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1 **"You challenge yourself and you're not afraid of anything!" Women's narratives of**
2 **running in Shanghai**

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8
9 **Abstract**

10 Distance running is a rapidly growing leisure practice among urban Chinese adults. This study
11 explores female runners' experiences in Shanghai through life story interviews with 14 female
12 runners. We analyzed their stories for cultural narrative resources and gendered life scripts used
13 in the construction of running identities and practices. Although all interviewees constructed
14 running within narratives of health, ideal body and achievement, women also storied running as a
15 liberating and autonomy-boosting activity. Yet, despite their privileged status as educated urban
16 citizens, they had to negotiate essentialist gender discourses and initially lacked self-confidence
17 in sports. Their achievements were constructed as exceptional, rather than something that all
18 other Chinese women could also potentially do.

19 **Key words:** sport culture; gender; narrative analysis; life script; social inclusion
20

21 **“You challenge yourself and you’re not afraid of anything!” Women's narratives of**
 22 **running in Shanghai**

23 In the last half decade, China has seen a phenomenal boom in leisure running, known
 24 colloquially as a “running craze” (*paobu re*) or “marathon fever” (*malasong re*). Although there
 25 have been a few running events for decades in China such as the Beijing marathon which has
 26 been organised since 1981 (<http://www.beijing-marathon.com/en/>), participants were often
 27 limited to (mostly male) elite and worker-athletes. In 2010, only 13 official “marathon” events,
 28 which in China include distances from 10 to 42 km, were organized (Xinhua, 2016), whereas
 29 2016 witnessed a total of 328 events and a record 2,8 million participants (China Daily, 2016).
 30 The leisure running industry has also taken off in a short period of time. *Runner's World* began
 31 publishing a Chinese version of its magazine in 2012 (Rodale, 2012) and Amazon China now
 32 includes numerous translations of globally popular running books and guides. A plethora of
 33 social media groups and smartphone apps also exist for runners in China.

34 A recent survey on leisure runners in China indicates that they typically have high
 35 educational backgrounds, work in non-manual occupations (i.e., white-collar jobs), and live in
 36 megacities such as Shanghai and Beijing (Xue, Ge, & Zheng, 2016). Newspaper articles largely
 37 attribute the popularity of running to increasing concerns for a healthy lifestyle (Xinhua 2016),
 38 though on occasion participants list other reasons, such as wanting to relieve stress (Prichard,
 39 Yan, Yu, & Wang, 2016) or find spiritual meaning beyond material wealth (Financial Times,
 40 2016). These reasons align with findings in many studies in the Global North, which have
 41 illustrated that common motives for running include stress relief, improved mood, and weight
 42 control (Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke, 2012; Masters, Ogles, & Jolton, 1993), a desire to
 43 have a healthy mind and body (Little, 2017; Shipway & Holloway, 2016), and a sense of

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

44 accomplishment and social affiliation (Major, 2001). Furthermore, Hanson, Madaras, Dicke and
45 Buckworth (2015) found that runners reported different motivations based on the distances they
46 raced, with ultramarathoners scoring higher on life meaning and lower on weight and health
47 concerns than participants in half and full marathon events. Indeed, tourism around running
48 events booms in China (e.g., Huang, Mao, Wang, & Zhang, 2015) as in elsewhere, providing
49 runners space to perform or even centralize their runner identities and advance their running
50 careers (Shipway & Jones, 2007). Although a paucity of research exists on runners' identity
51 construction in China, a number of studies from the Global North on gender identity in running
52 (Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke, 2012; Ronkainen, Watkins, & Ryba, 2016) and women's
53 running experiences in particular (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Griffin, 2010; McGannon, McMahon,
54 & Gonsalves, 2017; Little, 2017) have illustrated how women negotiate often conflicting
55 discourses surrounding athletic identity and femininity. Although women are increasingly taking
56 part in distance running across the globe, their running practices are often constructed within
57 hegemonic discourses surrounding femininity focused on the ideal feminine body and health,
58 rather than athletic achievement (Busanich et al., 2012; Griffin, 2010; Little, 2017). However, it
59 has also been shown how some women resist such understandings of running, focusing on their
60 accomplishments as athletes rather than on running as an instrument to construct ideal femininity
61 (Hanold, 2010; McGannon et al., 2017).

62 The recent enthusiasm for distance running in China is moreover in line with academic
63 studies that show how the new Chinese, urban middle-class are encouraged to transform their
64 bodies through self-improvement (Song & Lee 2010; Yang 2011), to take individual
65 responsibility in finding success and happiness in their lives (Zhang 2014, 2015), and to be
66 independent, competitive, risk-taking, and forward-looking (Liu, 2008). However, in contrast to

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

67 countries such as the United States or Canada where approximately 45 percent of runners in full
68 marathon events are women, in China women only account for one fifth of marathon participants
69 (Andersen, 2015). Informal surveys produced by Chinese websites nevertheless suggest that a
70 growing number of young (under age 30), unmarried women are taking up running as a leisure
71 practice (Sohu, 2016).

