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Physical activity, sport and transnational migrant spaces in Shanghai, China: (Re)crafting contours of a metropolitan cityscape

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Abstract

This study examines associations between sport/physical activity space, community formation and social life among Shanghai's highly skilled migrant demographic. There is limited illustration of the roles sport and physical exercise provision and spaces play in this migrant cohort's lives, community formation and participation in their host societies. Yet, such evidence is of value in determining social policy, urban development and community engagement initiatives. Using a mixed-methods approach involving public policy critique, cultural and spatial analysis and virtual community investigation, this article provides a conceptual exploration of ways sport and physical activity frame individual and collective migrant experiences, and how such experiences enmesh with wider geo-spatial, political and domestic context. Amid Shanghai's presentation as a globally attractive space, we reveal some of the complexities of the cityscape as an emblematic location for highly mobile, highly skilled migrants. A confluence of ideals about urban citizenship, social participation and localised physical activity/sport-based (inter)action, we note, articulate Shanghai anew, and contribute to debates on highly skilled transnational mobility and community formation.

Keywords

China, migration, physical activity, Shanghai, space, sport

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In recent decades, migration and multiculturalism have become contested concepts enmeshed with debates over integration, collective identity and community building (Kong, 2014). The contentious nature of transnational migration and mobility has precipitated examination of alternative models and patterns of migrant settlement, and different approaches to cultural integration and community in urban settings (Hellwig and Sinno, 2017). This focus is significant, given the extents to which local governments have invested strategically in urban planning to enhance community building and integration; frequently, via gentrification of sport and physical activity spaces (Liu et al., 2017). Simultaneously, an economic turn in migration policy has emphasised migrants' skills and engendered a global competition for highly skilled 'talents' (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg-Sorensen, 2013).

Progressing this research, and respective sociologies of sport and mobilities, transnational and community studies, and public health, this article offers an interdisciplinary perspective on the confluence of migrant lives, urban space, and sport and physical activity in Shanghai, China. Whereas existing research has examined less socio-economically resourced migrant communities, this study focuses on highly skilled migrants' community spaces. Evoking Newman and Falcous' (2012) advocacy to transcend current conceptualisations of mobility and unpick broader processes, interactions and forces acting upon bodies and their mobilities, this article illustrates aspects of national and metropolitan geo-politics of China/Shanghai, and the related uses of sport/physical activity in composing desirable locales for highly skilled migrants to inhabit. In doing so, the article contributes a counterpoint to prevailing Western/Global-North examinations of migrants and offers a transnational narrative as to how migrant relationships with sport and physical activity are formed in a city context.

The primary site of the study is Shanghai's central residential zones in which a substantial cohort of highly skilled Western migrants reside. As a recognised settlement zone for highly skilled migrants, Shanghai features consistently in upper echelons of global indexes evaluating international market attraction, living standards, urban development and technology, mobility and infrastructure (Tseng, 2011). Mindful of this context, we draw on spatial theory (Kohe and Collison, 2018; Lefebvre, 1991a, 1991b, 1996; Lefebvre and Régulier, [1986] 2004; Tuan, 1977), to investigate the framing of sport and physical activity spaces for some of Shanghai's highly skilled migrants. We conceive sport and physical activity in the broadest sense for two key reasons. First, in our engagement in daily life in Shanghai we noted considerable overlaps between informal and formal sport and physical activity, and associated recreation and leisure (e.g. consumption at gym cafes, interactions in sport retail spaces, casual spectatorship at public recreation events). Secondly, we acknowledge that participation in organised sport may comprise only one aspect of highly skilled migrants' experiences, and engagements with physical culture may span a range of different modalities and places (e.g. the gym, the park, the sport field, the pub, civic sites, the expat (sport) clubs). Accordingly, and as underscored by spatial scholars of sport (e.g. Bale, 1996; Fusco, 2005; van Ingen, 2003; van Ingen et al., 2018), and transnational mobility researchers who have focused on expat and/migrant sport space (Bridges, 2011), it is through wider conceptualisation of discursive features of the landscape that it is possible to appreciate the centrality of sport/physical activity to identify formation, place-making, cross-cultural dialogue, health and social welfare.

Subsequently, our research questions interrogate: (1) how migrant sport/physical activity is contextualised within Shanghai; (2) how migrant communities' health and welfare needs are (re)presented in virtual and physical space; and (3) what broader opportunities for migrants' health and lifestyle behaviours are. Overall, the article contributes to extant interdisciplinary research on sport, migration and community building, and adds understanding to migrant health and wellbeing discussion, sport/physical activity debate, urban transformation discourses, and transnationalism research. Specifically, our work attends to the social constructions of transnational urban space by documenting how various kinds of sport and physical activity spaces are (re)produced, commodified, and consumed.¹ Traversing civic sites, public and private locales, and expatriate-orientated websites, we interrogate ways highly skilled migrants are configured as a significant part, in social, political and cultural terms, of Shanghai's foreign population. Within this, we explore how highly skilled expats, through discussions within online venues and engagement with socially progressive forums, may contribute to a particular type of metropolitan identity and community formation.

