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The Social Context of Collective Physical Training among Chinese Elderly

An Anthropological Case Study in a Park in Beijingⁱⁱⁱ

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Abstract

This study analyzes the social context in China where the elderly participate in collective physical training, a cultural activity specific to the country. For this study, senior citizens aged 60 or above who participated in collective physical training in a park in Beijing were observed for five months. Research results found that collective physical training enables formation of social networks providing mutual caring and support. On the other hand, the participants conform to the self-disciplined modern discourse to survive in the post-Mao society. They do collective physical training due to their social conditions, such as the poorly established welfare system for the aged, severance pay that is too low to cover medical expenses. Although the participants seem to autonomously choose collective physical training based on their own preferences, the context of Chinese society, including hidden government intentions, leads the elderly to participate in training activities.

Keywords: Aging, Discourse, Self-discipline, Public dancing, guang chang wu, Physical training, Park, China

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Introduction

This study aims to reveal the current lives of the Chinese elderly through delineating the social context that induces participants to participate in collective physical training. People in many squares, including those in Beijing, perform various activities, such as *taichi* and disco dancing (*disike*). Collective physical training in parks or squares is perceived as an example of the “distinctive culture of China.” Since most of the participants in collective physical training are elderly adults (袁丽 2014), collective physical training has been associated with the social problems of aging.

The Government tries to hide the elderly in society, defining them as nonproductive support receivers (Powell 2012). On the other hand, participants try to thwart that Government strategy by engaging in collective physical training in public spaces as capable self-disciplined subjects. However, being self-disciplined subjects means that they conform to the government's hidden intention of making modern subjects. To survive the reality that marginalizes them as relics of the pre-modern period and does not recognize them as social beings, Chinese elderly conform to the self-disciplined modern discourse created by the government rather than fully resisting the Government that has left them to an uncertain future.

In the context of China, the study of the collective physical training of the elderly shows how the modernity of China appears differently through the body at different times in history. Collective physical training is a way of training productive agents who are in different generations (Morris 2004). When Mao Zedong declared the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, mass gymnastics (*jituantiyu*) became an important daily task for the public (*renmin*) following the introduction of the work unit system (*danwei*). The Communist Party of China (CPC) proclaimed, “[W]e officially promote mass gymnastics for the demand of physical training to intensify the progress of productivity and the labor force” (金欽昌 1994). Thus, mass gymnastics was implemented to help create a solid foundation of productivity, promoted as a method of living a modernized life dedicated to the nation and escaping the pre-modern life dedicated to oneself. From the Chinese Economic Reform by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, however, the CPC dismissed most of the Mao period policies as pre-modern and imposed fresh modern policies that fit the market economy system. At that time, the Government exploited the collective physical training strategy to shift the responsibility of welfare from the Government to individuals after the collapse of the work unit system (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). The CPC encouraged physical training not only to unite the people but also to lead them to consider self-management as a natural process. Unlike the Mao period, collective physical training has been advertised for individuals' health, rather than for the nation.

Thus, collective physical training in the Mao period was promoted to foster modern subjects who worked for the nation. In the post-Mao period, it has been promoted to foster modern subjects who can manage themselves without the help of the Government. In the same context, considering that the main participants in collective physical training are elderly adults, collective physical training shows how old age has been defined in the modernity discourse of China.

Theoretical Framework

Foucault (2007) argued that modern individuals always manage their own action for themselves by internalizing discipline without external control. Foucault called the governing strategy of imprinting self-discipline on the body of individuals “biopolitics.” As Zhang (2011) insists, we could find out the field of managing body as a governing strategy in China in what Foucault states as body politics.

Body politics based on self-discipline is highly visible in the physical training culture in China. “Training the body for China” reveals the government’s political strategy of claiming modernization that is infused with public culture (Brownell 1995). Although the culture of physical training was invented by the Chinese government to unite the people, these facts are not well-known, and Chinese people only regard physical training as a traditional virtue. Young and healthy bodies were valuable for national productivity in the Mao period, and are valuable according to consumerist standards in the Post-Mao period (Brownell 1995). In this social context, Chinese people train their body for themselves, being eager for young bodies.

