HAPPY, HEALTHY, AND MAKING NEW FRIENDS: GUANGCHANGWU AND THE LIVED RELATIONSHIPS OF PARTICIPANTS

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the late Dr. Linda Caldwell, who had enough faith to accept me into the 2016 PhD Dance cohort at Texas Woman’s University. I am eternally grateful and honored.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my children, Beverly Keller and Mark Keller, my best bodies of work to date. Always remember you can do hard things.
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ABSTRACT

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Guangchangwu 广场舞, or square dancing, is a mass dance practice performed in public squares that has become extremely popular among the middle-aged and elderly in China, especially women. The narrative surrounding guangchangwu online and in media presents the participants as cranky, outdated, belligerent troublemakers. But after participating with a group of guangchangwu dancers who met every evening in the park located in my apartment complex in Shenzhen, I understood this representation to be undeserved. Noting that the voices of the participants were largely missing from the narrative, this dissertation shares the voices of guangchangwu participants in Shenzhen, China, as they describe their experiences of dancing in large groups in public spaces.

This ethnographic study explores the practice of guangchangwu, describing how participants use the practice to stay “happy, healthy, and making new friends.” It examines embodiment within the practice of guangchangwu and how this relates to the role of dance in China and what it means to be Chinese; the distinct Chinese experience of public space and how guangchangwu participants subvert said places for their own personal and group needs; and how the experiences of the guangchangwu participants influence their engagement, exploration, and performance of the aging female body. My findings suggest that contrary to the negative representation of guangchangwu I had initially found online, my participants were warm, welcoming women craving camaraderie, health, and happiness within a community of their own creation. This research is important because it puts into conversation the often-neglected voices
of the dance participants with the voices of journalists and researchers observing and writing about the dancing event.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................... ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................................... iii
ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................ iv
LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................... ix

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1
    Building Bridges of Belonging in Guangchangwu ............................................. 1
    A Brief History of Chinese Dance .................................................................... 8
    Chapter Overview ............................................................................................. 15

II. METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................... 18
    Introduction ....................................................................................................... 18
    Statement of Purpose and Research Questions from My Approved Prospectus .... 18
    Ethnography as Methodology .......................................................................... 19
    Research Design ............................................................................................... 21
    Research Sites and Participant Recruitment .................................................. 22
    Data Collection .................................................................................................. 25
    Observation and Participation .......................................................................... 27
    Data Analysis ...................................................................................................... 30
    Positionality and Ethical Considerations .......................................................... 34

III. WE’VE BEEN DOING THIS OUR WHOLE LIVES ........................................... 38
    Chinese Identity and Dance .............................................................................. 39
    Who Are the Dancers? ...................................................................................... 41
What Do They Dance? ........................................................................................................ 45

Why Do They Dance? ........................................................................................................ 51

Guangchangwu and the Body ............................................................................................ 58

The Founding Influences of Guangchangwu and the Transmission of Cultural Knowledge........ 60

Guangchangwu’s Embodied Movement as Archival and Repertoire Collective Memory........ 63

Guangchangwu and the Transmission of Knowledge in the Public Space.......................... 68

Guangchangwu as “Third Space” ..................................................................................... 70

IV. WHERE THERE’S A PARK, THERE’S GUANGCHANGWU .................................. 73

The Meaning of Place and Space in Guangchangwu ......................................................... 74

Defining Chinese Public Space ......................................................................................... 77

The Chinese Experience of Public Space ......................................................................... 80

“Walking” in the Parks ..................................................................................................... 84

Wen Xin Gong Yuan ........................................................................................................ 86

Li Yuan Da Sha ................................................................................................................ 91

Rui Peng .......................................................................................................................... 96
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Wen Xin Gong Yuan ................................................................. 87
2. Li Yuan Da Sha................................................................. 92
3. Rui Peng........................................................................... 97
4. Rui Peng........................................................................... 97
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Building Bridges of Belonging in Guangchangwu

In 2015, I went to China with my family in pursuit of a lifelong dream. I left behind a stable and secure life in the United States, two successful businesses, and lifelong friends to teach ballet at the largest international ballet school in Shenzhen, China. At this point in my life, I was looking for something more, and I was fortunate enough to be given an opportunity to work with a former classmate from the Royal Academy of Dance and have my family be willing to join me in this adventure. That said, the move filled me with trepidation, as I was taking on a challenge in a foreign and unfamiliar place. China, with its millennia-long history rich in culture and tradition, was at times overwhelming, intimidating, and alien to someone like me who had exclusively lived in the United States. Indeed, the first few weeks in China were difficult. I had to navigate bureaucratic requirements and interactions with my new company that were mired in misunderstandings and miscommunications. Adjusting to what appeared to be a wholly different world was tough, even though I remained grateful that I was realizing a lifelong dream.

After a day of completing company requirements filled with the rote minutia of teacher training, opening bank accounts, and signing employment contracts, we were finally given an opportunity to explore the city of Shenzhen. Known the world over as China’s “Silicon Valley,” Shenzhen’s streets are busy with frenetic activity especially at night. Something that I immediately noticed, however, was that seemingly random groups of people everywhere were dancing in public spaces, in streets, parks, sidewalks, and anywhere where there was enough room to maneuver. Everyone was involved in the dancing—men and women, young and old. I was further intrigued by the diversity of dances that were being performed: there were dancers
with fans, hip hop dancers, line dancers, salsa dancers, aerobic dancers, tai chi dancers, and folk dancers. How wonderful it was to be in a place where dancing in public was so common and acceptable! In many ways, discovering a culture where dancing was celebrated validated my decision to move to China.

Every evening once my classes were finished, I walked through a picturesque park in Shenzhen called Wen Xin Gong Yuan. As is typical of most public parks in China, Wen Xin Gong Yuan features bridges painted red that cross over small ponds full of large goldfish and rock-paved footpaths that wind through lush, tropical foliage. When I went to work in the afternoon, the park was vacant and lonely. I soon learned that going outdoors during the hottest hours of the day was frowned upon, and that the few people who visit the park during the day are usually napping. Wen Xin Gong Yuan was an entirely different story when walking home around 8:30 pm in the evening. During this period, there were hundreds of people dancing in the park divided into multiple groups, each with its own style of dancing and music, bombarding your ears in a cacophony of sound and presenting an overwhelming sight of movements, colors, and textures. As I walked through the park on my way home, the music was like waves in the ocean as it ebbs and flows from high-pitched Chinese opera, serene traditional folk music, techno-influenced dance music and Western pop and hip-hop music. And the dancers! There were middle aged women in bedazzled shoes and short skirts partnered with equally dapper middle-aged men, young women in yoga pants and sports bras, older women in pants and padded jackets to keep warm, men and women in colorful silk pajamas, and shirtless old Chinese men, all of whom were gathered in the park to dance together as a community.

Among the many different groups of dancers that I encountered at Wen Xin Gong Yuan, the group that most intrigued me was the largest and most populous group comprised exclusively
of women, a group that I soon discovered was known as *guangchangwu*. I was fascinated by the sheer number of dancers as well as their dance steps, which appeared to me like line dancing in the US, but with Chinese “flavor.” As a dance teacher, I found myself interested in trying out the dances of the *guangchangwu*. I even said to myself, “This looks easy; I can do this.”

While there were several groups at Wen Xin Gong Yuan I considered approaching to ask if I could join the dance, I was intimidated by the number of women and did not really know enough Chinese to ask if I could join. A few months and a few Chinese lessons later, when it became cool enough to open the windows and catch the evening breeze, while I was sitting in my seventh-floor apartment, I heard the familiar rhythm of *guangchangwu* music. I went to my balcony and, looking down, I saw a group of women dancing in the small park that was part of my apartment building. From above I could see the patterned dances and that the group was not as large as some of the groups I had seen in other parks. After several evenings of practice repeating “*Wǒ kěyǐ hé nǐ yīqǐ tiàowǔ ma?*” (Can I dance with you?) and gathering my courage, I finally took the plunge, and the elevator, and began my *guangchangwu* adventure.

**Cross Step, Three Steps, Ten Crosses: What Is Guangchangwu?**

The moment that *guangchangwu* piqued my interest at Wen Xin Gong Yuan I began to do research on this unique and relatively recent dance movement that has spread across China. *Guangchangwu*, in Chinese 广场舞, means square dance. The name for this type of dance is related to the construction of massive public parks with centrally located paved squares that populate all large urban areas in China. At its inception, participants gathered in the squares of these public parks to dance, which led to the naming of this sort of dance as *guangchangwu*. Recent scholarship identifies the period between 1990 to 2008 as the origin of *guangchangwu* as it is practiced and performed today, as this was the time when public square dancing saw a
significant rise in popularity (Placeholder1, 22). As the populations within urban centers began to rise, the city squares could no longer accommodate the increasing number of dancers. The groups soon began dancing in any spare neighborhood space, including parking lots, sidewalks, and streets but the dance retained the name guangchangwu (Q. Wang 2015, 4).

Despite being clearly situated in the contemporary urban spaces of China, guangchangwu nevertheless traces its lineage to earlier folk-dance traditions. The most relevant among these dance traditions to guangchangwu is yangge (秧歌), a popular folk dance that has its origins during the Song Dynasty. Yangge translates as “rice sprout song,” and was performed by women in the Northern regions of China at the village center to protect the harvest from evil spirits. The public performance of yangge, the exclusivity of the dance to women, and yangge’s communal function all find expression in guangchangwu (Martin and Chen 2020, 23). Given the communal nature of the yangge tradition, the dance was eventually incorporated by the Communist Party of China during the Yan’an years (延安时期), 1936-1948, into its campaigns of mobilizing arts and culture for the masses (Martin and Chen 2020, 23). The continuation of yangge in guangchangwu can be seen in both the music and the steps of the two dances. Guangchangwu music, for example, includes Chinese pop and folk songs that retain the spirit and melody of revolutionary songs from the Maoist era, alongside Western music and music specifically made for guangchangwu (Q. Wang 2015, 6). The dance steps of guangchangwu include the cross step (jiao cha bu 交叉步) and the social dance pattern of three steps (san bu cai 三步踩). Notably, guangchangwu has the 10 crosses (shi zi bu 十字步), which are steps that derive specifically from the yangge tradition. For more contemporary influences, guangchangwu has steps from the Western jitterbug (Q. Wang 2015, 4). Arm gestures can include making the hands the shape of a flower by flexing and connecting the wrists with the fingers opening out
(shou wan hua 手挽花). Today, Guangchangwu is a combination of Chinese traditional folk dances influenced by local and global dance styles.

The popularity of guangchangwu and the potential of social dances as a propaganda tool has earned the dance movement support from the Chinese government. In 2015, for example, the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Culture of China introduced the 12 Public Square Dance Workout Routines (十二套广场健身操舞), which are instructional videos on the performance of guangchangwu that are accessible online (Seetoo and Zou 2016, 22). The Ministry of Culture, the General Administration of Sport, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development have all expressed support for guangchangwu, describing the dance as “enriching the spiritual and cultural lives of the common people in the cities and the countryside, improving the citizens’ health and fitness, and demonstrating the pleasant spirit and outlook of the masses” (Seetoo and Zou 2016, 23). That said, not everyone has such a positive perspective of guangchangwu, and the public dance has been the subject of controversy (Vincent 2015). Urban residents cite guangchangwu as a source of noise pollution. Responses to guangchangwu dancers have been so hostile, that residents have thrown feces at the dancers, fired guns in the air to scare them away, unleashed violent dogs to scatter them, and some residents have even purchased a 260,000 RMB (about $41,000 USD) sound system to play even louder music back at the dancers (Seetoo and Zou 2016, 23).

After my initial experiences of guangchangwu, I asked my coworkers and new friends how I could learn more and get involved. I received mostly skeptical looks or uncomfortable giggles. They questioned why I was interested and why I wanted to dance guangchangwu rather than ballet. One of my closest friends called it the old women’s dance and stated I was too young to join. But I was already intrigued so I turned to the internet to learn more. From the internet I
learned guangchangwu is defined in China as a physical activity for older women practiced in flat public spaces for fitness and entertainment (L. Zhang 2010). Despite its popularity all over China, there have been news reports on conflicts caused by it, such as noise pollution or use of a public square. When I began this ethnography, most of the information I could gather online or in media reports was negative towards the participants of guangchangwu, which made me apprehensive of joining a group or participating. But I soon was able to locate information with a more positive spin. In news articles published between May 2016 and May 2018 containing the keyword guangchangwu from the People’s Daily, one of the most influential official newspapers owned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, guangchangwu was perceived as an integral part of promoting the national fitness agenda (L. Zhang 2010). Yet even with the positive fitness component, the participants are often described as loud, noisy, aggressive, and confrontational. While media and online sources demonstrate an awareness of guangchangwu in the context of an aging society and a shortage of public space, general approval for this dance practice is still quite divided between positive and negative descriptions in text and presentations in images (L. Zhang 2010).

Within the literature on guangchangwu, Qianni Wang (2015) was one of the first academic researchers of guangchangwu I discovered. Wang, in Guangchangwu: An Ethnographic Study of Dance in Public Spaces states “guangchangwu is a form of ritual dancing which is nostalgic for a collective lifestyle, and it is a collective cemetery showing the helplessness they feel regarding the loss of their youth” (2015, 4). Wang further examines the naming of guangchangwu and its relation to the urbanization process of China, specifically, the massive construction of city squares in all types of Chinese cities. Naming the dance based on where it is danced shows how such dance is tightly related to the available spaces. With the
dramatic expansion of dance participants, city squares alone cannot meet the demand, and individuals have begun to dance in any spare neighborhood space, including lanes in city parks and parking lots, but the dance always retains the name guangchangwu. Wang also states in Public Dance: A Sociality Invented in Individualizing China, “Guangchangwu is characterized as a highly feminized everyday activity with a fundamental prevalence rooted in socialization” (2014, 7). China is experiencing a transformation of the idea of family as many Chinese women have experienced problematic marriages, empty-nest, or leftover women situations. These women have turned to guangchangwu to cultivate their emotional, spiritual, and social needs and demands. The stereotypes of guangchangwu participants found online and in media often ignore the complicated motivations of the individual dancers (Q. Wang 2015).

Chaïyi Seetoo and Haoping Zuo, in China’s Guangchang Wu: The Emergence, Choreography, and Management of Dancing in Public Spaces (Seetoo and Zou 2016), agree that dancing in public squares has become extremely popular among the middle-aged and elderly in China, especially women. It has been widely covered by mass media, but few understand it beyond the spectacle. Seetoo and Zuo examine the Chinese socialist past and present, exploring how generational difference, gender, and the cultivation of modern citizenship underlie this popular activity (2016). Additionally, the authors take a closer look at the dances of guangchangwu and how grassroots organizing has interacted with government management and support.

The most recent research I discovered comes from Rose Martin and Ruohan Chen, in The People’s Dance: The Power and Politics of Guangchang Wu (2020). The authors present an analysis of how the dance practice of guangchangwu in China has become a national phenomenon. Through oral narratives offering rich descriptions of lived encounters, the
experiences of those involved in leading, organizing, teaching and learning guangchangwu are revealed. Through these narratives, this book serves to understand the leadership practices occurring and how this dance practice is deeply rooted in the complexities of China’s rapid economic development, acceleration of urbanization, and the desire for a healthier and more communal lifestyle.

The rise of the guangchangwu is another interesting dimension occurring in the Chinese public space, one that involves the performance of historical identity. China is a diverse country, home to 56 ethnic populations and cultural groups. Chinese culture is a blend of a number of different ethnocultural forms, and guangchangwu is no exception. In fact, it has been highly influenced by these various ethnocultural forms as well as the historical foundations of dance in China. The music played in guangchangwu draws deeply from ethnic Chinese folk music and is sung by Chinese artists in various Chinese dialects. The motions of the dancers, in particular, the sweeping arm movements and twirling circles are drawn from Chinese folk dancing such as the long sleeves and ribbon dance. In this sense, guangchangwu is an activity rich in spectacle and ritual that engages strongly with Chinese history and culture.

A Brief History of Chinese Dance

Chinese dance traditions have a history spanning thousands of years, involving numerous dance styles and types that vary depending on the region where they are performed. Tracing this history is practically impossible, not only because of the immense diversity of dance forms that exist, but also because Chinese dance are living traditions that are continuously being developed even today. Much of the research into historical dance forms were conducted by historians during the 1950s, during which Chinese dances were categorized into two broad types: (1) Chinese classical dance; and (2) Chinese national folk dance. Chinese classical dance traces its
origins from local theater forms known as *xiqu*, the most prominent examples being Peking opera and Kunqu. Chinese national folk dance, meanwhile, originated from combining Han styles of dance such as the Northeast yangge, Shandong yangge, Anhui huagudeng, and Yunnan huadeng with dance traditions of ethnic minority groups both within and surrounding China, such as the Uyghur, Mongol, Korean, Tibetan, and Dai cultures (Wilcox 2019, 2). Of these two types, guangchangwu is aligned more towards Chinese national folk dance, given the lineage that can be traced back to yangge traditions of communal dance.

Chinese dances have similarly played diverse functions throughout its history. For instance, some types of dance are performed during festivals and rituals including Chinese New Year celebrations and the Autumn Harvest festival. Dances could also be performed as forms of expression, and many have developed among the different regions such as the Lantern dance commonly performed in the southern part of China, which involves undulating body movements that aim to emulate the movements of a dragon. Dance performances and activities have long served as a form of entertainment across social classes. Historically, Chinese royal courts mandated court dances and special performances for celebrations, and in more modern times, opera and ballet inspired traditional dances that are a popular form of entertainment in Chinese society (Van Zile 1990). Some forms of martial arts in Chinese society also involve rhythmic movements and music and are considered to be another type of movement practice comparable to dance. For instance, Tai Chi is a form of martial arts that is practiced by millions of people around the world and involves slow movements often combined with music and meditation.

The major periods of or developments of dance in China include the formative, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. The formative period was characterized by the Zhou dynasty, which lasted from 1046-256 BCE. The surviving evidence of dances and accompanying
songs from the Zhou dynasty are understandably from documents and artifacts of the royal court, and so, we can only glimpse the dance traditions of the elite from this period. Wang notes that some Chinese dances in the modern era, including the practice of dancing with long sleeves, can be traced back to the Zhou dynasty, showing the persistence of these early dance traditions (K. Wang 1985, 7). The Han dynasty, considered a golden age in Chinese history that spanned over four centuries from 206 BCE-220 AD, witnessed a period when palace singers danced while acting out warrior’s stories. The Tang dynasty, 618-907 CE, is cited as the greatest imperial dynasty in ancient Chinese history and saw the enrollment of thousands of pupils in music, dance, and acting schools. An important figure during the Tang period was Emperor Xuanzong, who showed interest in performing arts and instituted policies and practices meant to promote dance, art, and music in the region. Indeed, Emperor Xuanzong chose 300 of the best performers of the time and had them train and rehearse at the court, with the emperor attending many of the rehearsals personally. The group of performers became known as the Chinese opera circle, the “Pear Garden” (Zi, Sun and Luo 1999). The Tang dynasty period saw the peak of development in art and dance with many of the dances being recorded during this period. However, due to the increased popularity of the practice of foot-binding, the art of dance also began to decline during the Tang period leading to limitation and eventual elimination of female dancers.

The Song dynasty took place between 960-1279 and is commonly divided into Bei (North) and Nan (South) periods. The Song period witnessed the creation of qu, or verses set to popular music. The Yuan period extended from 1206 to 1368 and witnessed a change in the nature of performing arts after the new Mongol rulers, the descendants of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, removed some of the past scholars from court positions in government. The Ming period extended from 1368 to 1644 and witnessed reduced Mongol influence by the native Chinese
Ming rulers. The 16th century saw the rise of a famous musician, Wei Liang Fu of Suzhou who created a new form of music known as kungu based on southern folk and popular melodies. This time period also witnessed the rise of popular opera forms under the reign of Qing emperor Qianlong. The Qing dynasty (1644-1911/12) is credited with the emergence of Jing xi, the Beijing/Peking Opera, which is considered to be the quintessential Chinese art form. During this period, significant ritual dances and ceremonial music known as yayue were performed at the imperial court. However, the end of the Qing dynasty signaled the end of such practices, and today, they only survive as performances during Confucian ceremonies. The Qing dynasty also witnessed the establishment of numerous departments that had the responsibility of collecting music and dances as well as training performers for the royal court.

Classical Chinese dance traditions trace their origins in the Han and Tang dynasties through the traditional dress worn by performers, which have similar styles from the two periods (H. Li 2013). Classical Chinese dance combines martial arts, opera, and poetry in action and shape with an emphasis on the role of performance and spectacle. The Chinese classical form of dance comprises different elements including skill, the rhyme of the body, and shenfa, as well as the pose or motion of the body (Ye 2008, 473). During the eras just discussed, classical dance was usually performed in courts and served the purpose of entertaining the court and the emperor. One major characteristic of classical Chinese dance is its ability to use movement to express a variety of feelings including happiness, sorrow, joy, anger, delight, and emotions, informed by Daoist philosophy (Z. Li 2010, 132). The tenets of classical Chinese dance believe that full expression is only achieved when the inner feelings of the dancer drive the body revealing emotions from the inside. The training in classical Chinese dance has four major elements: form, bearing, dance technique, and tumbling technique (H. Li 2013). Classical
Chinese dancers emphasize beauty and form and are not required to showcase their muscul arity or virtuosity (H. Li 2013).

Guangchangwu does not exist in a vacuum as a dance form—it embodies a continuity in the long and rich history of Chinese dance traditions. Even with many aspects of guangchangwu drawing from more modern sources such as the Maoist period and Western popular music and dance styles, the influence of Chinese folk dance is inevitable. While guangchangwu includes elements of classical Chinese dance such as beauty and form, folk dance is more often credited as the inspiration for the dance practice. Folk dance is regarded as one of the oldest dancing cultures in China. Folk songs were mainly ritualistic in nature and were geared towards appeasing supernatural powers in order to receive favors including successful hunting, good harvests, and other forms of successes that humans seek for their daily survival. Indeed, particular dances are associated with specific successes or desires of the community: the Dragon Dance is performed to wish for good weather, the Lion Dance is performed for auspiciousness, the Crane Dance for long life, and the Peacock Dance for health and beauty (Zi, Sun and Luo 1999, 65). When identifying folk dances, however, the issue becomes very complicated. Minzu minjianwu literally translates as “ethnic nationality folk dance,” which refers to the folk dances of China’s 56 ethnic groups. When referring to each of these individual ethnic group dance traditions, the “minjian” is dropped, and replaced with the relevant ethnic group—Miao folk dance would be called Miaozuwu, while Dai folk dance would be Daizuwu. But the folk dances could also be qualified depending on the dynastic traditions, such that folk dances from the Tang dynasty would be called Tangdai minzu minjianwu (Chang and Frederiksen 2016, 2). While all of these folk dances are typically associated with a particular community ritual tied to specific events and traditions, their styles and movements can be influenced by many factors. The
Shehuo, yangko, and Caicha (Picking Tea Leaves) Han dance traditions are examples of the most common communal event celebrated via dance, which is based on agricultural activities (Zi, Sun and Luo 1999, 49). Other folk dances function narratively, retelling certain legends and folk tales of a particular ethnic group. For example, the Nuo dance of Jiangxi Province depicts the legend of the goddess Pan Gu separating Heaven and Earth, which translates into a dance where the Nuo dancers walk on stilts while performing, representing the Pan Gu's separation of the universe (Zi, Sun and Luo 1999, 60). Folk dances can also be based on the prominent instrument used in the performance, such as the Huagu (Flower Drum) Dance of the Southern Shanxi Province and the Yaogu (Waist Drum) of the Northern Shanxi Province that involve incorporating the playing of the various drums attached to the dancers’ bodies into the overall choreography of the performance (Zi, Sun and Luo 1999, 64).

Of the many forms of folk dance in China, yangge, is the folk dance tradition most relevant to guangchangwu. The original, pre-modern performances of yangge are linked to agricultural ceremonies, and the name yangge itself translating literally as “rice planter's song.” Yangge consists of stylized movement, singing and chanting, and depictions of rural life within a variety of regions (Gerdes 2008, 139). However, the communal and rural contexts of yangge have made the form very useful as a political tool to spread ideologies by the government, particularly during the reign of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China (Hung 2005, 82). From 1936 to 1947, the CCP used different forms of art such as dancing as a political strategy to influence people and disseminate socialist images and ideas. During the Cultural Revolution, the CCP situated the Chinese upper class as oppressive, resulting in the lower-class peasants and workers to view the revolution as a form of liberation. The CCP consistently used the performing arts to “assist in the process of educating the masses” (Gerdes 2008, 138). After the rise of the
People’s Republic of China (PRC), communist party officials focused on introducing a simpler form of yangge in the cities to target the urban masses and manufacture a sense of unity and purpose. The main purpose of the yangge type of dance was to influence people’s thinking and to allow the communist party to use it as a tool to disseminate communist propaganda. This was the main reason for the introduction of a simpler form of yangge dance to the urban areas as well as the government focused on embedding the communist message into cultural practices to influence a larger segment of the population (Gerdes 2008, 138). The CCP attempted to construct a narrative history through movement practice of yangge to manifest its support of the people, valor of the Red Army, the leadership of the party, and the country’s bright future in the form of dance.

Much of the literature on more classical forms of classical dance and performance art in Mao Zedong’s China focuses on the eight model operas, the only officially sanctioned theatre to be produced during the Cultural Revolution (X. Lu 2004). These operas were revolutionary in theme, planned and engineered by the wife of Mao Zedong, Jiang Qing. Not technically operas according to modern definitions, these performances glorified the People’s Liberation Army and the bravery of the common people, showcasing Mao Zedong playing a central role in the victory of the CCP in China. Indeed, analyses of the eight model operas are so prolific they have become synonymous with Cultural Revolution itself (X. Lu 2004, 118). Analysis of the model operas such as The Red Detachment of Women and other revolutionary artifacts now represent a unique academic subfield. In recent times, the grand imagery and music of this social movement have become one of the primary ways students and the general population are introduced to the Cultural Revolution. Additionally, a tendency to focus on the eight model operas has contributed to the Sinification of classical art forms in communist representations of China.
Chinese dance has a history of over 5,000 years developed during dynasties such as Zhou, Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, and Nanbei (S. Chen 2012, 37). Each dynasty has imparted its own distinct set of cultural traits and artistic forms that both built upon the previous dynasty’s artistic achievements and laid the foundation for the future of dance in China. This history, including the most recent era of state support for and the prominence of public dance, serves as the background, both historic and nostalgic, upon which contemporary practitioners’ experiences of dance in China are interpreted (Z. Li 2010, 127). Various campaigns such as the Cultural Revolution devastated the traditional arts, and dance and performance were co-opted as a propaganda tool by the CCP. As a result, political ideology inundated with a philosophy of class struggle has become the norm for performances originating from the mainland. This relationship between dance and ideas of Chinese-ness rooted in the birth of the PRC is defined by the coproduction of dancing bodies and a system that sustains “Chinese” dance forms even as broader ideas of what constitutes as “Chinese” are being created, codified and standardized (Placeholder1, 29). Today in China, through various movement practices such as Tai Chi and guangchangwu, dance is as much a part of everyday life as it has been in the past and “serves the people” through its inclusion in thoughts, feelings, and activities of living and working. From imperial court dance, folk dance, martial arts and state-supported dance, history has placed a weighty responsibility on the role of dance in China as a culturally complete interpretation of what it means to be Chinese.