China's metropolitan centres as a destination for highly skilled migrants

Since China's turn to state-managed capitalism from the late 1970s onwards, the country has gradually opened itself to foreign companies and immigration of various kinds. According to data collected by the World Bank, China's total international migrant stock has grown by 398.1% between 1960 and 2015, from 245,684 to 978,046 (The World Bank, 2019b). Relative to China's large population, the share of immigrants remains small, increasing from 0.03% in 1990 to 0.07% in 2015 (The World Bank, 2019a). Moreover, immigration to China is concentrated significantly to the country's coastal metropolises. Here, immigrants play a larger role in Chinese society in terms of visibility and significance to local socio-economic processes and culture. China's economic development since 1978 has emphasised the role of cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou or Shenzhen, designated as Special Economic Zones, that from 1979 onwards have expanded as centres of foreign trade, investment and academic exchange (Farrer, 2019). In this context, 'foreign talent' has come to be regarded as central to China's human resource needs and is selectively encouraged through visa policy and 'talent schemes' that offer substantial incentives to highly skilled immigrants, including both foreign workers and students (Ahl and Czoske, 2018; Wen and Hu, 2019).²

Official immigration policies also tightly regulate foreigners' entry and their movements and permanence within the country, through visas, work and residence permits, and close surveillance of immigrant communities (Haugen, 2018). Recent studies among highly skilled migrants suggest that these mechanisms of regulation and surveillance may contribute to a sense of socio-cultural distance and exclusion (Lehmann, 2014, 2019). Further research points to the measured duration of highly skilled migrant stays (typically spanning from several months to several years or even decades) (Farrer, 2019; Haugen, 2018). Shanghai, for example, issued 187,484 temporary residence permits in 2014, to authorise short-term visits for work and study. However, by 2017 it had only authorised 5439 permanent residence certificates (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2017b).

Of those who come to China, few stay long term or even permanently. Yet, against an international ‘war for talent’, Chinese authorities and businesses have sought to attract highly skilled talent to the country’s metropolitan centres. Accordingly, locations such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, or Beijing have crystallised as focal points of expat life and centres of community building and the country’s prime bearers of expat-centric infrastructure (Farrer, 2019; Ma and Trigo, 2008).

Although adopting different contextual foci (for example, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Guangzhou, Moscow, Singapore), scholars have drawn attention to the experiences of highly skilled migrant within global metropolises (Cai and Su, 2020; Farrer, 2019). Research here has noted synergies among such cities with regards to domestic and foreign policy shifts toward highly skilled migrant investment, city urbanisation and marketing, and related space-making. Internationally, highly skilled migrants seemingly also share comparable experiences in terms of cultural displacement, integration and assimilation, challenges with community building, localised tensions within the host community, and sustaining health and wellbeing (Hellwig and Sinno, 2017; Kong, 2014). Studies have also underscored the roles expat clubs play in these processes by providing spaces of familiarity, cultural engagement and social and economic mobility. Despite this work not focusing specifically on physical activity or sport, there is acknowledgement of its importance within the overall migrant experience; particularly in terms of migrants’ capacities to access health care services, utilise local physical amenities and lead ‘healthy’/‘healthier’ lifestyles (Habti and Elo, 2019). Subsequently, the concern we pursue in this article is how expat-centric spaces (notably gyms and sport clubs) are (re) produced and mesh with expats’ experiences of metropolitan space via particular ideas, infrastructures and interactions.

Sport/physical activity, migrant communities and Chinese metropolitan spaces

Scholars have long noted ways in which sport/physical activity can contribute, advantageously or adversely, to migrants’ lives and community formation via social and political interventions, external stakeholder engagements, improved resource provision and inclusive cultural practices (Agergaard, 2018; Studdert and Walkerdine, 2016). These contributions are also being explored within the context of China and national/civic approaches to urban development, public health, community building and sport. For instance, examining Shanghai’s rapid growth as a destination for global sport investment, Yu et al. (2018) highlight how geopolitical shifts and domestic political economy alternations toward free-market enterprise have generated new opportunities for China and Shanghai and the lives, commercial habits and persuasions of (some) of its citizens and communities. The manufacturing of sport within Shanghai, and the positioning of the city as a hub of global sport enterprise, particularly, has become a discernible feature of the metropolises’ modernization and cosmopolitan contours.

Within Shanghai’s modernisation, sport spaces form part of the wider enrichment of social, cultural and economic infrastructure that has emerged to cater to highly skilled migrants (Farrer, 2019). This infrastructure includes estate agents offering exclusive rental properties specifically to expats, supermarkets catering to foreign tastes, art

galleries hosting international exhibitions, to luxury leisure and recreation services (Taylor and Caswell, 2011; Zheng, 2011). These internationally oriented spaces are clustered in and around Shanghai's centre. Their westernmost reach is arguably marked by the Gubei International Residential Area (古北国际社区) in Hongqiao district. The oldest residential district specifically developed, since 1984, for highly skilled immigrants in Shanghai and China, Gubei provides residential facilities and upscale amenities for inhabitants from Western countries as well as East Asia, notably South Korea and Japan (Tu, 2018). In the Eastern reaches of Shanghai, across the Huangpu river, Pudong New Area (浦东新区), developed since 1993, is the site of the Shanghai Stock Exchange, the Lujiazui financial district, Oriental Pearl Tower and international communities employed in finance and business (Marton and Wu, 2006). In between, central locations, such as the West Bund, have become sites of gentrification and urban development catering to the needs of international residents and China's aspirant middle-classes (West Bund, 2020).

