether they thought the phenomenon will continue into the future. Their responses varied: while some said that younger generations will definitely pick up congregational dancing as they get older, citing participants in their 40's as evidence that dancers are not just retirees, others told me that this was a temporary phenomenon with an expiration date. Some of my younger Chinese friends and colleagues even burst into laughter at the question because the thought of themselves participating in congregational dance groups struck them as so absurd.

It is impossible to see the future, of course, but if I were forced to make a prediction, I would choose to side with those who say that congregational dancing will eventually run its course. However, I doubt that the phenomenon will disappear due to lack of interest from younger generations. People's interests change with age, and the same people who laugh now may be perfectly happy donning a fuchsia frock and dancing with a group of friends in thirty years. If congregational dance groups diminish in number or disappear from Chinese cities altogether, it will be because the conditions that currently make the phenomenon possible have changed.

Congregational dancing has thrived under a very particular set of social, economic,

and political circumstances. The SOE reforms that laid off millions of people from public sector jobs starting in the late 1990's, combined with compulsory retirement ages that force women out of the workforce at age 50 or 55, produce an enormous pool of urbanites who have little to do with their time despite being physically healthy and active. As I wrote in chapter one, many people who were laid off due to SOE reforms formed dance groups, and people who retired in the following years joined these groups upon leaving the work force. Had these reforms not occurred, or had the age of retirement been set even slightly higher, congregational dancing likely may have never reached the critical mass to become a national phenomenon. Moreover, the retirees who participate in congregational dancing are not merely out of work; they are at *leisure*. China's public pension program guarantees former work unit employees a set income (based on salary prior to retirement) for life. While it is true that most urban retirees cannot afford to live luxurious or privileged lives on these pensions, the guaranteed monthly income allows them to spend at least part of their time on hobbies like dancing rather than devoting all their waking hours to working to make ends meet. Lastly and perhaps most significantly, the congregational dancing phenomenon can only exist in its current form because the state allows participants the freedom to gather in public in large groups.

None of these factors can be taken for granted. I have highlighted some of the ways in which the phenomenon is threatened by encroaching state regulations at the end of the last chapter, but the other conditions are likely not sustainable in the long-term, either. There have been persistent rumors and reports that the central government in Beijing plans to raise the retirement age some time in the near future in order to ameliorate the effects of the aging population on China's development trajectory (Beland and Ka 2004; Frazier 2004; Zhu and Walker 2018). Though there are no concrete plans in place yet, it is only a matter of time before people will be expected to work longer into old age, decreasing the number of active, independent years they have to spend on recreational activities. The future of the

pension program for retired urban workers is also in question. Many smaller reforms to the program have occurred over the past two decades, and so far their effects have been unevenly distributed across income brackets (Smyth 2000; Zhu 2018). Multiple provinces have forecast that their pension programs will run at deficits as early as 2022 (Asian Insurance Review 2019) and the northeastern Heilongjiang province has already been forced to delay pension payments to retirees after being unable to come up with sufficient funds (Rothschild 2019). Practically speaking, I heard from many retirees that their pensions were not keeping pace with the rising costs of living and that they had doubts about whether their pensions could actually support them as they aged out of independence. More than one interlocutor told me in explicit terms that they plan to dance only until they or their spouses get ill.

All of this is to say that the conditions that make congregational dancing possible are fragile. It is likely that changes in any one of the factors will significantly alter the shape and scope of the phenomenon. For now, however, dance groups continue to offer retirees a space to exercise and socialize, and congregational dancers continue to use their groups as venues for cultivating individual interests, extra-familial support networks, and senses of personal enjoyment or *weidao*. But as I hope I have made clear in this dissertation, the broader implications of congregational dancing transcend the parameters of the phenomenon itself. Even if my own rather pessimistic prognosis about the eventual demise of congregational dancing comes to pass, the phenomenon will already have made an indelible mark on Chinese society. Already, congregational dancers have taught the Chinese public that elders may have their own consumer tastes and interests distinct from those of the youth, that retirees do not always prefer to retreat into quiet family lives, and most importantly, that there is more than one way to grow old. These are remarkable accomplishments for a segment of society that many people were willing to write off as vestiges of the collective era who cannot think for themselves.

Because I cannot travel into the future, I can perhaps best explain why I believe in the lasting impact of congregational dancing by telling a final story about a retired woman. In all the time I spent talking to retirees in Chengdu, I only met one person who decided to quit congregational dancing for reasons other than declining health or lack of time. She was a woman I called Auntie Liu, and is a friend of one of my aunts by marriage. When Auntie Liu heard about my research project, she insisted on having me over to her house for tea, where she listened to me talk about my findings before sharing her own experiences with the congregational dancing phenomenon.

Auntie Liu is a retired high school teacher who was in a congregational dance group for seven years— 2007 until 2014, until the group became, in her words, too caught up with competitions and *shequ* politics. She was in a group that met every morning at a small clearing in the riverside esplanade that runs through the south side of Chengdu. All was well until 2012, when city officials asked all dance groups who were using that section of the riverbank to move to a nearby park. The reason they gave was that dance groups were taking up too much space on the esplanade and disturbing other urban residents who wished to stroll or exercise. Auntie Liu's group moved to the park as requested, but park officials gave them a designated time allotment that limited their ability to come and go as they pleased. The group also had to abide by a noise ordinance that limited their music to a certain number of decibels. "In the summer," Auntie Liu, told me, "you could barely hear the music over the sound of the cicadas." As if these regulations were not enough, local *shequ* officials soon recruited the group to perform in dance competitions, changing the focus and tone of the group's daily meetings. What was once a simple group of friends and acquaintances dancing together on the riverbank had transformed into an endless cycle of rehearsals, costume fittings, and meetings with *shequ* officials. Auntie Liu, who told me she joined the group in order to get some fresh air and to experience some artistry (艺术味道)in

her daily life, soon became frustrated and bored with the group's new status quo. Along with two other members, she decided to leave the group to pursue interests that were not subject to state interference.