72 No qualitative study to date has examined the gender dynamics within running culture in
73 China. However, several studies have identified and examined an increase in structural gender
74 inequalities in recent decades (Fincher 2014; Tatli, Ozturk, & Hong 2016). Most women,
75 especially those in the urban middle-class, must find personal solutions to tackling the “double
76 burden” of having a career and caring for their family (Tatli et al., 2016). Following the nation’s
77 turn away from high socialism, which encouraged all women to pursue full-time work outside
78 the home, and its rapid transformation into a market economy, urban middle-class women are
79 now facing growing pressure to return to the domestic private sphere when family income allows
80 for it (Sun & Chen 2015), to focus their attention on bodily appearance (Yang 2011), and – with
81 the recent relaxations of the “one-child” policy and introduction of a new “two-child” policy – to
82 have more children (Shan, 2016). There thus is a clear tension for these women: on the one
83 hand, they are encouraged to be independent individuals who are competitive, pursue an
84 advanced degree and have a good career; on the other hand, they are expected to acquiesce and
85 retreat to the private sphere, while raising children and maintaining an ideal bodily appearance
86 (Liu, 2014). In this context, we wondered, how do women use running to negotiate the tensions
87 they face? What does running mean to them and how do they relate it to their broader lives?

88 This article draws upon life story interviews we conducted with 14 female runners living in
89 Shanghai, most of whom had taken up running in the prior two to three years. Shanghai has an

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

90 especially vibrant running culture and has for years been at the forefront of Chinese market
91 reforms, boasting an urban middle-class that is consumerist, individualist, and concerned with
92 adopting “modern” lifestyles (Sun & Wang, 2010). These interviews took place within a broader
93 project in which 16 men were also interviewed, but in this paper, we focus exclusively on the
94 women in order to provide a closer analysis of how they narrated their running practices within
95 global and local discourses on running, health, and gender.

96 **Gender tensions and self-cultivation in a neoliberal China**

97 Within the last few decades, under the direction of the government, Chinese society has gone
98 through major economic reform and growth, and processes of globalization and social
99 stratification have brought many changes to the ways in which people negotiate their identities
100 (Kim, Brown, & Fong, 2017; Liu, 2014; Wang, 2008). This helps explain why significant value
101 differences exist between generations living in big cities such as Shanghai (Sun & Wang, 2010),
102 with younger members of the growing middle-class less concerned about collectivistic values
103 and more focused on individualistic pursuits of self-enrichment, educational and professional
104 success, and leisure activities (Liu, 2008; Wang, 2008).

105 The state has colluded with market forces to simultaneously help fuel the rise of this
106 urban middle-class. Several scholars have noted that the Chinese government has increasingly
107 ruled according to a form of neoliberal governmentality that indirectly controls society by
108 encouraging its citizens to take individual responsibility for their health and well-being (Liu,
109 2008; Zhang, 2014). These self-disciplined neoliberal subjects are ostensibly in control and free
110 to make their own decisions; they are autonomous and self-regulating in their “freedom to
111 upgrade their bodies and minds responsibly” (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005, p. 217). These
112 urbanites are, in other words, focused on building their status in society by increasing their

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

113 embodied cultural capital through adopting new lifestyle habits and dispositions as well as their
114 *suzhi*, a term loosely translated as “human quality” but referring to a broad spectrum of
115 “qualities” that are supposedly self-cultivated, such as being well-educated and morally sound
116 (Xu, Fu, & Xi 2014). Bodily or physical *suzhi* (*shenti suzhi*) specifically refers to the quality of
117 one’s body and its health, which can be maintained through individual self-practices.

118 Accompanying the focus on individual self-cultivation, the government has further transferred
119 its previous responsibilities for social and welfare services (including health care), to the free
120 market. In other words, these services are now the responsibility of corporations and private
121 companies rather than the state, with individuals and families increasingly responsible for their
122 own health and well-being (Zhang 2014). Combined with the increasing stress from an ultra-
123 competitive society that is changing very quickly, this has led to a surge in the psychological,
124 psychotherapy, self-help, and wellness industries, as people try to cope with stress, find balance,
125 and “cultivate happiness” in their lives (Zhang, 2014, 2015).

126 The slogan “men and women are equal” (*nannu pingdeng*) was a hallmark of socialist life in a
127 party-state that aimed to employ everyone in an effort reach national labor production goals.
128 Gender equality under high socialism thus meant that women often worked full-time outside the
129 home, even while they were also still held responsible for domestic work. Prior to market reform,
130 services such as childcare and healthcare were, however, often provided by the state (Tatli et al.,
131 2016). In short, the state pushed women to work full-time and made efforts to assure it would
132 happen. These days, the market and individuals are now held responsible for dealing with
133 existing gender inequalities. This transfer has created a situation in which gender inequalities are
134 not always visible and are actually growing, as attention is deflected away from existing
135 structural inequalities and onto individuals and their families (Tatli et al., 2016). Even female

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

136 managers justify treating men and women differently in the name of remaining competitive in
137 the market (ibid); they fail to make the connection that the system itself favors an ideal male
138 worker. Thus, if a working woman faces a work-family conflict, the problem should be resolved
139 by the individual rather than involving state or organizational forces.