Conceptualising a transnational migrant commons

In examining highly skilled migrant landscapes in Shanghai we draw on Henri Lefebvre's (1991a, 1991b, 1996, 2003; Lefebvre and Régulier, [1986] 2004) advocacy for critical spatial appraisals. Central to this is consideration of the cultural conditions of space, intersectional connections, and the presence and processes of change inherent in spatial production, consumption and transformation. Lefebvre was not against attempts at concrete (re)presentations of space or acknowledging that space was so inordinately complex that it defied examination. Rather, Lefebvre appreciated the inherent difficulties and futilities of definitive spatial explanation. With regards to physical activity and sport in the lives of highly skilled migrants in Shanghai, Lefebvre's notion of *L'espace* allows us to move beyond just the temporal and geographical characteristics of communities within defined locales, and toward identifying and appreciating spaces' virtual, transcendental and ethereal qualities (Lefebvre and Régulier, [1986] 2004).

To appreciate Lefebvre's incorporation of the abstract and holistic dimensions of space a recourse to the early work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, 1979, 1982, 1986) is useful. For Tuan, space first existed in, and out of, meanings and experiences that accrue from individual and collective thought processes that then manifest within, and through, interactions and institutions. Tuan's extensive work does not offer any substantive consideration of sport/physical activity. However, his conceptualisations of space, and advocacy for humanistic geography, highlight the complex configuration of space as a cultural, historical, social and political enterprise. Through Tuan's work we can come to understand that physical landscapes are not benign, but rather constitute fluid sites of changing spatial arrangements and power relations. These ideas are detailed specifically in Tuan's (1982, 1986) considerations of the segmentation and territorialisation of space, its resultant effects on human interaction, and tensions between individualisation/privatisation and the democratisation of space. Such issues become relevant when understanding the Chinese and Shanghai metropolitan governments' establishment of dedicated migrant habitation zones, and tight surveillance of public life in the promotion of attractive transnational and Western-orientated cosmopolitanism. Relatedly, as Olson (2017) furthers,

through Tuan we may come to appreciate the importance of place to inhabitants' sense of security, home, familiarity, basic needs and shared cultural values.

Tuan's philosophical offerings to spatial critiques of sport and physical activity have been identified, foremost, by Bale (1996). Here, Bale offers, it is Tuan's emphasis on the humanistic qualities and characteristics of space, the idealisation of space as a site of/for human habitation and interaction, and the construction/pursuit of certain experiences within spaces that yield new insights for sport scholars. In recent decades, others have provided nuance to Lefebvre and Tuan's conceptualisations (e.g. Friedman and Andrews, 2011; Fusco, 2005; van Ingen et al., 2018; van Ingen, 2003). Bale's (1996) seminal early work, and van Ingen (2003) and Olson's (2017) later developments, specifically, established a need to critically interrogate the intersections between sports' metaphysical, physical and relational dimensions. Lefebvre and Tuan offer frameworks for not only examining constructions and reproductions of space, but understanding physical practices and bodies therein, and how bodies and practices become *of* space and place.

With its emphasis on intersectionality, identity formation, cultural context, social and political interaction and radical transformation, van Ingen (2003) notes, Lefebvre's work provides new possibilities for considering sports' position in configurations of our daily lives, lifestyles and landscapes. Adopting Lefebvre's emphasis on the holistic and transcendental notions of space, van Ingen (2003) reminds us that space is foremost an abstract concept that can never be fully deciphered, known or articulated in its 'concrete forms' alone (p.208). As such, recognition of the ideological and discursive elements of space are instrumental to understanding how spaces may be (re)configured. In unison, Lefebvre and Tuan's work advocates spatial analysis that originates at the ideological level and forms via cultural and social practices, institutional connections and physical interactions. From this, we take that the notion of space (specifically, the idea of collective/shared space) is enabled through commonalities of *thought*, *production* and *action*.

Although respecting the difficulties of identifying discourses in the ether, as Lefebvre and Tuan suggest, it is possible to evidence (or 'read') the formation of thought in the transmittance of social and cultural messages, institutional formations, (re)presentational practices, structural connections and *in situ* human behaviours. Thought space, thus, is not necessarily tangible *per se*, rather something 'felt', acknowledged, and that resonates within, across and between space(s) (Lefebvre, 1991a, 2003; Lefebvre and Régulier, [1986] 2004). Lefebvre noted such an appreciation was advantageous within the analysis of cities. In Shanghai thought manifests in various ways. For example, in the proliferation of English language media for the maintenance of expat communication (and transmittance of Western ideals); the promotion of transnational/cosmopolitan values (and endorsement of globally progressive attitudes); investment in shared virtual and physical community building (e.g. support for ex-pat interaction); and celebration of physical activity/sport. From thought, production space entails establishment of institutions, structures, processes and clear relationships and practices around the above ideological commonalities. The production spaces we focused on in Shanghai relate to virtual and physical public physical activity and sport sites, commercial activities orientated around health and wellbeing, and the related establishment of online highly skilled migrant networks and organisations.³

Lastly, we consider ways urban spaces in Shanghai exists as a site of action. We rehearse Lefebvre's concept of 'the third space' – a schema that incorporates the enactment of actions by the conditions and forces of spatial thought and production (Lefebvre, 1991a, 1996, 2003). The political imperative of the third space is in its transformational potential and opportunities for challenging power relations and reconfiguring spatial dynamics. Such reconfiguring may, if conditions allow, contribute to shifts in knowledge ownership and social hierarchies. In Shanghai, the action space is of interest as while residents actively participate in exercise classes, take out gym subscriptions, engage in park runs, these practices are highly individualistic and occur in exclusive and globally homogenised spaces in which social interaction, community building, and/or any opportunities or revolutionary (re)action, are mitigated by the conditions of the Chinese State which remain vigilant toward acts that might jeopardise or challenge domestic cultural and political conditions. Ultimately, a Lefebvrian approach is beneficial for examining spatial relations within Shanghai for some of the city's highly skilled migrant communities, and we offer the cityscape as a form of collective commons; initially a metaphysical space comprised of health/wellbeing, physical praxis and community and identity-making thought collisions that generate production possibilities and opportunities for agency and action.