After the economic reforms, the post-Mao government could not claim sole responsibility for the welfare of people, since they promote a competitive market for economic development. Zhang (2009) points out that the aging experience has been stratified in China because of the economic gap between the rural and the urban area. Since the government privatizes the elderly care systems, the quality of elderly care has stratified, according to the economic situation. Although many Chinese elderly suffer from lack of care, Zhang argues that collective physical training among Chinese elderly shows the possibility of active aging and mutual support in contemporary China (ibid.: 207). In light of this situation, the Chinese government advertises the traditional concept of *yangsheng*. An interesting point is that modernized self-discipline management strategy is closely related to traditional Chinese ideas (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). *Yangsheng* is a traditional Taoist way of self-training and self-management to balance the status of one's body. Unlike Foucault’s argument that individuals cultivate self-discipline after modernization, *yangsheng* (meaning self-discipline) is a classic ideology that has been handed down for thousands of years in China. In other words, it would be much easier to connect the traditional and modern ideology of self-discipline in the case of China. Chinese elderly also have accepted self-health cultivation methods, called *yangsheng*, from institutionalized state discourse about aging in the field of Traditional Chinese Medicine that regards aging as a disease (Yang 2006). However, the elderly do not passively accept this concept. Rather, they resist state discourse about aging by applying *yangsheng* in their own way. Yang’s (2006) argument reveals that the Chinese elderly are also agencies that reconstruct aging discourse by accepting and resisting dominant discourse at the same time.

In this theoretical context, this study not only highlights the everyday life of the Chinese elderly, but also tries to reveal rifts created in the modernization process led by the party-state. The Chinese elderly have experienced both the pre-modern and modern periods in China. Their life cannot be totally separated from the modernization discourse of the Chinese government.

Subjects and Methods

This study was based on ethnographic field research, a standard tool for anthropological studies. Given the difficulty of capturing life experiences and communication styles by analyzing documents or statistics, the ethnographic research techniques of participant-observation and interviewing were considered best

suited to the study goals. These techniques allow researchers to share subjects' experiences and perceptions. In addition, documents needed for this research were collected. The researcher decided on a park in Beijing as the research setting after a preliminary investigation in July of 2014, since more activities are performed there compared to other Beijing parks. Formal research in the form of participant observation and interviewing was conducted from September 2014 to February 2015. The researcher visited two groups (Groups A and B) three or four times a week. This study was conducted on, most over 60 years oldⁱⁱⁱ. The age of 60 was set as the standard for subject selection because the current CPC defines people over 60 as elderly (*laonianren*).

A master leads group A and teaches *liangong*^{iv}. The master is a 90-year-old man who came to Beijing from Sichuan after retirement at age 60. He had been in the military but started to train *liangong* to cure himself. About 20 people participate in *liangong* every day. Although members of group A range in age from their 20s to 80s, more than half of the participants are over 60 years old. New participants have to pay a one-time fee. Group A has a vertical relationship that is seen in the way that members address each other. Group A participants do not call each other by name. They call the teacher "master," and long-time male participants "big disciple (*dashixiong*)." These terms are based on the period of apprenticeship, not age. This shows that an apprentice relationship (*tudiguanxi*) establishes hierarchy. Master is central to this relationship, and most participants respect the master and believe what he says. Master often infuses others with *qi*, and participants request *qi* from the master. However, this vertical relationship does not mean a rigid relationship between classes. Although group A members all use appellation and respect for the elders, they are not ill at ease with each other. Sometimes members even make fun of the master.

Although the official training program starts at 10 am, most members come around 8 am. This time is the key to their personal relations. They do training while chatting. Many people emphasize that they do training every day, no matter how bad the weather is. When participants first arrive, they spread out a mat and start individual warm-ups. These gestures are ways to straighten the body. Participants believe that they can receive *qi* from the ground as they straighten their own body. Since personal training is nonofficial, there is no fixed rules and places. It means that they can do personal training in other places. However, they still get together and do personal training together. One participant said that "we can receive each other's *qi*, and most of all, it is fun!" This shows the distinguishing aspect of collective physical training compared with other individual training. Most of the participants do not socialize with each other outside of the park after the class ends. Some participants even do not have the phone numbers of the others. The relationships within group A are limited to training time.