140 Essentialist gender discourses have also gained strength with the rise of free-market
141 neoliberalism in China (Kim et al., 2017; Sun & Chen 2015; Yang, 2011). Kim et al. (2017)
142 found that young adults from the one-child generation held strong stereotypes about gender-
143 appropriate jobs and that men were generally expected to ensure the financial security of their
144 families, whereas women were assumed to have more dependent roles. Yet, they also suggested
145 that men tended to conform to rigid gender expectations, while women were more flexible in
146 negotiating their identities and career choices, motivated by aspirations for upward mobility. An
147 essentialist discourse is also apparent in lifestyle magazines that encourage urban middle-class
148 women to retreat to the private sphere for the purposes of childrearing and domestic duties (Sun
149 & Chen, 2015), and in the booming beauty industry, which encourages women to pay close
150 attention to their bodily appearance (Yang, 2011) and to “indulge in the possibilities and
151 pleasures of feminine expressions” (Liu, 2014, p. 20).

152 Moreover, these discourses are connected with a long-standing Confucian tradition in China
153 that continues to place importance on women's role within the family as wife, mother, and
154 caregiver. Heteronormative relationships are not only encouraged, they are expected, and same-
155 sex relations remain a social taboo to the extent that some homosexuals engage in so-called
156 contract marriages with the opposite sex in order to fulfill filial obligations (Engebretson 2014;
157 Choi & Luo 2016). In short, one's sexuality is considered separate from or less relevant than
158 adhering to these obligations. Marriage is especially considered “the principle rite of passage to

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

159 hetero-gendered adulthood” and dissidence in any form is frowned upon (Engebretson 2009, p.
160 5). Women especially face pressure to marry from their families and from a mainstream media
161 obsessed with stigmatizing unmarried women as “leftover” (Fincher 2014). As Yang (2011)
162 noted, it is also still socially unacceptable for a married woman to remain child-free – a fact
163 reinforced by the recent adoption of the “two-child policy” recently introduced by the Chinese
164 government (Shan, 2016).

165 Gender and sport

166 The academic discourse on women’s sport in the Global North has centered on an
167 observation that, despite advances in women’s participation rates, it remains a profoundly
168 gendered institution where men are considered naturally more skilled and competent (Cooky,
169 Messner, & Musto, 2015; Messner, 2009; Wachs, 2005). For example, Messner (2009) argued
170 that young sportswomen are often positioned as less knowledgeable and have limited access to
171 information that could help them develop competence and autonomy in their practice. Several
172 studies have also shown that vast majority of media coverage continues to focus on men’s sport
173 and perpetuate the norm of male superiority (Cooky et al., 2015). While sporting men are
174 portrayed as strong and skillful, for women their physical attractiveness or role as a girlfriend,
175 wife or mother is emphasized in textual and visual representations (Buisse & Embser-Herbert,
176 2004; Cooky et al., 2015).

177 In China, although there is a paucity of information on women involved in contemporary
178 leisure sport, scholarship on elite athletes and gender (Dong, 2003; Brownell, 2001) highlights
179 the same gender inequalities that exist more broadly in society. Elite sportswomen’s ambitions
180 and life goals are typically described as revolving around marriage and family commitments,
181 which, because of the inevitable “double burden,” have sometimes been temporarily postponed

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

182 due to athletic commitments (Dong, 2003; Brownell 2001). Moreover, as Brownell (2001) points
183 out, female athletes have largely conformed to essentialist gender discourses and rarely
184 questioned the one-sidedness of this burden. Thus, these elite female athletes continue to
185 perpetuate a hegemonic, heteronormative, and male-dominated script that reinforces gender
186 inequalities in athletic careers.

187 In her analysis of gender constructions in *Runner's World*, Abbas (2004) argued that, despite
188 the seemingly inclusive nature of running culture, gender inequality is “naturalized” in distance
189 running (i.e., the ideal runner is a male), and female bodies are constructed as “barriers” to
190 achievement. Overcoming these barriers was an individual responsibility within a discourse that
191 presumed running as an equal opportunity bodily practice. Other studies have also highlighted
192 gender narratives of running, such as women's running as a site for the pursuit of an ‘ideal’ size
193 and shape feminine body (Little, 2017). However, Hanold (2010) found that women who
194 participated in ultramarathons (distances over the classic marathon) resisted such understandings
195 of the running body, focusing more on what their bodies could *do*, rather than what they looked
196 like.