**Chapter Overview**

The chapters of this dissertation center the voices of the guangchangwu participants in Shenzhen, China, as they described their experiences of dancing in large groups in public spaces. Chapter 2, “Methodology: Ethnography,” discusses my research design and why ethnography is
appropriate for my research questions and purpose statement. I identify my reasons for choosing ethnography to explore guangchangwu and the lived experiences of its dancers, focusing on the value of participant observation inherent in ethnography’s approach towards understanding a particular phenomenon. This chapter also goes through the various issues surrounding ethnography and discusses how to avoid the ethical and epistemological problems that may emerge during the research. The data collection and processing methods that I used for the research are described in this chapter.

Chapter 3, “We’ve Been Doing This Our Whole Lives,” contextualizes the contemporary experiences of guangchangwu dancers by examining who the dancers in my dissertation are, what they dance, and why they dance. These three dimensions address the unique aspects of guangchangwu.

Chapter 4, “Square Dancing,” explores the performance of guangchangwu in Chinese public spaces. Guangchangwu is an undeniably public performance, and the complicated responses of society towards this public visibility is a context of the dance that cannot be ignored. Met with both support and hostility, it is clear that guangchangwu exhibits power that is expressed in public spaces, and a comprehensive contextualization of the guangchangwu dancers’ lived experiences necessitates understanding the nature and processes of this power in public space.

Chapter 5, “Close to My Heart: The Aging Female Dancer” examines guangchangwu as a place to engage, perform, and explore aging female bodies. The dimension of the aging female body acknowledges the phenomenon of guangchangwu as a gendered experience, one that has found personal and social value among older women. Hence, understanding how guangchangwu as a communal practice relates to the experience of the aging female body is important in order
to recognize the dance’s ability to evoke happiness, health and friendship specifically for its aging female dancers.

Chapter 6, “Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions” speaks to what remains unaddressed in my research on guangchangwu. Also discussed is how the research has impacted my own experience of participating in guangchangwu, and what future trajectories may be inspired by this research.
CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Outside of China, guangchangwu is best known for the controversies that surround it, especially the conflicting rights of the dancers versus the rights of residents living and working near the public parks regarding use of public space and noise pollution. In addition, the perception of the participants as cantankerous remnants of a bygone era has drawn negative attention to guangchangwu (Hunwick 2015). In contrast, however, this negative representation does not reflect my personal experience after dancing and spending time with the participants of guangchangwu. Many of the participants are my neighbors, acquaintances, and even good friends. They are women who I look forward to dancing within this unexpected dancing community. Indeed, my participation has prompted questions for me about how these dancers express their identities, their personal and national histories, their culture, and how they engage in social connections through their involvement in movement practices. Noticing that voices of the guangchangwu dancers were largely missing from the narrative surrounding guangchangwu, I developed the following statement of purpose and research questions that guided my research.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions from My Approved Prospectus

The purpose of the research is to listen to the voices of the guangchangwu in Shenzhen, as they describe their experiences of dancing in large groups in public spaces. This was accomplished by observing and listening to dancers as they engaged in their movement practice through the ethnographic methods of field notes, participant observation and interviews. I am interested in the intersection of the aging female body; how aging populations express their identities as performers of history within specific cultural contexts; how they participate in and
seek opportunities for health and well-being; and how they engage in social connections through their involvement in movement practices. This research is important because it puts into conversation the often neglected voices of the dance participants with the voices of journalists and researchers observing and writing about the dancing event.

This research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do participants at Nanshan, Shenzhen, China, identify as guangchangwu?
2. What is it like to be a part of guangchangwu at Nanshan, Shenzhen, China?
3. What is it like to perform guangchangwu in public spaces at Nanshan, Shenzhen, China?

**Ethnography as Methodology**

For my research, I chose ethnography, which is in the family of qualitative research methods, and pays particular attention to people’s lived experience as a part of a culture. However, not just any descriptions will do. According to Clifford Geertz (1973), ethnography is concerned with “thick description” or the uncovering of the multiplicity of experience as opposed to more quantitative yet superficial accounts of a community or culture. According to Deirdre Sklar, “To examine dance from an ethnographic perspective, then, is to focus on dance as a kind of cultural knowledge. Dance ethnography depends upon the postulate that cultural knowledge is embodied in movement, especially the highly stylized and codified movement we call dance” (Sklar 1991, 6).

Ethnography is best suited for my research because guangchangwu is a living dance tradition, one that is constantly being reinvented even today. Guangchangwu produces new forms that are tied to the personal and communal lives of their practitioners. Indeed, the women in my dance interest group have their own specific contributions to their performance of
guangchangwu that makes their dance unique not just from other dance groups in the area, but
different from other guangchangwu performers across China.

There are several examples of ethnographies conducted specifically for researching
dance. From my studies of dance ethnographies at Texas Woman’s University (TWU), I was
inspired by ethnographies written by Yutian Wong, Diedre Sklar, and Cindy Garcia. The
ethnographies written by these authors were my template for my own research design including
thick description, participant observation, and interviews.

In *Choreographing Asian America* (2010), Wong demonstrates how the study of Asian
American performance can lead to new understandings: for dance studies, an attention to the
ways in which Asian America has historically shaped American dance and the ways that we have
misrecognized Asian American choreography (as only either too exotic or not exotic enough);
for Asian American studies, an attention to aesthetic form in addition to, or as constitutive of, the
politics of representation. In provocative ways, the author lays out the ways Asian American
dance brings focus on marginalized, under-represented groups and tells the story of politics and
aesthetics of identity in the US. Drawing on ethnographic practices such as participant
observation and interviews, Wong follows the work of Club O’ Noodles—a Vietnamese
American performance ensemble—to understand how Asian American artists respond to
competing narratives of representation, aesthetics, and social activism that often frame the
production of Asian American performance. The author uses ethnographic methods and writing
including participant/observation, informal interviews, video documentation, and field
notes. This ethnography inspired me to research the guangchangwu participants as, to me, they
represented a misunderstood and underrepresented population. It was important for me to find a
way to give this marginalized group of dancers an opportunity to speak for themselves.
Sklar, in *Dancing With the Virgin: Body and Faith in the Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico* (2001), presents a thick description and performance analysis of ceremonial and religious belief associated with an annual pilgrimage in honor of Our Lady of Guadeloupe at Tortugas, a village near Las Cruces, in southern New Mexico. Sklar focuses special attention on the interpretation of aesthetic, bodily ("somatic") experience among local celebrants. She posits from the start "If spiritual knowledge is as much somatic as it is textual, then clues to faith, belief, and community would be embedded in the postures and gestures of the fiesta" (2001, 4). For Sklar, this translates into “ways of moving are ways of thinking,” meaning insight into what motivates guangchangwu participants to dance may be embedded within the dancers and dance practice itself (Dei91). Like Sklar, using the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews, I can gain a better understanding of guangchangwu within its cultural context.

Garcia’s *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles* (2013) is an exploration of the ways in which salseros/as in salsa clubs in Los Angeles, California, perform the complex meanings of Latinidad through dance. The author’s project is an ethnographic study of salsa dance using narrative and participant observation, which reveals social hierarchies, issues of class and race, and nuances of performing technique. Garcia’s ethnography was especially motivating for me in terms of the narratives surrounding her participants. I appreciated how her thick descriptions of clubs and participants brought the narrative to life. I was inspired to try to give the research sites and personalities of the participants of guangchangwu the same attention to detail.

**Research Design**

As ethnography is a naturalistic study, I wanted the results of my research to be presented in a descriptive, narrative form much like the previously mentioned ethnographies, rather than as
a scientific report. Inspired by Creswell (2013), I wanted thick description to be the vehicle for communicating a holistic picture of the experiences. I wanted to utilize extensive fieldwork and the personal, first-hand collection of data within the group whose culture is to be described to guide the formation and structure of my research (Madison 2011). The major research methods I wanted to use in my study included participant observation and key informant interviewing, which involved working closely with the participants (Madison 2011). These criteria made ethnography the best choice for my research design.

My intention was a final project constructed based on the informants’ experiences and the meanings attached to them. Ethnography will allow readers to vicariously experience the challenges and provides a lens through which readers can view the subject’s world (Creswell 2013).

**Research Sites and Participant Recruitment**

My dissertation prospectus was approved in February of 2019, and my official dissertation research period extended from February 2019 to January of 2022. My research sites included three public parks, Wen Xin Gong Yuan, *Li Yuan Da Sha*, and *Rui Peng*, chosen for their accessibility and proximity to my work and home. I conducted participant observation two to three times a week with a group of dancers at *Li Yuan Da Sha* calling themselves Dance Interest Group (舞蹈兴趣小组). The study also included formal and informal interviews with four participants of guangchangwu. The research was supplemented by fieldnotes to provide rich content and a detailed account of observations related to observation/participation, experiences, and perceptions throughout the study. Through in-depth interviewing and on-going participation, I attempted to capture the whole picture revealing how the participants describe and structure the world they live in; lived experiences, “in their own words.”
My four key informants were members of a purposefully selected single guangchangwu group, Dance Interest Group (舞蹈兴趣小组) that met in the residential public space of my gated apartment complex, Li Yuan Da Sha, in Nanshan District, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, China. With 35-50 participants nightly on average, mostly middle-age and senior women, I felt more comfortable when asking to join the group and, for me, the smaller group amplified the bonding effect of communal dance. Eventually, due to construction, the group moved to the public space of the Rui Feng building, located beside my apartment building. The new public space had no restricted access and the number of participants in my research study group grew to over 100 participants, though there were five to six additional large groups using the public space simultaneously. The dance practice was held in the evening, 8:00 pm-9:00 pm, every day, with very few exceptions. Attendance was not mandatory, with dancers coming when it was convenient for them to participate. Before and after the specific time to dance, participants would gather randomly to practice the more difficult dance steps or chat about health and family.

The participants were middle- to senior aged females, aged 50 to 75, who were retired or worked in the public sector. In the beginning, I spoke with many dancers until I settled on four participants who agreed via a translator and a translated Institutional Review Board (IRB) form to relate their lived experience of guangchangwu. The interviews lasted from half an hour to one hour. Some informal interviews were conducted after the dance event. Formal interviews were scheduled meetings at alternative locations agreed upon between me and the informant. Some in-depth interviews were done over the course of several meetings. Some incidental information, such as age, job, or years dancing was collected via WeChat communication. For my ethnography, I refer to the participants as Mrs. Huo, Mrs. Sun, and Mrs. Zhao, as a signifier of
my respect for them as my elders, and I refer to my most familiar contact by her first name, Wei, to signify our friendship.

Mrs. Huo is 65 years old and has been dancing for 10 years. She was a petty dealer, or street vendor, and volunteered with the subway, which is how she met Mrs. Zhao, with whom she became fast friends. She dances because she has “nothing to do” and wants to stay healthy and avoid disease. Mrs. Huo’s husband often went to ballroom dance in the park and one day she decided to go and dance as well. On May 13, 2015, Ms. Huo danced for the first time and “fell in love.” Half a month later, she bought a dancing machine that played music and videos on the screen. Mrs. Huo’s favorite dance is the Clap Hands Dance. According to Mrs. Huo, this dance is a kind of Buddhist exercise, creating by a woman in Guangdong over 40 years ago. This dance can cure the body of illness and promote blood circulation.

Ms. Sun is 64 years old and has been dancing for 6 years, 4 years as a dance leader. Before retiring, she worked as a college teacher and librarian for 45 years. Mrs. Sun has no child and no grandchildren allowing her to “just dance.” She danced in school as a child and always liked to dance. For her, dance is a personal habit stemming from interest and “what she likes to do.”

Mrs. Zhao is 68 years old, the oldest of the four informants. Mrs. Zhao was feeling discomfort in her shoulder and spine when she decided to try dancing. After she went to dance “a few times” those problems, shoulder and spine, got better. Now she insists on dancing every day because “a day without dancing, you will feel the body wrinkled.”

Wei is 56 years young and holds a special place in my research. She was one of the first participants that I befriended and has remained a friend since. She was a housewife for the better part of her adulthood and now lives with her son and his family—a wife and two small
children—in my apartment building. When I asked Wei why she danced, her response inspired my research.

**Data Collection**

As an ethnographer, I began systematic observations of the research site and participants, keeping daily field notes in which the significant events of each day were recorded along with my personal interpretations. Initial observations focused on general, open-ended data gathering derived from learning the most basic cultural rules and expectations as well as local language. This initial orientation process was important not only for providing a background for a more narrowly focused investigation but also helped me build a rapport with the informants, avoid breaches of etiquette, and test out whether the original research objectives were meaningful and practical in the local situation.

After the initial orientation or entry period, which took 3 months or longer depending on the individuals, I began a more systematic program of informal interviews amongst groups of participants trying to determine who would be most receptive to individual interviews involving questions related to my research hypotheses and specialized topics. While several different methods of selecting informants are possible, I relied upon the responses of the participants and their interest in being interviewed. From my initial interview process, I found four key informants who were selected for in-depth interviews. The selection of such a small number did not allow for strict assurance of a representative sample, so I needed to be careful and choose subjects who were well informed and reliable. Outside of the dance event, I remained connected to the participants within my dance group via WeChat where I systematically received updates regarding cultural data and significant cultural elements and interconnections as the interview process unfolded.
Initially, most of the questions I asked were directed by the immediate context generated by the participant’s responses. These informal interviews were useful for exploring interesting topics for further investigation. In the individual interview approach, I prepared a list of questions in advance to ensure that all relevant topics were discussed. I was still able to explore interesting topics as they arose during the interview if deemed necessary, but the main questions were there to bring meandering conversations back to the main topic(s). These types of questions were useful for eliciting information within the parameters of the study while also allowing for in-depth probing of topics, which may or may not be related to the study. I used these standardized questions, carefully worded and arranged, for the purpose of minimizing variation in the questions posed to the interviewees. This method was useful for collecting interview data even though it provides less flexibility for probing questions depending on the nature of the interview and the interviewing skills of the researcher.

I utilized participant observation which is steeped in the tradition of detailed evaluation of observational data. In participant observation the observer participates in ongoing activities and records observations. For my study, participant observation extended beyond naturalistic observation because the observer is an "actor" in the action. Often the researcher takes on the role being studied; for example, living in a commune, becoming a firefighter, or participating in guangchangwu. This level of participation may appear to give the researcher an "insider" viewpoint and the information obtained may be richer than that obtained through systematic observation. But there are also potential problems, particularly bias and reactivity, which may be magnified in participant observation. If events are interpreted through the single observer's eyes, with extensive notes and writing coming from one's impressions, then clearly one's own views are the only views considered. There is the also the problem of "going native," which means
becoming so involved with and sympathetic to the group of people being studied, that objectivity is lost. Additionally, because the observer is a participant in the activities and events being observed, it is easy to influence other people’s behavior, thereby raising the problem of reactivity, which may unknowingly influence what is being observed.

The main method of data collection I used in my research study was interviewing key informants. After establishing the role of participant for myself, I kept a look out for participants that I could approach as possible key informants. When selecting key informants, I did not want to select group leaders as much as I was interested in other members because I believed they were more accessible and more willing to share their experiences. My four key informants were chosen on this basis as well as by the extent to which their voices represented the group.

**Observation and Participation**

This ethnographic research was gathered from a study of middle-aged and older Chinese women who participated in guangchangwu in Shenzhen from August 2018 to December 2019 focusing on their lived experiences. As previously stated, the first phase of my research began with an investigation into the discourse surrounding guangchangwu online. The result of this investigation left me feeling a little apprehensive about participating in guangchangwu as the representation of the participants online was quite negative. Facing my fears, I chose the dance group within my own gated community as it was small and felt more “private” than the groups I observed in the parks.

In the second phase, I began the process of participating as a dancer. After seeking and gaining permission to join the small group, I visited the field site two to three times per week over a 6-month period to join in the dancing. As a dancer and new researcher, I decided to participate in the dancing as much as I could when I joined the group. To my surprise, I found
the dances difficult to pick up, so I focused primarily on learning the movement believing if I
could master the movement, I could better understand the culture of guangchangwu. I
simultaneously kept field notes of my observations at the field site and my experiences as a
participant of guangchangwu.

In the third phase of my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews in English with
an interpreter with randomly chosen participants in attendance during and after the dance event. I
did not discriminate in regard to whom I approached. The interviews lasted approximately 10-30
minutes and were based on open-ended questions allowing each participant to guide the
interview according to their own expertise and interests. After the initial interviews, I identified
four individual informants representative of the members of my guangchangwu group who were
willing to share their experiences and conducted multiple interviews with these selected
participants. The date and times of the interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the
informants. I used audio and video recordings to record the interviews and then created a
transcript of each, which were made available for review by the participant. When needed,
follow up questions were communicated by WeChat. All transcriptions were translated as
necessary. The responses of the participants helped me begin to understand how these women’s
lives, while separate and encompassing multiple stories, intersect in their participation in
guangchangwu.

Gradually I took more of an ‘observer as participant’ role in the group, which allowed me
to observe other members as they focused on practicing and performing the dance steps. My
research was supplemented by fieldnotes to provide rich content and a detailed account of
observations related to observation/participation, experiences, and perceptions throughout the
study. I observed their dance movements, interactions between participants and people passing
through, and conversations. A large part of guangchangwu is conversation. From my field notes, I described the participants’ routine during guangchangwu as follows:

Dance, talk, dance, talk (maybe about what dance is next or a dance step, maybe about gaining weight, maybe about family), dance, drink hot water/tea, dance, talk, dance…

My guangchangwu group may have met every day at the same time and same place, but it was never the same people both in the dance group and the surrounding areas. New participants came and went. There were always other things happening during and surrounding guangchangwu, and I often found myself distracted. There were people passing through on the way to their apartment, children playing games and riding tricycles, people participating in other forms of dance like ballroom, people talking, and people sleeping. Recalling the negative representation of guangchangwu in the discourse, I had not expected for the people who had to walk through or interact with the participants to be indifferent. I assumed they would be angry with the participants for making too much noise and taking up too much space, but my observations indicated that was not the case. These observations left me with new insights as to how guangchangwu is perceived in their communities.

Observation not only allowed me enough time and space to witness my participants’ everyday lives as an observer, but also helped me to learn more about them as part of their communities. Community is a consistent and important theme in Chinese society and my observations confirmed as much. Community can be a city, a district within a city, an apartment complex within a district, or a guangchangwu group within an apartment complex. No matter how it is defined, once you are a part of a community in China, the community becomes like family. This is most clearly apparent in the Chinese language surrounding family, which are discussed further in Chapter 4. From my fieldnotes, I found this response regarding my friend
and key informant Wei demonstrating how once I was part of the guangchangwu, I was accepted into the community:

I have seen Wei in many different areas of our community: near the large bridge closer to the public park, at the grocery store, on the food street close to the university. She always waves to me and shouts my name whenever we meet by chance.

In addition to my continued observation and participation in guangchangwu, I also attended a large guangchangwu competition where I met more dancers and watched some beautiful performances. I recorded some of the performances, posed for pictures with the participants, and documented the experience in my field notes.

**Data Analysis**

The methods of data analysis I used in my ethnographic research included coding and situational analysis. Data analysis allowed me to re-order and re-assemble data looking for new and emerging themes that may or may not support the research question. Codes are shorthand devices used by the researcher to label, separate, compile and organize data. These codes translate into developing theory as they are interpreted and analyzed. Types of codes I used included Open coding, Values coding, and In-Vivo, coding which allowed me to construct a narrative for my research.

I began with Open coding, which is a questioning activity that allows for the discovery of the unexpected and is useful for opening up lines of inquiry (Saldaña 2016). I then turned to In-Vivo coding and Values coding. In-Vivo coding is a first cycle coding method in qualitative analysis which derives codes from the data itself. In-Vivo codes utilize the language and terminology used by the participants rather than alternative methods where codes are researcher-derived. This allows codes to reflect the perspectives and actions of the participants.
In-Vivo coding helps researchers attain an in-depth understanding of the direct stories, ideas and meanings that are expressed by research participants. I considered In-Vivo coding useful in conducting research on a group of participants that come from a particular culture or subculture, in my case guangchangwu, where it would be important to utilize their spoken words or phrases. Reading through the data, I noticed the participants often utilized the phrases “happy,” “healthy,” and “making new friends” in their responses. These phrases were derived from the transcript and as codes, they captured the essence of what the participants were communicating.

Values coding is a method of coding that delves into the subjective nature of human experience. Values coding assigns the labels of values, attitudes, and beliefs expressed by the participants. Values reflect a participant’s judgment of what is important. The way the participant thinks or feels about something was coded as an attitude. An acceptance that something is true, based on the participants’ values, attitudes, personal experience, opinions or morals was coded as a belief. From the responses of the participants, I gathered that most participants valued guangchangwu as a way to stay healthy. In response to the question of why they danced, the responses I received included “for health only,” “the benefit of it is health,” “just for health,” and “really good for old people’s health.” When questioned about how they think or feel about guangchangwu, the participants responded with “at this age,” “we are free to do whatever we want,” and “because we like it.” Additionally, the participants referred to their guangchangwu groups as “family,” “we are like sisters,” or that “we made a lot of friends thanks to guangchangwu.” The participants’ belief, which includes values and attitudes as well as personal knowledge, experiences, and opinions, supported my theory that guangchangwu was instrumental in keeping the participants happy, healthy, and making new friends.
Once I had identified themes and ideas, I used the process of situational analysis to identify the central phenomena across dimensions of guangchangwu to understand effects of social, physical, and organizational structures. Situational analysis addresses broader situations as a whole and considers that most situations do not occur in a vacuum (Clarke, Friese and Washburn 2017). Rather, each situation is messy, a product of recognized, silent, and sometimes absent influences. For my study of guangchangwu, I created and analyzed three types of maps: situational maps, social worlds and arena maps, and positional maps. Situational analysis, specifically mapping, helped me discover the bond between the community and participants of guangchangwu. There are observable connections between where participants live and where they chose to participate in guangchangwu. Most often, this choice is determined by proximity to the field site, such as the public area located in my gated apartment complex or, once construction was begun, the public space in the commercial building located adjacent to my apartment building. Even in larger areas, such as Wen Xin Gong Yuan, most of the participants lived in the surrounding apartment communities. Gender (Female) and age (over 50) were also indicators of participations in guangchangwu.

An analysis of these three types of maps allowed me to focus on the situation broadly conceived and revealed three key relationships: public space, the performance of historical identity, and the aging female body. In China, because of the rapid urbanization process, more and more public spaces are being squeezed by development. Many argue that expanding private space is now taking up public space. Public space is a core component in the communal mentality of Chinese culture. Furthermore, from my research, I discovered guangchangwu, through the appropriation of space, creates a new space, neither public or private, which I call “intentional” space. This signals a transition in China that needs further research, particularly
regarding how this shifting paradigm will affect not only guangchangwu participants, but all Chinese citizens. Social reform and the new, more open policies are resulting in fast social transition. The middle-aged and older participants of guangchangwu share a special cultural background, a complex product subject to traditional, Maoist, and Western influences, the mix of which has sometimes resulted in conflict and stigma. The performance of what appears to be an antiquated historical identity by guangchangwu participants often brings disdain and ridicule from other segments of the population. Additionally, the age and gender of the participants cannot be ignored. As most participants are middle-aged and older females, how they confront and manage their aging female bodies though the practice of guangchangwu creates a social world, a collective group with a shared identity and perspective committed to collective action (Clarke, Friese and Washburn 2017). Ultimately, understanding the elements in the situation and their distinct perspectives, and their relationality is a primary goal.

My final step was to use existing theory as a tool to help explicate the analysis coming out of the data. Incorporating theory and literature into this ethnographic research allowed my research to engage in the broader discourse of guangchangwu, identifying where it may add new knowledge to the field and distinguishing the particular focus of my research (Creswell 2013). Additionally, incorporating literature and theory into my study refined the framework of my research, justified the research, and informed future research (Creswell 2013). Theories of public space are often described by planners and policy makers in terms of safety, welfare, and use. Yet, public space is inextricably linked to loftier ideas of community, memory, citizenship, identity, and freedom of expression. Victor Turner’s (1974) performance theory draws attention to the performative nature of societies around the world, how events and rituals as well as daily life are all governed by a code of performance. For ethnographic studies, performance theory highlights
how the participants are connected to their historical identities and suggests that every one of us puts on a performance in society through the clothes we wear, the conversations we hold or the food we eat. Guangchangwu is such a performance, designed as a signal-system to others of the participants’ place within a social group and society. Theories of aging describe the process as the progressive decline in function and performance which accompanies advancing years. Many aging female bodies also feel as if their bodies, indeed their identity, become invisible as they age. Yet, participants of guangchangwu consistently put their aging female bodies in situations that require them to be highly visible, such as public space. These theories, and their influence and relevance to guangchangwu, underpin the focus of this dissertation.

**Positionality and Ethical Considerations**

It is not uncommon for researchers in ethnography to presume that studies of “public” behaviors, such as guangchangwu, are less problematic than more focused, quantitative research. I argue that research involving public behaviors presents unique issues in terms of definitions of privacy, failure to reveal that the participants are being observed, and the role of the researcher. Ethnography as a research methodology is concerned with ethical considerations in respect to the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants. The researcher’s motivations, design of the research, reflexive nature of the researcher’s self, the interpretation of the findings, and the researcher’s own biases, assumptions and prejudices must also be considered.

I followed the detailed ethical guidance and institutional regulations such as informed consent, vulnerable populations, and evaluation of risk (TWU IRB procedures). I also took into consideration how to carry out research between two cultural and ethical contexts. During my fieldwork, I showed my respect for the local Chinese traditions such as respect for elders. I was
aware of cultural sensitivities and expressed my understanding and empathy when I did interviews.

For my research, I relied on the work of D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (2011). Madison examines issues that may arise in critical ethnography and investigates the moral and ethical implications of conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, Madison presents foundational paradigms that connect ethnography and performance through experience, social behavior, and cultural performance (Madison 2011). Ethics, in terms of my ethnography, can be defined as moral principles and beliefs that govern the how I conducted my study while maintaining the principles of doing good and preventing harm. My research ethics can best be described or expressed as the “tension between the aims of research to make generalizations for the good of others, and the rights of participants” in my attempts to compose an accurate picture of the culture being studied (Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden 2001, 93).

Firstly, as a researcher, I had to acknowledge my position as a foreigner in a Chinese culture. This position means there may be experiences that are beyond my capability to understand due to cultural differences. For this study, I was surprised to learn that modern Chinese culture is a rapidly evolving amalgamation of various global cultures combined with traditional Chinese customs. Even though foreign culture and society highly influence the lifestyle of most modern-day Chinese citizens, they still have a great respect and regard for their traditional morals and value systems. Additionally, my position as a foreigner who moved to China to teach implies to Chinese nationals that I am making a respectable salary that is quite large compared to average Chinese salaries. This foreign and financial privilege sets me apart from the participants of guangchangwu who are living on fixed retirement incomes.
Although I occasionally observed guangchangwu without revealing I was observing—while walking home through the park, from my balcony in my apartment complex—I knew that to obtain feedback from my chosen participants I would need to be transparent about my research objectives. To ensure the participants understood the intent of my research, I used a translator to help me explain my presence and objectives to the participants. When I began the interview process, I utilized a consent form that also articulated my research objectives in both English and Chinese. The consent form ensured that the informants were informed of all the data collection devices and activities including transcriptions. I presented my informants with copies of their transcripts for them to approve. If the participants felt the translation did not represent their voice or beliefs, they had the option to make changes, remain anonymous, or opt out of the research. There are several issues with translation faced by the researcher and participants including sentence structure, cultural differences in grammar, missing words, colloquialisms, and compound verbs and words. To ensure a reliable and authentic translation, I was assisted by a professional translator from the ballet school I worked for. This gentleman translated the participants’ responses in Chinese to English and English to Chinese and served as an intermediary and interpreter between me and the participants. If there were any discrepancies or questions regarding the translation, he contacted the participants on WeChat to clarify intent. Additionally, the informant’s rights, interests, and wishes were considered in decisions regarding what information or representation would be included in the research.