Unlike group A, group B members usually do not come together for healing. It is a kind of social group for aunts (*ayi*) with common interests. There is no master. However, the participant who has been longest with the group, *Jianghua* (66 years old) leads the group. *Jianghua* started to lead this group in 2001. She said that she learned dances from older people and now teaches them to new members. People wander into the park, see seniors dancing and decide to join. The number of people who participate alone is much larger than that of people who come with friends. Most of them are women in their 60s. According to *Linan*, there had been two men last year. However, they were not members when I joined. Unlike group A, there is no fee to participate, except for the 25 *yuan* a year for the portable amplifier. Relationships in group B seem horizontal rather than vertical. There seems to be no hierarchy, and members address each other by name. Although *Jianghua* lead the team, they are not treated as the master in group A is. Unlike the elders in group A who are not accustomed to devices such as smart phones, most members of group B use smart phones; some have tablets. They use these electronic devices to maintain relationships. For instance, they use group talk in Wechat^v for announcements. One of the most

distinguishing marks of group B is that its members meet after the activity. Group A members hardly meet outside of the park, but group B members go on a trip once or twice a year or have lunch. Of course not all of them can participate. However, the relationship built by collective physical training spills over into these other activities.

Although it is hard to memorize all the songs followed by different movements, participants naturally master the hundreds of movements through repeated practice. Those who have danced longer tend to stand in the front row, and those who have learned shorter tend to stand in the back. This arrangement is naturally formed rather than intended since new members cannot but emulate the older ones. For a long time, senior members have taught dance to new members. In addition, they listen to the latest music and learn new dance steps online. Since *guangchangwu* is so popular in China, there are many videos in Youku^{vi} that can be found. *Jianghua* studies these videos at home and teaches the movements or sometimes develop their own. One of the distinctive topics of conversation is “dancing instruction.” This emerges because members talk to each other while they are dancing. Although *Jianghua* teaches moves to others, those who learn quickly also teach those who need more practice. If members have questions, they ask the person next to them. In this process, they welcome newcomers and become friends by teasing people who appear awkward. Dancing instruction is an important way for group B members to form relationships.

Aging Discourse in China

By looking at the discourse created by government policy and mass media, I examine the concept of aging in the Chinese context as well as how this concept is reconstructed. This has hegemonic power in creating the “official” discourse in the communist society. Social discourse in one society does not naturally exist; rather it has been created through historical and political contexts. We should take into account aging discourses in China to figure out the image of aging in China, since this discourse underlies the public’s view.

Government’s welfare policies aimed at old age

Current welfare policies targeted at the elderly in China are largely divided into two categories. One is old-age insurance, and the other is an ID card only issued to people over 60. The CPC officially promulgated *the Elderly Rights Law 1996^{vii}*, which was edited in 2013 to cover the aging problem. After this period, elder care policies were implemented in earnest (佟新 2007).

One of the policies that related to the elderly is an ID card (an “aging certificate”) for people over 60. This card is issued to every elderly regardless of individual life condition. This aging certificate gives various benefits to the elderly, such as free entrance to parks. The CPC issues two different types of cards. One is for people from 60 to 64; the other is for people over 65. Although the CPC issues cards to those over 60, most benefits are received by people over 65. And most of the participants in group A and B understand that the card can be issued to people over 65.



[Figure 1] ID card for the aged (aging certificate)^{viii}

This ID card practice highlights the fact that aging status is defined not by the elderly themselves, but by the government. The aging certificate policy shows the limitations of current welfare policies for the elderly in China, which defines the elderly based on chronological age alone. Although participants in group A and B had relatively healthy bodies for their age, they also thought that they were already old because they had an aging certificate. The aging certificate is one kind of national apparatus regulating the elderly in a standardized way. So elderly individuals are constituted by the government from the moment of issue regardless of their own self-conception.