Since then, Auntie Liu has tried various pastimes. First, she tried her hand at essay writing. She had some luck at first: she wrote a semi-fictional story based on some events she had witnessed during a visit to some distant relatives in a rural village and posted it online, where a junior editor at a literary magazine saw it and wanted to publish it. However, the magazine's editor-in-chief rejected the story just a few weeks before it was slated to appear in print. Apparently, the editor decided that the essay was politically incorrect because it contained vivid descriptions of poverty in the village. Auntie Liu was astonished and disappointed. She said the story had no political commentary; she had simply relayed some real-life events as they unfolded from her own perspective. The entire episode left a bad taste in Auntie Liu's mouth and she gave up on writing shortly after. "I learned then that very few things are safe from politics," she said.

About one year before we met, Auntie Liu enrolled in a traditional Chinese ink-drawing class with a local teacher. She made a new group of friends in the class, and she now draws every day in her grown daughter's former bedroom, which she has converted into an art studio for herself. When I asked her why drawing was different from writing or dancing, she explained that it was different in at least two ways:

*First, unlike writing or dancing, you can keep your drawings to yourself. It's much more personal. You can't write something and just keep it in a pile, that's not the point. Writings must be shared in order to achieve their potential. Same with dancing. You can't dance without an audience. Why do you think the da ma are out in public all the time? But with drawings, you can draw, then put it away, then take it out to look again later, but you can get enjoyment from it without sharing it with anyone. Second, "they" [the state] don't understand art. 他们想看也看不懂 [even if they looked, they would not be able to understand].*

After this conversation, Auntie Liu brought me back to her spare bedroom/art studio to show me some of her drawings. They were lovely examples of traditional Chinese

landscapes and bird-and-flower paintings done in vibrant-colored inks on translucent papers and silks. They would not have been out of place in a museum shop or a store that catered to tourists. In other words, while it was clear that Auntie Liu had poured some part of herself into these drawings and found great personal meaning in them, it was not immediately apparent where in the drawings this meaning dwelled. Because she had chosen traditional subject matters and did not depart from conventional techniques and styles, the subjective dimensions of the pieces were obfuscated or concealed. Auntie Liu took great pride in this. Pointing to a moody painting of a small farmhouse set on a hillside, she told me rather mysteriously, “You see a house, I see much more.”

Given her disdain for state-regulated pastimes and the high premium she places on individual expression, I thought that Auntie Liu had turned her back on congregational dancing entirely and for good. I was incredibly surprised, then, when she credited congregational dancing with turning her into who she was at the end of our conversation. She told me she had never considered personal expression [自我表现] or internal experience [内心感受] to be important aspects of life prior to retirement, and that she had learned to value these things during the course of her participation in her congregational dance group. “I left because it became too complicated,” Auntie Liu explained. “But for me, dancing was the beginning of all of this. I wouldn’t be drawing today if I hadn’t danced back then.”

Auntie Liu did not elaborate much beyond this, but I understood what she meant. She was no longer dancing, and yet her words echoed what many of my dance group interlocutors told me on a regular basis about what their participation in the phenomenon had given them: a sense of self, the confidence to prioritize their own needs, and the social support to validate their personal choices. Auntie Liu was no longer a congregational dancer, but her story showed me that the inner trappings of the phenomenon have the

potential to reverberate beyond dancing itself, and that congregational dancing has the power to transform at least some aspects of Chinese society even if its duration is limited. It had certainly left a lasting impression on Auntie Liu. When I left her home, Auntie Liu gave me a small drawing of a bamboo grove on a stretched silk fan as a parting gift. “For you,” she said as she handed it to me on my way out her front door. “Something to help you remember the *da ma* by.”

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Since she was the only person I met who no longer participates in congregational dancing but was nevertheless transformed by her experience, it’s possible that Auntie Liu is an anomaly. I suspect, however, that there are thousands or even millions more retirees throughout China whose worldviews and priorities have irrevocably changed as a result of their participation in the phenomenon. In dance groups all over the country, retired women are learning to embody a new kind of subjectivity that prioritizes personal experience while still considering the demands of other relationships. By focusing on something for the sake of personal enjoyment, and by sharing this enjoyment with people who share their interests, they are learning—however slowly—to develop avenues for individual expression and remold their identities according to their own ideals. This is not the sort of skill that is taught by dance teachers or by online dance videos; it is not transmitted through model routines or official speeches at Old Age Universities. It is an embodied knowledge that is cultivated in small increments over time; it emerges from countless conversations with friends about how to best grow old, from years of effort to balance family duties with emerging desires to prioritize one’s own desires, and from the realization that the *weidao* of life—the substance that gives life its shape and its meaning—comes about via shared experiences but ultimately belongs to oneself alone.

We must wait to see the degree to which these profound changes will impact Chinese society as a whole. In the meantime, there is much to dance about.

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