197 Chinese sports media follows a similar pattern to that mentioned by Abbas (2004) in which
198 the ideal runner (or leisure athlete) is presumed to be male. However, the Chinese media on
199 running is more blatant in following a gender discourse that renders women's bodies as objects
200 to be beautified and cared for, thus largely silencing alternative narratives for understanding the
201 running body and practice. As the organizers of the women's half marathon in Beijing stated,
202 “the run aimed to offer female runners a way to show their beauty and vibrancy” (Yang, 2016).
203 Similarly, in the women's section of “Running World” website
204 (<http://www.paobushijie.com/women>), we found that a vast majority of the stories related to

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

205 achieving an ideal feminine body (thin and toned) through running and other exercises. A few
206 stories also addressed the fear of becoming “too” muscular through running, ensuring women
207 that running would not lead to excessive muscle gain. One described how to use makeup so it
208 would stay on when running. Although stories related to body modification dominated the
209 content, several also addressed the mental health and well-being aspect of running, suggesting
210 that running could increase life quality and happiness. These reinforce the notion that individuals
211 are responsible for taking control of their own lives. Articles provided advice on how to learn to
212 enjoy or even fall in love with running. Often these tips – in relation to training and psychology –
213 were shared by fashion models rather than athletes, exercise scientists, or professionals in
214 psychology. Notably, none of the articles in the women’s section (in contrast to the site as a
215 whole) was focused on performance enhancement or scientific training knowledge, though one
216 recent article encouraged women to challenge themselves by trying to complete a longer distance
217 than what they had achieved before.

218 **Methodology**

219 The present study draws upon narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009)
220 and a life story approach (Atkinson, 2002) to explore meanings that women assign to their
221 experiences in distance running. Within narrative inquiry, stories are considered as our primary
222 means of making sense of our experiences and communicating them to others (Riessman, 2008).
223 While personal stories draw on embodied, lived experiences, narrative approaches conceptualize
224 these stories as sociocultural constructions in that they are always dependent on narrative and
225 discursive resources that the storyteller has access to. The more stories we can access, the more
226 openings we have to understand ourselves in different ways (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). When
227 evaluating our lives and thinking about our futures, we rely on our narrative resources and

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

228 culturally available “life scripts” about normative events that constitute a life course (Fivush,
229 2010). In this study, we understand gender as an inextricable part of life scripts that at specific
230 socio-cultural locations offer guidelines on how “a good life” should unfold (Spector-Mersel,
231 2006).

232 This study draws on interviews with 14 women residing in Shanghai who had participated in
233 leisure running for 1-10 years (average 3.2 years). The participants were native Chinese, aged
234 24-46 with an average of 32.5 years (one woman did not want to disclose her age), and active
235 runners. Seven women identified themselves as single, one as in a relationship, three as married,
236 and three noted they were divorced. The participants were recruited via personal networks of the
237 researchers, snowball sampling, and advertisement in social media. We explained to potential
238 participants that we hoped to learn about “runners’ experiences”, indicating that we looked for
239 people who self-identified as runners. The sampling method yielded a group of highly-educated
240 and mostly white collar workers, many of whom had either studied abroad or worked in
241 international companies.

242 In the interviews, participants were first invited to share stories from childhood, family, and
243 school, and the ways in which sport or exercise had (or had not) been a part of their youth. We
244 then probed into educational experiences and current work and family situation. In addition to
245 general questions about the life course, such as “did you participate in sports growing up?” and
246 “how did you get started in running?”, we also asked direct questions related to gender, such as
247 “is it better to be a man or woman for running?”, and encouraged our interviewees to qualify and
248 elaborate on their responses. Participants were interviewed in cafés and researchers’ offices, and
249 the interviews lasted an average of 83 minutes.

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

250 Ten interviews were conducted in English by the first author and four in Chinese by the third
251 author. All interviews were transcribed and those conducted in Chinese were translated into
252 English. Although there are always challenges in interviewing participants in non-native
253 languages and in translation, our analytical focus was on identifying broad themes, storylines and
254 cultural narrative resources, rather than on, for example, specific linguistic strategies. We found
255 that using English in interviews was not a major drawback because most participants had studied
256 abroad, worked in international companies, or had numerous foreign friends, or all of the above.

257 We employed both thematic and performative approaches in our analysis of the interviews
258 (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). With the thematic approach, we sought to discern
259 common elements or “whats” of the stories, focusing on discerning themes that emerged as
260 building blocks of the stories. The responses we received varied from person to person, but we
261 did notice common patterns: the majority of our interviewees cited physical and mental health
262 and bodily appearance as major reasons to begin or continue running, and many gained
263 knowledge about running through social media and running clubs. However, as we will
264 demonstrate below, women also often identified running as an autonomous, confidence boosting
265 activity. After discerning these emerging themes, we used a performative analysis to determine
266 the ways in which the narratives were communicated, and what the speakers sought to
267 accomplish by telling particular kinds of stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). In this phase, we were
268 interested in finding out how speakers positioned themselves in relation to common gender
269 narratives and life scripts, how they located different actors in their stories, and what experiences
270 were included or omitted. In doing so, we also sought to be reflexive about how our positioning
271 influenced our developing interpretations.

