



BUYING FACE & BUSTING BELLIES

CHANGING FITNESS ATTITUDES IN CHINA

By Emily Waltz

If fitness in China was once an unambiguously public activity, conducted en masse in large squares or parks, it is now moving increasingly toward the private sphere. While Taiji generally draws a gray-haired crowd to public parks, for the young and well-heeled, a gym membership is becoming part of the corporate package; a sign of the good life.

Interest in sports as leisure activities is growing with prosperity. Individuals cite reasons of both health and fashion, while governments are concerned with national health and corporations with the potential profits represented by growing demand for fitness centers and equipment.

One image of fitness in China is the ubiquitous little outdoor exercise centers, replete with bars and twisting discs, swinging foot-pedals and the cylinders with bumps on them (it is a bit puzzling how to use some of it, admittedly). This might be the neighborhood model of health consciousness: low-tech, small-scale, outdoor, common, free. On the other end stands an escalating roster of gyms and fitness centers with complex equipment and

specialized classes and yearly memberships costing between hundreds and tens of thousands of the people's currency. Thousands of institutions have opened their doors in Nanjing and other major Chinese cities, from hotel gyms to international fitness chains to university and community sports centers.

The new wave of fitness got a boost from the 2008 Olympic fever sweeping through China. More than just a few weeks' entertainment, the thirst for Olympic gold was tied to a feeling of national pride, and a sense that it would be a way to prove that China had arrived. Athletes doubled as national heroes, and stimulated interest in increased physical activity. But even before the Olympic hit, China had a well-established history of communal fitness activities, the most prominent of which may still be group calisthenics. Children at school still gather in rows for morning calisthenics, and companies have their workers do the same, generating rows of uniforms moving in unison, an activity not generally part of Western office culture.

Calisthenics in the Mao era were designed to heighten

patriotic feeling. Released in 2011, the ninth and newest official set of exercises was redesigned for the problems of the modern society: too much time sitting at desks hunched over computers, and growing obesity. Radio calisthenics broadcast daily in Beijing at 10am and 3pm. The most dedicated companies enter their workers in calisthenics competitions, which are open to both state-owned and non-state enterprises.

TRENDING TOWARD GYMS

Commercial gyms are the biggest players in the Chinese fitness industry. Hotel gyms follow, while public gyms trail far behind. In 2004, the Los Angeles Times ran an article arguing that joining a gym in China was more about making a fashion statement than anything else, quoting from interviews with gym members who went to sit in the in-house internet bars playing online games instead of using any of the gym's expensive equipment, and others who only came to use the sauna as a replacement for the traditional bathhouse.

Certainly, rumors of people smoking while exercising or wearing high heels to run on treadmills would reinforce the idea that frequenting a gym is more to see and be seen than it is about health, but if that was once true, it appears to be changing fast.

In a pattern familiar to many developed nations, China's economic progress has led to increased urbanization, more sedentary lifestyles, and higher consumption of meat and dairy, factors that lead to a less active population and a new set of national health challenges. News outlets in 2013 seized on a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association warning that the rate of diabetes in China had reached epidemic proportions, estimated to affect nearly 12 percent of the population, surpassing rates in the United States and by some measures, the highest in the world.

Some are choosing to exercise indoors because of another phenomenon associated with China's rapid rise, the deteriorating air quality that makes outdoor exercise something of a health risk; though depending on the filtering systems in place, indoor air may not

be much better.

Others cite the change of attitudes toward chubbiness; overweight men whose bellies were once a sign of prosperity are now told that extra weight may damage their career prospects if it is seen as a sign of laziness. What is socially desirable follows the change between thinness as a marker of those who might not have enough money to eat well to a marker of those who have the money to join a gym or hire a personal trainer. Leisure sports have become another sign of affluence, spreading from the wealthy to the middle class.

NICHE SPORTS

With the growth of the sporting industry as a whole, more and more niche sports are beginning to find their way into China, not only catering to the more individualistic minds but also mixing with local culture to form a wealth of entertaining anecdotes.

The website for Health and Safety in Shanghai warns that "some sports, such as squash, ice hockey and rugby might be harder to find, but they are in fact also available here." Spinning, rock climbing, yoga, pilates, kettleball and pole dancing are a few of the fitness activities enjoying enough popularity to support independent centers.