Another welfare policy for the aged is mostly focused on the care industry. The CPC emphasizes two major policies. One is old-age insurance^{ix} and the other is aging care service. Old-age insurance is for the elderly poor who do not receive severance pay or government subsidies. If the elderly pay a specific sum of money to the government, the CPC grants them a pension after the age of 65. Although the elderly who worked in the work unit system (*danwei*) before the economic reform do not need old-age pension, since they receive severance pay, some of the elderly could not receive severance because they were farmers or peasants at that time. In addition, the CPC launched a pilot project of residential mortgage old age insurance in 2014, so called “reverse mortgage care (*yiweiyanglao*),” in four major cities in China, including Beijing. This is a new type of insurance that offers a pension for only those who have housing. Although the CPC launched this pilot project, this policy shows that the concept of care is transformed from a fundamental right given to everyone without discrimination in the socialist era to a privatized service offered only to those who have real estate after the economic reform. The CPC insists that the nation can no longer take care of people, and people should purchase care for themselves. In one government announcement,^x the government wrote: “We Chinese have traditionally taken care of the elderly in our own families. However, more and more of the young generation get stressed about the reality that the population available to support the elderly has been decreased by the one child policy, so that we should extend the care service market.” There is no argument that the government should take care of the people as in the socialist period. After the economic reform, the Chinese government has marketized the aging problem.

How old age is represented in mass media: the matter of longevity and care

As mass media becomes more and more influential, the idea of aging is partially constructed by the way mass media represents old age. First of all, there are articles about the aging problem in newspapers. I will analyze some articles in Xinhua.com, a website operated by Xinhua—one of the most reputable press agencies in China. In particular, I will focus on two public trends related to the health and care problem in old age. One is about how to keep fit, while the other is about social issues related to the aging problem.

Delaying the aging process is important for the Chinese, since aging is related with biological decrepitude. Especially in the traditional Chinese context, longevity is discussed in association with the idea of *yangsheng*. *Yangsheng*, which comes from Taoism, means balancing *yin* and *yang* in your body by self-discipline. *Yangsheng* cannot be treated by medication. One can only recuperate *yangsheng* by meditation or self-training. As one participant in group A said, “*yangsheng* is one of the most famous words among the elderly,” it emerges in articles quite frequently.

[Case 1] Can we live to 100? The four *yangsheng* secrets^{xi}

There is an anecdote—written in *yangshengbuyu* by *Chen Jiru*, in the Ming Dynasty—about a long-lived old man who always eats salt. *Chen Jiru* recalls a time when he visited one village and witnessed three brothers over 80 years old who were still young and robust. He asked them the secret of *yangsheng*. The three brothers answered, “we cannot find salt in this area, so we have to eat very little salt and farm.”

Although *yangsheng* comes from traditional Chinese Taoism, “the secret of *yangsheng*” in this article does not contain an ideological concept; rather this only contains a common rule for daily life. For example, the articles argue that one should “not eat too much” and one should “drink enough water.” However, the media leads people to act with self-discipline and gains the public’s trust by promoting *yangsheng*.

Another topic that appears in news articles related to aging is the care problem. In China, “4-2-1” emerges as a serious problem along with aging. 4-2-1 means that there are four grandparents, two parents and one child in families because of the one-child policy. One child has to take care of all six parents and grandparents after they grow up (胡莎莎 2014). When I search on the Internet website Baidu using the keyword “4-2-1^{xii}”, there are 167 articles that come up. Among these articles, 65 include “care of the elderly (*yanglao*).” This shows that nearly 39 percent of articles directly connect the 4-2-1 problem to the care problem for the elderly.

[Case 2] Can’t wait to solve “4-2-1 problem”^{xiii}

Four elderly, two parents, and one child—the “4-2-1” family is a new composition of the family in the one child era. Parents are in trouble since they have to take care of their own child and grandparents. Reverse mortgage old-age insurance emerges as a substitute for “growing children as a backup for old age.”

Another argument that reveals how the mass media represents aging is welfare reform. The CPC recently tried to solve the care problem by marketizing care service and insurance. Now the government only assumes part of the care responsibility and individuals have to take on costs. This means that “the welfare system that people can enjoy from the cradle to the grave during the Socialist era,” without discrimination, has disappeared (이경아 2006). The media veils this policy as the perfect solution and propagates “purchasing discourse.”