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Findings

“I was never a physically active person”

Most women constructed narratives where running and sports were largely absent from their childhood and youth. As Ms. Zhou (30) explained:

When I was little I always pictured myself as someone probably doing well in academic subjects but really, really weak in physical aspects. I always felt that I couldn't run, I couldn't throw... In high school, the amount of academic work was overwhelming. We were facing lots of pressure. Exercise was just to keep you from getting sick.

Women's narratives from youth frequently emphasized academic education and dealing with significant pressure in competition for university admission (Liu, 2014). Ms. Cheng (37) was one of the few women who had been involved in her school's athletics team, but “my mom talked me out of the team because of school work”. Most women did, however, feel encouraged to engage in moderate exercise for the sake of health (i.e., preventing illness), a belief that likely stems from a combination of traditional Chinese medicine and societal remnants of Maoist period high socialism (Hoeman, Ku, & Ohl, 1996; Shuman, 2014). As Ms. Wei (30) recalled:

In my childhood I always got sick. My dad said, ‘maybe you should do some exercise, to keep you from getting sick’. So I started to run. (...) In the Uni(versity), like all of a sudden, I got really healthy. After that, I didn't run much, just in some [physical education] classes.

In describing their youth, most women recalled essentialist discourses of “natural” gender differences in sports skills and stated they had few opportunities to develop athletically. Sport activities were often constructed as conflicting with cultural discourses on femininity and the ideal feminine body:

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

294 Ms. Zhang (age not disclosed): Because of the nature of the education system, it is thought
295 that females cannot do so many sports. You can read about this in Chinese books, about how
296 a female is supposed to be gentle and soft, lacking in muscle.

297 Interviewer: Do you think this influenced you?

298 Ms. Zhang: Yes. After I became a teenager, I stopped doing any kind of exercise. I wanted to
299 stay slim, to be more female, in terms of physique, less muscular.

300 All our participants started their current running practices in adulthood (some as university
301 students). The decision to (re)start running in adult life was most often constructed as a
302 transformative experience (Griffin & Phoenix, 2016), narrated within circulating discourses on
303 health and the ideal female body. Losing weight was identified as the most “natural” reason to
304 start running. As Ms. Tang (30) put it, “everyone wants to look beautiful”, thus confirming the
305 dominant narratives offered in the media surrounding women’s running.

306 Several women also mentioned that they began running as a way to better take care of
307 themselves both mentally and physically. Many explained that they used running to deal with
308 pressure in studies or work. The construction of running as a means to prevent illness also re-
309 emerged within this context, such as in Ms. Zhang’s story: “When I moved back to China [from
310 Europe], I earned more money than before. But I felt less secure, so I had to build up my muscle,
311 to take care of myself, otherwise, if I get ill it could be expensive”. Illustrating the insecurities of
312 the health care system in China, she explained that running was her means “to be independent,
313 strong and self-sufficient”. These narratives also reflect the increasingly ingrained belief in
314 contemporary China that, in order to deal with relentless competition and pressure (and become
315 successful), one must take individual responsibility to employ self-care tactics and ensure well-
316 being (Zhang, 2014).

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

317 Yet, although our participants talked about stress relief, their simultaneous focus on
318 achieving an ideal female body through running reveals that running was also a source of
319 pressure for some women. We also noticed that, as they continued their running practices, all the
320 women we interviewed had eventually found a competitive element within themselves –
321 meaning in most cases running faster or longer distances. Running thus became an achievement
322 domain involving pressures and stresses of its own.

323 Running knowledges

324 Although women frequently told stories about their own agency in beginning running
325 practices, it was clear that most often their “progression” in running had been facilitated by
326 running knowledges constructed and shared by men. Many women were explicit about their
327 reliance on men (e.g., boyfriends and training partners) in providing advice in training methods
328 and other running-related information, thus confirming a gendered pattern in the construction of
329 sport expertise (e.g., Messner, 2009). In these stories women themselves seemed to reinforce
330 essentialist gender discourses and be complicit to a gender order that at other times they sought
331 to break. Ms. Gao (35), for example, described her male friend’s role in her first marathon as
332 such:

333 Ms. Gao: He prepared everything for me.

334 Interviewer: Ok. Did he make a training plan for you, which you then followed?

335 Ms. Gao: Yes. And the clothing, and running shoes, and so on – everything.

336 A similar story about her first marathon experience was told by Ms. Yang (29):

337 I have a colleague from the company’s Boston office. He ran quite a few Boston marathons.

338 He shared with me the training schedules to do the full marathon with 50 or 45 weeks of

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

339 training (...) And I also had a friend who ran with me in the marathon. He was talking with
340 me and gave me some good advice during the run on how to save energy.

341 An exception to the clear pattern in the gendered distribution of running knowledge was Ms.
342 Zhuang (37), who had run short and middle distance events in school. She considered herself as
343 capable of figuring out her training alone. As she explained:

344 I began to collect information on the internet, like what to pay attention to before a full
345 marathon. It was said that you had to run 30 km three weeks before the race. Then I made my
346 plans, according to what was on the internet, about how long I would run each day. I ran that
347 30 km three weeks before the event and I could manage it, which was how I got my confidence.