I know that my participation in guangchangwu helped me access the participants in a way that observation alone would not have made possible. At the start, the participants would welcome me each evening when I arrived, explaining to newcomers that I was a ballet teacher and wanted to join their dance interest group. After a few months, my presence was no longer
remarkable, and the participants were comfortable socializing and dancing as if I was not even there. Had I only observed the participants, I do not believe they would have accepted when I began asking to interview them individually. Establishing myself as a member of the dance interest group, willing to be happy, healthy, and making new friends, allowed me to gain an access to the participants I would not have been allowed as merely an observer.

In summary, the alternative perspectives of this study are important because they put into conversation the often-neglected voices of the dance participants with the voices of journalists and researchers observing and writing about the dancing event. The viewpoints of the dancers offer new insights into how aging populations participate in and seek opportunities for community and belonging which keeps them “happy, healthy, and making new friends.” These alternative perspectives are important because they introduce new definitions of the aging female into a rapidly evolving society. A deeper understanding of guangchangwu may potentially bring new social structures into existence and create alternative social relations that may otherwise go unresearched or unspoken.
CHAPTER III

WE’VE BEEN DOING THIS OUR WHOLE LIVES

Every evening in the streets, sidewalks, and public parks of China, over 100 million practitioners gather to participate in the movement practice known as guangchangwu (Vincent 2015). This female-dominated public dance emerged from a series of long-existing activities imbued with governmental politics and is steeped in historical aesthetics that sustain “Chinese” dance forms. It is precisely against the backdrop of such social discourse that the practice and persistence of guangchangwu becomes meaningful: Through an effective organizational structure, these elderly women make their existence visible and audible. During my interviews, expressing how difficult I was finding the movement of guangchangwu, I asked the participants how they remembered the dances, the gestures, and the music. One of the participants matter-of-factly responded, “We’ve been doing this our whole lives.” This response made me consider what “doing something your whole life” looks like or means. For guangchangwu participants, the answer to this question traces specific social, gendered, and generational histories and traditions of contemporary China. Guangchangwu has its own artistic validity and conveys complex meanings to broadly based Chinese communities and audiences with historical, social, and cultural relevance. To engage with guangchangwu beyond the level of spectacle, it is important to discuss who are the dancers, why do they dance, and what do they dance. Every participant of guangchangwu comes to the practice as a collection of embodied memories signifying their personal histories, traditions, motivations, and purposes, making the practitioners as varied as the styles of guangchangwu they participate in. And while most participants understand guangchangwu as an opportunity to exercise and visit with friends, it is also a site for engagement with embodied connections to dance, traditions, and history in China.
History, including the most recent era of state support of and the prominence of public dance, serves as the background, both historical and nostalgic, upon which contemporary practitioners’ experiences of guangchangwu are interpreted. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) devastated the traditional arts in China. Dance performances, art, and music were co-opted as a propaganda tool by the CCP (EpochTimes 2012, Moffatt 2013, Ramzy 2016). As a result, performances originating within mainland China have become imbued with philosophies of class struggle (Moffatt 2013). This relationship between dance and ideas of Chinese-ness rooted in the birth of the PRC is defined by the coproduction of dancing bodies and a system that sustains “Chinese” dance forms even as broader ideas of what constitutes as “Chinese” are being created, codified, and standardized. The conflation of these ideas has placed a weighty responsibility on the role of dance in China as a culturally complete interpretation of Chinese identity.

**Chinese Identity and Dance**

Chinese identity and its contribution to dance in China has been explored from a number of different perspectives (Johnson 2005, E. E. Wilcox 2011, H. Wilcox 2011). For example, Emily Wilcox (2011), in her historical account of the performance of Mongolian ethnic identity in traditional dances suggests that Mongolian identity is perceived through dance movement and performance, whilst Hui Wilcox (2011) in her exploration of trans-nationalism and inter-ethnic conflict amongst Chinese migrants in America, asserts that Chinese dance is central to the construction of a unified Chinese identity. Similarly, Johnson (2005), looking at Chinese diasporic identity in New Zealand, suggests that the performance of traditional Chinese dances such as the Lion Dance in schools plays a significant role in the education of identity among Asian immigrant students.
Identities are not exclusively or even primarily individual. They function within collectives and are typically categorized by individuals through membership in larger groups, defined by nationality, ethnicity, age, class, and gender. Nationality, class, and gender are not descriptions of tangible or concrete components. Rather, they are socially accepted and functional concepts that embody a certain world view and prescribe specific kinds of behavior. Rather than accepting these categories as natural and given, Stuart Hall (1996) argues that they are the result of historically and culturally contingent choices. Identities are positions within a network and are defined by their connections in society and politics. In gender studies, Judith Butler (1990) relates the process of identity formation to performance. Butler theorizes that gender is not a fact; the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated (1990). This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established. It is in the repeated performance of ritualized acts that ideas of identity are legitimized. This is how movement practices such as guangchangwu connect to Chinese historical identity. Participants collectively dance as a “we” in the ritualized act of guangchangwu reflecting shared social and historical realities, the articulation of which can be used to various political ends.

Identity, like history, is never finished. It is continuously refashioned as people make cultural meaning out of shifting social and political circumstances. Guangchangwu is an example of a movement practice that makes connections to the participants’ shared historical identities and their everyday lives through embodied performance. Popular understandings of guangchangwu regard the phenomenon as a nostalgic yearning for Maoist collectivism while participants express more social and health related motivations. And while the uniformity of the movements and familiarity with the songs suggests a reverence for the socialist propaganda of
the Cultural Revolution, the foundational elements of Chinese folk dance and song as well as spectacle speaks to a deeper, more ancient connection with the past. Guangchangwu as a site for the performance of Chinese historical identity illuminates concepts of person and history that emerge in the participant’s ongoing attempts to define and direct their lives. For this ethnography, I began by asking who are the dancers, what do the dance, and why do they dance.

Who Are the Dancers?

My journey into the practice of guangchangwu began with a group called 舞蹈爱好群, Dance Interest Group, that met at 8:00 pm every evening in the small park adjacent to my apartment building. While generally in China guangchangwu groups meet either early in the morning or in the evening, the evening hours, particularly 8:00-9:00 pm, seem to be most popular in Shenzhen. Their household duties and family responsibilities completed, for most of the dancers this is their time for themselves. At 8:00 pm it is already dark, making it easier for me to approach the dancers. I felt uncertain of what my reception would be. China has a reputation for upholding traditional values such as respect for elders and I did not know if these ladies would be offended by my asking to join them. I had also done a little research into guangchangwu and was aware that these ladies had a reputation for being a bit confrontational. I am close in age to many of the women in the group, but at that time, after a few moments composing myself on the side of the park, I assumed my most self-effacing posture as I asked in Chinese if I could dance with them. My apprehensions were quickly alleviated. I had approached the nearest woman at the front of the group who appeared to be the leader. Her name I later learned was GuGu. GuGu was managing the stereo that resembled a karaoke machine except where there are typically lyrics running across the screen, there were videos of dancers performing guangchangwu. The screen glowed like a beacon in the dimly lit park, the dancers
drawn to and surrounding the stereo like mosquitoes to a bug zapper. The dance leader, or *da ma*, meaning big mother, which is not a reference to her size or age, but rather a definition of her position in the group, stands closest to the stereo. The videos are on CDs or USBs that are inserted into the player, a technology clearly developed to meet the needs of this popular and widespread practice.

Even though I could only catch every third or fourth word, I was able to answer a few of the questions the women asked regarding my occupation (ballet teacher) and where I lived (Li Yuan Da Sha). Several of the more curious dancers had gathered around GuGu and I as we spoke, smiling and nodding their heads in approval that it was okay for me to dance. They had begun “oh-ing” and “ah-ing” and shouting to the others an introduction and then one of the ladies shooed some of the other dancers to move back and gestured for me to stand in the front. In my later visits to the Dance Interest Group, there was a gray-haired woman who always warmly welcomed me with smiles and nods of encouragement, even though I never learned her name. She eventually became one of my favorite people to see at guangchangwu. She was one of the dancers who stayed in Shenzhen during the Chinese New Year when it became cold, dancing every evening attired in layers of sweaters and puffy coats. While I was skeptical at first, because puffy coats are not very fashionable, I eventually gave in and bought one, and now I must admit that they are most comfortable and warm and very lightweight, which is good for dancing. One night, when I came down to dance in a pair of yoga pants and a light jacket, my gray-haired friend scolded me and said I needed a better jacket. So, I bought one. When she saw my new puffy jacket the next evening, she smiled and gave me a thumbs up.

On my subsequent trip to the park, I brought along my Chinese teacher, Elaine, as my interpreter for the participants. She spoke for me and told them why I was interested in dancing
with them, asking if it was okay for me to observe and participate in guangchangwu. From Elaine, I learned that most of the women in my apartment group are retired. GuGu, who Elaine informed me had elected herself the spokeswoman for the group, said that there a few in the group who still work as a yi’s, 阿姨, pronounced “I-ee,” which is a Chinese term for “aunt” and can be anything from a street sweeper, custodian, housekeeper, babysitter, or an actual aunt. The term is also applied to any older female acquaintance or friend, like how we use “Ma’am” or “Miss” in the United States. This is the reason I never learned my gray-haired friend’s name as the term is also used as term of endearment and respect for any older female or close friend. Whenever we spoke, I called her 阿姨 and she called me gu niang, 姑娘, which translates to young lady. My gray-haired friend would often link her arm through mine, lead me to the center left of the dance leader and stand beside me as we began dancing in the dark.

As I continued to dance with these women, I began to wonder how their lives, while separate and encompassing many stories, intersected in this custom of guangchangwu. The genesis of guangchangwu is often traced back to the 1990s, after millions of Chinese people lost their jobs at state-run firms as China adopted more capitalistic practices during the “reform and opening up” initiated in 1978. Many people lost their jobs and found themselves with more time on their hands but very little money. Even so, people still had a strong need for entertainment and health opportunities. Public parks became a suitable place to congregate as they were available at no cost. Dancing became a low-cost form of entertainment and exercise for many who had lost their jobs. Dancing in the public parks also replicated the communal feeling of living in a small rural village, which many had previously left in hopes of securing a better job in the city. The origins of this communal nature can also be traced to the participants themselves, most of whom are older Chinese women in their 50s and 60s whose childhood and teenage years
overlapped the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese citizens were encouraged to favor collectivism and the wellbeing of others over individualism and self-interest. Many women from this generation grew up participating in marches and political demonstrations in public squares. It is possible guangchangwu, during its emergence in the early 1990s, offered these women the same sense of communal security and collective pride. The women in my guangchangwu group are no exception. Reinforcing a strong communal bond, my participants told me spending a lot of time with one another in guangchangwu makes them feel like “sisters” and “family.” “Chinese people are very friendly. After we knew each other in guangchangwu, whenever we meet, we chat and hang out,” Mrs. Huo explained. “We have made a lot of friends thanks to guangchangwu,” added Mrs. Sun. Women who participate in guangchangwu do so as much for the opportunity to spend time with their friends as they do for the actual dancing. Through their daily interaction in guangchangwu, these women establish unified values and friendships, and develop a strong sense of community belonging (M. Chen 2021).

Although my informants were not forced out of their jobs or to retire, they all chose to retire once they met the required age, 50 years old. Mrs. Zhao, Mrs. Sun, Mrs. Huo, and Wei all expressed that “old people do not have work to do” and their children “have grown up and do not need us so much,” and since they no longer work, they are free to practice guangchangwu. Mrs. Sun elaborated, “We old people have a lot of spare time, so we work out by doing guangchangwu.” After retirement, these women found themselves with “a lot of spare time” but unlike their predecessors, they are not in the same financial situation. Contrary to the perception that the retirees have no money, many Chinese women spent their employment years saving their hard-earned paychecks. Possibly due to the lack of resources they experienced during the
Cultural Revolution, or the loss of employment during the “reform and opening up” policies introduced in 1978, saving money became a customary practice in Chinese households. The intent was to save money so their children could go to the best schools, thus obtaining the best jobs. This would ensure that in their old age, their children could then look after them. But many of these women are also financially savvy. For example, when the rate of gold dove in April 2013, these Chinese women over 50 stunned the globe by collectively purchasing 300 lots of gold worth $14 billion in 10 days (Huifeng 2014). The phenomenon prompted *The Wall Street Journal* to describe this generation of Chinese women as a primary force influencing the global gold market (Huifeng 2014).

Guangchangwu involves women coming from a wide range of backgrounds. My participants came from different villages, different jobs, different incomes, yet through guangchangwu, they were able to access a community sharing a passion for dance.

**What Do They Dance?**

The first time I danced guangchangwu I felt nervous because I was dancing front and center. All the participants knew I was a trained dancer and ballet teacher, and I did not want to look uncoordinated or like I could not keep up. But as I began, the steps felt so different and the feet and hand coordination was so intricate, that I soon recognized I was a complete beginner. In my early definition of guangchangwu, I would always describe it as line dancing with traditional Chinese gestures. What I had thought looked like simple line dancing was in fact much more complex than I expected. The first hurdle is that most combinations start on the left foot. At first, I thought this was just the result of the dance leader mirroring the video, but many of the dances started in a pose with the left foot behind the right making the first logical step on the left, but my ballet body did not agree.
It did not take very long to realize that no one was paying any attention to how well/not well I was doing. It may have been the darkness that made it feel like our bodies were performing in the shadows, dancing in the dimly lit park, but I quickly became, like my fellow guangchangwu, the epitome of the phrase “dance like no one is watching.” There is no special training needed to become a guangchangwu participant. The “teaching” of the dance is provided by the dance leaders but learning the dance is the responsibility of the observer. You can dance big and dramatic or small and discreetly, whichever you prefer. No one judges your talent or coordination. In fact, other dancers are supportive, regularly chanting “jia you!,” which can be translated several ways but is always encouraging. And while the dancing is not physically exhausting, the women frequently take breaks to sit on a bench and chat, eat a snack or drink some tea. One evening, one of the older women who also leads the dances was taking a break with her friend when a song came on that everyone seemed excited to hear. GuGu made some gestures implying that she did not know the dance and approached the woman on the bench. I was a little bit too far away to hear the whole conversation, but I know that GuGu was asking the woman to come lead the dance. The grannie laughed and waved her hand at GuGu like she was not interested. All the women in the group started cheering and she eventually stood up and walked to the front to begin leading the dance. She was quite impressive, executing the difficult steps with all the confidence and grace of a seasoned dancer. She did not even need to look at the video to help her remember!

After participating for a few weeks, I sensed there was something more in the performance of guangchangwu. I was reminded that ways of moving are ways of knowing, and I had a lot to learn. One of the most difficult things to get accustomed to was starting on the left foot. When I asked my participants if there was any significance in so many of the dances
beginning on the left, the dancers stated, “No specific requirement,” and “Most guangchangwu is like this, about 60-70% starting on the left foot. It’s not fixed or regulated, but most importantly, guangchangwu is easy to learn.” Reinforcing that there is an embodied element in guangchangwu, another participant added, “Like a culture in China, left side comes before right side.”

At present, dancing in public squares follows several tracks: dance workouts benefiting health, reinterpretations of Chinese folk and ethnic minority dances, fusion dances choreographed to Chinese and foreign pop songs, and distinct performances for formal events, sometimes with propagandistic purposes (Seetoo and Zou 2016). These different styles of dance occasionally overlap as participants continue to fuse and reinvent their dances. The Chinese government’s recent regulations for guangchangwu—designating quiet zones in public parks, limiting the amount of people allowed in the squares, and placing a decibel limit on the loud music played on low-quality speakers wheeled in by dance leaders—also included the dances the participants performed. In 2015, China’s General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Culture released a joint statement saying public square dancing must follow 12 sanctioned dance routines which need to be taught by approved fitness instructors. The state mandated guangchangwu routines were choreographed to optimize the health benefits of exercise (Seetoo and Zou 2016). While these dances are regularly performed, it is clear that the growing popularity of guangchangwu has seen the emergence of an entire industry that produces new music, choreography, and instructional videos on a regular basis.

As previously stated, Mrs. Huo’s favorite dance is the Clap Hands Dance. Mrs. Hou extols the Clap Hands Dance as a kind of Buddhist exercise, created by a woman in Guangdong, China, over 40 years ago, which can cure the body of illness and promote blood circulation. She
further explains the Clap Hands Dance “can remove blood stasis, can be happy to forget sad things, and let the mood be cheerful.” The effect of this dance results in there being “nothing wrong with the body, the mood is particularly comfortable than in the past.” According to Ms. Huo, the Clap Hands Dance has a total of 14 sections, each section a specific action, performed a total of 84 times. While performing this dance, the participant “reads” to Amitabha Buddha, whose name means “immeasurable light” and is renowned for his longevity attribute. Each section of the Clap Hands Dance takes 3 minutes. With minimal movement of the lower body, the dance is primarily stationary. The focus of the dance is on gestures of the hand, many of which resemble hand mudras, elaborate hand and finger gestures which have symbolic meaning as visual language. The “clapping” element of the dance refers to soft pats/claps on the body to the arms or chest, as well as actual claps with hands. The music is slow- to mid-tempo and meditative in melody, with movement that could be mistaken as tai chi if not for the consistent repetition of phrase. Dancers wear their everyday clothing rather than traditional silk tai chi apparel. Mrs. Zhao, who also enjoys the Clap Hands Dance, insists on participating in the dance everyday so “the whole body is comfortable.”

For more fast tempo dances, like Little Apple by the Chopsticks Brother, one of the 12 guangchangwu routines approved by the government, the emphasis lies in physical exercise to help stretch the muscles and loosen the joints. The music, and therefore the movement, is upbeat and dynamic with a consistent beat and percussive rhythm. When played loudly, it is easy to keep tempo with the music. Dancers wear comfortable clothing, typically pants and long-sleeved shirts for community groups, that allow for unrestricted movement. Competitive groups may require matching uniforms. The choreography, relatively stationary and confined to one’s own dance space, is simple and not too intense for the older dancers. For the lower body, movements
include step together side to side, step together step touch right and left (like a grapevine), high knee lifts, toe taps both side and front, and small jumps on two feet as well as marches front and back. Arms are more choreographed than feet to compliment the theme of the music with flexed and rounded elbows lifted chest high or higher, flicking and circling hands, and some shoulder shimmies for some flare and excitement. There are also some head circles, shakes, and hair flips. Many dancers modify the movement to accommodate for mobility issues, taking smaller steps or eliminating jumps, head, and arm movements entirely.

Although *Little Apple* has set choreography, most guangchangwu groups will adjust or repeat the choreography most suitable for the participants. This results in the dance being performed in different ways by different groups while still remaining recognizable as *Little Apple*. The dance in its entirety is reminiscent of the jazzercize and aerobic routines from the 1980s in the United States. There are many dances that fall under the description of “square dance” on the Jellybean (Tangdou\(^1\)) app with all retaining the same aerobic/jazzercize aesthetic. Guangchangwu groups, or more accurately the group leaders, often chose dances not based on the dances themselves but rather on their favorite choreographers. As there are many versions of the square dances available to choose from on the app, group leaders often pick and choose famous teachers whose style and choreography more closely align with the physical or artistic needs of the group.

Under the umbrella title of “square dance” are dances labeled “original” or “aesthetic body dance.” *Standing Waiting for You 3000 Years* is an example of guangchangwu that employs more traditional Chinese folk-dance gestures and movement. The melody evokes

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\(^1\) Tangdou operates a content app, targeting middle-aged and elderly users. The app’s content touches on a variety of topics, including fashion, food, health, and skin care. The company also offers offline meetups to people craving a sense of camaraderie. Many of the dances used for Guangchangwu can be found on the app.
Chinese folk music in a three/four count or waltz, noticeably slower and smoother than the pop music used in *Little Apple*. Dancers often wear long, flowing skirts or wide-legged pants with long-sleeved shirts that sway and wave. This sort of clothing is used intentionally to enhance the graceful, sinuous movement of this style of square dance. Fans, drums, scarves, and ribbons are also often incorporated. The result is a semi-stationary, elegant choreography including many waltz steps, transfers of weight, rocking steps, turns, and poses. Gesture is highly utilized throughout, arms lifted high or opened wide, often upwards and outwards and the movement is precise and uniform. The arms can be sharply bent or softly rounded, wrists flexed or soft. One of the unmistakable tenants of “aesthetic body dance” is the “positive back teaching” observable in the unbroken or lifted line of the spine and upper back, almost balletic in presentation. This style of guangchangwu is performed for visual impact evoking nationalism and praising the beauty of China. These groups are often much larger and comprised of a wider range of ages. Many of these groups participate in competitions aspiring to be seen as more serious and professional than other genres of guangchangwu.

There are many more than the three styles of guangchangwu seen in any public space. As Ms. Zhao explained there are “different kinds of dance; fitness dance, bodybuilding exercise, ballroom dance,” and as Ms. Hou clarified there is “folk dance, shuffle for teenagers, and Shuibing dance (fast paced).” While guangchangwu is both a form of exercise and social activity, I quickly began to understand that this dance practice was much more complex, layered, and diverse than I first thought. Guangchangwu styles represent genres of dance from folk to ballroom as well as aerobic-like steps and jumps. Groups of dancers perform movements that range from simple, repetitive, pedestrian dance to salsa, hip hop, or ballet. The choreography ranges from simple and stationary movement in local parks and squares to intricate
and expansive performances on professional stages. As Mrs. Sun explained, “There are many kinds of dance we usually dance: aerobics, sailor dance, modern dance, body dance, classical dance, step dance, line dance, in three, 16 steps, 32 steps, these are part of the square dance.” Guangchangwu has become an umbrella term encompassing dance forms with varied practices and a breadth of artistic ideals (Martin and Chen 2020). What remains consistent in all these forms is their ability to carry with them an aesthetic that appeals to both dancers and the audience (Seetoo and Zou 2016). The choreography reveals the extent to which the aesthetics and conventions of Chinese institutional dance genres are deeply ingrained in the popular image of guangchangwu and the performance of historical identity.

Why Do They Dance?

My first question to the guangchangwu participants was “Why do you dance?” The answers from the dancers were a resounding “to be happy,” “to be healthy” and “make/be with friends.” When I began my interviews in earnest, I was disappointed that few of the participants wanted to answer any questions or participate in the research beyond this recurring response. When asked a question such as “Do you have anything else you would like me to know about guangchangwu?” I often got a flat “No” response. Sometimes the interviewees would begin listing all the types of guangchangwu: Clapping, Aerobics, Shuffle, Sailor Dance, Step Dance, and several more. I was worried that I would not get any deeply reflective responses.

I had anticipated once the interview process began, the participants would be excited to finally tell someone their self-reflective stories of how guangchangwu had impacted their lives. Ethnographic interviewing often provides a means of discovering the interviewee’s culture – their perceptions of the world, behaviors, values, and beliefs. Yet, I did not feel their responses were very reflective. I did not realize until much later that the cultures of the interviewer and the
interviewee affect the perceptions and behaviors of the interview. I myself was not being introspective enough to recognize that these women’s experiences may not be more complex than their participation in guangchangwu. In truth, I would often find myself getting upset by what I perceived as shallow, superficial responses. It was not until I was complaining to one of my cohort members about the lack of depth I was receiving in my interviews and how the participants only ever responded with “happy, healthy, and making new friends” that the lights went on in my brain. My cohort member simply said, “Isn’t that enough? There must be something there if that is the consistent response you keep getting.” Suddenly, I recognized that “happy, healthy, and making new friends” was the core of guangchangwu. At that time, I also wanted to be happy, healthy, and making new friends. It is not that “happy, healthy, making new friends” is not a reflective answer; it is the answer, and, in its simplicity, it is complex. And a chance encounter at my apartment gate would help me understand how meaningful participating in guangchangwu can be.

One evening on my way home from work, after my 12-hour day teaching eight different ballet classes, as I touched my token to the gate to open it, I heard my name being called from behind me. This took me a little off guard as not many people really knew my name, so I looked around and saw one of the ladies from my Dance Interest Group jogging towards me. This woman’s name was Wei, and she eventually became one of my best informants, filling me in on where we were dancing when some construction near the park in our apartment building made our group temporarily relocate. After we formally introduced ourselves, she always greeted me by name, often sent me WeChats of dances, and encouraged me to stand near her whenever I attended. On this particular night, Wei had two purposes; the first was to get into the apartment via my gate token; and the second was to ask me if I was coming to dance. I did not know
exactly what time it was, so I asked, and she replied that it was indeed 8:00 pm. Then I told her that I did not think I would make it because I was very tired from work. The whole encounter lasted approximately 10 minutes, but I was pleasantly surprised that Wei recognized me and took the time to speak with me. She seemed understanding but the incident left me feeling a little guilty that I did not go back down to dance. It was at this moment I had a realization that this is one of the ways guangchangwu promotes making new friends. I was overcome with a feeling of belonging, that the group may miss me when I am not there, and a little bit of my loneliness dissipated. It had taken a year and half, but I finally had a group of friends in this strange foreign place. Eventually I asked Wei why she participated in guangchangwu. Her answer “to be happy, healthy, and make new friends like you,” summarized the answers I received from all the participants and became the inspiration for my research.

Mrs. Sun expressed it best when she stated, “Almost all the parks have the dancing. I believe that within those different parks, there will probably be some sense of community, like we belong to this guangchangwu group, or we belong to this one.” Guangchangwu has proved to be quite useful in generating harmony between different individuals through movement in space and time (Q. Wang 2015). In many historical periods and societies, creating harmony and bringing people together are examples of the contributions dance can make in a community and culture. Dynamic and physical, the practice of dance has deep roots as a traditional cultural tool for community building. Scholars of collective dance hold differing opinions on the depth of social interaction among dancers. Qi Zhang and Ge Min (2019) believe “there is a strong collective spirit of camaraderie among the middle-aged women who exercise together or participate in group activities.” The women in my guangchangwu group all expressed that participating in guangchangwu helped them acquire new friends, which in turn gave them a
sense of belonging. I also experienced this feeling after my encounter with Wei at the apartment gate. This important component of social dancing may originate in the group dance, but it is expressed on other occasions outside of the dance event bringing into the discourse the stability of communal dance and further resulting possibilities for socialization. When the dance is over, many women in my guangchangwu group simply leave and go home. But many, however, stay and continue to practice the dance steps or chat for half an hour, sometimes longer, in smaller groups. Topics include learning dance steps, strategies for staying healthy, and family. To deepen their friendships, these women visit one another’s houses, help each other download and watch dance videos on Tangduo, communicate via WeChat and even gather at KTV, popular Chinese Karaoke clubs. I was extremely happy to receive an invitation to KTV even though I could not attend because I was working. I did enjoy looking at the pictures on WeChat though and I sincerely wished I could have gone.