Methodological approach

This article forms part of a larger qualitative multi-methods study on sport and physical activity and its involvement in highly skilled migrants' experiences of community formation and social integration in metropolitan China. The primary field site of this study is Shanghai, a centre both of urban development and of highly skilled migration to China (Farrer, 2019). We consider, first, some of the ways migrant community formation and social integration are framed within national and local public policy (Chen et al., 2018; Li et al., 2016). Second, we examine ways migrant community formation is organised through locally specific institutional processes, and the respective participation of public and private and commercial entities. Third, we interrogate the roles public and private stakeholders play in commercialising highly skilled migrants' urban spaces. Addressing these objectives, we synthesise information from a range of empirical sources. This material includes policy reports, expert interviews with members of relevant public and private organisations (e.g. local community offices and non-governmental-organisations (NGOs)), in-depth interviews with highly skilled migrants across several locations in Shanghai, participant and virtual fieldwork of physical activity and sport websites orientated toward Shanghai's Western expatriate communities. The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee of the lead author.

Utilising our conceptual framework, we report the initial findings, drawing on a narrative analysis of two types of online spaces for Western expatriates. We focus on online sources in so far as the primary concern of this article is the *discursive construction* of social space: its discursive production, promotion and marketing, as well as experiences as they take shape in online exchanges among expat gym users. Online sites are suitable to examine the discursive construction of fitness spaces due to the centrality of online media, particularly smartphone-centric social media, to contemporary social life in China, including community formation, expat life and sports (Gong, 2020; Zhang and Wang, 2019).

Accordingly, we concentrate first on marketing and review websites that promote gyms and other exercise spaces in Shanghai and, second, English-language, Shanghai-focused online fitness forums in which mostly Western expats, alongside other immigrants and Chinese, discuss uses of these spaces and attendant questions. We selected English-language online spaces due to the status of English as a common *lingua franca* among highly skilled Western migrant in China. English-language online spaces also capture a broader audience than those aimed at narrower linguistic groups (such as German-speakers). We present a conceptual case study wherein the data is employed to illustrate the usefulness of the theoretical framework, the utility of a particular set of conceptual constructs, and the potential connections that may exist between these constructs in relation to individuals' lives and spatial experiences.

We selected both types of websites through keyword-based online searches, using the search engines google.com and bing.cn. Google.com is banned in China and can only be accessed via virtual private network (VPN), commonly used by foreigners in China. Bing.cn is freely accessible but heavily censored, returning a narrower range of relevant results than google.com. Our use of these two search engines is based on our engagements with expats, and our own experiences working as migrants in Shanghai that have suggested more likely use of Western search engines than local, Chinese-language only equivalents, such as baidu.com.

Through these online searches, we built a register of marketing and review sites for gyms and exercise spaces, as well as of online fitness forums. We reviewed each site in full, selecting for further analysis relevant sections, on issues of sports participation, the use of public and private space for exercise, physical and mental wellbeing, and migrant community formation in Shanghai. We transferred these sections into MaxQDA for further analysis, using thematic coding. Developing our approach to thematic coding, we build on standard coding techniques in qualitative research, and particularly Saldaña's (2016) authoritative coding manual. Following Saldaña's approach, we undertook two cycles of coding, identifying and comparing key themes and issues in our dataset, followed by the use of analytic and interpretive techniques to generate a focused narrative through our data. Coding thus took place in multiple rounds of individual and joint work, to ensure inter-coder reliability, and to construct a joint analytic framework of key themes (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Merriam, 2009). These themes were then considered in light of our overarching spatial analysis presented below. With this approach, the article illustrates how the conceptual framework highlights some of ways ideology, production and action manifest *in situ*.

Discussion

Thought space: contextualising representations of expats in Shanghai

Our conceptualisation of thought space necessitates exploration of how highly skilled Western migrants inhabiting Shanghai are represented in public discourse, on the part of both state and private actors involved in the provision of physical activity/sport spaces. At the outset, we also evoke Lefebvre's appreciation of the intangible and ideological dimensions entrenched within forms of identity formation within spatial reproduction.

