

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gender tensions and self-cultivation in a neoliberal China

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gender and sport

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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:

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

Interviewer: Do you think this influenced you?

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

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

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

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

Running knowledges

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

Ms. Gao: He prepared everything for me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Building confidence, claiming autonomy

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

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

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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.

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

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

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.

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

“Not like other women”

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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