Huang (2016) identifies how collective dance, specifically guangchangwu, creates “horizontal social ties” that “constitute a new kind of post-socialist collectivity that is distinguishable from earlier forms of social groups by virtue of the individualized subject positions of its participants.” Post-Maoist Chinese society has fostered the formation of individualized subject positions, though such positions are primarily restricted to consumerist, economic activity encouraged by the state. What collective dance offers are forms of socialization and communal activity that goes beyond the motivations of consumerist individuality. Similarly, Farquhar and Zhang (2012, 77) observe how “little collectivities form spontaneously and continuously in the parks for yangsheng activity; sociability in public and knowing — at least a little — one’s neighbors is commonly thought of as a key element in urban ways of nurturing life.”
The practice of guangchangwu varies from group to group, teacher to teacher, and dance to dance. In addition to the wide range of styles and approaches utilized in guangchangwu, the creative process and practice involves the use of and engagement with technology such as WeChat. While the use of technology is informing how artistic practices of guangchangwu are shared, it is possible to suggest that the online sharing and communication of the dances has contributed to the increase in guangchangwu’s popularity. Thanks to online applications such as WeChat the “older” generation is embracing technology and engaging on screen with videos depicting a plethora of guangchangwu groups in a variety of settings. Such videos are created by guangchangwu practitioners nationwide—often with professional help—and then uploaded to popular video-sharing websites such as Youku or Tudou, or Tangdou to share with other guangchangwu enthusiasts. Knowledge-sharing networks are important because they function as tools that guangchangwu practitioners across the country can use to build a collective culture regardless of geographical proximity. They are a way for dancers to connect and build links beyond their localities. These videos enabled participants to develop their guangchangwu practice in the comfort of home. More importantly, they serve as a means for participants to negotiate the boundary of inside/outside that has been mapped onto the spatial mobility of women in postreform China.

Another important component that influences the social interactions of the guangchangwu dancers is that most participants are members of a neighborhood. All the dancers in my dance interest group are within walking distance of my apartment complex’s park. Options for dance spaces are determined by where individuals live, and most dancers participate in groups located closest to their homes. Anthropologist Chi Nakane (1970, 2) describes Asian neighborhood relationships as concerned more with location rather than quality. In Eastern
societies, people often build relationships based on proximity while in Western countries, citizens trust other citizens based more on the quality of the existing relationship. Within the society of guangchangwu, neighbors are situated closer to each other than complete strangers, which provides a foundation upon which deeper social connections can be formed. For this reason, the relationships between guangchangwu members cannot be separated from relationships within the community.

Much of the chatter between the dancers concerns the participants’ health. Dance as a form of exercise has a long history in China and holds a prominent place in the culture from school children who line up in the morning to march or do calisthenics to employees who prepare for the workday by collectively moving or cheering. There is an old proverb in Chinese that says, “Walk 100 steps after dinner and you’ll live to be 99.” Exercise is a way of thinking deeply ingrained in the culture. Most of the women in my guangchangwu group agree that dance keeps them fit, both physically and mentally, and most of the conversations they have at the dance event concern ways to take care of their health. The women like to pat each other’s bellies, as well as anyone else’s, mine included, and chide one another about the size of their tummies. On one occasion, while we were dancing, a neighbor of one of the participants came strolling through the park with a toddler. The participant stopped dancing to speak with the mother and child (it did not appear that they were related because they greeted one another like they had not seen each other in a while) and the two ladies just went ahead and patted one another’s bellies. While the music was loud and they were a bit far from me, I overheard the words “belly,” “lose weight,” and “slim/skinny.” Health conversations often include issues regarding illness and how to treat them. Most of the treatments are based on traditional notions about health. Everyone in China, including my young students, believe that warm water will cure any illness including
headache, body aches, sore throats, and coughing. One day when I taught class with a sore throat and could barely talk, one of my six-year-old students told me to drink hot water! The women at guangchangwu always bring individual thermoses of hot water or tea to share, even in the summer. My Chinese acquaintances and coworkers bemoan cold drinks and cold weather. I cannot count how many times, as I sip my ice water, that someone has told me, “Cold not good for healthy.”

The movements and music of guangchangwu generate the spirit of happiness, health and making friends that other activities in which these women take part may not provide. Dance is unique in producing a sense of belonging and relationship to the participants of guangchangwu that transforms this public social performance into a community. The community of guangchangwu with whom I danced simultaneously reflects the aspirations of the participants to be happy, healthy and make new friends not only revises the negative impressions that I garnered from the portrayals of guangchangwu in Chinese media, it has also allowed me to examine my own conceptions of happiness, health, and making new friends within my experiences with dance. As such, these three motivations for the guangchangwu dancers became the focal points for my ethnography.

Further reflection on the answers I received when I asked why these women danced lead me to recognize that the representation of the guangchangwu participants in newspaper articles, on YouTube and on social media stood in stark contrast to the lived experience I was having with actual guangchangwu dancers. My guangchangwu participants were not cranky, outdated, belligerent troublemakers. They were warm, welcoming women craving camaraderie, health, and happiness within a community of their own creation.
Guangchangwu and the Body

Dance, as an art form, can often function as a communicative act. It uses the medium of body movements to convey meaning and information, in the same way that visual art uses images or music uses sound. Susan Leigh Foster notes how all body movement serves as “the vehicle or instrument of an interior subject who communicates through movement about feelings, libidinal desires, status, class, or degree of physical accomplishment, to name but a few possibilities” (1985, 46). This expressive quality of body movements has been established by embodiment theory, which seeks to frame the signifying power of dance to its physical and tangible medium. During the second half of the twentieth century, the same embodiment theory has extended the capacities of the body beyond simple expression, particularly in dance scholarship. The body and its movement do not simply convey meaning and information but can record and transmit cultural meaning and information across history. As Diana Taylor notes, “Embodied expression has participated and will probably continue to participate in the transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and post-writing” (2003, 16). The binary opposition between embodied expression and writing is an important concept, as performance art has been largely conceived as an inferior medium when it comes to transmission of social knowledge. Foster, in her 2011 lecture “Choreographies of Writing,” points out that writing is perceived as a rigorous, intellectual, and more permanent medium that makes it superior in critically engaging with dance and performance. As such, there is a wealth of written critical work about dance, but there are no dance performances that engage in critical discourse with dance (Foster 2011).

The same idea extends to the transmission of cultural knowledge, where the permanence of the written text is deemed more enduring than the supposedly ephemeral nature of
performance and body movements. Yet in many cultures around the world, it is embodied expression that has served as the primary means of recording and preserving culture across generations. Diana Taylor’s framework in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, sees the “archive” and the “repertoire” as means of cultural transmission that are in tension with one another (2003). Taylor argues that “archival memory” consists of documents and artifacts that ultimately sustain the power structures that operate within a given society, and thus, the written text becomes the primary means of transmission of cultural knowledge via “archiving” (2003, 19). Meanwhile, the “repertoire enacts embodied memory” via gestures, movement, and singing, and affords agency to the transmission of knowledge (Taylor 2003, 20).

Guangchangwu is an especially interesting case of embodied expression as means of transmitting cultural and social meaning, as its history of performance in China touches on the various conceptions of the body as archive and repertoire. Guangchangwu’s origins in regional dance traditions performed by local communities manifest the transmission of cultural knowledge prior to the primacy of the written text as the archival medium, similar to practices in other pre-writing societies. The adoption of guangchangwu as a cultural practice by the CCP imbued the dance form with another layer of socio-political significance and modified its role as transmitter of cultural knowledge. Contemporary guangchangwu, which is supported by the current Chinese government while also largely shaped by the practices of individuals and communities highlights the complex interaction and difficult tension between archive and repertoire. The likewise tense relationship of the guangchangwu dancers with their respective communities—with the primarily elderly dancers of guangchangwu often eliciting hostile responses for their performances—complicates the function of the dance as embodied expression that facilitates the transmission of knowledge.
The Founding Influences of Guangchangwu and the Transmission of Cultural Knowledge

There are two main practices during China’s dynastic period that influenced the formation of the contemporary dance practice of guangchangwu: (1) the folkdance tradition of yangge; and (2) mass public performances during community celebrations. Yangge, which means rice sprout song, is the folkdance tradition most attributed with influencing not only guangchangwu, but all forms of contemporary community dance practices in China today. Yangge became popular during the Song Dynasty (959–1278 CE) and was performed mainly by women in villages located in the Northern region of China to encourage a good harvest and ward off evil spirits (Martin and Chen 2020, 23). The association of yangge as a women’s dance establishes the continuity to today’s guangchangwu being performed mainly by older women. The contemporary belief concerning guangchangwu’s benefits to physical health, which was also expressed by my interviewees, can be traced to yangge being a ritual performance promoting health and prosperity. Meanwhile, mass public performances in the form of parades conducted during the beginning of the lunar new year. Members of a village would perform the parade with the goal of travelling to the shrines of local deities and pay tribute (Martin and Chen 2020, 24). While the specific traditions of these parades are different depending on the region, the public nature of guangchangwu performances can trace their origins to these dynastic practices.

The foundational influences of yangge and public performances in parades represent the transmission of cultural knowledge via repertoire, via embodied performances. This derives from two factors that inform these transmission practices. First, writing, while already a well-developed tradition among the Chinese elite during the dynastic period, was not widely accessible among rural communities. As such, the primary means of transmitting the knowledge of these influences across generations was through the performances themselves. There was no
centralized authority that enforced standards for yangge and parades, which then resulted in no archival records of a unified account of such standards. Second, the regional nature of the influences generates meaning that is unique to the practices. The variations in yangge are tied to the local deities worshipped by a community, or the kind of crops and trades a region is known for. As such, the embodied performances themselves become the manner by which these regional traditions are passed down from one generation to the next, as the performances themselves only make sense to a specific community or region. Taylor describes a similar phenomenon in pre-colonial Mesoamerica, where the friar Bernardino Sahagun describes the Mexica as transmitting cultural knowledge via singing and dancing (Taylor 2003, 40). Outsiders like Sahagun had no idea what these performances meant: “Shared performance and linguistic practices constituted the community itself. Others could not decipher the codes” (Taylor 2003, 41). Eventually, there would be adoption of similar practices and traditions surrounding folk dances and parades across regions. Indeed, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese folk dances had “combined Han styles (such as Northeast range, Shandong yangge, Anhui unageing, and Yunnan huadeng) with ethnic minority styles such as Uyghur, Mongol, Korean, Tibetan, and Dai (E. Wilcox 2019, 2). That said, the transmission and reception of regional traditions were ultimately determined by the local contexts of the communities involved.

When the dynastic period ended and the CCP’s ascent to power, the resulting communist government recognized early on the value of adopting and appropriating public performances for promoting the state agenda. During the Yan’an years the CCP mobilized arts and culture for the masses, and with the establishment of the PRC in 1949, yangge became an “official celebratory art” (Martin and Chen 2020, 23). By the 1960s, however, yangge would be banned for being a feudal practice, and would be replaced by zhongziwu (loyalty dance), which celebrated the ideals
of the PRC and Mao’s regime. It is notable how many of the features of zhongziwu are similar to yangge, especially the public nature of its performance, which indicates the appropriation by the government of a dance tradition as propaganda. The PRC also wanted to showcase Chinese folk dance—along with Chinese classical dance—as a representation of China’s cultural production in the world stage. In 1954, the Beijing Dance Academy was established, and the national curriculum integrated dance programs on xiqu-based Chinese classical dance as well as four styles of Chinese folk dance, including Han, Korean, Tibetan, and Uyghur into the country’s educational system (E. Wilcox 2019, 71-72). As such, there was state support for zhongziwu, and it was performed in schools, places of work, and public places throughout China, allowing it to become rapidly integrated into the everyday experiences of the citizens. The local parades conducted primarily for religious purposes were likewise replaced by the PRC’s preponderance of military parades and celebrations meant to stoke nationalist sentiments (Martin and Chen 2020, 24). The centralization of public performance practices under the CCP and PRC would have a lasting legacy that would inform how guangchangwu is performed today.

It should be clear that during this period of time, the influences that shaped what would eventually emerge as guangchangwu was transmitted via archival memory instead of the previous reliance on repertoire. Folk and classical Chinese dance practices were formalized and standardized and were taught via the formal structures of the public educational system. Indeed, one of the immediate concerns of the PRC after establishing the organizations that would teach classical and folk Chinese dance as part of China’s cultural identity internationally was the technical prowess of dance performances. In 1949, a 200-person music and dance pageant titled *Long Live the People’s Victory* was staged in celebration of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress and Founding Day (E. Wilcox 2019, 48). The main criticism of the even
lay in the lack of skill and training on the part of the performances, which prompted the establishment of the technical standards governing performances of Chinese dances. The maintenance of existing power structures via dance as an embodied, social practice further emphasizes the archival nature of cultural knowledge transmission during this period. From the structuralist perspective, the body movements involved in dance function as an inevitable reflection of society. Mary Douglas, in the 1960s and 1970s, had adopted the structuralist framework and pointed out how the body lends itself to the generation of symbols that represent the society that acts on said body: “The body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries that are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The function of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures” (Thomas 2003, 21). The PRC exploited this symbol-generating capacity of already existing traditions in dance and public performances in order to spread nationalist ideology and to maintain the power of the CCP. For example, one of the standardized gestures in zhongziwu involves a “tightly held fist with the arm extended, or where both arms are raised above the head with the fingertips and palm face the sky to indicate an embrace of the ‘red sun,’” celebrating communism and the CCP.

Guangchangwu’s Embodied Movement as Archival and Repertoire Collective Memory

The transmission of cultural knowledge today among guangchangwu dancers is a complex, complicated process that has been significantly shaped by history and the local contexts of the dancers. As such, the teaching of guangchangwu and the social norms and beliefs that are propagated and sustained alongside learning the dance generate both archival and repertoire memories. The body becomes an archive for cultural knowledge because of the efforts of the Chinese government to prescribe standards for dancing guangchangwu. The Ministry of
Culture, the General Administration of Sport, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of
Housing and Urban-Rural Development have all made initiatives to standardize guangchangwu
performances, making teaching materials available online. In many ways, this is very similar to
the PRC’s efforts during the Mao era to formalize classical and folk dances in service of the
government’s interests. The government’s current initiatives to promote guangchangwu can be
identified as a response to an aging population, where instead of providing health and social
services for the elderly, it is cheaper to promote a program that citizens will have to implement
themselves. But more than this pragmatic reason, the promotion of guangchangwu sustains
control and existing power structures by extending the social routines established during the Mao
era. Guangchangwu is framed primarily as a form of physical exercise, and “collective exercise
as a whole was embedded in the daily routine in Mao-era China, when workers and students
alike would regularly participate in collective calisthenics set to music broadcast over
loudspeakers” (Chao 2017, 4507).

Many of the experiences of guangchangwu dancers involve a very structured way of
learning the dance, demonstrating the archival nature of the transmission of cultural knowledge.
In these formal classes that are becoming more and more prevalent, a lingwu or dance leader
would showcase the gestures and movements of the dance for new dancers to follow and then
practice repeatedly. The lessons typically occur in three stages. First, the foundational
movements such as movements of the chest, shoulders, and basic steps are shown to the new
dancers. Second, the teacher demonstrates a single choreography for a particular dance. Third,
the dancers repeat the choreography several times to remember the choreography (Martin and
Chen 2020, 55). The online resources provided by the government also feature prominently in
the contemporary teaching and learning of guangchangwu. Guangchangwu dancers have
appreciated how important these online resources are for learning the dance, as most of them are able to understand the fundamentals of a particular style or choreography especially if there are videos available online. Some dance teachers have also taken advantage of apps like Qianye Dance to supplement their teaching (Martin and Chen 2020, 61). One of my interviewees, Mrs. Sun, teaches guangchangwu and relies on these online resources for her lesson plan. Moreover, the fact that she does not teach “outdated” moves to her students showcases the growing trend of formalization and standardization in the transmission of cultural knowledge.

While it may be argued that the availability of online resources, especially videos of guangchangwu affords newcomers like myself accessibility towards learning the dance, these resources do come with drawbacks associated with the reliance on archival memory. Many of the dancers who learn online have noted that the absence of feedback hampers their ability to learn a dance or choreography (Martin and Chen 2020, 60). Practicing on their own, new guangchangwu dancers like myself may have difficulty in replicating the gestures and movements and feel as if they are doing something wrong without feedback not only from the teacher, but also from seeing and experiencing the dance with others. Deidre Sklar, in her work with dance ethnography, identifies the importance of “empathetic kinesthetic perception” in gaining a full understanding of the social and cultural impacts of dance (Dei91). In her investigation of the performances at the Tortugas fiesta, she notes how it was crucial that she employs this empathetic kinesthetic perception to recognize the nuances of the dances and actually understand what the actual experiences of the dancers are like: “Empathic kinesthetic perception often provided clues not just to the sensations of particular movements, but to the whole complex of concepts, values, affects, and action that comprise the Tortugas fiesta” (Dei91, 7). Relying on online resources and dancing on one’s own for guangchangwu dancers deprives them of the
ability to employ empathetic kinesthetic perception, as the dancers play the role of observer of movements, recording and archiving the movements of the dance and/or choreography rather than having an embodied experience. Taylor comes to a similar conclusion in her study of how social trauma is culturally transmitted through public performance. She notes how performances that engage with social trauma are “always in situ. Each intervenes in the individual/political/social body at a particular moment and reflects specific tensions” (Taylor 2003, 167).

While the transmission of cultural knowledge in guangchangwu clearly has an archival dimension, most of those who teach and learn the dance today rely on memories generated by repertoire. Guangchangwu dancers exercise a large degree of agency in their performances, which is reflected in the variety of dances that they can choose to learn. The diverse range of guangchangwu practices range “from the aerobics-like steps of jianshenchao, to the ballroom-style dancing of jiaoyiwu, to the hyperenergetic jumps and turns involved in shiliubu” (Chao 2017, 45). The important aspect of this diversity is that guangchangwu dancers can choose what dances or styles they want to learn, depending on what they need and their specific personal and social contexts. The responses from my interviewees confirm this agency made available to them in learning guangchangwu, pointing out that they only learn the steps for dances that either appeal to them or something that they are physically comfortable doing. Not only did my participants express agency in what they danced but also with whom they danced, as Mrs. Huo stated, “If you knew this dance already, you could always go to another one to learn a new dance.” Since guangchangwu is performed primarily by older women, the physical capacities of the dancer are a very important factor to consider when learning a dance. Furthermore, guangchangwu dancers can choose to employ their own movements and incorporate it into their performances. Despite the increasing formalization of guangchangwu stemming from pressures
from the state to control the dance’s performances, the actual, embodied performance of
guangchangwu is autonomous and freeform. For example, one of my interviewees, Mrs. Zhao,
chooses to join a guangchangwu group that consists of a smaller number of participants, and she
only performs movements and gestures that are comfortable for her and her physical capabilities.
Wei, another guangchangwu dancer from my own group, would modify the steps of a
choreography to coincide with the movements and gestures that she personally likes and that fits
her range of movement. As Taylor describes dance as a form of transmitting cultural knowledge
is not exact nor “objective,” but adapts to the body and the contexts of the dancer conducting the
transmission (2003). As such, the embodied performances of guangchangwu manifests Taylor’s
conception of cultural memory created through repertoire, where “The repertoire both keeps and
transforms choreographies of meaning” (2003, 20).

Guangchangwu’s generation of cultural memory via repertoire is further emphasized by
its challenging of existing power structures rather than sustaining them. Foster has identified that
the creation of meaning in dance is always situated within structures and hierarchies of power,
and politics informs which aspects of cultural and social knowledge is transmitted during a dance
performance (2011). Guangchangwu directly challenges conceptions of the aging, female body
and the norms that govern the spatial mobility of Chinese women. While the government
initiatives promoting guangchangwu emphasize its physical benefits, and the guangchangwu
dancers themselves acknowledge how they want to keep healthy by performing physical
activities such as guangchangwu, their embodied experiences demonstrate that the dance means
more to them than just exercise. The organic emergence of guangchangwu in the late 1990s “was
envisioned as a practice that enabled women to move beyond the constraints and burdens of
overseeing their households, albeit temporarily. The space carved out by guangchangwu was
theirs and theirs alone, a practice they could participate in for their own joy and benefit” (Chao 2017, 45). The very movement from the private space of the home to public spaces represents a political gesture that reconceptualizes the attribution of the domestic domain to women. Mrs. Huo has noted that guangchangwu is an activity that she wanted to do for herself, something that was not dictated by the needs of her husband or her children. Furthermore, the visibility of being in public challenges the notion that the aging body is something that is unacceptable to society, and thus should be obscured or hidden. The older women who perform guangchangwu assert their being and presence—physically and socially—through their public performance. In these contexts, learning guangchangwu is not simply an act of replicating dance traditions shaped by Chinese history and cultural mores; it participates in transforming cultural knowledge and explores the possibilities of change in existing power structures governing age and gender in China.

**Guangchangwu and the Transmission of Knowledge in the Public Space**

The public performances of guangchangwu have been met with hostility in some regions and communities, where the dancers are conceived as a nuisance playing loud music to the detriment of residents and taking up parks and public squares. Given such a response, it would seem that the challenge posed by guangchangwu to cultural norms in China is unwelcome, which is unsurprising given that any kind of change will often provoke resistance or pushback. This does seem to indicate that the public is resistant to the transfer of cultural knowledge via guangchangwu, that Chinese society is reticent in accepting the “choreographies of meaning” being presented in the embodied performance of the dance. That said, this tense relationship between guangchangwu and Chinese society is actually demonstrative of guangchangwu’s success both as an artform and as a political action. The philosopher Jacques Derrida recognizes
the power of dance and physical performance in Antonin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” in Derrida’s essay “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation.” Derrida calls the Theatre of Cruelty as “an affirmation” of a “new negativity” (2002, 292-293). In particular, he finds value in Artaud’s attempt to remove any semblances of imitation and representation in performance art, or indeed, all art in general. Derrida subscribes to Nietzsche’s proclamation that “Art is not the imitation of life, but life is the imitation of a transcendental principle which art puts us into communication with once again” (Derrida 2002, 295). If art is not supposed to imitate life, then art should not function as a facsimile or replication of the lived experience—rather, it should be the lived experience. To accomplish this, Artaud “violently erases” all the elements of the performance that restrict and separate it from the audience (Derrida 2002, 298). The result is that Artaud’s pieces are overwhelming to the audience’s senses; they violently assault the audience and force them to engage with the work. The audience also “forgets” that they are watching theatre at all because of the overwhelming sensory experience they are subjected to in Artaud’s works.

Guangchangwu’s performance in public spaces shares interesting parallels with Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. The guangchangwu dancers, with their loudspeakers and accompanying musical instruments, force the community to acknowledge their presence through a similarly overwhelming sensory experience. The dancers’ occupation of public spaces such as parks and squares do deprive others of the use of these spaces during the performance, but it also eliminates the idea of a “stage” where the dancers perform. These aspects of the performance that provoke hostility from society are also the elements that manage the violent elimination of representation and replication in guangchangwu. The guangchangwu dancers are not imitating life as art, they are life. The physical reality of the guangchangwu performance in public forces
Chinese society to acknowledge the dancers, which, given that most are aging women, imposes upon Chinese society the necessity of recognizing the being of these individuals. This transformative paradigm is what guangchangwu aims to transmit to society in its performance, and while there is undeniable pushback from communities, it is a necessary one that Chinese society must engage with.

**Guangchangwu as “Third Space”**

The combination of various dance practices, artistic ideals, and the large number of participants with different cultural backgrounds present in guangchangwu has resulted in what is considered by Burke (2009, 136) as a “cultural hybrid.” Cultural hybridization occurs when individuals from different cultures merge becoming another new culture with its own beliefs, traditions, expression, language and habits. Sharing these characteristics, guangchangwu can be identified as a cultural hybrid. The process of cultural hybridity creates what Bhabha (1990, 211) describes as a “third space” where “something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” occurs. Guangchangwu becomes a third space through the synthesis of participants bringing with them various dance practices for dance teaching, learning, performing, and creating (Placeholder1).

As a third space, guangchangwu offers a unique opportunity to engage with a diverse population of women who exists within a dance practice community. Guangchangwu is a collective choice born out of women’s common experiences and desires based on their gender and age (Q. Wang 2014). These common experiences include China’s policy of forced retirement which has brought together civil servants, bank managers, schoolteachers, business owners, and housewives. Other participants may experience a transformation of their traditional family roles including problematic marriages, an empty nest, or a leftover woman situation.
Their participation in guangchangwu may alleviate the stress and anxiety of social isolation as well as have a positive impact on their overall health and wellbeing.

Today in China, guangchangwu encompasses a variety of existing forms of dance from the historical yangge to more contemporary athletic-style aerobic dance. Most of these dances retain their individual style and characteristics but are now retrospectively referred to as guangchangwu in dance discourses due to their performances in public squares that populate China’s urban landscapes. The elements inherent in these different dance styles that identify them as guangchangwu—movement practice, large groups, public spaces, female—can be traced to the development of dance in China from ancient times through the Cultural Revolution as well as into contemporary culture. In fact, guangchangwu has been highly influenced by the historical foundations of dance in China. The music played in guangchangwu draws deeply from traditional ethnic Chinese folk music and is sung by Chinese artists in various Chinese dialects. The motions of the dancers recall the sweeping arm movements and twirling circles from ancient Chinese classical dance and folk dancing. In this sense, guangchangwu is an activity that engages strongly with Chinese history and culture. This engagement allows for a fuller exploration of what it means to be a Chinese participant of guangchangwu in terms of political or economic terms, but also in terms of their everyday lives. The making of this identity is the result of interplay between top-down governmental and institutional change and the production of culture (Chao 2017).

As previously stated, guangchangwu represents a cultural hybrid where individuals with their own beliefs, traditions, expression, language, and habits merge becoming another new culture. As a new culture, each group of guangchangwu dancers represents a distinct group whose subversion of public streets, sidewalks, and parks creates a third space (Bhabha 1990).
Third space theory suggests a shared space where participants engage in social relationships that are sometimes individual, sometimes group, sometimes both. In the practice of guangchangwu, participants create alternative physical places, that are neither public or private and produce alternative spaces of collectivity for female participants (Chao 2017, 13). I define this third space as intentional space. Intentional refers to the participants’ acknowledgment of the designated function of public places in China while simultaneously utilizing them for their own personal and group needs. Their motivation for gathering in large groups in public spaces is, as my participants describe, to be happy, healthy, and making new friends. Whether guangchangwu participants are aware when they mobilize as a group, using public space for their movement practice, they are creating a new kind of space is debatable, yet new spaces are created. Furthermore, this new space, this intentional space created by guangchangwu, is subversive, as it serves as a signal to society of the group’s intent to use space for their own purpose, reclaiming space through dance.
CHAPTER IV
WHERE THERE’S A PARK, THERE’S GUANGCHANGWU

My exploration of guangchangwu needs to return to where I found it: public space. As Mrs. Sun explained in her interview, “Where there’s a park, there’s guangchangwu,” a sentiment shared by other participants I interviewed. Guangchangwu is distinct in the massive number of participants taking over public space, garnering the attention of the general population and the Chinese government. In its name and everyday practice, guangchangwu is framed by physical place. Due to the number of participants, guangchangwu is not an indoor activity. It follows that any flat, paved area with nighttime lighting or covering from the sun, enough area to accommodate dancing bodies, and distance from residential housing or businesses will do. Most often, the type of place that meets these requirements are public parks and squares. However, guangchangwu has grown in popularity so quickly participants even appropriate alternative public places that were not necessarily designed for such use such as sidewalks and streets to support their practice (Q. Wang 2015). Additionally, these public places are imbued with a diverse sense of space by guangchangwu participants and their dance practice, in what I have called intentional space. It is precisely this distinct Chinese experience of public space that allows guangchangwu participants to subvert said places for their own personal and group needs.