Here, for example, the term ‘expat’ or ‘expatriate’ carries connotations that go significantly beyond those of the term ‘highly skilled migrant’. Angela Lehmann (2014: 7) argues that ‘expatriate’ ‘carries historical baggage and indicates a type of migration from the West that is declining in prominence, that is, being employed at home and posted on an assignment, usually with a start and end date’. While Respecting Lehmann’s critique, we argue the term brings to the fore the transformation of postcolonial transnational social relationships, in terms of Western migrants’ emplacement in their host societies. Rehearsing Lefebvre and Tuan’s appreciation that holistic representations of space can be ‘felt’ through semantics, signs and signifiers, official discourse, on the role of expatriates within the broader urban development of Shanghai articulates these relationships in specific ways. One key site official narratives of urban planning are showcased publicly in substantial detail is the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Hall. Located in the iconic People’s Square in the heart of the city, the hall charts the history of Shanghai’s socio-economic and spatial development and sets out the government’s vision for the city’s future. Internationalism plays a central role in specific spatial (re)productions of this vision. As described in the Exhibition Hall:

According to the Shanghai Master Plan (2017 – 2035) approved by the State Council on December 15, 2017, ‘Shanghai is one of the municipalities under direct administration of the Central Government of China and the core of the world class city cluster in the Yangtze River Delta area. Shanghai is also an international center of economy, finance, trade, shipping, scientific & technologic [sic] innovation and a cultural metropolis as well as a national historical city. Shanghai will be an excellent global city and a modern socialist international metropolis with world influence.

To become an ‘excellent global city’, the Shanghai Master Plan sets out highly specific targets for urban development. These include ambitions to improve the city’s ‘core functions as a global city’, for example by raising the number of employees in the cultural sector, increasing spending on research, and developing attractive physical space for sport, physical activity and recreation. Within this urban development programme, expats occupy a highly particular space, in ideological, social and geographic terms. In July 2019, the Exhibition Hall hosted an animated short film that presented a particular interpretation of expat spatial practices in Shanghai. Shown on a large video screen and titled *The Party of World* [sic], this film traces the lives of six foreigners. All of them are ostensibly young, university-educated and employed in a range of professional occupations, and, with the exception Japanese migrant Kim, they all hail from a range of Western countries.

As the film states its threefold central claim: ‘With a booming city and rich history mixed in with so many different cultures Shanghai is truly a World Party!’ These three central themes – burgeoning economic development, cultural richness and cosmopolitanism – are then explored through stereotypical lives of the Shanghai expats. This intertwining of structural and ideological representation becomes fundamental in legitimising Shanghai as an attractive migrant metropolis. For example, Pier [sic] the Frenchman is excited about the professional opportunities he has found in Shanghai as an architect, and ‘he enjoys the fun the city offers, from performing with his band at different pubs and clubs to hanging out with his friends and enjoying wild parties sometimes a little too much’. In contrast, Hurman [sic]

the German works at a multinational corporation and is far more dedicated to his work than Pier. He commutes to work every day and enjoys Shanghai's 'multitude of mass transit options', including 11 metro lines and more than 1,000 bus lines, due to which he does not have to suffer from traffic jams. In turn, Barbra [sic] from the USA enjoys life in Shanghai greatly. She makes the most of the multitude of cuisines on offer in the city's restaurants, and she makes up for her love of eating out with frequent yoga sessions.

Like Pier, Hurman and Barbra, all five expats' avatar-esque reproductions are shown to experience Shanghai primarily as a site of lifestyle-focused consumption while concomitantly contributing to the city's economic development and active, youthful, vibe through their work in diverse highly skilled professions. Their socio-economic positioning aligns with their geographic positioning within the city (here, assumptions are made in the representational space regarding where migrants live, who they fraternise with and in what activities they partake, which include sport and physical activity). Through this portrayal of foreigners' lives in Shanghai, *The Party of World* achieves two narrative accomplishments. First, it typifies the foreigners regarded as desirable immigrants within Shanghai's broader urban development: mostly Western, highly skilled, affluent, and focused on the consumption of the city as a lifestyle space. Second, *The Party of World* sketches how the Chinese state imagines the insertion of Shanghai into the broader space of transnational socio-economic relationships, as a cosmopolitan city that benefits from its cultural openness by attracting the best and brightest global talent. More broadly, the film excerpt sits within (and is reflective of) the site's larger ideological, public and political function to demonstrate the might of China's economic force in leveraging large-scale metropolitan development. There are, invariably, nuances to representations of space here that defied capture. Yet, it is evident there are prevailing (state-propelled) ideals and narratives that craft thought spatial contours and contribute significantly to desirable renderings of the city as progressive urbanised locale and valuable landscape for migrant investment and habitation.

Production space: expat fitness and the individualised representations of social space

The construction of expats in official urban planning discourse is paralleled in online media narratives aimed at this social group. Here, private fitness centre websites aimed specifically at expats, alongside affluent Chinese customers, play particular roles in marketing companies' contributions to expat lifestyles and physical wellbeing. The following advertisement for a 'boutique fitness centre' is a case in point:

This one is a 'boutique fitness center' that offers small classes in yoga, personal training, sports injury massages, boot camp, body shaping[. . .] Instructors hail from various countries [sic]. The place also has its own juice and snack bar, and two relaxing lounge areas with Internet access. All of their classes are conducted in English, and they offer over 15 types of yoga classes including ashtanga, flow, hot, hatha, power, pre and postnatal, yoga kids, tai chi, and meditation. . . A variety of memberships are available, and the drop-in price is 200rmb.

