

Public square dancing, agency, and meaningful aging in urban China



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Global population aging has prompted older adults to reimagine what it means to grow old. In China, rapid urbanization and large-scale layoffs from state-owned companies have positioned roughly 100 million retired urban women as “socially old,” who take up *guangchangwu* (public square dancing)¹, to, as the local saying goes, “struggle for their lives” (p. 1). Claudia Huang’s book offers an ethnography of lived experiences of these dancing middle-aged and old women, a group often overlooked in scholarship and public discourse, and of the social contexts that

shape their everyday worlds.

This book centers on how retired urban women go outside to “struggle for their lives.” Huang explores the challenges they face, the resources available to them, and the broader purposes behind their efforts. The central argument frames retirement of these urban women not as a stage of social decline but as an active pursuit of *weidao* (life’s flavor), including sensory enjoyment, friendship, and modest forms of self-cultivation, through collective dance. Drawing on an anthropological life-course perspective and on the cultural construction of age, Huang shows how the Western paradigm of “successful aging” is translated in China’s

¹ All Chinese expressions cited in the text are in Putonghua, the official Chinese language, and are transliterated in the official Pinyin system.

official discourse as *jiji yanglao* (active aging), which emphasizes self-responsibility, productivity, and an “ageless” ethos; such framing risks stigmatizing those who are frail or chronically ill as having “failed” at aging. In response, Huang advances a *weidao*-centered framework of “meaningful aging,” that situates agency as collective and affective, to rewrite the agency and aging values of retired women in urban China. Methodologically, the study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Chengdu between 2014 and 2018. Public square dancing varies by venue, degree of public visibility, dance genre, and intensity. Huang conducted participant observation with two contrasting dance teams: the Dancing Beauties, an indoor, fee-based group, and the Sunset Dance Group, a community team that meets in a public park.

The first two chapters situate retired urban women’s agency within socialist and post socialist change since the 1950s. Chapter 1 asks why so many of them dance in public. Through dancer’s life history, Huang shows how congregational dancing becomes a medium through which women who lived through rustication, the *danwei* system, and subsequent layoffs begin to ask what they want, remake the self, and rebuild social networks after decades of disruption. Chapter 2 examines the dancers’ marginalized public image and their self-understandings. *Dama*, literally “big aunt,” is a stigmatizing title applied to urban women, typically aged 50 to 70,

who engage in collective leisure; their public activities are often framed by media and younger cohorts as noisy or unbecoming (Zhang, 2022). They are associated with permed and dyed hair, bright scarves, and selfie sticks. This ensemble counters gendered stereotypes while circulating emotional capital in friendship-based social interactions. Rather than accept the role of the virtuous mother/grandmother or the market’s “tender girl/ripe woman” binary, *dama* rework age and gender norms through a distinctive aesthetic and peer intimacy.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Huang conceptualizes square dance as a peer-governed arena where *dama* negotiate their roles within the family amid the reorganization of gender and generational relations in post-socialist China (Santos and Harrell, 2017). Maintaining friendships with peers outside the family becomes a way to gauge and limit self-sacrifice for the family, especially in grandchild care, and to push back against China’s “inverted” family structure (chapter 3). When they cannot readily imagine or plan a positive future for elder care under eroding state guarantees and unstable family support, the Sichuan phrase “*shua yi tian, suan yi tian*” (“play one day, count one day”) captures *dama*’s mix of bitterness, humor, and denial (chapter 4).

Chapter 5 analyzes state attempts to discipline square dancing and how *dama* find flavor (*weidao*) and freedom under an authoritarian state. Three cases show how the state tries to insert itself

into everyday practice: state-imposed choreography rejected by dancers; a state-organized competition prescribing a single Tibetan song; and a rural village head funding a local square dance team. While formalized, replicable art forms have shaped square dancing, processes of standardization, review, and appropriation have not extinguished *weidao*; dancers have leveraged them to enhance visibility and access to resources.

Dancing for their lives is theoretically careful and ethnographically rich. It links life-course anthropology with studies of leisure, embodiment, and relocates the value of aging from productivity to affective and collective practice. It sustains thick description through years of participant observation with two groups and makes methodological reflexivity visible. As the conclusion notes, the scale of traditional public square dancing may contract under the combined pressures of the pandemic governance legacy, postponed retirement, and pension strains. Yet the underlying pursuit of emotional connection, bodily vitality, and everyday self-cultivation will not disappear. Urban older women will continue to choreograph new rhythms and invent new rituals within temporal interstices, micro-spaces, and digital platforms, co-shaping the next phase of China's "flavorful aging" alongside the state and the market. I concur with Huang's call, resonant far beyond China, that in an expanding global "silver society," old age should be recognized as a frontier of social innovation and cultural

production, rather than merely a policy burden or the passive object of care.

The book's main contribution lies in clarifying the meaning of congregational dance and the forms of agency it enables. Friendship-based leisure emerges as peer-governed community-based social infrastructure that organizes time, mutual aid, and access to public space in late life. The interlocutors, however, are mobile, urban retirees in Chengdu with relatively stable leisure windows and some discretionary income. While Huang explicitly justifies leaving men aside, the framework leaves out elders with significant disability, home-bound older adults, and those in acute economic precarity. A second limitation concerns voice in intra-household bargaining. In Chapters 3 and 4, reconstructions of intergenerational negotiation rely mainly on dancers' accounts; perspectives from spouses, adult children, or in-laws receive limited treatment. Future work could widen the lens to include less mobile and low-income elders, and to bring in household members' viewpoints while attending to elderly-care welfare infrastructures. Such extensions would help specify when, and for whom, "meaningful aging" can be sustained.

This book will be of considerable value to scholars and students in anthropology, sociology, gerontology, and China studies, as well as to policymakers seeking innovative perspectives on aging. Its vivid ethnographic storytelling, accessible prose, and concise length

make it well suited for use in advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars.

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