I begin this chapter by defining place and space and how the relationship between the two influences China’s social structures and societal norms within public, private and intentional space. I explore the historical implication of the construction of public space in China, the result of which reveals the interplay between top-down government and institutional change with the processes of culture (Goheen 1998). I then take a deeper look at how designating a space as “public,” particularly in China, holds lingering socialist legacies and ideas which are emplaced in
these spaces fostering competing articulations of place and identity (Yao, et al. 2021). My experience of guangchangwu was different in each intentional space I participated: Wen Xin Gong Yuan, Li Yuan Da Sha, and Rui Peng. Therefore, I discuss the nuances that made each place a separate site for the performance of guangchangwu by transforming public places into lived, individualized intentional spaces for participants. Since guangchangwu is primarily a woman’s activity, I also explore how issues of gender and gender dynamics manifest in public space. I conclude with an exploration of how public space has been regulated in response to guangchangwu.

**The Meaning of Place and Space in Guangchangwu**

For my study, I use the terms “public place” and “public space” when referring to parks, squares, sidewalks, and streets or anywhere else participants of guangchangwu engage in their dance practice. A clarification of the meaning of place and space is therefore necessary. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau distinguishes space from place (1974). De Certeau explains that “a place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence;” a place is thus “an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability” (1974, 117). For example, TWU is a place. Located in the city of Denton, Texas, it is a collection of physical structures made of durable materials. It is a campus with buildings that hold colleges, departments, and programs, each with their own organizational framework for staff, faculty, and students. These elements of the university are deliberately ordered and designed to assist with the functioning of the education process in this place. A public place for this dissertation refers to a park, square, sidewalk, or street built by the government for use by the population. These public places are relevant to the practice of guangchangwu because political and historical influence are literally built into them.
For example, one only has to say *Tiananmen Square* to conjure images of the protest and the square itself.

Contrary to place, De Certeau explains that space “is composed of intersections of mobile elements” (1974, 117). On any given day, TWU is a space. It is composed of students learning, sleeping, or texting, in the classroom, speakers calling out to the crowds on the mall, teachers hurrying to office hours, delivery trucks moving across campus streets, etc. Though the university is designed as a place for education, that is not what always occurs in the space of the classroom, the space of the mall. Or sometimes, it is exactly what occurs. In this sense, “space is a practiced place” (de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life 1974, 117). De Certeau’s definition of active space distinguishes it from a stable notion of place. The practice of guangchangwu generates a distinctive space through the large number of dancing bodies, loud music, and movement, which is not necessarily what the space was designed for.

Distinguishing between space and place in this way is important, especially when considering the relationship between space, power, and social relations. For large dance practices like guangchangwu, the meaning of space is a product of organization and the social transactions and experiences that occur in public places, both currently and historically (Soja 1989, 80). Guangchangwu participants and their dance practice, affected by the spaces they inhabit, can thus be explored to understand how both space and place are constructed, organized, and imbued with power. Foucault maintains that “power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (1977, 4). Roxanne Mountford further argues that “Spaces have heuristic power over their inhabitants and spectators by forcing them to change both their behavior . . . and, sometimes, their view of themselves”
(1996, 50). Consideration of the relationship between spatial/social organization in public places, assists in exploring and describing how social relations are maintained or constructed in guangchangwu.

Michel de Certeau notes how the modern experience has created an abstract notion of the city which “provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties” (1974, 94). This interconnection of functions inevitably leads to spaces where these properties converge, a byproduct of the city’s inhabitant’s activities. At the same time, the forces in control of the city are also able to exert their influence in manipulating such spaces. As a response, the citizens of the city try to break away from the “panoptic power” that controls the city-as-a-concept, thereby creating truly “public” spaces (de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life 1974, 95). Indeed, most of the discourse surrounding public space relate public spaces to urban experiences, questioning the viability of a democratic public sphere in a city that is controlled by oppressive forces via “collective action,” or trying to understand how the flow of public activity informs the process of the formation and emergence of public spaces in urban geographies (Goheen 1998, 484).

The dynamic nature of power and space is important to the discussion of guangchangwu. Foucault maintains that power is relational and at no time and in no place are power relations stable (1977). This instability leaves room for resistance, particularly when considering guangchangwu’s use of public space and how the participants reclaim space through dance. Recalling de Certeau’s assertion that space is dynamic, relational, and variable, a space may be designed for a certain practice, but the actual use of the space is not determined by the construction of places. At any moment, spaces are alive with the potential for social interpretation and use. Guangchangwu practitioners alter the idea and meaning of the spaces they
utilize in their practice through intention. Their dancing revision, or re-interpretation of space, allows guangchangwu practitioners to subvert places such as parks, streets, and sidewalks, for their own personal and group needs, intentionally changing the space from its proposed function in order to support their activities.

**Defining Chinese Public Space**

In China, public space refers to 城市公共空间. The key term here is 公, and would translate as “public” in English. Chinese public space includes squares, parks, streets, and other places open to people. However, as with most Chinese-English translations, 城市’s meaning is very subtle. Depending on context, in Chinese 城市 sometimes means official and sometimes means public. For example, 城市公园 refers to public parks and 城市 refers to official matters/duties of the government. Thus, public space in China often refers to both public space and official space. Scholars who study China’s urban issues have focused on China’s urban redevelopment, suburban developments, and urban forms in general (Wu, Xu and Gar-On Yeh 2006). They point to the gated tradition of Chinese cities such as Xi’an or the Forbidden City in Beijing and this has influenced urban life. Bray (2005) has discussed in detail the gated work-units in socialist China, or danwei, and how that format continues its impact in contemporary China. Studies have shown how contemporary Chinese organize inside their own gated communities to protect their shared/group interests (Y. Huang 2006). Additionally, some anthropologists have studied how Chinese use formal public places such as official parks for their daily routine—working out, meeting friends, playing chess, and guangchangwu (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). In the case of guangchangwu, Chinese people, particularly retired people, successfully utilize the official parks for their personal/group well-
being. To what degree the space is public and how accessible it is to the general public is a debate much bigger than my research.

Useful in the examination of the experience of public space in China is the influence of the Soviet Union during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) under the rule of Mao Ze Dong. In this case, the Chinese experience of public space is quite different, especially in the urban experience of transforming danwei into post-Mao public spaces. Danwei, while considered a workspace in the “Soviet spatial practice,” had its origins in the Confucian hierarchical and cosmological organization of the family (Bray 2005, 67). The hierarchical organization of the public space of the danwei, particularly during the dynastic period of China, was a cultural expression of the social dimension. The functional organization of space in danwei is based on family and their social roles and was the manifestation of their conception of the ideal society. The attributes of the danwei itself are expressed within the physical space “arranged conveniently within a neatly symmetrical space—everything is at hand to provide for the daily needs of a modern working community” (Bray 2005, 67). When Soviet spatial practice was adopted in China, the organization of the danwei was appropriated to become a form of social control. This appropriation of danwei took advantage of the physical dimension of community organization and translated it into a Western version of panoptic control in terms of hierarchical and functional organization. Instead of serving the community’s needs, the danwei served the needs of the government. The justification for this cultural shift from community to state labor derives from recent attempts to restore the communal function of the danwei and must also acknowledge the relationship of its physical organization with the return to the culture of Confucian community and the needs of contemporary China’s social and cultural aspects. For example, the reintroduction of the baojia system as a “social contract” that encourages citizens to
fulfill their civic duty for the betterment of the community within danwei spaces can trace its cultural lineage to Confucian ideals, rather than the oppressive relegation of labor of the Soviet spatial practice (Bray 2005, 189). In this sense, the idea of public space for the use of the family/community influences the types of activities engaged and performed therein.

Public space and its use by the community in China opens the discourse to the inter-relation between people. In public space, as well as within a community, the interaction between people and the behavior of a single person have to follow certain rules which define a society in its specificity. The character of public space is mostly about the idea of public connection, or how people recognize a certain kind of space in term of social behaviors. In this perspective, public space in China is public not because it is “outdoor” or big. It becomes public because of people’s common use and interpretation of it. In public space, behavior is probably the most significant issue. Here, the rules are stricter and the interactions between people are based on customs that are broadly recognized as “civil.” This is particularly true in China where social behaviors and social conduct belong to a social convention, according to the state and the image that a single person must sustain in front of the world.

My apartment building, Li Yuan Da Sha, and the apartment building my guangchangwu group relocated to, Rui Peng, are contemporary examples of the idea of public space within a “private” community. The small park at Li Yuan Da Sha and the central square at Rui Peng where my guangchangwu group met, are public spaces provided by the community for the community. Anyone can access and use the space for their chosen activity. In one sense, they are like extensions of private living space, similar to a community living room where residents can enjoy their favorite hobbies, play instruments, take naps, or participate in guangchangwu. Nothing is off-limits as the place and space belong to and is shared by all.
The visibility of the guangchangwu dancers in the public space, both in terms of their physical bodies and in the performance of dance, has been central to the ongoing public discourse about the phenomenon’s function in contemporary Chinese society. While I am primarily focused on the personal meanings that guangchangwu participants in my community create, it is important to contextualize the situation of guangchangwu in public spaces as having an impact on the lived experiences of the women with whom I danced guangchangwu.

Guangchangwu, through its appropriation of public space, invites conversations regarding the coarticulation of place and identity (Chao 2017, 18). In practice, guangchangwu blurs the boundaries between public/private and produces alternative spaces of collectivity for female participants (Chao 2017, 13).

**The Chinese Experience of Public Space**

In my attempt to contextualize what makes a Chinese public space distinct, I must first discuss my personal idea of public space as an American. Public space has been intensively studied in the US, from both its formal political uses and its more informal use as a place for citizens to gather and recreate. As a political setting, public space has important symbolic and realistic functions in modern democratic societies such as the US as public places for speeches, ceremonies, and other public events, as well as formal public settings for protests, rallies, and other organized events. Squares, parks, or streets, considered informal public space, capture another key component of modern life—leisure and entertainment. People go to public space for casual walks, shopping, meeting friends, or any other spontaneous, unorganized events.

In public spaces in the US, whether in conversation or standing in line, most people leave a comfortable distance between them. It is common to hear expressions like “in your face” or “too close for comfort” to address that uncomfortable feeling when someone is too close or
encroaching on personal space. The degree of separation individuals maintain between each other in social situations falls within the study of nonverbal communication and is culturally determined (Rakel 2016). Many Americans also prefer a comfortable buffer of personal space when accessing public spaces, using their eyes by way of not making eye-contact to maintain proper distance (Rakel 2016). In some ways, use of public spaces in the US is contingent upon not being bothered by others while using the public space. Take, for example, public transportation such as busses or trains. Few Americans, upon alighting an unoccupied bus or train, would sit directly beside already seated passengers. And on airplanes, having a chatty passenger in the seat beside you can make or break the flight. In public spaces, even when surrounded by others, many Americans expect to be left alone. This social trend parallels with the physical transformation of American public space—the decline of the usage of formal public spaces including parks and the simultaneous privatization and commercialization of public space. Lopes, Cruz, and Pinho (2012) state the transformation and privatization of urban spaces such as squares, parks, and streets, have been reconfigured to support more commercial activities. The spontaneity of public spaces has been replaced by chain suburban shopping malls (Chiodelli and Moroni 2015). People’s use of public places has been replaced with well-programmed shopping behaviors instead of spontaneous personal activities.

Public spaces in China simply do not work the same way. There are cultural norms in public spaces related to social interactions and displays of respect, but Chinese people are not bothered by closeness to others including an acceptable amount of pushing and shoving in public. People on busy streets may walk straight towards one another, run directly into one another, or cut one another off. Standing or walking very close together, looking over someone’s shoulder while texting, are also normalized behaviors. Lack of boundaries may be the result of
China’s population density. But more influential may be that, historically, Chinese families have lived in walled dwellings and cities where individual space has little significance. Their experience of public space has been that it belongs to everyone as an extension of their personal space.

One of my first experiences of riding a train in China demonstrates this difference. Accompanied by my colleague, we purchased tickets to travel from Shenzhen to Guangzhou, a two-hour train ride, for a short business trip. After purchasing the tickets, we walked towards the pre-boarding area. What I saw before me was a large, unorganized mass of people. More than 300 people were gathered near the gate, shoulder to shoulder, body to body, only a pair of double glass doors holding them back from the platform. There were no ropes forming lines or instructions on how to board the train. About ten minutes before the train arrived, the glass doors opened, and like water spilling from a pail, everyone began to flood through the doors to the platform. Walking briskly to a train car, we alighted the train. Looking at my ticket, I could see I was on the wrong car. My colleague sat down in a row that had two available seats. Again, I looked at my ticket and could clearly see this was not my seat. Bringing this to the attention of my colleague, she motioned with her hand for me to sit and told me not to worry. She explained that whoever’s seat I was taking could have my seat elsewhere on the train. I sat, panicking just a little for taking someone else’s seat. A few minutes later, a woman stopped at our row and stated I was in her seat. My colleague explained that we were traveling together and asked if she would take my ticket. The woman agreed and we exchanged tickets. I was astounded at how uneventful the whole exchange had been. My experience as an American had prepared me for the woman whose seat I had taken to refuse to change seats or protest moving to a new car. My colleague
just laughed at me for being so worried, explaining, “A ticket is sold for every seat on the train, so everyone has a seat.”

Chinese people use public spaces in fundamentally different ways than Americans. These differences are directly related to the relationship between China’s social structures and societal norms which influence Chinese people’s public behaviors. In China, public spaces are comprised of two dimensions: the physical dimension and the social dimension. The social dimension is apparent with most definitions of public spaces, particularly in the attribution of their formation to the activities and beliefs of the people who experience these public spaces. Since culture is a social process, it must manifest in public spaces as well. However, the role of the physical place that constitutes public space must not be discounted. The control of the design and construction of public physical spaces has been largely relegated to the state, which makes the physicality of public spaces the primary means by which governments can control the public. One of the crucial problems in Chinese public spaces in the last four decades has been the design of parks, squares, and designated public buildings in that they prioritize celebrating the accomplishments of the administration that funded them (Miao 2011, 181). Such control of the physical dimension of public spaces can influence the culture that contributes to the emergence of the “public” urban spaces. Thus, in the same way that culture generation by the citizens validates a space as public, the physical dimension of such a space may in turn shape the culture production that can occur in that public space. The process is two-way, where physical and social dimensions both affect and are affected by culture to create the definition of a public space in a particular society.

What one then sees about public space is that while there are common aspects of their conception beyond culture—the postmodern ascription of dynamic meaning to public spaces and that public spaces are most expressive in urban geographies—the complex processes of culture at
both the social and physical dimensions ultimately lead to differences in the conceptions and practice of public spaces across the societies of the world. If public spaces represent the public sphere at a particular time and place, then the constantly changing culture in urban spaces must necessarily shape just exactly what constitutes public actions and engagements. At the same time, the physical attributes of the public space both influences and is influenced by culture to express the unique Chinese experience of public space.

“Walking” in the Parks

Public parks in China are unique and best grasped by presence through sights, sounds, and smells. It is an immersive experience. Wonderful in their floral decoration and overwhelming in both their enormity and disrepair, China’s public parks are an assault on the senses. They are living spaces, a meeting place of concrete and nature exposing a living history. Large and small, they are an oasis in a desert of construction and steel towers. The public park imprints itself on you when walking through it, across its planned trails and architectural bridges. Its movement and energy are comprised of continual narratives of millions of people whose everyday lives intersect within it. An endless supply of new and old stories, first-time and ancient visitors fill its sidewalks, squares, and pavilions. There is always somewhere to go, which offers these practitioners infinite choices of where to go. In the park everyone is transitory.

For de Certeau, “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (de Certeau and Rendall 1988). For guangchangwu participants dancing is a speech act transforming empty places into lived spaces through mass movement and improvisations that “weave places together” with old, new, and unique movements. Practitioners create stories as they move from place to place within the group,
within the square, and within the public park. Public parks in China thus become “a space of enunciation,” whereby participants of guangchangwu act out new possibilities and mold space in their image.

For guangchangwu participants, public parks embody the liminal experience of being in-between. For female practitioners, guangchangwu enables them to move temporarily beyond the constraints of inside/outside, familial obligations/individual pursuits, to a space carved out for them alone for their own joy and benefit (Chao 2017, 18). In these public spaces, participants make a place for themselves while society is leaving them behind through a coarticulation of place and identity (Chao 2017, 18).

What follows is my attempt to walk the public parks, in the spirit of de Certeau, to describe the nuanced differences I discovered in each location. Where Wen Xin Gong Yuan was crowded and loud, Li Yuan Da Sha was small and intimate, and Rui Peng was busy and modern. Each space left me with a new representation of what guangchangwu looks and feels like. But all the spaces revealed to me the communal and accepting character of guangchangwu.
Wen Xin Gong Yuan

Wen Xin Gong Yuan (see fig. 1) was the first park at which I encountered guangchangwu. It was located directly across from the school where I worked near the busy intersection of Wen Xin Er Ma Lu and Hou Hai Da Dao. Part of my walk to work each day required that I pass through the park at 4:30 pm and 8:30 pm Monday through Friday and 8:30 am and 8:00 pm Saturday and Sunday. During the morning hours, the park was sparsely populated by tai chi practitioners and grandparents entertaining young grandchildren. Older Chinese people were taking advantage of exercise equipment such as ellipticals and pulldown machines aimed at light cardio workouts and gentle strength training. The assortment of colorful exercise machines resemble children’s playgrounds, but are targeted more for seniors (although few children, nor myself, could resist the temptation to at least try them out). Many of the machines in these “senior playgrounds,” which can be found in all Chinese public parks, are designed to deal with common old age issues like balance and dexterity. During the day, when the temperatures were at the hottest it was hard to find anyone in the parks. As I often ate my lunch in the park, I soon noticed that the exception was during lunch hours, 11:00 am-1:00 pm, when the students and employees of the nearby schools and businesses would come to eat or take naps in the park.
The park encompassed a centrally located paved square bounded on one long side by a covered pavilion and a large grass covered area on the other. The pavilion is painted bright red with intricate, colorful Chinese inspired details. It is raised two steps higher than the paved square. Surrounded on three sides with benches and a flowing breeze makes it the perfect place to nap. The paved square and grassy field have no protection from the sun. In the morning, tai qi practitioners in pastel pajamas move in slow, unison arches. Small children fly kites, blow
bubbles, or play chasing games. Around and throughout the park winding walking trails paved with pebbles or cobblestones intersected making for a variety of paths to wander. Red bridges over small ponds filled with goldfish also made the stroll more interesting. The goldfish were excessively large for the small pond as visitors often bring bread to feed the fish. Large native trees like Mangroves and Cypress offer shade and attract birds and mice while tropical ground plants add colorful pops of red and yellow. The park stands out as a very green area surrounded by the metal and gray of the tall city buildings.

Three sides of the park are bordered by busy streets, one a major thoroughfare, one an elevated highway, and the other a smaller, but still busy, public street. To the fourth side of the park, a shopping mall and education mall, Nan Shan Shu Cheng, welcome people inside for some respite from the heat. More than a dozen tea and coffee shops are accessible from outside the mall, beckoning park visitors to come in for a beverage or a cake. From the two large entrances of the mall, whose doors remain open year-round, blasts of cold air cools people passing by to and from the park. Between the park and the malls there is another large, paved area where a group of women who practice aerobics meet in the evening. This space is half part of the park and half part of the entrance to the mall. There are often over 100 aerobics participants, making negotiating the area difficult.

The evening in Wen Xin Gong Yuan is quite different from the daytime. The number of people in the park grows to the thousands as groups arrive to participate in guangchangwu, ballroom dancing, shuffle dancing, and aerobics. At times, it is hard to pass through the square due to the number of dancers. The park’s paths are dimly lit by outdoor garden lights, but the large central square has no direct lighting. Rather, it is dimly lit by the city that surrounds it, the neon signs, streetlights, and tall buildings casting strange shadows and inconsistently
illuminating the space, making it feel more like a nightclub than a park. There are many groups that gather here and it is hard to understand how each group retains its individuality while sharing the same space. The dance styles range from simple stationery line dances to intricate partnered ballroom dances. Observing the different groups was sometimes more challenging because it was difficult to isolate individual groups, to see and hear where one group started and another group began.

After several visits, I understood that dancing in Wen Xin Gong Yuan is serious business, instructional and intentional in nature. Feeling more like an event than just dancing for exercise, female participants wear flashy clothes, bedazzled shoes, with their hair elegantly coiffed. Some dancers, particularly the Latin and ballroom dancers wear seductive dresses with cutouts showing a little skin. The aerobics dancers wear shorts, yoga pants and sports bras in a brazen display of skin. The guangchangwu dancers wear comfortable, everyday clothing that is easy to move in. While not flamboyantly dressed, guangchangwu dancers far outnumber the other dancers. One shuffle dancer dyed her hair platinum blonde, which set her apart from most of the other participants. Over time, she became quite popular for her shuffle dancing, and a large crowd of younger dancers found their way to the park to participate and follow her.

There are more men participating in the dance activities in Wen Xin Gong Yuan. One group of dancers perform classical ballroom such as waltzes and foxtrots for couples only. Another group is a little flashier and dances very fast salsas to Latin music, also for couples only. Sometimes two women will dance together but they do not seem as highly competitive as the more established pairs.

People passing through the park would often stop and watch the dancers, particularly the Latin and ballroom dancers. I got the sense that most of the dancers, and groups, were not there
to be seen or to impress other people. Young children would run amuck amongst the different
dance groups. No one ever seemed to be annoyed by the constant distractions. They just
continued to dance with their own groups in loosely defined spaces.

Possibly because the area is not surrounded by many residential buildings, only
commercial buildings/businesses, the music in Wen Xin Gong Yuan is much louder than in the
other spaces I discovered. Initially, I found the loudness of the music difficult to listen to. Some
of the portable stereos were so loud that the music was distorted. It was hard to listen to the
music from one group while the music from other groups was blaring less than 30 feet away on
all sides. The music ranged in styles from songs written specifically for guangchangwu, folk
songs, ballroom music, and more modern, upbeat music used for shuffle dances and aerobic
dance. Every so often, I would recognize a piece of classical music or hip-hop music. Once I
heard “Apple Bottom Jeans” by Flo Rida playing simultaneously over waltzes and
guangchangwu music. The solution for the dance leaders is to continuously turn their music up
louder and louder in an attempt to hear their music over another group’s music. This results in a
lot of yelling; by the leaders to the participants, by the participants to other participants, and by
people passing by to the participants, but I never witnessed anyone yelling in anger. In fact, I was
astonished at how amicable the dance event was considering the controlled chaos I was
experiencing.

Walking through Wen Xin Gong Yuan became a pleasant ritual for me. On my way home
from work at night, I would take my time strolling through the dancers, admiring their dance
abilities or beautiful outfits, smiling at familiar people. Early in the morning every weekend, I
would run into a few of my students on their way to class, stopping to eat a quick breakfast they
had purchased at the coffee and tea shops surrounding the park before making their way to class.
Whenever I was free on Saturday or Sunday, I would take my lunch to the park and have a small rest before heading back into the studio for a very long day of teaching ballet. There was something about Wen Xin Gong Yuan that felt insular, like being inside a bubble, which was peculiar considering it was located in a commercial area of such a busy part of the city. Inside the park, I was transported. The city, the noise, the rush no longer existed. Only the park, the music, and the dancing remained.

Li Yuan Da Sha

The guangchangwu group I participated in for my research met every evening at 8:00 pm in the park area of my apartment community (see fig. 2). Located in the northwest corner of the block where Guimiao Lu and Nan Hai Da Dao intersect, my apartment is located next to Nan Han Gong Si, China Southern Airlines, which houses dormitories for the stewardesses, mechanics, and airline captains. My apartment building is not big compared to the buildings that surround it. Li Yuan Da Sha has two towers with 30 floors. Each floor has six apartments, making a total of 360 residences. This little corner of the very large block was always full of foot traffic; people coming and going from work, people making their way to the subway, grandparents and their grandchildren running and playing, the everyday movement of city inhabitants. The subway station is new, having been completed after I moved to Shenzhen, which dramatically increased the number of people coming and going past the park. During construction, the noise of the machinery drilling and compressing the new construction was unbearable. Afterward, the increase in foot traffic was equally insufferable.
In February, during Chinese New Year, when many of the residents had returned to their hometowns, a new gate entry system was installed, which required a key/fob to open. I believe it was meant to be a deterrent to the increase in people walking through the community. In reality, it did not do much to prevent people from taking a shortcut. Anyone trying to shave some distance off their walk to work or the subway would simply wait at the gate for someone with a key/fob to open it and pass through without opposition.

The park itself is located within the gates in front of the apartment building adjacent to the main street, Nan Hai Da Dao. The park is paved with flat stones that resemble a mosaic. A trellis covered the side adjacent to the sidewalk that bloomed with beautiful bright pink flowers in the Spring. The trellis also provided shade for benches underneath upon which the karaoke machine sat during guangchangwu. While not a large public park like Wen Xin Gong Yuan, the
tall buildings surrounding the park made it feel like a hidden valley. The main street funneled a constant cool breeze even in the hot summer months. The sound of the music reverberated off the apartments and settled all around us while we danced. The lighting from the new subway station as well as the giant illuminated Jumbotron located over a McDonald's provided the light for the park and the participants. The atmosphere was at once fast and modern as well as intimate and traditional.

This space at Li Yuan Da Sha is significantly smaller than Wen Xin Gong Yuan. Wen Xin Gong Yuan could hold thousands of dancers, while the space at my apartment could hold 100, though the group never reached anywhere close to that number during the months I danced there. I did not even realize there was a group that met at my apartment complex until I had lived there for over six months after I had already discovered guangchangwu at Wen Xin Gong Yuan. One evening, when it became cool enough to open the windows and catch the evening breeze, while I was sitting in my seventh-floor apartment, I heard the familiar rhythm of guangchangwu music. I went to my balcony and looking down I saw a group of women dancing in a small park belonging to my apartment building. From above I could see the patterned dances and familiar movements of guangchangwu. The group was not as large as the groups I had seen at Wen Xin Gong Yuan which influenced my decision to go down and ask if I could participate.

As I approached, the screen of the karaoke machine glowed like a beacon in the dimly lit park, the dancers drawn to and surrounding the stereo like mosquitoes to a bug zapper. After a few minutes of the participants discussing how I was a foreigner, I was allowed to join the group and took a place to the side and back of the assembling group. I welcomed the dim lighting, as I did not want to stand out or draw too much attention to myself. Despite my attempts to blend in,
neighbors walking through the park stopped and stared at me. Once, a man on his way to the subway even stopped and took a picture of me through the black metal fence.