(<https://www.laviezone.com/956/shanghai-best-gyms/>)

The term ‘boutique’ emphasises both distinctiveness and exclusivity, while references to fitness trainers’ international diversity and instruction offered in English make it clear that this fitness centre is a specifically cosmopolitan space, quite apart from ordinary Chinese life. This sense of exclusivity is highlighted further by references to the centre’s costs. Per-session prices – 200 RMB, or approximately £23 – represent an expensive price point against average salaries in China. This focus on individuality is marked by the emphasis placed on bespoke ‘personal training’ and highlighted by the range of tailored exercise programmes on offer. Descriptions of a ‘juice and snack bar’ and a ‘lounge area with Internet access’ make it clear that this fitness centre is not just dedicated to its customers’ bodily health, but also to the enjoyment of a certain, affluent and relaxed, lifestyle. Evident in this interplay between representational space and spatial practices was a reminder that the creation and existence of such places is never benign, but rather, political, politicised and politically laden. In this case, vis-à-vis certain social class values and associated consumption practices orientated towards exclusivity, individuality and lifestyle enjoyment. Such spatial qualities also resonate in online advertisements for other fitness centres. For example:

This is a popular gym and clubhouse attached to Embassy Court, a high-end housing estate. Members can use an indoor and outdoor pool, plus a good gym on the third floor. There’s also a cafe in the basement with decent coffee and sandwiches. In the summer, the outdoor pool is a big hit on the weekends with Embassy residents and health-club members. Membership’s about 7,000 a year. (<https://www.laviezine.com/956/shanghai-best-gyms/>)

Again, exclusivity and cost are highlighted through terms such as ‘high-end’, and a reference to a luxurious gated community in Shanghai’s former French Concession. In line with the first advertisement above, Embassy Court fitness centre highlights provisions made for its members’ individual, café-going, lifestyles. Individualisation is evidenced elsewhere in an advertisement of a night gym that provides exercise for very busy, hard-working, clients:

At a gym in the Yangpu District Citizen’s Fitness Center on Longchang Road, it’s 11pm and 15 people are soaked with sweat as they exercise. They are members of Lefit, a Hangzhou-based gym chain that moved into Shanghai a few months ago. Unlike traditional gyms that usually close before 10pm, Lefit members scan QR codes on the doors with their phones to gain access at any hour. During the day, the gym provides aerobics, dancing, yoga and body building courses just like ordinary gyms. By 9:30pm, coaches and staff begin closing up unless members have made late appointments with their personal trainers. (<https://www.shine.cn/news/metro/1708091959/>)

Personal trainers support individual fitness needs, while ease of access is guaranteed through convenient scanning of QR codes via smartphones. The advertisement continues:

Most people think of night as a time to sleep, not exercise. However, there are some people whose work schedules or dislike of crowds don’t make daytime exercising convenient. To cater to these night owls, 24-hour gyms are sprouting up across Shanghai. Though quite common in the United States and other Western countries, 24/7 gyms are a relatively new trend in China.m (<https://www.shine.cn/news/metro/1708091959/>)

Anecdotally, commercial gym/leisure centres are perceived by some Chinese residents as Western (and, thus, 'posh'/'exclusive'). By stating that late-night gyms are a new trend in China, and by tying the newness of its business model to a common practice in the USA and other Western countries, the advertisement renders the fitness centre as a modern and global, in the sense of 'Westernised', space fit for individualised identity work. Further marketing materials present images of a sanitised, yet modern, gym space characterised by plain colours and shapes, and separated from the outside world through a lack of windows and other visible markers of location, and long rows of individual exercise machines.

The same sense of individuality and detachment from the outside world emerges from an online account of the so called 'ParkBox', a portacabin-like exercise space just big enough to accommodate one person:

Shanghai's residential areas will soon provide locals and expats with small, 'intelligent' fitness capsules giving the opportunity to work out anywhere at anytime.

...

The new ParkBox shipping container-sized mini-gyms are equipped with treadmills, dumbbells and other fitness aids, can accommodate up to five at one time and are open 24.7. Exactly one thousand ParkBoxes are to be installed in and around Shanghai, with the focus on residential enclaves containing a large number of younger people. For dedicated fitness fans, the mini-gyms have a computer system named 'smart coach', which performs data analysis of workouts and also offers personalised fitness programmes.

...

Another new innovation aimed at consumers is proving popular with husbands who hate accompanying their wives on the regular weekly shopping trip. Shanghai's Global Mall is now home to 'husband rest pods' in the form of entertainment booths. . . . The pods are receiving mixed reviews from the public, with some wives claiming their partners spend too long in them and need dragging out when it's time to leave.

(<https://www.expatsblog.com/news/1412178055/parkbox-streetside-mini-gyms-help-shanghai-locals-and-expats-stay-healthy->)

The term 'capsule' again speaks of detachment from the outside world. An idea reinforced by descriptions of around-the-clock access and computerised fitness trainers that obviate the need for *in situ* instructors. Through references to the young age of the pods' users and their convenient location (near a popular luxury shopping mall), this narrative construction of commercial exercise spaces overlaps with the construction of internationalised expat identities in official ideology. Both Chinese authorities' urban planning narratives and the construction of exercise space by private companies rely on prevailing representations of space – notably, an understanding of expats as a privileged social group – to regenerate the city as an ideal(ised) migrant-tropolis comprising the most favourable spatial practices. This positioning, conceptually at least, places high-skilled

migrant constituents (and, invariably, also middle class Chinese urban residents) as distinct and attractive consumer market, and frames their existence in part, by the pursuit of increasingly individualised lifestyles in globalised social spaces.

Action space: the physical active, ethically orientated, ‘expat’

Research has noted the resourcefulness of varied migrant groups to establish frameworks that support maintenance of cultural praxis and/or contribute to host-country integration/assimilation (Peck, 2020). Such groups may also provide for social, political and economic action. First, in affording digital and physical sites for migrants’ identity work and the exercising of political power and capital. Second, the spaces serve as an institutional framework of resources migrants may utilise to advance their daily lives and long-term comfort. Third, the sites offer a platform to achieve imperatives and goals beyond the physical and social and, we argue, may aspire to the sorts of progressive and empowering potentialities Lefebvre desired of transformative space.