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Individuals are unconsciously affected by their preferences in their process of growth (Bourdieu 1979). These preferences are not formulated independently but through the social conditions in which people live. Old age is a part of life; thus, it is also affected by the preferences that penetrate our lives. Although the elderly, as a group, retire at a similar age and are defined as “elderly” from a chronological perspective, their life experiences vary. Therefore, the ways in which they decide to spend their old age also vary, and the real lives of the elderly do not perfectly match the uniform aging discourse in Western gerontology (Cohen 1998).

Elderly people in China inhabit a reality in which the welfare system for the aged is poorly established, there are few leisure activities for the financially strapped, and severance pay is too low to cover medical expenses. Furthermore, the elderly distrust the medical approach to aging. They also have memories of the Government fully controlling and taking care of all aspects of life; however, they are now in a desperate situation in which they have to take responsibility for their later years by themselves. In this situation, as we will see, they survive by constructing social networks in which members take care of one another through collective physical training.

Limitations on welfare for the aged; lack of leisure facilities

The CPC recently recognized the danger of becoming an aging society and proposed several welfare policies for the elderly. However, such proposals cannot be fully implemented due to China's lack of infrastructure (김병철 2010).

Although there are 101 elderly leisure facilities in Beijing, only 17^{xiv} are assigned as senior activity centers (*laonianhuodongzhongxin*), not including other small silver halls (*laonianhuodongzhan*) in villages. However, senior activity centers do not provide total-care services. For example, there are no social workers in these places. They are only places for seniors to play sports. Participants feel confined because of the limited types of activities that can be performed in senior activity centers. On the other hand, participants can do whatever they want in the parks. In the parks, they participate freely in collective physical training, while the senior activity centers actually limit their freedom.

Furthermore, participants feel uncomfortable because the senior activity centers are small and confining. They go to the parks to enjoy "fresh air." Even though the press in China has recently warned about refraining from outdoor activity because of the fine dust in the atmosphere, participants still think that outside air is fresher than indoor air. Thus, when participants say "fresh air," they are not referring to the level of air pollution but to a subjective sense of a park as an "open space."

Engaging in multiple physical activities, participants try to show that they are still useful to other society members. However, the welfare system for the aged in China does not offer a stage that makes them visible. The welfare policy for the aged in China only concentrates on business expansion for elderly care services. This stigmatizes the elderly as subjects who only receive support, reducing the likelihood of them being perceived as the relatively healthy elderly. In this situation, parks are the only places that appeal to the active public. As mentioned above, there are few leisure facilities for the healthy elderly; in contrast, the number of parks is approximately 600.^{xv} Furthermore, if participants have elderly cards (*laoniandaiyuka*), they can enter any park in Beijing for free. This offers important suggestions on why elderly people prefer parks to other spaces.

Severance pay: just enough to scrape by

The reason why the elderly choose to participate in collective physical training after retirement is significantly related to their economic situation. All of the participants in Groups A and B, except one who was a farmer, were office workers who lived off severance pay. Some participants noted that they lived with children who supported them. They said they could cover "basic living" expenses using only their severance pay. Except for one individual who served in the army, however, no respondents felt that their severance pay was sufficient for living. They could, at best, scrape by on what they had, but they could not afford to do other activities.

[Case 3] *Gongfang*, male, 60 years old, Group A

Gongfang: The severance pay is enough if there is nothing else you can do. If you have a disease, you soon spend all of it.

Researcher: Ah...when you have a disease...

Gongfang: If you have a disease, it isn't enough, even if you have insurance.

If the elderly get sick and are hospitalized, they say that they cannot afford the high hospital bills. Furthermore, in many cases long-term care is needed, since many diseases in later life are chronic, hard to treat, and need continuous treatment. The participants do collective physical training to avoid getting sick. They consider training important not only because they love the outdoor activity but also because they cannot afford treatment if they get sick.

Although the Government recently designed several policies related to subsidies for the aged, such as medical endowment insurance, many participants still depend on their children or severance pay in their old age. Physical training in free—at least for the elderly—open spaces, such as parks, appears to be their spontaneous choice. However, an examination of the hidden side of Chinese society shows that this activity reveals the weaknesses of the national welfare system for the aged.