The metal fence that separates my apartment complex from the main sidewalk leading to the subway is six feet tall and sits on top of a two-foot concrete wall. It does not provide much privacy. It is black wrought iron with 8-inch spaces between the bars. Anyone passing by can see directly into the park area. The fence serves primarily to delineate the border between public and private space between the pedestrian sidewalk and the apartment’s park area. The park area runs the length of the apartment building with grassy areas on both sides. Beside these grassy areas there are paved areas with similar equipment for exercise like those found in Wen Xin Gong Yuan. On multiple occasions, while the guangchangwu group danced, older gentlemen would come to the park to stretch and exercise on the fitness equipment. Regardless of the gate and the fence, there are always people walking through the dance space. It is a public space for tenants of the apartment building so that is to be expected and the traffic has no impact on the dancing beside the occasional dancer stopping to chat with a passerby or a neighbor stopping to chat with a dancer.

After a few visits, and trips on my apartment’s elevator with other dancers, I understood that most of the participants in my guangchangwu group lived in the Li Yuan Da Sha. From my research, I had discovered that most participants walk to a dance event that is close to where they live making members of a dance group members of a neighborhood. Options for dance spaces are often determined by where individuals live, and most dancers participate in groups located closest to their homes. For this reason, the relationships between guangchangwu members cannot be separated from relationships within the community.
The group of guangchangwu dancers at my apartment complex had only been dancing together for one year when I met them. Through my translator, I learned that there had been a different group, a bit larger, meeting in this space before. My translator had a difficult time understanding what had happened to the previous group because she struggled with the many different dialects spoken by the members. Difficulties with the numerous dialects spoken in China have plagued me throughout the time I have lived here. In spite of their language differences, the group at Li Yuan Da Sha feels familiar with one another as they all chat before, during, and after the dance. They often arrive and leave in small groups of three to five, always chatting, always happy.

Many of the participants stay and continue to practice the dance steps or chat for half an hour, sometimes longer, in smaller groups, after the dancing ends. Topics include learning dance steps, strategies for staying healthy, and family. When I asked the participants whether they socialized outside of guangchangwu, shopping together or eating together, one of my participants responded “Absolutely. All of them. We go out and eat together. We are like sisters. After we knew each other in guangchangwu, whenever we meet, we chat and hang out.”

As this group is the only one in the small park, the volume of the music did not have to compete with other groups. It was easier to focus on the movement and the dance leaders while listening to the music. There were never any complaints from the apartment residents. Over time, I could recognize the music as it began playing and knew what dance we would be doing.

My guangchangwu group wears comfortable clothing like flat shoes, pants, t-shirts, and jackets. Most of the time, regardless of the weather, they wear multiple layers and quilted vests. For less formal groups like mine, what is worn to dance is not important. When asked how they prepare for dance, specifically what they will wear, one of my participants explained, “No
preparation, very casual every day, like outside the home, plain clothes.” Another participant responded, “There is nothing fastidious about clothes among the people who dance together.” My experience at Wen Xin Gong Yuan had been quite different, with the dancers all dressed appropriately for their chosen style of dance. Additionally, at the guangchangwu competition I attended with other members of my group, I took pictures with guangchangwu dancers who wore a military style sailor outfit and traditional Chinese folkdance attire. All the groups at the competition had been elaborately dressed. My group did not participate in the competition, but they had many friends who they cheerfully greeted and congratulated.

During the time I spent dancing with the Li Yuan Da Sha group the size of the group and the relative privacy of the gated space provided a sanctuary where I could learn the dances without feeling conspicuous and interact with the participants on a more personal level than I had experienced in Wen Xin Gong Yuan. I began to feel a part of this group and enjoyed getting to know the participants. In this tight-knit group, I learned the motivations of the guangchangwu participants and found friendship and community.

Rui Peng

A few months after I began participating with the guangchangwu group at my apartment community, construction was begun at the small park to replace the uneven stones with a flat surface. The first night of Tomb Sweeping Holiday, the first week of April, I went down to the park in my apartment complex, but no one was there. I shrugged it off as the result of the holiday. After the holiday I went down to the park again, but still no dancing. I began WeChat-ing my dance friends and learned that our group would now be meeting in a new place. I was informed that our group would temporarily merge with the groups from the apartment/commercial building beside us, Rui Peng (see fig.3 and fig.4).
In contrast to Li Yuan Da Sha, which felt small and intimate, Rui Peng felt modern, busy and bright. Rui Peng’s public area was not a park in the same sense as Wen Xin Gong Yuan or Li Yuan Da Sha. Rather, Rui Peng was a public square accessible to anyone. While there was a small central garden full of exotic plants and flowers, the remainder of the square was completely paved in concrete. Rui Peng was a newer building designed for commercial business on the first three floors and private business in the attached towers. With four towers of upper-
level residences, I estimate there were over 960 apartments in the building. The Rui Peng building has a large, modern, well-lit square in the center of the complex and is significantly larger than my apartment building. There are several groups that meet to dance at Rui Peng, so I had to walk around a bit to find my group. The groups that meet here range from traditional Chinese dances with fans, faster-paced shuffle dances, to more traditional guangchangwu dance. Surrounding this square were commercial businesses: banks, convenient stores, coffee shops, a massage business, nail and hair salons, a Chinese medicine shop, a sex shop, music store, a 7-11, a restaurant, an escape room/game shop, and a photography studio. Private businesses and apartments were accessed via elevators and escalators in the four corners of the building. Rui Peng is a popular building on our block and has a lot of foot traffic throughout the day. It has several paved open spaces with the added bonus that these spaces are completely covered so when it rains, you can still dance.

I eventually located my group in a corner close to the apartment access area. The lighting was not as good in this space as in the center of the building, the only light here coming from illuminated advertisements on the walls and the soft glow from the coffee shop next to us. It was quite smaller in size than the previous space at my apartment building. Automated mailboxes lined the back wall beside the elevators. During our dancing, people would come to collect their packages, snaking their way through the dancers to reach the mailboxes. It was amusing to watch them swerve and duck through the space like they were unintentionally dancing.

The original space we danced in at Rui Peng was quite small. In my online research, I read that the per capita space for sports for an individual person in China is 1.5m$^2$. While I danced in this new space, I tried to imagine my 1.5m$^2$ space (approximately equal to a 3x3 square foot area). Looking at space this way felt claustrophobic, and I became increasingly aware
of how close the dancers were to each other and to me. I am even more amazed now at how the dancers do not run into each other (or maybe that I have not run into anyone). Thinking of space in a finite unit really focuses on space as a commodity. In the urban realities of China’s city, even 1.5 square meters of paved space has value. Due to the rapid urbanization process, more and more public spaces are being squeezed by development. Many argue that expanding private space is now taking up public space. As public space is a core component of the communal mentality of Chinese culture, this signals a transition in China that needs further research. It also begs the question of how this shifting paradigm will affect not only guangchangwu, but all Chinese citizens.

I recognized most of the faces from my guangchangwu group, but there were also a few ladies I had not seen before. Everyone was engaging in conversation between dances, and I got the feeling that almost everyone was familiar. About 30 minutes into dancing, a young lady, maybe 20ish, dressed in pink pajamas and a shoulder strap maroon handbag, walked to the center of our group and began dancing. I think she may have been walking by, she possibly lived in the building, heard a song that she liked, and just decided to dance spontaneously. She knew all the steps so she had definitely danced before. After a few dances, she went on her way. What stood out about this to me is that you mostly hear that this sort of dance does not appeal to the younger generations, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

While the young woman mentioned above wore her pajamas to dance, other participants danced in their work clothes or uniforms. The ladies from Li Yuan Da Sha still wore their comfortable shoes, pants, and jackets. Some of the women in the larger group that danced in the main square wore nice dresses with floral prints and flowing long sleeves. People walking through also wore a variety of clothing including business suits and athletic wear. A small group
of younger dancers practicing street dance in front of the escalators wore oversized sweatshirts, baggy joggers, and Adidas tennis shoes. In contrast to the dancers in Wen Xin Gong Yuan, who dressed to impress, the dancers here wore clothing that identified them as belonging to their specific group.

In our small corner, there were no competing groups playing loud music, so it was easy to focus on the dances. We used the same songs as we had at Li Yuan Da Sha, the concrete walls of the corner amplifying the music as it reverberated off the walls. Here again, in Rui Peng, I never heard anyone complain about the music being too loud. All the dance groups, and the other people enjoying the public space, coexisted with no objections.

As Rui Peng is located on the same block as Li Yuan Da Sha, many of the members of my group were familiar with the residents of Rui Peng. After all dance events were over, I would observe some of the members chatting with the participants from the larger group. Slowly, members of the Li Yuan Da Sha group began dancing with the larger group until the day came when I received a WeChat that our two groups would become one. My dance group merged with the larger group dancing in Rui Peng and moved to the centrally located square that was well lit. The “new” group created by the move was significantly larger in the number of dancers, but they were equally as welcoming. The number of dancers increased from 50 to over 150. This new group was also more diverse in terms of age. Guangchangwu is often assigned a value related to age claiming it is a dance practice for older, retired women and grandmothers. In Rui Peng, I noticed that there were many women who arrived with their young children, letting them run and play while they danced. There was also much more foot traffic as people gained access to the many businesses surrounding the square. The people who passed through or sat in small groups observing the square were also younger than the people I had seen strolling through Wen Xin
Gong Yuan. Many families congregated in the square, enjoying the many amenities and entertainments Rui Peng provided for the residents. I experienced a little more anxiety dancing here under the fluorescent lights rather than in the darker, more secluded park in my apartment community. In the well-lit square, it was obvious I was a foreigner, and many people would stop, stare, and take pictures of me while I danced. The upside was that in Rui Peng I could observe more interactions between the various dancers and people passing through the space.

Rui Peng left me with a completely different experience of guangchangwu than I had felt in either Wen Xin Gong Yuan or Li Yuan Da Sha. In Rui Peng, I had the impression that families and friends gathered here to unwind and spend time with their families after their long workday. The Rui Peng building was modern and fast-paced, and an energizing atmosphere filled the square and public space. There was a lot going on in this space, but everyone was happy and enjoying themselves. In these newly constructed communities, residents and dancers alike hope to find material comforts and social connections. How so many people associated and intersected in this space was interesting to observe.

**Issues of Gender in Public Space**

Regarding the questions raised by the conceptions of public space in my research into the practice and performance of guangchangwu, an aspect of the dance that relates to the changes in public spaces relates to the issue of gender. The dancers of guangchangwu are almost exclusively women over 50 years of age. Additionally, most of these women are considered elderly because they are over 60 years of age, China’s marker for being elderly. From my observations, they have conducted their own form of resistance in the performance and mobility in urban geography, as they have essentially refused the designated function of the state for streets and other spaces at the margins. Instead, they have designated such spaces as public because of their
need for cultural expression. Historically, the role of women in the public sphere has been marginalized, which makes it even more interesting that women would be moving in resistance to a Chinese government that aims to impose even more regulatory control over its citizens. An important development that has allowed Chinese women to become more prominent in the public sphere is China’s rapid pace of industrialization. In some ways, the same patterns of social change can be observed in China as they had occurred in the Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War (Cartier 2001, 179). During and immediately after the Cultural Revolution, the drive to industrialize motivated by the State to centralize labor, motivated populations to migrate en masse to urban centers, including women. The resulting situation was a complex one, as the state wanted to maintain the marginalized status of women as relegated to domestic labor, and yet also wanted to take advantage of women’s labor for the economy. This tension extends to the local, community level, with the issue being resolved via cultural means: The idea of the “dutiful daughter” who works hard for the family became a narrative that justified the allowance of women to have economic empowerment in entering the state’s labor force, while still maintaining the existing patriarchal power relations (Cartier 2001, 181).

Given this context, it is interesting to explore how much the changing notions of women’s role in Chinese society inform the decision to appropriate public spaces via the performance of guangchangwu. Given how public space formation involves the complex interaction between the social and physical dimensions, from my research there is a connection between the shifting gender perceptions and roles in Chinese urban geographies and the female appropriation through what Karen Franck describes as “loose space” (2006). Loose space is what results when residents liberate designed public spaces such as parks, plazas and parking lots from the limits of the original, intended program and piggyback new and unforeseen functions of their
own choosing on the space (C. Chen 2010, 24). Informed by the upwards social mobility imparted by the economic empowerment of being part of China’s booming economy, the performance of guangchangwu in loose space is an extension of women’s experiences in rural spaces, now brought over and appropriated within urban public space.

Understanding the nature of public spaces, particularly the complex ways that culture affects both the social and physical dimensions of the space has been crucial to the formulations of these questions, and the answers are likewise informed by the processes that allow public spaces to emerge. Moreover, the recognition that forces exist to undermine the function of public spaces as sites for discourse and expression of the community’s identity also frame the performance of guangchangwu as a form of resistance. This resistance, now more than ever, is important if public spaces are to remain in service of the public.

**Regulating Public Space in Response to Guangchangwu**

In 2015, the government’s solution to the issue of guangchangwu and its appropriation of public space, specifically the General Administration of Sport and Ministry of Culture, was to regulate guangchangwu. The regulations were introduced in the spirit of “spread(ing) positive energy” by imposing a 45-decibel noise level limit on music as well as restricting the number of participants to individual park limitations (Hunwick 2015). While limits on noise levels, time of day/night, and the number of participants were expected, Chinese authorities also imposed much more direct and limiting restrictions. China’s Ministry of Culture decided that all choreography and music must be approved by the government proclaiming “there will no longer be different dance routines for each community, but instead only unified national routines chosen by an expert panel of fitness instructors (Hunwick 2015).”
Even though guangchangwu was unpopular with some of the local communities, the edict issued by the government proved to be even more unpopular. Critics of guangchangwu argued that the issues with the dance practice never had anything to do with choreography, but the time of day or night they danced, the level of noise from the music they played, and the use of public spaces including sidewalks and roads. The Wall Street Journal noted, “newspaper commentaries and social media chatter responded to the news with ridicule, with many complaining that the regulations had largely sidestepped the issue of noise that is at the heart of many complaints” (Hunwick 2015). Instead of regulating the dances, they argued, the government should have found acceptable places for the participants to dance, places that would have kept the noise out of public space. Critics stated the regulations were perceived as another example of China’s effort to curtail free expression. With no meaningful effort by the government to find or build suitable venues for guangchangwu, the participants continued to congregate in public parks, shopping malls, sidewalks, and anywhere they could find available public space. Over time, Chinese provinces have tried several more times to further regulate the number of dancers allowed in parks, the content of the dance routines, the volume of the music, and the locations where guangchangwu participants can congregate (Chao 2017). Yet their efforts have had no real impact on the practice of guangchangwu. Contrary to the perception of Chinese nationals never standing up to their governments, guangchangwu participants represent the triumph of the collective and communal over the nationalistic.

From my experience of participation in guangchangwu the participants can be reclassified from what has been considered rule-following, nationalistic members of society to transgressors, albeit happy, healthy, and friendly transgressors. Guangchangwu participants, through small transgressive actions like dancing in public places where dancing is not
necessarily expected, or playing music that is too loud, or showing a dancing body that is seen as older, challenge the power relationships around them (Placeholder1). Foucault (1977) would view such transgressions not as actions that enable permanent change in society, but as those that could help individuals to find moments of freedom and otherness, moments apart from restrictive social dictates and moments of difference to represent. While social media and the news have focused on a negative representation of guangchangwu, my experience of guangchangwu and the voices of the participants has revealed to me the instability of representation and the nature of dance as revolution. My data indicated that while guangchangwu participants are not actively attempting to “fight the power” per se, their dancing can be viewed as a rebellious activity been accepted and supported from within (Placeholder1). Much like a protest, their impressive numbers are rigorously self-organized, arriving at specified times every day, staking out their own portion of space to dance. Guangchangwu participants are the epitome of a happy, healthy, and friendly rebellion exemplifying how even when a government tries to restrict expression, no government can be entirely successful. Art, dance, and culture will always find a way.
CHAPTER V

A SPACE TO ENGAGE, EXPLORE, AND PERFORM THE AGING FEMALE BODY

From the moment I set foot on Chinese soil, I knew that there was something significant happening to my body. Throughout my life, I always experienced my monthly period very regularly, but during my first month in China, I just stopped having them at all. Thinking that this was a stress-related occurrence primarily caused by my recent relocation, it was not until a year later living in China that I understood what was really going on. Several instances clued me in to what was happening to me. First, while on a trip to Hong Kong with my daughter, I found myself crying uncontrollably in a bathroom stall; I had suddenly lost control over my emotions. Second, I noticed that at least once a day, I would lay on the cold concrete floor of my apartment to cool off because I was experiencing hot flashes. While the Shenzhen climate is indeed hotter than I was used to, the hot flashes I was experiencing were simply overwhelming. I found myself becoming disproportionately irritated with minor inconveniences, particularly when encountering problems with communication. Additionally, while I took great care to keep my body fit and strong, I was nevertheless becoming constantly fatigued even during days of light activities. When I looked in the mirror, all I could see were new wrinkles and gray hairs. As I continued to feel more and more depressed, I began isolating myself from my new friends in Shenzhen and even from my own family. Assessing these incidents, the truth finally dawned on me; I was experiencing menopause, the life-changing hormonal shift that causes immense physical and emotional pain, as well as being detrimental to my social interactions and personal relationships. The onset of my menopause came somewhat of a shock, as I never really thought of this inevitable aspect of aging before. Being confronted with the reality of aging was, in many ways, a traumatic experience for me. Worse, I felt that I was alone in my suffering, that none of
my family, friends, and colleagues could understand what I was going through. At the time, I did not know that the experience of menopause is as diverse as the women it affects, and I could not recognize that many other women around me were also grappling with menopause and aging. After managing to finally confront the reality of aging, I decided that there must be something I could do to cope with this new chapter in my life. I considered joining a gym, taking piano lessons, or enrolling in a Pilates class or Latin dance class. I was desperate to do something in this moment of transition, if only to momentarily distract myself from the symptoms of menopause.

I was in this emotionally distraught state when I heard guangchangwu music in my seventh-floor apartment one balmy summer evening. Looking outside, I saw a group of women dancing to the music. My curiosity grew stronger when I noticed that the group was comprised of older women, women who had possible also gone through my current situation. I decided to ask the group of dancing ladies if I could join them, and this would prove to be one of the best decisions I would ever make in my life. At that time, I was not aware that I needed so much more than just an activity that would keep me physically active. I also needed to be part of a community, to develop a sense of belonging amongst individuals with whom I could relate. I would become part of this guangchangwu community and seeing my fellow guangchangwu participants wave to me or shout my name when I saw them in my neighborhood made me feel like I belonged. Dancing with these women pulled me back from my depression by evoking positive emotions and putting me in a calm, meditative state of mind. Guangchangwu is an activity with multiple dimensions. It is a physical activity, one that functions as exercise that helps immensely in coping with an aging body. It is emotionally therapeutic and allows one to discover new aspects of oneself. It is a social activity, building a community among the
participants of the dance and facilitating an engagement with society at large through its performative aspects. Participating in guangchangwu and getting to know the women who performed the dance in my community not only allowed me to explore all of these dimensions, it also gave me an opportunity to explore my personal understanding of what it means to be aging, female, and a dancer. Thus, guangchangwu and its dancers have become very close to my heart.

Navigating Discussions of Menopause

As I described in the introduction of this chapter, for me, menopause had a significant effect on my life, making my work and personal life difficult to navigate. The changes that I went through in menopause were very tangible and made me very aware of my body. So much so that the need to relieve the symptoms of menopause and the search for solutions to its debilitating effects were foremost in my thoughts during the time. But among my fellow guangchangwu dancers—and among Chinese women in general—menopause seems a non-existent phenomenon. In fact, it came as a surprise to me that the participants of guangchangwu I interviewed never discussed the topic of menopause unprompted. This left me slightly disappointed, since part of me hoped that I would earn some wisdom on how to deal with menopause from my new friends. What I discovered was, just like guangchangwu, menopause is a nuanced and culturally situated experience.

There is no direct Chinese translation of the English word “menopause” (Shae 2020). The Chinese word for the cessation of menstruation is juejing and refers only to that event, excluding all of menopause’s related symptoms, such as hot flashes/night sweats and irritability. Gennianqi is the Chinese word more often used in conversations of menopause as its context involves the transition from middle to old age and does include behaviors related to menopause such as growing more irritable. For Chinese women, gennianqi may include the cessation of
periods but neither menstruation nor being female are necessary for it to have meaning. The term could also be applied to men who display angry outbursts or have trouble controlling their behavior. Western medicine defines menopause as a universally female aging process involving hormonal decline resulting in hot flashes and night sweats and feelings of depression, irritability, and anxiety. Hormone Replacement Therapy, HRT, and diet and lifestyle changes are often recommended for women experiencing symptoms. Anthropological research has demonstrated that this definition and the related symptoms are indeed not universal. For example, Marcha Flint (1974) found that Rajput women in India reported few symptoms with no hot flashes or depression surrounding the cessation of menstruation. Rather, the Rajput women experienced menopause as a liberation from strict social protocols surrounding menstrual taboos inside and outside the home. On this basis, Flint proposed that many symptoms of menopause may be culturally defined (1974). Other research followed demonstrating a variance in severity and existence of menopausal symptoms among Mayan women in Mexico, Greek women, and Japanese and Chinese women (Beyenne, et al. 2001). Further research, however, indicates the lack of symptoms in medical and historical accounts of women in these cultures is actually the result of linguistic limitations: words do not exist in these cultures’ language that refer to menopause and its symptoms, leading to the assumption that “Asian women don’t have symptoms of menopause” (Shae 2020). This aspect of differentiating the experience of menopause among different cultures only highlights how the biological phenomenon of menopause is not independent of the significance within a particular cultural setting (Geraghty 2022, 17).

The term “menopause” in the US combines the end of menstruation and overall female midlife aging, while in contemporary China, female midlife is divided into two distinct though
overlapping concepts, juejing and gengnianqi. For Chinese women, juejing is associated with being freed from the physical inconvenience of monthly periods and is generally welcomed. The women I spoke with expressed no particular feelings towards the cessation of their menstrual cycle, stating, “I no longer need to bother with that” or “that is over.” Gengnianqi has a much broader meaning referring to the transition from middle to old age. There is a very strong non-gender specific association towards irritability embedded in the meaning of gengnianqi and is often used to explain why older people lose their tempers. My participants did not see themselves as suffering from gengnianqi. Chinese women do have hot flashes but there is no embarrassment surrounding them with most preferring to use diet, exercise, Chinese medicine and meditation to control hot flashes. Having witnessed gengnianqi on several occasions during my observations of guangchangwu, I began to understand that aging people are given wide berth to vent their anger. Situated in ideas of respect for elders and filial piety, the midlife transition in China is usually viewed as a time of vulnerability to irritable outbursts, which must be tolerated, though managed carefully through self-regulation, social tolerance especially in the family, and when needed, herbal medicine (Shae 2020). The much higher level of irritability reported by Chinese women can be explicated through differences in symbolic meanings of the midlife transition in the market reform era, more positive cultural sentiments surrounding the release of anger, and differing generational experiences of historical change (Shae 2020). There is a need to be extremely cautious about generalizations about differences in views and experiences of menopause and midlife aging in eastern versus western cultures. An East/West divide is not a nuanced enough way to analyze these things, and over just the course of a decade experiences of the body at menopause and midlife can change in the same culture (Shae 2020). Thus, in the case
of the corporeal experience of menopause, guangchangwu becomes a space to engage, explore, and perform the aging female body.

**Corporeal Complexities of the Aging Female Body**

It must be acknowledged that the primary reason why contemporary guangchangwu dancers conceive of the dance as primarily a fitness exercise derives from the Chinese government’s initiatives supporting the adoption of guangchangwu among its elderly population. Guangchangwu derives from folk dance traditions and contexts that developed from regional cultures, but it has largely gained popularity because it has been promoted by the Chinese government “as a way to engage with and care for an older generation, the Chinese government has sought to engage activities such as guangchangwu as a way to give older people the possibility to sustain a healthy lifestyle through physical activity and social interaction” (Martin and Chen 2020, 16). As previously mentioned, in March 2015, the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Culture of China introduced the *Twelve Public Square Dance Workout Routines* which were made available for free online, and later in August, the Ministry of Culture, the General Administration of Sport, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development jointly issued the *Circular for Guiding the Healthy Development of Public Square Dancing* (Seetoo and Zou 2016, 21-22). Currently China has more than 200 million people aged 60 or above. It is estimated that by 2050, the country’s population who will be aged 60 and older will reach 479 million people, accounting for 35.1% of the total population (National Bureau of Statistics 2020). There are multiple factors that have led to China’s aging population, ranging from its institution of the one-child policy in the 1980s (Martin and Chen 2020, 51), to the greater concentration of people moving from rural to urban spaces, to the declining trend in fertility rates that have historically occurred in all countries where standards of
living are increasing, and where there is a rapid expansion of the middle class (C. Huang 2016, 227). It makes sense that the Chinese government would provide support for guangchangwu as a way to address the health concerns of its aging population, as the dance is a relatively low-cost, convenient activity for both the state and citizens as a fitness activity.

Guangchangwu also represents a space where the corporeal complexities of the aging female body can be engaged, explored, and performed. Dance has always been a physical artform, where creation and expression are rendered via the tangible body’s movement through space. The centrality of the body in guangchangwu coincides with the physical dimension of the female experience. Indeed, one of the central concerns of feminist theory is that of embodiment, given that “the body is a site for the symbolic construction of sexual difference, a ground for political exclusion or inclusion, a locus of subjectivity, a prospect for self-realization, and the material focus of many labors that typically fall to women and/or define femininity” (Threadcraft 2016, 207). At the same time, the experience of aging is likewise centered on the body, as the physical changes involved in growing older have dramatic effects. In my guangchangwu group, the members and I are very much aware of the physicality of the dance in both these respects, as our reasons for dancing are motivated in part by what guangchangwu does for our aging female bodies. The corporeality of guangchangwu manifests feminist issues surrounding the primacy of the body image in defining women’s roles and identities, as well as ageist ideology that renders older women in particular to be undesirable and invisible. The engaging, exploratory, and performative space of guangchangwu also involves the psyche, as dance is an activity that involves both the body and the mind. For myself and my fellow guangchangwu dancers, our dance performances have a therapeutic element, facilitating positive emotions and improving our mental health and well-being. While dance can have a therapeutic effect without it being dance
therapy, which is a very specific field, various cultures around the world have recognized the therapeutic function of dance (Homann 2017, 37). The psychological dimension of guangchangwu also initiates reflection on the dancers’ notion of self, which is a crucial element in the experiences of aging females. As we find our gendered roles changing as we grow older, questions of identity and self-conception become a central concern. Guangchangwu has helped me and my fellow dancers engage and explore our shifting identities through the dance performance. Finally, one of the most important aspects of guangchangwu is its communal dimension - guangchangwu is not just a dance performed by a group, a community, but it is one that is performed in public, thereby directly engaging with society at large. A consistent theme that emerges in my interviews is the feeling of belongingness among guangchangwu dancers as they perform with other aging women. The public performance of guangchangwu, meanwhile, addresses the problem of visibility that aging women especially have to grapple with. As a cultural practice, guangchangwu has challenged many of China’s social norms, and “has potentially dismantled divisions of different classes, backgrounds, and experiences in Chinese society, allowing a mobility and interaction among diverse people through the corporeal participation in dance” (Martin and Chen 2020, 81). In the following sections, I will analyze the emergent themes in the accounts of the interviewed guangchangwu dancers along these three dimensions—the physical, the psychological, and the social/cultural—to showcase the experiences of the guangchangwu dancers in their engagement, exploration, and performance of the female body.