In Shanghai, these sites may produce possibilities for social advocacy, community development and/local activism.⁴ Foremost, are the well-established and emergent expatriate organisations that provide physical and digital spaces for highly skilled migrant engagement. Ex-pat and foreign residents’ associations – many of which operate out of, or in conjunction with, national embassies and via expat and alumni mailing lists –, for example, provide regular spaces for cultural and social exchange. Kiwi-Club (Beijing) KiwiConnect (Shanghai) and Kea-Kiwi Expatriates Abroad (all promoted on the State Embassy and Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade websites) offer Chinese-based New Zealanders monthly occasions to ‘socialise and network in a laidback kiwi environment, hosted by the New Zealand Embassy’ (<https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/countries-and-regions/north-asia/china/new-zealand-embassy/living-in-china/clubs-and-societies-for-new-zealanders/>). Similarly, Kea-Kiwi serves to grow and facilitate interactions within a ‘powerful worldwide network’ (currently approx. 25,000 New Zealanders globally, including 1200 in China) of expats and ‘high-powered’ ‘friends of New Zealand’ (<https://www.keanewzealand.com/>). As a form of ‘virtual enclaves’ (Montgomery, 2008), these organisations act as an access point to highly influential business networks, political resources and social circles through which members may advance ambitions. Such groups echo similar associations elsewhere that have long provided focal points for community building (Agergaard, 2018; Alinejad, 2011; Montgomery, 2008).

For Shanghai’s migrant residents, organisational spaces are fortified further by internet sites such as expat.com, expatexchange.com, internations.org, shanghai-expats.seashanghai.org, shanghai-expat.net and meetup.com. Providing logistical migration expertise, introductions into local life and community engagement opportunities, the sites also promote a variety of social events and physical activities. The virtual spaces advance a common perception of highly skilled expat migrants as opportunity-seeking/entrepreneurial, extroverted, paradoxically cosmopolitan yet loyal to nationalistic sentiment, and socially unifiable (or at least willing to contribute to collective causes) (Farrer, 2019). Within these spaces sport and physical activity engagement both acts to facilitate social interaction

(e.g. via the tennis club, gym space, football pitch or golf course) and provide means through which migrants can reproduce and project positive health and wellbeing ideals.

In distinction from narratives described previously, online exchanges among expats document physical exercise and sport as a medium of exchange and sociability among expats. In one online expat forum one user, for example, uses the high cost of a gym to propose a shared membership registration:

Anyone thinking of joining Will's Gym? I'm considering it since there's one near my apartment, but it's pretty steep if I sign up alone — 16800/year (23800 for two years). On the other hand, if I sign up with another person it's 12000/year (16800 for two years). So yeah if you've been looking at Will's but balking at the price shoot me a pm and we can sign up to get the discount together. EDIT: I have been enlightened, this price is way too high and I should seek out a non-VIP Will's or a different gym. Thanks all for the feedback, I really appreciate it! (<https://www.laviezone.com/956/shanghai-best-gyms/>)

Here, a paradox emerges for individuals in enacting expat life. Against the 'affluent' image of highly skilled westerners in China constructed by the Chinese government and private companies, these migrants in Shanghai are victimised by their own image – they need to 'live up to' the identity of a transnational elite and face the financial burden.

Exchanges among expats also articulate the preference for individualised lifestyles depicted in the previous sections. Consider, for example, the following description of a popular fitness trainer:

Some local trainers speak basic English, which can be enough to guide you for a good workout. However, if you speak Chinese or are lucky enough to find a local trainer with a high level of English you can make much better use of the service. . . .

Tom Fazio was one of the earliest foreign personal trainers in Shanghai, starting to offer his services in 2008. . . . Clients include CEOs and executives, stay-at-home Moms and Dads, and fitness and martial arts enthusiasts. According to Tom, the key benefits of hiring a personal trainer include 'Intelligent Program Design' that ensures consistent physique improvement, without over-training. And moral support for a journey that is sure to be challenging'. Tom's advice for those worried they cannot fit a personal trainer into their schedule is to view this process within a short, fixed timeline, whether it be six weeks or three months.' (<https://www.healthandsafetyinshanghai.com/shanghai-personal-trainer.html>)

Spaces such as Will's Gym, or the services of Personal Trainer Tom (of which there are many plying their trade in Shanghai), are of value to some expat migrants in enabling fulfilment of health and wellbeing goals. Similar to other features (e.g. restaurants, clubs, churches, alumni groups) (Farrer, 2019; Montgomery, 2008), the existence of, and routine engagement with, digital and physical resources also provide Shanghai's highly skilled migrant residents with comforts that may aid habitation, social mobility and a sense of ontological security around which immediate and long(er) term life may be orientated.