Distrust of medical approach

Participants see being treated for chronic diseases or mobility impairments in old age as an economic burden, even if they think such treatment is not effective. Again, this is related to the fact that diseases in later life are usually chronic diseases that cannot be cured completely.

[Case 4] *Liwei*, female, 73 years old, Group B

Liwei: In fact, I don't take medicine. Some elderly people go to the hospital every day and take several pills at one time. But they don't train. I think training is better than that. If you train, you can maintain low blood pressure, be free of disease, and be happy.

Researcher: You mean that training is better than going to the hospital?

Liwei: Better than going to the hospital or taking medicine. Training is much better than taking medicine. Taking medicine, in some cases, is not healthy.

The Chinese traditionally emphasize the concept of *yangsheng*, which refers to mental and physical self-discipline; elderly participants think they can maintain their health without the help of medical experts. Since the concept of *yangsheng* emphasizes self-discipline, it is regarded as not only a traditional idea followed in the specific Chinese cultural context but also as a noble theory followed by strong modern subjects who can manage themselves (Chen 2003; Farquhar and Zhang 2012). Thus, participants resolve to take care of themselves in later life, as they distrust medical interventions. They believe they cannot reach longevity only through medical treatment. Medical approaches have to run parallel with self-discipline of mind and body, since longevity refers to the whole life, not just the actual corporeal body itself. The distrust of the medical approach and the concept of *yangsheng* combine to trigger participation in collective physical training.

Embodied memories of life in the work unit system

Participants have memories of life in the work unit system, the basic social and working structure of the socialistic planned economy in the Mao period before 1978. People shared everything and worked together in one community, which was called a "unit" (*danwei*) and was controlled by the CPC. People in

a unit were bound to their own unit for their whole lives. Every person was involved in a unit. Since people in one unit shared housing, canteens, welfare services, childcare, etc., their lives totally depended on their unit. The CPC controlled these units, so when people wanted to do something, they had to get permission from a manager dispatched from the CPC.

The memories of those days are still alive within participants. But China has changed dramatically since it was governed by the CPC in the context of socialism. Because of that, the various generations “cannot be completely assimilated with each other,” and they embody very different social contexts, given the dramatic regime shift. The current elderly adapted to the work unit system before Chinese economic reform. On the other hand, younger people who were born after 1980 have lived very different lives (이응철 2011).

Most participants think that training has to be done together. In reality, they have done the same sort of training with each other for more than 10 years, so they do not have to train with others for learning purposes. However, they still prefer to train with others for several reasons, one of which might be their shared memories of life in the work unit system.

[Case 5] 2015. 02. 15. Field notes on a participant in Group A

I sent the master a traditional confectionery gift set containing many cookies as a gift for Chinese New Year. The master handed out the cookies to the other participants. (omitted) When I ate most of the cookies I had received, the master gave me another and said, “Eat whatever you want; this is a communist society.”

Following economic reform, the CPC in fact admitted individual ownership. Since then, the idea of “my thing” has arisen instead of the idea of “our thing.” However, the master’s statement shows that elderly participants still reflect their past memories of collective life in the current society despite the changed economic system.

Chinese society continues to define the elderly as the old generation, differentiating it from the current generation, and generating negative discourse about the elderly. Those who embody the lifestyle of the work unit system are regarded as social misfits, and they are considered to be in conflict with the younger generation (Yan 2009). Most of all, the opinion gap about the public dancing culture between generations is still too wide to allow formation of an alliance. Chinese society pays attention to the social conflicts related to the public dancing culture.

[Case 6] On the conflict of generations, which is the reason behind the conflict on public dancing^{xvi}

In fact, the core of the conflict on public dancing appeared due to differences in lifestyle (omitted). Meanwhile, public dancing has been a contentious issue in China. Some young people, especially, hate the public dancing. In the middle of the conflict of generations, which has become harsh, there is a heartless phrase: “It is not the elderly that have become bad; innately bad people became elderly.” Many young people insist that public dancing is just a past memory that symbolizes the older generation’s backwardness, which causes noise pollution.