**The Physical Dimension: Constructions of a Healthy Body in Guangchangwu**

The most prominent theme that has emerged from the interviews of my fellow guangchangwu dancers is that they participate in the dance practice because of its perceived
health benefits. All of the interviewees have consistently described guangchangwu as a form of physical exercise, an activity that is part of their fitness regimen to keep healthy as they age. As Mrs. Zhao describes, “We do exercises everyday... Some of us do gymnastics, some do clap exercise, some do guangchangwu, and some do ballroom dance.” Associating guangchangwu to a healthy body is not limited to just keeping fit by doing physical exercises. Mrs. Huo believes that her participation in the performance of guangchangwu helps reduce her blood pressure and lowers her blood cholesterol levels. Several of the interviewees have described how guangchangwu has made tangible improvements to their physical health and well-being, curing ailments and alleviating aches and pains associated with the corporeal aspects of aging. Mrs. Zhao relates her experiences with pains in her shoulder and back where she “usually felt uncomfortable in the shoulder, suffering shoulder periarthritis and discomfort in her cervical spine.” After dancing a few times in summer, Mrs. Zhao claims that her pains have been alleviated, alongside with the general improvement of her health. Mrs. Sun, whose work in a library meant she spent many hours sitting, said she also suffered from shoulder and cervical pain. She was dubious of the benefits of dance because it was “not her character” but after three months of participating in guangchangwu “these problems are all good, and good very thoroughly, without a shot or drug.” Mrs. Huo, who suffered from backaches, a frozen shoulder and neck pain claims that by participating in guangchangwu for about five years, “I have made a full recovery. I have a really healthy body now. Guangchangwu is really good for old people’s health.” The participants of guangchangwu I spoke with seemed to have an intuitive sense of how physical activity can increase muscle strength, maintain bone integrity, and improve balance, coordination, and mobility. All four of my informants described guangchangwu as a way to “not get sick.”
There is a significant body of scientific support for the health benefits conferred by
Across various studies, research suggests that dance, as well as other forms of exercise, uniquely
benefits happiness by stimulating the release of important chemicals in the body and brain such
as dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins (Murcia, et al. 2010). These hormones are
often referred to as the “happy hormones” as they are responsible for inducing positive emotions
including happiness, pleasure, and even love while simultaneously minimizing feelings of pain
and unpleasantness. Additionally, dancing together immerses participants in the present moment,
activating brain pathways that produce and release feel-good, trust-boosting substances.
Dopamine is the key neurotransmitter for the brain’s reward pathway—it gets released when we
anticipate, enjoy, or remember pleasurable moments (Kosik 2019). Purposefully reflecting on the
good things that we are grateful for day-to-day also activates the dopamine system. In addition,
dopamine incites motivation to explore the unexpected, seek novelty, and innovate. A study by
the Greater Good Science Center, GGSC, supports that listening to syncopated, rhythmic music
that we like increases dopamine levels (Suttie 2015). In general, people who routinely activate
the dopamine system through real life experiences experience more joy and have a more positive
outlook—both core facets of happiness that can be enhanced by dancing. Dopamine also figures
importantly in spontaneous and purposeful bodily movements. In fact, several studies have
shown that dancing restores motor functioning in patients with movement disorders (Tarr,
Launay and Dunbar 2016).

At the 2017 American Dance Therapy Association conference, Professor Sue Carter
described how the neuropeptide oxytocin underlies benefits of dancing together—by linking
affection to perceptions of similarity in shared movement (Devereaux 2017). In other words,
moving together makes people like one another more. Typically known for its role in reproductive and childrearing processes, research now associates oxytocin with fueling interpersonal trust and driving social approach and affiliation. When people share friendly eye contact, touch, or mirror each other’s movements, everyone’s brain releases oxytocin. This dims anxiety and pain and highlights the promise of human connection; people feel more generous, cooperative, and willing to support one another under the influence of oxytocin. A third neurotransmitter, serotonin, which is typically credited with enabling emotional contentment and ease and is concentrated all over the brain, has also been tied to dancing. Specifically, the enduring physical exercise of dancing itself, as any other exercise routine might, increases levels of circulating serotonin. Healthy serotonin levels guard against anxiety and depression, improve the quality of sleep, and even slow brain aging. As a physical exercise alone, dancing helps maintain serotonin levels that support mental habits of calm, presence, or mindfulness, and leaves us less distracted by mundane worries and hassles. Finally, dancing activates the endorphin system, known for inhibiting feelings of fatigue or discomfort during physical exertion or pain. Like dopamine, endorphins signal pleasure, mainly by getting unpleasantness out of the way and allowing for a positive outlook. Endorphins steer biological reserves away from vigilant, self-defensive responses and free up energy to focus on dancing and connecting amicably with other people. Interestingly, none of these chemicals work in isolation. They all influence one another in a complex, reciprocal feedback fashion.

The observed physical health benefits of dance have led to the development of medical applications for dance. Since the 1970s, the “gate control theory of pain” has prompted the use of dance for treating and alleviating pain (Goodill 2005, 88), pain being the primary health issue that has been cited by my informants that guangchangwu manages to address. Gate control
theory posits that the experience of pain arises from the inability of the processes in the central nervous system to filter out the transmission of neural signals from pain stimulus. Given this model, the way to mitigate pain is to enable the central nervous system to conduct this function of filtering out pain signals. Dance accomplishes this by introducing rhythmic aural inputs, which are transmitted quickly within the central nervous system. This allows such inputs to “compete” successfully with the far slower pain stimulus signals, thereby alleviating or even mitigating pain (Goodill 2005, 88). Other health benefits of dance have been to reduce stress levels of individuals with heart disease (Goodill 2005, 98), as well as developing a more regular and rhythmic breathing for individuals with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, and emphysema. As such, the narratives of my fellow guangchangwu dancers that attribute physical health benefits via dancing are not unfounded, as scientific research and medical applications demonstrate.

The Psychological Dimension: Chinese Conceptions of Body Image and the Politics of Women’s Bodies in Guangchangwu

Beside the four guangchangwu dancers I interviewed, I spoke informally with a young woman who I consulted concerning the social and cultural norms surrounding women’s roles in Chinese culture. During my discussion with this young woman, it becomes apparent that similar patriarchal ideologies operate in Chinese culture that specifically concerns the aging, female body. The standards of physical beauty for Chinese women, as described by this young woman, included having white skin and being skinny as the most important ideals overall. Additionally, having a tall, narrow nose, big, round eyes, and a small mouth was important for facial beauty. She further explained that there is no variety of pretty in China, only the standards defined above, and that Chinese men see only the ideals described above as pretty. This description of
the standard of beauty that Chinese women are expected to conform to highlights the way that body image functions as a way to impose patriarchal control. Body image concerns the way that women are conditioned to view their bodies, and by extension, their self-identities. Indeed, “poor body image and, in particular, women’s focus on and dissatisfaction with their weight are pervasive among women, irrespective of their cultural background, ethnicity, race, sexual preferences, or socioeconomic status” (Clarke and Korotchenko 2011, 20). A negative body image for women in many cultures is the norm, and the effects of low self-esteem make women more susceptible to other forms of patriarchal control. Standards of beauty and the politics of women’s bodies refer to the ideals of feminine beauty that emerged from Chinese culture and society. When women in China conform to such ideals this represents another form of patriarchal oppression that targets women’s bodies.

When considering the age of guangchangwu participants, the embodiment and the experience of aging refers to ageist attitudes that are more pronounced towards aging women. Ageism has been found to be all-pervasive across eastern as well as western cultures, including Confucian-based Asian cultures where respect for elders and filial piety are social norms while simultaneously a global youth culture has emerged that has generally been negative towards older people and aging in general (Löckenhoff, et al. 2009). The demand of capitalism means that products and services are marketed almost exclusively to younger demographics, which in turn produces media portrayals that display ageism. This has led to cultural ideals that privilege youthfulness to be framed and positioned as normative indicators, which in turn designates older people as invisible. This has made old age “an undesirable condition, which must be fought at all costs and with all available means because ‘we are judged not on the basis of how old we are but on how young we are not’” (Clarke and Korotchenko 2011, 29). Ageism is an even more hostile
experience for women, given that the other patriarchal structures of oppression have attributed the worth of a woman to the condition of their bodies. The body image ideals of beauty involve the female body, and aging only serves to further degrade that body, in turn deviating the aging female body even more from the normative body image and beauty standards.

Aging can be a tumultuous process for women considering that an established identity is being challenged from both within and without. The traditional Chinese ideal of women with round faces and curvy bodies has within the last decade been replaced with American, European, and Korean ideals, especially in marketing and the media, featuring thin bodies and angular faces (Jung and Lee 2009, 350) This cultural shift in views of beauty has occurred in other countries as well, but Jung and Lee state China is especially interesting because its economy has grown and adopted a consumer culture so rapidly (2009, 354). This is clearly reflected in the beauty industry, where China has become the world's second-largest market, after the United States, in the total consumption of cosmetic products. Additionally, other industries relevant to the contemporary beauty industry, such as diet clinics and health clubs, even cosmetic surgery, which were all almost unheard-of in China a few decades ago, are now more popular (Jung and Lee 2009).

In China, much like in other cultures, the standard of physical attractiveness is that of a youthful, toned, thin and healthy body and the pursuit of that standard, as well as attention to appearance, have become fundamental to the feminine gender role and identity (Clarke and Korotchenko 2011, 133). During my participant observation, I often observed participants patting their bellies while dancing, a practice intended to increase blood circulation to that area and promote weight loss. Periphery conversations often circulated around issues of weight loss and health, with the participants exchanging diet tips and hot water. This demonstrated to me the
conflicted relationship women have with their bodies which tends to increase as they begin to experience normative declines in health and functional abilities in later life. Aging women may mourn the loss of the familiar younger self while simultaneously feeling insecure about the person they are becoming. The variety of changes and losses in middle to later adulthood place a strain on the adult self’s continuity. Older women are concerned with the changes in their appearance that accompany aging impacting their sense of self-esteem and identity. Identity is a concept that is always situated and is not equated with the self. While identities are socially constructed objects, the self is a process that is subjectively experienced. The body is a “biologic individual,” and the self, or “socially self-conscious individual,” are mutually influential. The sense of self is constantly emerging relative to changes in the body. For aging females, identity is “physically situated and shaped by capabilities, limitations and activities of the body, as well as dominant cultural meanings pertaining to female beauty, femininity, social values, and later life (Clarke and Korotchenko 2011, 31).”

While the subjection of the aging female body to oppressive norms surrounding ideals of beauty and privileging youth may be experienced by some women, cultural differences do have a significant impact on how women respond to aging and what practices and norms they end up adopting as a result. When individuals from different cultures pursue their own internalized cultural values with age, cultural differences in aging occur. Individuals from independent cultures like the US learn to value autonomy and uniqueness. They are encouraged to express the self as a separate physical entity in actions, words, ideas, and feelings (Fung 2013, 372). In contrast, individuals in interdependent cultures such as China, see themselves embedded within social units, prioritizing the needs of the group over their own by following the customs embraced by the society (Fung 2013, 370). For example, relationship harmony is more important
than self-esteem to the psychological well-being of Chinese people. Chinese culture emphasizes social reciprocity and adherence to norms and traditions, and with aging comes the expectation that they will exhibit these characteristics to an even greater extent. A more recent study has indeed demonstrated that attitudes towards aged people among the Chinese is less negative than their Western counterparts. Vauclair, et al. (2016) compared ageist attitudes in the United Kingdom and Taiwan by conducting a survey concerning responses to older members of society. These two societies were chosen because they had the same levels of socio-economic development, therefore eliminating wealth and standard of living as a factor influencing ageist attitudes (Vauclair, et al. 2016, 136). The study found that the Taiwan respondents had a more favorable response to older people concerning aged individuals’ social status and economic threat (Vauclair, et al. 2016, 141).

This is in line with the hypothesis that the collectivism in most Eastern cultures prescribes respect towards the elderly as a way of sustaining relational harmony (S. Li 2011). In Chinese society, filial piety is an attitude of respect for parents and ancestors influenced by Confucian thought and demonstrated through service. Furthermore, it has shaped the ways in which family care giving, intergenerational equity, economic support, living arrangement and other aspects of individual, family, social, political, and legal relationship are supported in China. This may also explain the disconnect between the negativity surrounding guangchangwu found on the internet and my personal experience of participation in guangchangwu.

Significant changes have occurred in the last decade in the pursuit of a more modern image and identity for Chinese women, one that centers on cross-cultural boundaries and embodying the appropriate influence of Western feminism and femininity (Delaware 2018, Golley 2018, Schaffer and Song 2007). Younger generations of Chinese women, in an attempt to
construct a new feminism/femininity with Chinese characteristics, have assumed identities that are cosmopolitan and global. The result has been largely detrimental in terms of empowering and emancipating women with regard to the aging female body. In the aforementioned study, while there were favorable opinions regarding the elderly when it comes to social and economic status, the Taiwanese respondents also displayed greater hostility towards aging individuals based on personal beliefs (Vauclair, et al. 2016, 142). This translates to more direct prejudice being expressed towards older people, where ageism appears more openly. Vauclair believes that the reason for this result is that the spread of Western culture into Asia via continued globalization brings with it an ageist, youth-oriented culture, to the extent that it is able to counter a culture’s emphasis on social and relational harmony which insists on maintaining respect for the elderly (Vauclair, et al. 2016). This runs counter to the Confucian Chinese conception of well-being, where “creating and maintaining a state of harmonious homeostasis in the human mind and body, in the individual, and in his or her social, spiritual, and natural environment is a distinct element of the Chinese well-being conceptualization” (L. Lu 2012, 330). The complex interplay of a dynamic and evolving cultural forces clearly impacts the way that the aging Chinese women construct notions about their body. Given that their participation in the dance practice centers on the agency and control they are able to exercise over their bodies, guangchangwu becomes a way to interrogate these forces through a discussion for feminist embodiment.

**Feminist Embodiment and Guangchangwu**

In many ways, guangchangwu offers a space in which the oppressive regimes of body image that shape conceptions of the aging female body can be challenged through the performance of the dance. Dance is an artform that lends itself to the concept of embodiment, which situates the body as the site of gendered constructions and engagements with identity,
social roles, and politics. To be embodied/to have a body means to have a presence in the physical, material world, and to have a locus through which one can experience reality. After all, “My lived body is my center of orientation, to which all objects I perceive are relative. It is the kinesthetic unity through which I can move freely and change position and perspective” (Jansen and Wehrle 2018, 37). While being embodied affords the individual agency and power to engage with and construct reality, that embodiment also subjects the individual to important limitations. To have a body exist in the material, physical world means to be subject to material, physical laws that constrain the individual’s capacities. In the aging female body, this is evident with the degradation of motor skills, limitations on movement, and deteriorating health. Furthermore, to be embodied means to be limited to one’s “individual abilities, habits, acquired skills, and on a body’s whole experiential past” (Jansen and Wehrle 2018, 38). The aforementioned social and cultural bodies that impose norms concerning body image and standards of beauty make up the aging female body’s “whole experiential past” in this regard.

Feminism recognizes the dualistic nature of embodiment, and various feminist intellectuals have emphasized these two aspects of embodiment in various degrees. Early feminists focused on the limitations imposed on the female body, noting how the biological capacity of childbearing has been used to justify the objectification of women’s bodies. Simone de Beauvoir’s proclamation in *The Second Sex* that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (1953, 273) is predicated on emancipating women from the limitations imposed upon them by physiology. She acknowledges that women are socialized into accepting the objectification of their own bodies, because “in her dawning awareness that her body is an object for others, the adolescent girl begins the process of making her body into an object, rather than use her body as a tool for discovering and apprehending the world” (Threadcraft 2016, 212).
Women must therefore transcend these physical limitations tied to their bodies in order to likewise free themselves from patriarchal control.

More contemporary feminist scholars, however, have reconceptualized embodiment as more than just an imposition of restrictions tied to the woman’s body, expanding de Beauvoir’s idea of the female body being socially constructed. Judith Butler, for example, drawing from ideas on discipline and the self-regulating subject from Michel Foucault, identifies how the construction of the gendered body is predicated on performances (Butler 1990). Gender performances create the conception of what constitutes a “natural” body, and the discipline these habitual performances creates in turn makes the woman impose self-regulating regimes upon her own body (Threadcraft 2016, 218). Sandra Bartky similarly takes ideas from Foucault, specifically about surveillance, to explain how embodiment makes the normative prescriptions of beauty and femininity on the female body appear to be natural instead of being socially constructed as de Beauvoir recognized (Threadcraft 2016, 219). The aging female body is always subjected to the patriarchal gaze, which for Bartky constitutes Foucault’s notion of surveillance. The experience of being constantly under surveillance creates systems of control, as the target of the surveillance awareness that they are being watched will provoke voluntary changes in their behavior in accordance with the ideals of the ones conducting the surveillance. A notable aspect of Butler and Bartky’s reconceptualization of the female body and embodiment is that while they both identify how patriarchal power is wielded over the physical experiences of women, they also recognize the opportunity for resistance and even emancipation (Threadcraft 2016, 220). This is possible because of the dual nature of embodiment, where the material and physical presence of the self in the body means that women can reclaim their bodies and exercise agency over the construction of that body. What is important in contemporary feminist embodiment “is
not only whether, from a third-person perspective, some choice for the enhancement of one’s body or for the optimization of one’s bodily possibilities in fact is free, but also how that freedom of choice is as such experienced and what aspects of this experience can account for the vehemence with which that freedom is now commonly felt and defended” (Jansen and Wehrle 2018, 50). It is not a simple matter of denying the body and its corresponding restraints that would afford women liberation from the oppression of patriarchal structures that govern how the female body is constructed; rather, women choosing how to construct their bodies, as well as being highly critical of our capacities to freely choose those constructions, is what creates the possibilities for emancipation.

Guangchangwu creates the space for these liberating possibilities via embodiment. Guangchangwu offers many options for its female dancers that coincide with the personal and individual physical and physiological experiences. The way that Mrs. Sun became involved in guangchangwu is illustrative of the diverse options made available for older women and their aging female bodies can choose from. Mrs. Sun was initially hesitant to participate in a dancing group when her colleague had told her that it was a physical activity that potentially had curative and therapeutic aspects. She felt that it was “not in her character” to join a dancing group and was especially worried about her physical capabilities limiting her ability to actually perform the dance, as she was suffering from shoulder, back, and cervical pain. Hence, Mrs. Sun chose to only observe her colleagues for a few days. She soon discovered that guangchangwu was a dance that catered to her needs because it involved movements that were not only easy to get into, you could, as a dancer, also adjust your performance in ways that are preferable to you because of the freeform nature of guangchangwu. Another emergent theme among my fellow guangchangwu dancers during their interviews is that they all chose to participate in dancing free from the
constraints of family responsibilities and matronly roles. They all described how their children are all grown up and have their own lives, and it is time that they also live their own lives. Choosing to dance in guangchangwu is an intimate and personal choice for my fellow dancers, something that is free from the influence of their previous roles as mothers and wives. In fact, Mrs. Huo recounts how her participation in guangchangwu was actively motivated by her desire to engage in an activity that was for her to enjoy on her own. She revealed to me how her husband had been ballroom dancing every week since the two of them have retired. When she pointed this out to her husband and called attention to how much time he was spending away from her, her husband got angry. In response, she became interested in dancing herself, and found guangchangwu to fit her preferences and her abilities. All these accounts from my interviewees demonstrate how guangchangwu affords the possibilities for contemporary feminist embodiment among aging women, where they are able to reclaim their agency through their bodies in order to achieve emancipation from the oppressive regimes of patriarchal norms and ageist ideologies.

**Constructions of a Healthy Mind in Guangchangwu**

One of the most prominent themes identified in the accounts from the dancers I interviewed involved the benefits of the activity to the dancers’ psychological well-being. Mrs. Sun expressed her belief that guangchangwu promotes “brain health,” and that dancing has allowed her to develop a healthier self-image. Mrs. Huo describes how the Buddhist and meditative elements of guangchangwu were particularly appealing to her, and that this resulted in improvements to her mood, allowed her to be calmer and more comfortable and made her forget her sad experiences in the past. Mrs. Zhao feels more comfortable after her dance sessions, which is why she schedules them during the evenings as her last activity before going to sleep.
Mrs. Zhao also finds that guangchangwu relieves her from boredom, as the focus necessary in the performance of guangchangwu in public helps keep her attention. She mentions how during days where she is unable to dance, she does not feel as energized, describing how her body feels “wrinkled” during these instances. Generally, the interviewees all identify how guangchangwu evokes positive emotions during and after the performance.

It must be noted that in the contemporary, holistic perspectives concerning health and well-being, the mental health benefits experienced by my fellow guangchangwu dancers are inextricably tied to their physical health. The research on the physiological effects of dance discussed earlier identified how hormones like oxytocin, serotonin and endorphins are chemicals produced by bodily processes that influence mood and mental states of human beings. Many foreign studies have found that dancing is beneficial to mental health. The Public Health Report of the US National Library of Medicine says dancing can probably alleviate some symptoms associated with mild to moderate depression. Evidence also suggests that physical activities and exercise could provide a beneficial effect in cases of alcoholism and substance abuse, improve self-image, social skills and cognitive functioning. They could also reduce symptoms of anxiety and physiological response to stress. Some of these physiological manifestations can include chronic fatigue, chronic allergic reactions, chronic pain, muscular and vascular headache, irritable bowel syndrome, temporomandibular joint pain, primary insomnia, low back pain, and primary hypertension. These psychogenic illnesses and their physiological symptoms coincide with the accounts of my informants, as they have described fatigue, back pain and hypertension as physiological problems that have been alleviated by their participation in guangchangwu. The positive impact of dance on their mental and affective states translate to improvements in their physical health. In many ways, holistic perspectives of health and well-being acknowledge that
all physical illnesses and disorders have some form of affective/emotional dimension. After all, the severity of the discomfort or pain experienced by the body is subject to the emotions felt by the individual. This relationship between mind and body has motivated research in affective neuroscience to the neurological underpinnings of emotional awareness and the capacity for a subjective sense of self. Affective neuroscientific research has recognized that Eastern traditions such as yoga, acupuncture, and, to a large extent, traditions involving movement of the body like dance have long adopted the holistic perspective unifying mind and body (Homann 2017, 39).

With regard to the aging female body, guangchangwu promotes mental health via promotion of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is “the belief that one can successfully perform behaviors to produce a desired outcome” (Goodill 2005, 40). This belief represents agency and is the opposite of hopelessness. One of the primary sources of anxieties among older individuals in particular is the loss of agency, as the cultural narrative of “bodily decline” insists that the corporeal experience of aging involves increasing limitations and restrictions on what a person can consciously and willingly do. The loss of self-efficacy is detrimental to a person’s mental health and well-being, causing depression and negative affective states. This has certainly been my experience when I went through the symptoms of menopause, as the physiological and psychological changes of this phenomenon made me feel that I was no longer in control of my body or mind. Being robbed of my agency sent me to a depressive state, and I became keenly aware of mental and bodily decline happening to me. My interviewees recount similar experiences in this regard, even though Chinese cultural norms do not formally conceive of menopause as part of the transition to old age. For them, it was the illnesses and pains that made them feel that they had reduced self-efficacy. My informants told me how these aspects of bodily decline were already manifesting before their retirement, indicating the immediacy and
tangibility of getting older. Mrs. Sun, who had worked as a college teacher, remembers how rheumatism and shoulder pains were already affecting her during her work, which in turn negatively affected her mental and emotional states during the time. Mrs. Zhao similarly identified her aches and pains as a source of anxiety and stress prior to her participation in guangchangwu.

Dance practices like guangchangwu, which allow the aging person to move their body, resists the cultural narrative of bodily decline by demonstrating in tangible ways that the body is still one’s own, that the person still exercises agency towards their corporeal experience. Guangchangwu, which specifically caters to the aging female body in the Chinese context, introduces a process of “unlearning” concerning body movements, highlighting the new ways that the body can move as one grows older. Indeed, “This process of ‘unlearning’ congealed forms of comportment and movement in order to open the body to alternative modes of articulating the body-self has, of course, been a concern in dance research focusing on experimental dance styles and body practices, practices that initially emerged in a therapeutic context” (Schwaiger 2012, 128-129). Dance proposes an alternative narrative to bodily decline, where aging does not generate more limitations and restrictions to the physical body’s capabilities, but rather results in different and alternate capabilities. Dances like guangchangwu encourage its dancers to explore the potential of these new possibilities, which in turn empowers the dancers with agency and self-efficacy. Dance movement practices focusing on psychotherapy implement this framework, as the patients are asked to regulate the movements of their bodies and in doing so, experience a greater sense of ownership and agency over their bodies, which in turn have a therapeutic effect on their psychological disorders (Samaritter 2019, 129).
The themes of self-efficacy and agency are evident in the accounts of my informants in their performance of guangchangwu. Mrs. Sun emphasizes the diversity of variations in guangchangwu: there is the step dance, line dance, 3-steps, 16-steps, 32-steps variants, just to name a few. She highlights how being able to choose which variations feel comfortable to her movements is one of the main appeals of guangchangwu. In many ways, these variations represent avenues of explorations for the new possibilities of the aging body, expanding one’s agency with growing older rather than restricting that agency. Mrs. Huo, who’s preferred guangchangwu variations involve elements from Buddhist meditation, present further options for exploring the aging self and thus promoting self-efficacy. She describes how her current dance consists of 14 sections, with each section consisting of an action that is done 84 times over three minutes. In between each section, she reads the Amitabha Buddha, integrating meditative components into her dance. This may seem like a very procedural and formulaic approach to dancing guangchangwu, but it nevertheless manifests self-efficacy and agency. In fact, this is the same approach adopted in some forms of dance therapy, where body memory is developed in order to build resilience in the individual. Individuals who take part in dance therapy often have physical injuries or illnesses that reconfigure their body’s capabilities, in similar ways to the effects of aging on the body. As such, new body memories—gestures and movements that become ingrained into the corporeal experience—need to be developed, which is accomplished through identification of the new physiological and kinesthetic abilities of the individual, which are then “memorized” through routine (Samaritter 2019, 128). The new body memory developed then becomes an anchor for resilience, which is the mental capacity of the individual to withstand stresses and traumas. Mrs. Huo’s preferred dance routine can be seen as her way of
developing her body memory, which impart in her psychological resilience, promoting her mental health and well-being.

**Conceptualizing the Aging Female Self in Guangchangwu**

Another important aspect of the psychological dimension in guangchangwu is how the dance creates the space for conceptualizing the aging female self. In many ways, aging involves a reexamination of one’s identity and self-conception, as the transition towards a new life stage means leaving behind elements of one’s identities and abandoning previous roles in lieu of new ones. The process of identity-formation is a complex one, involving both intimate and personal explorations and social and cultural factors that shape these explorations. In the experiences of aging women, the social and cultural factors are even more pronounced, particularly those that impose patriarchal norms on the definition of a woman’s identity. As Bendelow and Williams in *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (1998), women’s identities have been tied to the body, with the reproductive, childbearing role of women coming to define their personhood. This has several key implications. Even with research contributing to changing priorities regarding the aging female body, appearance continues to be an important issue for older women, particularly in terms of looking young and weight management (Clarke and Korotchenko 2011, 503). This translates to women growing older representing a loss of identity and selfhood—with older women losing their defining ability to bear children, patriarchal societies render the aging female without a sense of self. This is true in the case of China, where unmarried women over 27 years of age often referred to as *sheng nu*, or leftover women. *Sheng nu* applies to a growing body of the female population in China who are seeking education, economic freedom, and a more unconventional life path than their parents. But despite the progressive movement, the message from society remains unchanged: If you are not married
before 27, you are not only doing something wrong in society’s eyes, but you also lose your only valid source of self-conception as a woman.