Invariably the most prominent group in Shanghai is 'Active Sport Active Social' (ASAS), established in 2003 by a local Shanghainese resident and Indonesian migrant. The group is also promoted on the *smartexpat.com* site (dedicated to enabling highly skilled migrants' transitions into Chinese life) (<https://smartexpat.com/china/shanghai/>)

business/lifestyle/clubs-associations/shanghai-active-sport-active-social-asas-9302). While many expat associations utilise sport, this group operates as a meeting place for migrants with substantive focus on facilitating participation of expat sport teams in local competitions (the group is currently the largest co-ed sport league in Shanghai with approx. 3000 members). Supported by international schools in Shanghai and commercial stakeholders, ASAS adopts an inclusive approach and encourages participation from wide migrant sectors. Distinct from other expat virtual community spaces within the context we examined, and recalling the political dimensions of the third space, the group has strong social advocacy and ethical orientations; particularly, vis-à-vis community development and charity outreach. ASAS's actions to contribute to community development, social mobility, wellbeing, and notably fill a gap in state initiatives, harmonises with Lefebvre's desire for spaces to yield transformational potential, produce new ways of being, and challenge (or in this case, provide alternatives to) existing power relations and practices.

ASAS is distinct in that by operating beyond nationalistic/state-based organisations, supporting broad membership, shifting networking away from explicit corporate and political foci (and toward social, education and developmental ends), and supporting inclusive community development and local charitable actions, it counters some of the hegemonic, and state-contoured, constructions of migrants. ASAS participants might still engage with practices of lifestyle consumption and individualised identity construction that reflects 'successful' habitation, yet the group provides ways migrants may connect their lives with social activism agendas. We acknowledge here that similar orientations are evidenced in other transnational communities (see, Nagel and Staeheli, 2010; Sobré-Denton, 2016). Ultimately, ASAS's existence and progress, and the sustainability of similar migrant networks, nonetheless, remain contingent upon the motivations of individual proponents, local resourcefulness, underpinning social and economic investment, and the wide cultural and political conditions of China and Shanghai in which these groups reside.

Conclusion

This article establishes a theoretical agenda advancing ways in which spatial connections, productions and actions of/within highly skilled migrant communities might be understood. In so doing, the work is located at a unique analytical crossroad of spatial analysis, migrant identity, lifestyle migration, community/urban development and the crafting of virtual communities for physical activity/sport practices. Whereas aspects of this intersection have been explored in other global contexts, the confluence of these areas has hitherto been unexplored with regard to the lives and experiences of highly skilled migrants, contemporary China and the Shanghai metropolis. Building from our theoretical interrogation of this context, this study contributes to conceptualisation of discursive constructions of sports and physical activity spaces, and of roles these spaces may play in community formation among highly skilled migrants. Our argument highlights how discursive formations of everyday experiences of sports and physical activity may impact upon lived corporealities and subjectivities, enabling the identification of social ties that, in turn, enable community building in transnational metropolitan locales.

At a time of more rigorous scrutiny of China's foreign policy, changing global migrant mobility to/from China, continued Western investment in China (Cai and Su, 2020;

Farrer, 2019), the bureaucratised experiences of highly skilled migrants *in situ*, and the use of physical activity/sport within lifestyle migrant discourse, interrogations of Shanghai as an exemplar of migrant community building remain needed. Such analysis should, we believe, also consider various outcomes and consequences for individuals and communities that flow from the spatial formations and engagements we have detailed in this article. While beyond the intention and empirical scope of this article, we are cognisant, for example, that there may be an array of health, social and cultural outcomes that transpire from the ideological formulation of space, the tangible features of the landscape and production and consumption processes that are engaged with by bodies therein. For instance, as witnessed during research for this article (and in our wider experiences in Shanghai/China), there are notable individual benefits (e.g. social and economic capital accrual, privilege and access of opportunity) that flow from highly skilled migrants' experiences of gyms, sport clubs, expat-based sport organisations, parks and online communities. We also assume (although currently we lack substantial empirical epidemiological evidence) there exists discernible health benefits of participants' experiences that result from Shanghai residency. Yet, access to public health data, least of all in relation to migrant residents in China, is extremely difficult to access and verify. Accordingly, we have been cautious to avoid unqualified links between the space and eventual health outcomes.

Accordingly, advancing critique of active migrant bodies within cityscapes, further work should consider how the cultural hybridity of metropolitan spaces is created, maintained, and challenged, against the backdrop of China's urban development, selective immigration of highly skilled professionals, and entrenched politics vis-à-vis authoritarian management of public spaces and a growing discourse of de-coupling from the rest of the world. While beyond the theoretical and thematic remit of the present study, recent research has begun to explore these issues (e.g. Farrer, 2019; Wu, 2020). Further research in this area would be liable to add substantially both to debates about the internationalisation of Chinese sports and about the contemporary scope and limits of cultural globalisation at large.

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Notes

1. Following Steven Vertovec (2009: 3) we understand transnationalism in terms of sustained ties and exchanges among non-state actors operating across national borders, such as businesses, NGOs, and determinate groups of individuals, and the features of these ties and exchanges.

2. According to the local government of Shanghai in 2014, for example, 56,027 foreign students were registered in the city, 8454 new foreign expert certificates were issued to highly skilled workers, 118,205 employment applications were newly registered on behalf of foreign citizens, and 169,686 foreigners were living in the city with a permanent residence permit (Shanghai Municipal People's Government, 2017a).
3. While not a specific focus of this article, we also acknowledge the role of production technologies and circuits of commodification and consumption that contribute to this spatial production, connectivity and maintenance.
4. We recognise that physical activity, sport and health sites may not set out explicitly to serve the sorts of action functions we describe here. Gyms, for instance, may be considered simply as places to work out. Likewise, expat organisations may rarely consider their leisure activities as means to promote a 'particular style' of life.

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