348 Although Ms. Zhuang (37) explained that she was self-directed in accumulating training
349 knowledge, she nevertheless interestingly noted that it had given her confidence – a gendered
350 theme we explore in the next section.

351 **Building confidence, claiming autonomy**

352 Nearly all women explicitly claimed that running had helped build their self-confidence in some
353 way. For many, confidence came through a process of overcoming certain challenges, such as
354 adding distance to their runs, employing new training methods, or in completing a race for the
355 first time. These narratives became sites where women, to different degrees, challenged
356 essentialist gender discourses and claimed competence, rather than dependence, in running. Ms.
357 He (34) was one of the women who most strongly challenged dominant gender norms. She
358 attributed having joined a group of like-minded runners (that included other women) as both
359 having helped her dispel a perception that women were physically weak and as also providing
360 training that makes her confident to face challenges. As she stated,

361 You find your group, your interest and people like you. It's like wow, cool! Girls don't really

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

362 wear makeup, they wear sports clothes. They're not afraid of showing their muscles, they're
363 strong. And we sweat a lot together, we train very hard and we feel like you challenge
364 yourself and you're not afraid of anything. I feel the power when I meet this group... that's
365 the life I want to have.

366 On other occasions, however, self-confidence was actually boosted through conforming to
367 dominant ideals of femininity and gaining validation from others. Ms. Zhou (31) described how,
368 after she started doing yoga and running regularly, "people would comment, oh, you look well.
369 You're looking very fit, like your butt looks nice." This focus on physical, bodily transformation
370 is in line with societal pressure for women to take self-initiative in beautifying themselves (Yang
371 2011). Yet although Ms. Zhou said she found such comments encouraging, it is worth noting that
372 none of the women claimed that bodily appearance was the only or even primary reason why
373 they continued to run in the long term. In Ms. Zhou's case, consistent running practices had built
374 up her confidence to be successful in other sports activities. She described how she had
375 unsuccessfully tried to learn how to swim in graduate school and given up because she was
376 afraid of the water, stating "you need to overcome a fear like that." She stated that she now felt
377 "more confident" in her physical ability, adding "not only can I achieve my academic goals but I
378 can also be strong and physically active... last summer I started to learn swimming again." In
379 short, she trusted her ability to succeed physically (as well as academically), learn new skills, and
380 had the confidence to actively try other activities. She stated:

381 I also started going to the gym and started doing weights... [Laughing] I would have
382 never imagined myself doing that before, that wouldn't fit my image of myself. But after
383 running, I go, well, I can squat, I can do that.

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

384 For our interviewees this new sense of self-determination also extended beyond sport skills,
385 sometimes helping them develop a sense of control over their own well-being. Ms. He (34)
386 explicitly stated that she began running as a way to gain direction after ending a long
387 relationship: "I wanted to find something that I can do every day - that gives me energy and
388 keeps me alive. So I started running every day at the gym." Similarly, Ms. Huang (40) cited
389 running as her emotional crutch through difficult times, including a divorce: "If I run less, it
390 affects my emotions, I become depressed. Pressure from work and family can cause this, so I
391 need to exercise to feel good."

392 Overall, women's stories about gaining confidence or a new sense of self also point towards
393 an omitted narrative of lacking self-confidence prior to taking up running. As indicated in their
394 stories, many of our interviewees did not believe they possessed any athletic qualities before
395 initiating a running practice, an understanding that draws upon essentialist discourses of gender
396 in China (Liu, 2014). Ms. Zhang (age not disclosed) explained that, when many of her foreign
397 running friends signed for the famous Berlin marathon, she had not (yet) dared to do so: "to run a
398 marathon, especially for a female, you really need to make up your mind to do that. So I was not
399 ready." She explained that being a 'serious' female runner was still quite exceptional in China
400 and against the normative expectations for being a woman: "many Chinese women join the
401 group but few of them are serious runners, they can't run regularly." Although she maintained
402 that she was different in her ability to commit to her training, she simultaneously held that
403 running a marathon was not something that a woman could typically do. Yet, she maintained
404 that, after long training and determination, at least a half-marathon would be possible for her in
405 the future.

406 **Managing family responsibilities**

407 Two women we interviewed had children who lived at home, while another had two older
408 children who had left home (for boarding schools abroad?) before she began running. For them,
409 although motherhood and running could co-exist, they did not always find it easy. As Ms. Huang
410 (40) with two children explained:

411 Ms. Huang: [In the beginning,] I ran by myself on the track while the kids played on the
412 grass. I could run laps, still seeing them. Then I met a group of runners there and they
413 suggested I join them. They always have a monthly race. I said I can't come because of
414 my parental responsibilities. They helped in organizing babysitters.

415 Ms. Huang, who was divorced for two years at the time of the interview, explicitly noted that it
416 had always been her responsibility to take care of the children, even during her marriage. Ms.
417 Zhuang (37) similarly described taking care of her child as her responsibility, even if her husband
418 and her parents were at home:

419 Ms. Zhuang: I get up at 5 am and come back [from running] at 6 am. My kid gets up at 7
420 am, and he goes to school after the morning routines. It's perfect time management. In
421 the evening, I stay with my kid for his homework, and he finishes at about 8 - 9 pm. I'm
422 able to go out [for a run] at 9:15 pm the latest.