The participants accustomed to the work unit system not only spend their lives emphasizing mutual support but also are accustomed to the culture of sharing open spaces, such as parks. On the other hand, younger people who live in a social atmosphere that emphasizes the right to private property of individuals do not understand the public dancing culture, and they think of it as noise pollution. From the perspective of young people, public dancing is a symbol of pre-modern China that has to be abolished. Including the debate on public dancing, the media describes the social conflict as only a matter of a generational problem between the elderly and young people, and defines the elderly as a past

generation that cannot adapt well in today's rapidly changing society. Though the elderly definitely live in the present, these kinds of media reports describe them as if they are bound to the past, and take away their voice. Through this stigmatization, they become individuals who "cannot fully assimilate into society" (Goffman 2009).

In this situation, the participants, however, reveal themselves through collective physical training, which was discounted as a past thing, rather than allowing Chinese society to stigmatize and hide them. In the name of modernization, Chinese society defines the participants as the old generation and objectifies them as non-productive subjects. The participants, meanwhile, prove themselves productive by keeping alive this pre-modern activity.

Building sympathetic and mutual relationships

Even if participants start collective physical training for their physical health, they also regain their mental security as they interact with each other in collective training. They participate in the activities not only for physical health, but also for friendship (Zhang 2009). They know each other better than family, since both groups engage in daily activity, and most of them have participated for more than five years. For participants who moved from rural areas at the request of their children who live in Beijing, it is hard, as a stranger, to build new social networks. Under these circumstances, collective physical training becomes a mutual caring environment in which those who cannot receive care elsewhere take care of one other.

The participants experience a sense of belonging through the action of sharing. Furthermore, the sharing action itself creates a sense that they are taking care of one another, since it encourages others to share something. This action helps them develop psychological stability. The sharing behavior of participants in collective physical training includes various activities from sharing things to sharing knowledge. The most common sharing activity centers around food. The participants usually eat what they bring in the middle of the training session, sharing it with others.

The activity of sharing knowledge is also common. The participants participate in this activity to maintain their health in old age, and topics related to health tend to be shared animatedly. For example, one day, a participant brought some horse oil balm and showed it to the other participants. I asked her about this, and she said it was especially good for joint pain. Although horse oil balm is a kind of folk remedy for which there is no medically proven effect, participants still believe in the efficacy of this balm. While proving the effectiveness of horse oil balm in the context of medical science is very difficult, the participants are not interested in medically proven benefits but in the experiences of others who have already used it. The participants tend to trust other participants' reports on their experiences, since they trust each other. Given their trust in each other, it is obvious that the social network created from collective physical training is at the forefront of their lives in old age.

The participants not only share things but also take care of each other. Sometimes, those who live with family take care of others who live alone. The participants consider each other more than friends. They are concerned (*guanxin*) for the other participants' safety.

[Case 7] *Chunyang*, female, 55 years old, Group A

Chunyang: I think the master is very unfortunate.

Researcher: Why?

Chunyang: He doesn't have anyone who takes care of him, and he does not receive any money from the Government. Though the master insists that he was a war veteran, I heard that war veterans receive quite a large amount of severance pay. But I think he does not receive any money from the Government.

(omitted) I heard that he lives alone and his children do not take care of him. He usually does not speak with them.

As mentioned above, the master receives deference from the members of Group A. On the other hand, he is a lonely man with no fixed income and no children who take care of him. All the participants in the group recognize this situation. The participants say, "The master is also elderly, so he might not be able to teach us." Therefore, they make a united effort to give the master pocket money. They even keep track of the master's birthday. The master is not only a teacher who instructs them on *liangong* moves and provides them knowledge about health; he also receives care from his disciples. The caring relationship is not unilateral but mutual. Regardless of their previous lives, they are all living in old age, so they know more about each other's situation than anyone else could know. They encourage and embrace one another without separating givers and takers (Stalp, Williams, Lynch and Elise 2008).