Guangchangwu offers a space where aging females can engage in the process of reconceptualizing the self in their new life stage. Both myself and my fellow guangchangwu dancers recognize the value of this space, affording us the possibilities of liberation from our previous roles and identities that were dependent on oppressive patriarchal structures. A common theme in the responses from my interviewees emphasizes how the women have a lot of spare time, not just because they have retired, but also because they no longer have responsibilities to take care of their children. This reasoning indicates the loss of the reproductive/childbearing role that has come to define the identities and conceptions of the self among women in patriarchal societies. The “spare time” that my fellow guangchangwu dancers have suggests the loss of purpose in their life, which has led some, like Mrs. Sun to experience boredom. Mrs. Zhao is more explicit, noting that because she has finished raising her children into adulthood, she has already “done her job,” which means that as an older woman, she was now free to do what she wants, to live the life that she wants. In short, my interviewees found themselves having to understand and construct their new self as they enter the new life stage of becoming an older woman. Guangchangwu provided the space for this construction of the new self, something to replace what society has deemed they have “lost” in no longer needing to play the role of mother and/or wife. Furthermore, the interviewees all value guangchangwu as something that they can occupy themselves with to use their free time and accomplish what they perceive as their primary task: staying healthy and avoiding illnesses and injuries.

Guangchangwu can function as a space for the exploration of the self for aging women because it is a dance that specifically caters to their experiences in their specific life stage. All
my interviewees acknowledge how guangchangwu is great for elderly people. While they primarily cite the physical health benefits of the dance as their reason for the activity being great for aging individuals, my informants also highlight the ways where guangchangwu allows them to express themselves. For example, I asked my interviewees about a particular aspect of the performance of guangchangwu, where in several of the variations I would start the steps with my left foot. As I am a trained ballet dancer, I am familiar with Western traditions of dance, and in Western dances, the dancers always start with their right foot. The response I got from my informants is that while there are dances that prescribe starting in the left or right foot based on the folk-dance origins of guangchangwu, contemporary practice gives the dancers the freedom to choose what they want to do. They note that in Chinese culture, the left side comes before the right side, but in guangchangwu, there are no strict or formal regulations that prescribe which foot one’s dance should start with. The freeform nature of guangchangwu goes back to the mental health benefit of empowering aging women with self-efficacy, as the dance acknowledges the changing experience of embodiment among older women.

Guangchangwu is also able to provide a space for conceptualizing the self for aging women as a social practice that began as a transgressive act among China’s elderly women, which then successfully transitioned into widespread social and political acceptance. Many of Chinese dance traditions remain “connected to the activities of folk practitioners and other ritual specialists in temple processions, weddings, funerals, exorcisms, and holiday festivals” (E. Wilcox 2019, 4), but guangchangwu is unique in that it has been coopted from its rural origins by the Chinese state during the socialist era. As mentioned earlier, even in the post-Mao era, guangchangwu has received state support as a way to deal with the social issue of a growing elderly population. This was only made possible because China’s aging women decided to claim
guangchangwu as an activity for themselves, constituting a transgressive act that challenges social norms: “dancing in a location where dancing is not necessarily expected, playing music that might not please everyone, and displaying a dancing body that is viewed to be older or more ‘amateur’ than what is expected—individuals may challenge the biopower around them” (Martin and Chen 2020, 30). In this manner, China’s aging females legitimized guangchangwu as a practice for themselves, creating the space for individual aging women to freely explore conceptions of themselves.

**The Social Dimension: Guangchangwu as Community Dance Practice**

Another crucial dimension of guangchangwu as a space for the exploration, engagement and performance of the aging female body is the social dimension, manifested in guangchangwu as a community dance practice. All my fellow guangchangwu dancers identified in their interviews how being part of a community is one of the most important factors as to why they participate in the dance practice. Mrs. Sun mentions how guangchangwu affords her the opportunities to regulate her interpersonal relationships and meet new friends during the performance. Mrs. Huo describes how a significant reason why she enjoys guangchangwu is that she is able to hang out with other women her age, and the guangchangwu groups would often go out and do other activities. Even Mrs. Zhao, who prefers to be part of our smaller guangchangwu group because she feels that she is not a very sociable person, recognizes how dancing as part of a community allows her to reflect and examine her social interactions. All my informants have described our guangchangwu group as a “family,” a testament to the strong interpersonal bonds that the dancers have developed within this community. As with the physical and psychological dimensions, a major factor that informs the communal engagement of my fellow guangchangwu dancers is the benefit it confers towards their health and well-being. The members find a strong
support network within the dance group. Director Jean Liu, in the short online film *Body Language: Guang Chang Wu*, captured the essence of this mantra (2021). Layered across images of participants in gathered skirts, with bamboo fans, and colorful handkerchiefs, the short film reflects on the joy and community that guangchangwu brings to the participants. One woman stated, “Even though I am entering old age, I can still draw a lot of nourishment from dance. In my heart, I can still reach new heights.” Another participant sees guangchangwu as “an opportunity for new friendships.” In its own way, guangchangwu helps the participants relieve feelings of loneliness and isolation. One of the featured dancers in the film describes how guangchangwu manages to address the needs of aging women for a sense of belonging and prevents feelings of isolation:

> When we are all together, there are no other thoughts, only dancing, whole-hearted investment, focus on your own body, focus on your breathing. There’s a euphoria you can only feel after dancing together (Liu, *Body Language: Guang Chang Wu* 2021).

Chris Thomson (1994) introduced a system of categorization for community dance practice, identifying them as either (1) ameliorative; (2) radical; or (3) alternative (Houston 2008, 12). Ameliorative community dance practice primarily frames dance as a leisure or recreational activity. Radical community dance practice uses dance to empower its participants in order to overcome oppression or discrimination. Alternative community dance practice aims at holistically promoting the participants physical and mental health and well-being. Based on this categorization, it would seem obvious that guangchangwu functions both as an ameliorative and alternative community dance practice. The opportunity to be with other aging women in the practice and performance of guangchangwu indicates shared participation in leisure and
recreational activity. The physical space where guangchangwu are performed—in public parks that are easily accessible in the local vicinity of where the dancers live—are themselves spaces of recreation and leisure. The proximity of the dance space also means that members engage in other leisurely activities that facilitate community building and socialization. In Chengdu, for example, part of the guangchangwu dancers’ routine is to share meals prepared by one of their members in their homes, and several participants would then play games of mahjong after the performances (C. Huang 2016, 235). This is not at all an uncommon occurrence among guangchangwu dancers throughout China. In my own group, the dancers would also engage in other recreational activities before, in-between, and after performances. Many of the participants also described similar activities of playing mahjong and being part of communal meals among the guangchangwu dancers in their area.

Meanwhile, the social support network provided by guangchangwu enables the community dance practice to confer the health and well-being benefits in alternative community dance practice. Emphasizing the importance of utilizing the social dimension of large dance practices and their shared movement may also offer an alternative way to address issues of isolation: Connecting to others through movement may help participants of guangchangwu overcome isolation and experience their potential and agency to regulate the relational attunement as well as the shared movement content (Jansen and Wehrle 2018, 130). This was certainly applicable in my own experience with menopause as I learned to engage with my aging female body. The irritability and subsequent depression I went through during this period had resulted in my own feelings of isolation, as I refused to participate in social interaction, even among my family and close friends. Participating in guangchangwu enabled me to connect with others once again, and our shared movement in dancing made me recognize the agency I still
possessed in initiating social interactions and the formation of interpersonal relationships. My fellow guangchangwu dancers, meanwhile, were already immersed in a culture that places importance in maintain interpersonal relationships and participating in community-formation. Chinese culture values social harmony and recognizes its role in psychological well-being. The origins of guangchangwu in communal practices and rituals are a testament to this element of Chinese culture. Indeed, a significant factor that earned guangchangwu support from the Chinese government is the recognized function of the dance as an activity that promotes social harmony and community building. The ability to meet new friends and feel a sense of belongingness with my group of guangchangwu dancers validated to me how the dance practice helps the participants feel “happy, healthy, and making new friends.”

**Making the Invisible Aging Female Body Visible through Public Performance**

The final aspect of the social dimension of guangchangwu I will address is the performance of the dance in public spaces. This is especially important to the aging female body, as patriarchal ideologies have rendered the aging female body invisible. The aforementioned cultural narrative of bodily decline in aging, along with the normative standards and ideals that govern the female body to be young and physically attractive only recognizes the young, skinny, and healthy Chinese woman. When the biological definition of the woman as the child bearer and child carer—wife and mother—disappears, so too does their sense of self and presence in society disappear. What transpires is a double invisibility; the aging female body loses its presence, and the woman loses her youth and her ability to play the defining reproductive role of the woman in a patriarchal society. The Confucian principles that prioritize respect towards elders may mitigate some of this invisibility for older Chinese women, but with the encroachment of Western culture and its consumerist, youth-oriented norms and standards, this
aspect of Chinese culture is also being transformed. Furthermore, the previously discussed cultural conception of sheng nu or leftover women indicates that there are aspects of Chinese culture that specifically target the aging female body and renders it invisible for not conforming to patriarchal ideals. Chinese women who grow old and lose their ability to fulfill their patriarchal roles of getting married and having children become objects for society to discard as “leftovers.”

In the literature dealing with gender and aging, it has been found that middle-aged or older women in many contexts in society can increasingly feel unseen, excluded from dialogue, activities and representations (Wallach et al., 2017). Interestingly enough, none of my fellow guangchangwu dancers that I interviewed explicitly stated that they felt invisible in their experiences of aging. All of my interviewed dancers focused on the personal importance of guangchangwu, both in terms of their physical health and well-being, as well as the need to connect to others. Mrs. Zhao’s response that emphasizes how it is not in her character to interact socially with many people even suggests that she still has some qualms regarding the public performance of guangchangwu. She remembers feeling “embarrassed” during her first few performances but became more comfortable as she felt her health and mood improve. I have a similar experience with Mrs. Zhao, where I also felt somewhat embarrassed that I was performing a dance in a very public place. While I am comfortable performing in front of an audience as a classical ballet dancer, performing in the middle of the dense, urban space of Shenzhen is altogether different. That said, there are several indications that remaining visible in society is an important part of why guangchangwu makes my fellow dancers feel good. One of my younger colleagues who is still in her twenties and thus serves as an observer of guangchangwu dancers, noted how the dancers in her area feel happy publicly performing and
being visible to their community. She described how the women who perform in guangchangwu competition go onto the stage to perform. When people are clapping for them, they feel like they are important in society because people actually see them and then they will feel happy. Another indication of the need for visibility among the older women performing guangchangwu is that all the dancers choose a public space to meet and perform. My informants all point to parks as the ideal space to congregate for the performance of guangchangwu. They reason that such spaces are free and accessible, but there are other spaces in urban areas where guangchangwu dancers can choose to perform; areas that are more private and not visible to the communities they reside in. It is also significant that for other activities that accompany guangchangwu, such as shared meals among members, shopping or playing mahjong, the dancers move to these more private spaces. It is only physical activities like guangchangwu, activities that showcase the aging female body, that are performed in public spaces.

All of these suggest to me that the public performance of guangchangwu does empower its participants by making them socially visible, whether they acknowledge it or not, thus intuitively resisting the regimes of patriarchal control that attempt to render the aging female body invisible. The dance of aging female bodies insists on older women’s continued presence, embodiment, and visibility, subverting the norms and expectations of a patriarchal society. My own experiences as a guangchangwu dancer have shown me that I do value my visibility as an aging woman. As I dance with my fellow guangchangwu dancers, I have felt that I was telling society “I am here, I am an aging woman and I exist.” While my interviewees may not explicitly state that they feel visible and relevant to their community with the performance of guangchangwu, due to language barriers or lack of acknowledgement, the pride they exhibit when they dance, the recognition of the capacities of their aging female bodies do speak to me of
visibility’s importance to them. My interviewees have all stated the importance of performing guangchangwu publicly, describing how meeting in the park to dance has become something of a “subconscious” act, and that knowing that a lot of people will be there during the early evenings means that they must make the most of this limited period for performance as individuals and as a group.
CHAPTER VI
IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

I began this ethnography of guangchangwu to listen to the voices of the participants in Shenzhen, China, as they described their experiences of dancing in large groups in public spaces. Using ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews, I observed and listened to dancers as they engaged in guangchangwu. I acknowledged that the participants’ voices were often missing from discussions of guangchangwu, and saw my research as an opportunity to take a closer look at their motivations, focusing on the intersection of Chinese identity, public space, and the aging female body.

Through an examination of Chinese identity, I demonstrated how participants of guangchangwu define the role of dance in China as a culturally complete interpretation of what it means to be Chinese. While the responsibility for the role of dance in China as a culturally complete interpretation of what it means to be Chinese may not be the primary intention of the participants, this identity is embodied, tracing specific social, gendered, and generational histories and traditions of contemporary China. Guangchangwu simultaneously sustains “Chinese” dance forms even as broader ideas of what constitutes as “Chinese” are being created, codified, and standardized within the dance practice. Guangchangwu provides participants with a community where they can collectively dance as a “we” in the ritualized act of guangchangwu reflecting shared social and historical realities, the articulation of which can be used to various political ends.

Guangchangwu, in its name and everyday practice, is framed by physical place. How public space is defined and utilized in China is influenced by history and culture, creating a distinct Chinese experience of public space. Chinese citizens view public space in fundamentally
different ways than other countries, particularly the US, considering such spaces an extension of their personal/private space. It is this understanding of public space that allows guangchangwu participants to use parks, sidewalks, and any public spaces, for their own personal and group needs. The visibility of the guangchangwu dancers in public space, both in terms of their physical bodies and in the performance of dance, has been central to the ongoing public discourse surrounding guangchangwu. Regulating guangchangwu in terms of noise pollution or the number of participants is far less difficult than regulating the dance practice itself, though both ways have been tried to varying degrees of success. Through its appropriation of public space, guangchangwu creates an intentional space, neither public or private, and produces alternative spaces of collectivity for female participants (Chao 2017, 13).

The experiences of the guangchangwu dancers, as they participate in the dance practice, influence their engagement, exploration, and performance of the aging female body. While most of the dancers I interviewed consistently described guangchangwu as a form of physical exercise, an activity that is part of their fitness regimen to keep healthy as they age, I realized I had a more personal reason to explore guangchangwu: menopause. I believe I was drawn to guangchangwu as a result of my experience of menopause, and I was slightly disappointed that the participants of guangchangwu I interviewed never discussed the topic of menopause unprompted. Rather, they repeated the mantra I was now used to hearing so often: guangchangwu keeps them happy, healthy, and making new friends. In an effort to understand, I redirected to dimensions of the practice that related to aging female bodies: the physical, the psychological, and the social. These dimensions demonstrate suggest to me that the public performance of guangchangwu empowers the participants by making them socially visible, whether they acknowledge it or not, thus intuitively resisting the regimes of patriarchal control that attempt to render the aging female
body invisible. Through guangchangwu aging female bodies insist on older women’s continued presence, embodiment, and visibility, subverting the norms and expectations of a patriarchal society.

In this final chapter, I will examine the implications of the intersection of Chinese identity, public space, and the aging female body and how this influences issues of representation and globalization as well as what remains unaddressed in my research on guangchangwu. I will also discuss the future of guangchangwu and make recommendations in regard to sustaining this culturally relevant dance practice. Finally, I will discuss how the research has impacted my own experience of participating in guangchangwu and explore what future trajectories may be inspired by this research.

**Representation and Guangchangwu: Who Tells the Story?**

From my first encounter with guangchangwu, as I walked through Wen Xin Gong Yuan, I knew I needed to know more about this dance practice, so I began my search online. Online and in the media, the representation of guangchangwu was one of loud, belligerent, and cranky older Chinese people who could not, or would not, follow the rules. This representation of guangchangwu was what initially made me a little apprehensive of participating in the dance practice. I was surprised at the negativity I found when I looked online or spoke with my Chinese friends about participating in guangchangwu. My colleagues were unsupportive as well, mostly snickering and wondering why I would want to join the “dance for old people.”

After joining the guangchangwu group at my apartment complex, I understood the negative representations I had previously found were unfounded and unsubstantiated. The women I danced with were happy, always smiling, and welcoming. They wholeheartedly accepted me into their community, giving words of encouragement and acceptance. Additionally,
I never once encountered anyone passing through the dancing event or living near the park complaining about guangchangwu as I had seen online. My experience made me question why there was such negativity surrounding guangchangwu and the answer to that question lies in representation and who can speak for/with/or about whom.

The issues surrounding representation are so complex I can hardly do them justice in one dissertation. Additionally, as a white, female American living and working in China, I am not certain I am the best suited to undertake the argument. Nevertheless, I will argue that knowledge is “socially situated,” and my experience as an aging female guangchangwu participant has allowed me access to a more personal perspective than those I found online. Guangchangwu is a social world; a collective of phenomena pertaining to a community co-constructed by individuals in their daily interactions (A. E. Clarke, Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn 2005). Social worlds are created by shared similarities, as well as by virtue of the way participants relate to it, including myself (A. E. Clarke 2005). As a participant, I had the opportunity to get a look inside the practice of guangchangwu which has allowed me to make my assessment of the dance practice.

In the case of the narrative surrounding guangchangwu, representation points more to what is lost—the welcoming and happy culture of guangchangwu I discovered—rather than what is found—the negative stereotype of outdated, irritable elderly troublemakers found online. Most newspaper articles and videos I found online were written by individuals far removed from the physical practice of guangchangwu in China. These narratives of guangchangwu, primarily from America, Australia, and the United Kingdom, were oriented towards more familiar conceptions of embodiment, public space, and aging female bodies found outside of China making this the origin of where the problem of representation begins.
In these Western and European countries, the world view is primarily individualistic, or idiocentric, focusing on personal freedom, interests, and achievement. In developing times in these cultures, people lived in communities with a focus on community priorities until Capitalism replaced these ideas with an individualist culture. Capitalism, which promotes individual and intellectual rights, has been and remains a primary influence in idiocentric cultures. As these cultures do not share the same world view of identity or public space as Chinese citizens, it is difficult for them to observe and understand the popularity and support of guangchangwu in China. In contrast, collectivism in Chinese cultures is a belief system focused on collective views, traditions, doctrines, teachings, and practices. It is the opposite of the individualistic world view. In Chinese society, filial piety is an example of a collectivist attitude of respect for parents and ancestors influenced by Confucian thought and demonstrated through support for one’s parents. Furthermore, it has shaped the ways in which family caregiving, intergenerational equity, economic support, living arrangement, and other aspects of individual, family, social, political, and legal relationships are supported in China. These differences in world views may explain the disconnect between the negativity surrounding guangchangwu found on the internet and my personal experience of participation in guangchangwu.

When observing guangchangwu participants, people who live in individualistic cultures construe what they see as elderly dancers flagrantly ignoring the rules and rights of others by blasting their music and using publicly provided space as if it belongs to them. They are viewing collectivist ideology through an individualistic lens. What they don’t see through this lens is that to Chinese citizens, public space is an extension of their space, as I discussed in Chapter 4, and as such can be used for their own group needs without mutual disturbance. Recently, I was telling one of my male students about my research when he stated that the guangchangwu group
in his community had taken over the large basketball courts to hold their dance practice. When I asked how he felt about this, he shrugged and replied he and his friends could play basketball anytime, anywhere. He added that it was only fair to let the old women enjoy their dancing. Like the many others I spoke with about guangchangwu, there was no malice or derision, only an acknowledgment that, as Mrs. Huo stated, “We can do what we want.”

Representation matters, who is telling the story matters, to ensure that the story is not one-sided or an unfair representation of a diverse population. If I had not looked past the representation of guangchangwu I found online, I would have never had the opportunity to get to know how welcoming and warm the participants of guangchangwu are or how much I had in common with them. Since my initial research on guangchangwu, the narrative has improved thanks in part to researchers like Jean Liu, whose representation of guangchangwu dancers in New York showcases how participants grow in strength and confidence from the dance practice (Liu 2021). In the future, the responsibility to seek out diverse voices and diverse representations should not only be applied to those writing about the group or individuals. If there is a dance practice that intrigues you, ask to join them, learn more, listen more. Be like a guangchangwu participant and dance like you own the space.

Going Global

From small rural towns to large cities in China, guangchangwu is exceedingly popular and can be found in all public spaces. In the last decade though, guangchangwu has managed to migrate from mainland China, receiving mixed receptions. In 2014, a group of Guangchangwu dancers performed in the plaza of the Place de Louvre in Paris (T. P. Chen 2014). Another performance took place in Moscow’s Red Square but was cut short by Russian police (T. P.
Chen 2014). And in New York City, guangchangwu participants dancing in Central Park were shut down following noise complaints (T. P. Chen 2014).

Despite all the less than favorable rhetoric, guangchangwu is slowly gaining international attention. Primarily recognized for the health benefits for elderly populations, municipalities in the US and UK have appropriated guangchangwu to provide a way for older people to exercise, socialize, and be visible in society. For example, China Exchange, a London-based organization, organized "It’s Hip to be Square," a series of free public dances modeled after those in China (Mo 2017). In the US, particularly in cities with Chinese diasporic populations such as San Francisco, Houston, and New York, guangchangwu provides a senior-centric activity allowing participants to exercise as well as express their cultural and historical traditions.

However, the question of whether guangchangwu will ever be as popular in foreign cultures as it is in China remains. My experience of guangchangwu leads me to believe that while pockets of enthusiasts for guangchangwu can and will exist outside of China, as described in the previous paragraph, it is unlikely that it will ever become as well-accepted in a foreign context as it has been in mainland China. Similarities between guangchangwu and other dance forms such as line dancing, aerobics, flash mobs, and other sorts of instructor-led dance practices, already exist in other countries, yet still do not attract anywhere near the same number of participants. One possible reason for this discrepancy may be that participation in guangchangwu in China is free. Unlike instructor-led dance practices in the US, there is no cost associated with the practice of guangchangwu as there is no need to take lessons or pay for an instructor.
Another factor in guangchangwu’s popularity in China is its focus on the aging population. By 2030, the elderly, defined as persons over 60, will constitute over a quarter of the population in China. To stave off the massive burden this will place on China’s healthcare programs, the Chinese government has endorsed guangchangwu as a way to optimize the health benefits of exercise for the elderly, as discussed in Chapter 3. This could be guangchangwu’s advantage in terms of becoming a global practice. The participants of guangchangwu I spoke with extolled guangchangwu as a physical activity that can increase muscle strength, maintain bone integrity, and improve balance, coordination, and mobility. All four of my informants described guangchangwu as a way to stay active and “not get sick.” However, this is sustained by cultural elements in China’s aging population as discussed in Chapter 5, primarily the support for older adults, which is considered to be the foremost responsibility of the immediate family. Elderly populations in other countries do not necessarily receive the same support from their families, with many residing in assisted living or nursing homes, lacking access and opportunities to participate in group exercise or dance practices. With no intent to diminish the efforts of assisted living or nursing home facilities, as many do provide movement and exercise activities for persons in their care, I advocate that guangchangwu may find a global purchase in these types of facilities in addition to the already services provided. Indeed, the future of guangchangwu may lie in its physical, psychological, and social benefits for elderly populations.

The Future of Guangchangwu

My first experience of Chinese culture was in Wen Xin Gong Yuan where I discovered the various ways citizens utilize public spaces with creativity and diversity. In public parks, squares, and spaces in China, it is not unusual to see people dancing, playing sports, or exercising as well as people singing, playing instruments or card games, or even taking naps.
see the diverse use of public space as a reflection of the collectivism still omnipresent in the Chinese cultural paradigm. A public park should be fully used, not only as an escape from the dense urbanization Chinese cities, but also as a place for various activities that can operate independent of one another, without mutual disturbance.

The Chinese government’s regulations for parks and public places, primarily targeting guangchangwu, may signal the demise of the diverse park culture found in China. While these regulations do not ban large groups from dancing in public squares, the new rules may dissuade some guangchangwu groups’ continued practice in public parks and will even deter new groups from forming in the future. Neighboring residential areas deserve peace and quiet, but from my experience, most citizens are not upset with the guangchangwu participants, but rather the levels of the music, the primary issue addressed in the new regulations regarding decibel limitations. If guangchangwu is ever banned from assembling in public parks, one of the essential activities that make Chinese parks so interesting and inviting will be lost.

Never have I witnessed a group of guangchangwu participants without seeing a sea of happy smiles. From my experience, participating in guangchangwu undoubtedly brings joy to all those involved. Guangchangwu is full of people enjoying the outdoors and acting as one collective unit, especially aging female dancers and the elderly, helping them combat feelings of isolation that, sadly, can be so prevalent in densely populated urban areas. Stricter regulations may quell large group activities like guangchangwu and seem in direct contradiction to the overall positive reception of surrounding communities and people passing through the dance event I observed during my time dancing. Targeting guangchangwu as the only source of disturbance found in public spaces seems prejudicial, especially since parks in China are inherently full of people engaged in diverse activities. As I stated in the introduction, the music
and dancing I found in the park were what drew me to guangchangwu in the first place and the overwhelming diversity of activity is the source of their appeal.

As international influence expands in China, and traditional activities are being regulated, replaced, or made redundant, it is worth noting that guangchangwu may lose popularity with future generations. For me, as a dancer, public dancing, from traditional folk dances to ballroom dancing to shuffle dancing, embodies the significance of the abundance of culture found Chinese parks. Many young people, like my fellow coworkers, are not drawn to the physical group activities of the past, with most preferring more modern, solitary exercise options like jogging, hiking, or cycling. Guangchangwu is seen as something the middle-aged or senior citizens do. It may not be able to draw new participants from future generations. More regulation may serve to accelerate the demise of this distinct experience of Chinese public space.

**Conclusion and Future Research**

My decision to join the guangchangwu group at Li Yuan Da Sha was life-changing to say the least. What began as curiosity became a constant in my life for the past six years and became the motivation for this dissertation. There were many evenings my research of guangchangwu was a form of meditation, allowing me to focus only on the movement and experience of the dance practice. From my first uncertain steps, I began to relax into my new chosen home and felt the community that belonging to a guangchangwu group brings to the participants. I have since moved to another city where I continue to teach ballet. My new school is in Anshan, in northern China, whose culture, and hard “r” filled accent, are dramatically different than Shenzhen. Anshan is considered a small city in China, with a population of only seven million. Guangchangwu, however, remains consistent as well as the women’s reasons for participating: to
be happy, healthy, and making new friends. Even here, after all the “oh-ing” and “ah-ing,”
asking where I am from, learning I am a ballet teacher, these aging female bodies welcomed me
warmly into their community. They were delighted to see I already knew some of the dances,
offering me hot water and smiles.

In Anshan, the guangchangwu dances are more folkdance inspired and more men
participate than what I observed in Shenzhen. The median age of the dancers also seems to be
slightly older. My future research may focus on why guangchangwu has become primarily
associated with older women, specifically in more metropolitan cities. Other future trajectories
inspired by my research include to what degree space is considered public and how accessible it
is to the general public; how guangchangwu creates intentional space that blurs the boundaries
between public/private and produces alternative spaces of collectivity for female participants; the
cultural norms and stigma surrounding conversation of menopause in China; and how the care
and maintenance of female bodies during menopause, will be affected by the encroachment of
Western culture.


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