423 Although Ms. Zhuang maintained that her family was "supportive" of her running, her narrative
424 positioned herself as the main caregiver of their child, especially regarding his education. That is,
425 she explained that her leisure time was reserved only for those early and late hours when it
426 would not interfere with her child's needs. She could thus avoid potential feelings of guilt and
427 selfishness, which have been noted as common concerns for mothers pursuing sports activities in
428 Western contexts (e.g., Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017). In her words, "I deal with him first. I'll

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

429 ensure everything is fine with him before I go out for a run.” She also specifically mentioned her
430 involvement in her child’s homework routine, a common task for many urban Chinese mothers
431 who take exclusive responsibility for childrearing and their children’s education (due to a lack of
432 husband involvement, some women have described this as “widowed parenting”) (Chen, 2017).
433 In this interview and that with another mother, this gender order - where women were almost
434 solely responsible for childrearing - was considered natural; husbands were described as
435 accepting that their wives run, but did not actively encourage or help facilitate it by, for example,
436 shouldering childcare responsibilities or even coming to cheer for their wives at running events.
437 Indeed, husbands played very little role in these women’s narratives, which instead focused on
438 running as an activity that could only take place for a mother once the rest of her familial
439 obligations had been fulfilled.

440 Lastly, we asked all participants to anticipate their lives 5 to 10 years in the future. In these
441 stories, many women predicted getting married and having children, in line with the standard
442 heteronormative expectation that is difficult to avoid “regardless of gender or sexuality”
443 (Engebretson, 2017, p. 165). Yet, these women generally constructed stories where their (future)
444 husbands were equal caretakers of the children and their running practices would not interfere
445 with motherhood. Some even claimed that being a runner could actually have a positive impact
446 on future children (McGannon et al., 2017). Ms. Tang (30), single at the time of interview, was
447 quite clear about criteria for a future partner:

448 I think my partner will take care of the children when I am running (...) Sharing the
449 responsibility is what a partner should do. So I will [still] have my time to do things like
450 running which I think is a part of a quality life.

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

451 At the age of 30, Ms. Tang technically falls into the stigmatized category of “leftover
452 women” (Fincher 2014), though it should be noted that neither she nor the other women
453 explicitly brought this up for discussion. Nevertheless, it is clear that single women’s narratives
454 of the future drew upon a different life script than of those who had already married and had
455 children. Single women envisioned futures in which, followed a marriage and children, they
456 would not be solely burdened with family responsibilities and still have plenty of leisure time to
457 pursue individual interests. These life scripts drew from contemporary discourses of the
458 “modern, autonomous female” (Liu, 2014) and imagined gender equality in work, home, and
459 leisure. Yet, as other studies have indicated, men sometimes draw upon more rigid narratives
460 surrounding masculinity (Kim et al., 2017). These women may run into conflicts in the future
461 when negotiating relationships, leisure, and familial obligations.

462 **“Not like other women”**

463 A number of our participants constructed narratives where they distanced themselves as
464 runners from other women, and from the media discourses surrounding women’s running. Many
465 interviewees described other women who took up running as undedicated and overly focused on
466 socializing, appearance, or fun rather than athletic development. In most cases, they uncritically
467 attributed such “faults” to the individual, rather than addressing broader gender inequalities and
468 cultural pressures to conform to an ideal femininity. As Ms. Zhang (age not disclosed) explained:

469 You can see that I am a serious runner, but I don’t know about other Chinese women’s
470 motivations to join the group. Maybe some other women’s interests are different from mine,
471 maybe they just do it for fun. They do it [for a while], and then they stop...

472 Similarly, when asked about whether she would consider joining a women-only training group,
473 Ms. Cheng replied: “It’s better for [athletic] development if you’re running with boys. And some

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

474 female-only groups like to focus on showing their beauty. I don't like this." These women
475 delineated themselves from "other Chinese women" by highlighting athletic pursuits behind their
476 running practices, thus reproducing dominant gender narratives that position women as naturally
477 lacking athletic qualities. Similar to findings in studies in the Global North (e.g., Rupperech &
478 Matkin, 2012), these women took pride in their achievements noting that they were able to do
479 things that other people – and especially most women – could not. Our interviewees also
480 occasionally mentioned that many women were unlikely to become regular runners due to
481 concerns about being exposed to sunshine or fear of gaining muscle mass, echoing discourses
482 found in the women's section of the "Running World" website
483 (<http://www.paobushijie.com/women>). Many women developed narratives that specifically
484 sought to rebuke such notions and to distinguish themselves from the supposed stereotypical
485 concerns of most women.