If the participants do not participate in any other social activities after retirement, they not only spend a lot of time at home, but also take care of other family members, such as grandchildren. There is no other place to relieve the stress and conflicts of their family relationships. In this situation, the social network formed through collective physical training becomes the only refuge from the family. The participants empathize with each other's lives, chatting about the discord and conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Sometimes, voicing their complaints about their arduous lives takes a load off their minds, or they derive comfort from listening to other participants' stories that are more miserable than their own. They can fully focus on the "activity of the body" since physical training is a vigorous activity that can preclude much thinking. During physical training, participants can fully escape from home. They can forget their complicated thoughts about their families. Just as a shaman goes into a trance during a ritual, the participants experience a state similar to *liminality*, removing themselves from the world (social structure) by concentrating on physical activity (Turner1995). Although they must return to the reality of life as a Chinese person who has social constraints, they enjoy the sense of freedom they gain from the training session by fully focusing on themselves.

Conclusion

Although the participants seem to autonomously choose collective physical training based on their own preferences, the context of Chinese society leads the elderly to participate in training. Though the agent making the selection is an individual, Chinese elderly (who are just scraping by on severance pay) have few choices, since the complex social context pushes them to choose certain ways of living.

Nonetheless, this limitation of choice actually has the effect of priming the pump for maintaining this activity, since it means that many Chinese elderly actually participate in the activity. If people get together and create a community, it is easier for them to voice their opinions effectively. The Government promoted physical training in the past, but now, when the Government no longer takes care of them as it did in the Mao period, the participants themselves are actively involved in this training. In reality, the elderly must take full responsibility for themselves in later life, so the participants choose collective physical training as a means of survival. In this process, participants have established a strategy to live as social people who are productive subjects. Though collective physical training is considered a symbol of pre-modern culture, ironically, participants use training to transform themselves into self-disciplined subjects and to counteract the aging discourse that discounts them as pre-modern people. They can literally show their healthy and active bodies—seen as productive bodies in the context of the market

economy—in the public space. In short, collective physical training has emerged as a way for the elderly who have lost their social lives to regain them. However, considering the social context in which collective physical training is so prevalent, there is a hidden intention of the Government; that is, the Government endeavors to make the Chinese elderly self-disciplined modern subjects. Participants inevitably conform—even if they do not realize it—to the Government’s expectations rather than fully resisting the policies that have left them with an uncertain future.

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NOTES

- ⁱ Verified by Seoul National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Research Ethics.
 Verification Number: **IRB No. 1404/001-012**
- ⁱⁱ Based on the 2015.06dissertation. Park, Yeori. (2015). Chinese Senior Citizens' Collective Physical Training and the Reconstruction of Old Age: The Case of a Park in Beijing. *Department of Anthropology in The Graduate School of Seoul National University*, Chapter 4.
- ⁱⁱⁱ In order to protect the identities of my informants, I do not specify the individual's name. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
- ^{iv} The dictionary definition of *liangong* is “a method of training the body to follow a regular motion.” According to the master, *liangong* is a physical training technique that originated from *qigong*. It is not like a martial art such as *tai chi quan*, which is aimed at fighting, but like a meditation training program based on Taoism. (Reference: homepage for Korean Traditional Knowledge Portal <http://www.koreantk.com/ktkp2014/>)
- ^v Weixin is a mobile messenger application widely used in mainland China.
- ^{vi} Youku is a video streaming website like YouTube. Chinese must use their own website because the Communist Party of China prohibits access to YouTube.
- ^{vii} 中华人民共和国老年人权益保障法 1996
- ^{viii} 北京市园林绿化局关于进一步做好老年人游览公园景区优待及相关服务工作的通知 2008
- ^{ix} 北京市人民政府办公厅转发市劳动保障局等部门关于市属科研院所转制企业参加养老保险社会统筹实施办法通知 2001
- ^x 国务院办公厅关于印发社会养老服务体系规划建设规划(2011-2015年)的通知
- ^{xi} 杨, 羽. 2015. “如何长命百岁? 长寿老人的四字养生秘诀.” 新华网. April 22.
- ^{xii} Research at 19th March 2015. Rounded to the nearest whole number from 38.9%
- ^{xiii} 杨, 建蓉. 2014. ““421 家庭” 养老不能等.” 新疆都市报. October 29.
- ^{xiv} Homepage for http://www.tuofangying.com/news_view.aspx?id=26
- ^{xv} Based on the officially marked parks on China's Baidu site: <http://map.baidu.com/>
- ^{xvi} 彭, 晓芸. “广场舞之争背后的代际冲突.” 南方日报 (广州). May 27.