In 2012, China Daily featured an article about pole dancing and its image rehab from a risqué to respectable form of exercise, highlighting the story of an instructor from Chongqing (though the majority of the article consisted of pictures of skinny, flexible women wrapped around poles). The sport has also found a foothold in Nanjing; that same year, a "pole-dancing grandmother" grabbed international headlines, photographed with copper hair and thigh-high leather boots, talking about encouraging older citizens to maintain active lives and the pole dancing courses she had begun in Nanjing.

While boutique yoga studios have yet to fully invade Nanjing, Shanghai is predictably a hub where any number have sprung up. One company boasts several branches across the city with airy rooms, an international cast of instructors teaching bilingual sessions, and several dif

ferent kinds of yoga. It is also outlandishly expensive, more than ten thousand RMB for a yearlong unlimited membership, a package the sales staff push hard. While the first class is theoretically free, potential new recruits are asked to come in early and stay late, captive to a series of frenetic sales pitches that seemed out of place with the rest of the studio's calm, a symptom of the overreliance of the Chinese fitness industry on generating new sales.



Standing apart, as a somewhat strange idea of corporate-sponsored community is lululemon, of designer yoga wear fame and its see-through pants product recall; the company made headlines for having to issue a recall of some 17 percent of its high-end pants because the material was so sheer. Customers had been displeased to discover the translucency, and articles joked about people showing more than they had bargained for while in the downward dog pose. In what is apparently a reflection of the company's commitment to foster grassroots community participation and introduce newcomers to yoga, the shop offers sporadic complimentary classes at its Shanghai Xintiandi showroom. The racks of expensive halter-tops and yoga pants are pushed aside to let a dozen or so attendees spread out their mats on the store's hardwood floors.

FISHING IN THE NEW MARKET

Of course, China's massive population has industry analysts salivating over potentially the biggest fitness market in the world. However, less than one percent of mainland Chinese currently have gym memberships, while Bloomberg News cited a European sports and leisure consultancy predicting if just four percent of China's population joins, this will generate enough demand for 30,000 new clubs in the next twenty years.

There is already an annual China Fitness Summit in Beijing. Yet, if it is a sector many see as a field of opportunity there are some serious constraints that might give potential investors a moment's pause.

LOSING CUSTOMERS

Estimates are that Chinese gyms retain only about 20 percent of their current members, on the low end of reported retention rates in the Asia-Pacific. Hong Kong, for instance, has retention rates near 60 percent.

A 2009 report from the consultancy firm Deloitte went so far as to say that China's fitness industry is not as healthy as it should be, given the population's increased prosperity and attention to health. The penchant among gyms for lowering prices to compete is ultimately hurting the industry, requiring establishments to focus more on attracting new members instead of the service and quality that might allow them to retain old ones, and creating short-term cash flow problems.

Fitness centers in China typically offer only yearly memberships, leaving some members worried about losing their money should a gym suddenly fold, or unenthusiastic about paying for a year if business has them away often for months on end. Deloitte and others have called for the adoption of a monthly model and an end to yearly and lifetime membership sales.

Other gyms are striving to compete on added service and quality instead of price. Impulse Fitness Club, a chain headquartered in Qingdao, expanded to include so-called health management specialists (certified by the

Ministry of Health) to fill the void of people looking for comprehensive medical advice, evaluations, and fitness plans in a nation with few private doctors. The company also reported plans to install chips in workout equipment capable of capturing data about each member's workout habits, to better shape an overall fitness plan. The national Ministry of Science and Technology also has plans for high-tech fitness innovation, including a cloud platform national fitness database.


Based on surveys that indicate the majority of Chinese members go to the gym with someone else, the report concludes that word-of-mouth may be more critical in China than other markets, and in order to generate referrals, service must improve.

MEMBERS ONLY

China is currently home to 7056 fitness establishments, 70 percent of whose users are between the ages of 19 and 40.

The statistics seem to support the notion that gyms are more popular with young professionals, and especially among those living on the Eastern seaboard. An IBIS World industry report estimated in an industry set to generate \$4.62 billion in 2014, 20 percent of total fitness industry revenue comes from Beijing, with Shanghai following close behind at 18 percent. There is speculation that the Beijing and Shanghai markets are saturated, though second tier and inland cities may yet harbour unmet demand.

Where there may once have only been low- and high-end options, a growing middle class has more predicting middle-range gym options that are neither ritz nor grime.

And yet for many, the idea of a private gym membership is still out of reach. In an eChinacities Internet forum, one user posed the question "why are gyms so expensive in China?" Another user replied with what was voted the most popular answer: "Gyms are for the rich, who want to buy some face. The rest walk backwards while screaming toward the moon." 



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