486 Similar to Griffin (2010), we found that constructions of women's running more broadly
487 were framed by notions of running as a means for better health and socializing. However, on a
488 personal level, many women embraced qualities of athleticism and competitiveness. While their
489 stories exemplified experiences of personal empowerment through athletic achievement, such
490 experiences remained at an individual level. That is, these narratives worked to sustain the
491 "ideologies of difference" (Wachs, 2005, p. 527) and did little to challenge essentialist discourses
492 that work to shape gender relations in Chinese culture (Kim et al., 2017). In asserting that most
493 women were not up to being "serious" runners, our participants who were more competitive
494 actually considered their gender an advantage, explaining that it was easier for them to succeed
495 in races in the less competitive women's category.

496

Discussion

497 Within the growing, affluent Chinese middle-class, the search for health, well-being, and
498 happiness constitute central concerns in life (Zhang, 2015). The “running craze” in China can be
499 contextualized within these urban citizens’ broader concerns about “a good life”, which for our
500 participants included not only material wealth, career and/or family, but also having meaningful
501 leisure activities (Liu, 2008). Coinciding with a neoliberal governmentality that encourages
502 people to develop individual autonomy and take personal responsibility for their health and well-
503 being, our female runners indicated that running was a means to “take control” over their lives.
504 Many women appeared to use running to achieve the ideal feminine body and to manage stress,
505 but they simultaneously described their practices as empowering and derived from the self rather
506 than something imposed on them (Yang, 2011). Furthermore, although there is a clear conformity
507 to neoliberal discourses that displace social or governmental responsibility to that of the
508 individual, on a personal level these runners experienced running as liberating and life-
509 enhancing. In short, they found it to be an extremely self-fulfilling and worthwhile leisure
510 activity. These findings extend previous studies from the Global North on women’s distance
511 running as a sub-cultural context in which neoliberal discourses and middle-class values are
512 normalized (see Hanold, 2010). This suggests that urban middle-class female runners in
513 Shanghai largely make meaning of their running experiences through shared global narratives,
514 rather than any particularly “Chinese” cultural discourse on health or physical culture.

515 Similar to scholarship on gender and sport in the Global North (e.g., Messner, 2009; Wachs,
516 2005), and studies on gender relations in China (Liu, 2014; Kim et al., 2017), we also found that
517 our participant narratives reproduced discourses of “natural” gender difference in sporting
518 interests and athletic abilities. An assumed female inferiority was obvious when many of our

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

519 interviewees described how they relied on men to help them train for marathons, and especially
520 in their need to build confidence for pursuing such challenges. Although they often stated that
521 anyone, regardless of gender, could run, to run well was constructed as an exceptional
522 achievement for a woman. The “serious” female runners, by positioning themselves in
523 opposition to the majority of women engaged in recreational running, did little to challenge
524 discourses of female athletic inferiority.

525 Our study suggests that narratives surrounding gender and family roles are being contested
526 in contemporary China, which was evident in the gap between women’s narrative imaginations
527 of the future and the stories of those who were already married (or divorced) and had children.
528 These narratives always followed a standard heteronormative script most likely because, as
529 described previously, same-sex relations are still considered socially taboo in the face of filial
530 obligations. Single women in their late 20s and early 30s were confident that they would still
531 have their own time even if they had children, and that their future husbands would be at home
532 with children while they went running. They also downplayed any potential difficulties in
533 realizing their future script, assuming that their spouses would willingly share this vision. Their
534 optimism and belief in retaining personal autonomy vis-à-vis familial obligations contrasted to
535 the stories of the two women with young children – and studies previously mentioned – that
536 indicate most urban women continue to shoulder the responsibility for childrearing.

537 While the majority of our participants deviated from what is considered a traditional female
538 life script (i.e., they were over age 27 and unmarried, or had divorced), they did not express
539 anxieties of being “leftover” or having failed in their relationships. By contrast, they often
540 focused career possibilities and leisure pursuits, and when asked, they set high standards for
541 potential future partners. It is important to emphasize, however, that these women, by virtue of

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUNNING IN SHANGHAI

542 their backgrounds and lifestyles, came from a privileged group that does not represent all
543 Chinese women. In other words, they were all highly educated, living in a first tier cosmopolitan
544 city, many had international connections, and most came from white collar backgrounds or were
545 white collar workers. Furthermore, it is relevant to note that most of them were relatively novice
546 runners, which is likely to have influenced the meanings they assigned to running (see Hanson et
547 al., 2015).

548 Running was a central theme for the middle-class, neoliberal life scripts that our participants
549 developed. Yet, these narrative performances, with a focus on individual accomplishments and
550 transformations, could be also read as attempts to keep a “success” narrative going by omitting
551 experiences that might destabilize such self-narratives. For example, because non-
552 heteronormative relations are still stigmatized in China (Engebretson, 2014; Wu, Mou, Wang, &
553 Atkin, 2017), we did not explicitly ask about sexuality or intimate relationships in the interviews
554 (and most of our participants did not venture into such topics). In future work, it would be
555 valuable to further explore gender performative elements, and to expand the current study by
556 examining Chinese women’s leisure sport activities within a broader demographic.

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