

***Dancing in the Street in Contemporary Beijing:  
Improvised Uses and Long-Life Practices within the Urban System***

**Abstract**

A daily ballet happens on the streets in Beijing. Tracing this time-space movement, marking its rhythms to reveal that micro-scale world of how local Beijing residents dance with the changing city is the intent of my research. A dance of life, for "long-life," exhibiting resilience, the human spirit, agency and inventiveness at work, improvised spatial use is the subject of my inquiry. A city with an official population of 15 million inhabitants and a burgeoning community of foreigners busy readying itself for the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing is witness to a vision reminiscent of New York or London erupting overnight from the body of a historic Chinese city. Yet transmission of culture through millennia still persists, as a palimpsest, floating just above, along side, or around the corner from new spaces and new lifestyles; these persistent phenomena are worth documenting, saving and considering. Despite violent, overnight transformations of familiar spaces, elderly Chinese women are still dancing in the streets, enjoying themselves, circulating their *qi*.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1). to give an account of on-going doctoral research on the improvised uses of interstitial spaces within Beijing's urban system for health, and (2). to suggest new research directions that further examine urban experience from the perspective of users.

**“Culture is not just relics, rather, it is a state of mind”<sup>2</sup>**

Just as space is not visible, neither is pure culture, but both direct and mitigate every thought, action and emotion that penetrates a life, moving and shifting with time. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*<sup>3</sup> describes how cultural and social processes reveal and express values that would otherwise remain hidden in the background. These processes reflect simultaneously, how one “reads space” and what one's code of understanding spaces is. Recognizing a user group's cultural ordering of space requires careful consideration of precedents and examining social, historical, and sociological processes of a particular culture. Demanding a necessarily

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<sup>1</sup> *Qi* is the “life-force” or “vital essence” that is central to Chinese conceptions of the body.

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence with Peter K. Bol, Beijing, China May 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

interdisciplinary approach, examining the genealogy of spatial use for specific cultures could reveal sensual, psychological and physical needs at stake, empowering designers to direct their energies in informed directions, possibly to generating new, unprecedented orderings of space. The following paper describes the role that residents' personal notions of health play in mobilizing public use of interstitial urban spaces in Beijing.

## **Previous Research**

Beginning in Fall 2004, my on-going research is based on mapping recreational activities on the street and in parks, subsequent interviews with participants, and the analysis of the perspectives of the interviewees. The study commenced with a six-month period of citywide mapping for improvised uses. During this first phase, I hired taxicab drivers to drive to as many fan-dancing locations as possible for an entire evening. The drivers, who have twelve hours shifts, circulate extensively through the city each day; they see much of what happens in the city and must keep abreast of the daily micro-changes in the urban environment in order to adequately perform their duties. This surveying and mapping stage continued until taxi drivers were no longer able to locate any new spaces that were not already marked on the master Beijing activities map. I believe now that I have most of the northern city's established outdoor activity areas.

During the two-year course of research in Beijing, Professors Yu Kongjian and Li Dihua kindly allowed affiliation with the Graduate School of Landscape Architecture (GSLA) at Peking University and offered invaluable and generous logistical support for this work, in exchange for teaching in the GSLA design program. The GSLA later provided me with four research assistants<sup>4</sup> who provided me with assistance collecting data throughout the summer of 2005.

The second stage involved non-structured, extensive interviewing and open-ended discussions with street dancers, Beijing locals with legal residency permits, and taxicab drivers. My goal at this time was to lower the interfering effects of my own preconceptions and to increase awareness with local issues, as defined in through the eyes and words of Beijing residents

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<sup>4</sup> I was assisted by the diligent help of full-time research assistants from Peking University: Xu Jingsi, Hou Anyang, Xu Liyan, Peng Siyuan; and also part-time research assistants: Xu Zhiyi, Shen Fanbu.

themselves. I sought to understand how locals experienced their world so I could determine the structure of a questionnaire that would reveal their particular viewpoint in meaningful ways.

After two months of open-ended, unstructured interviewing, I began the third stage of my research: formulation and administration of the preliminary questionnaire.<sup>5</sup> Adjusting the questionnaires each time after returning from the field, I sought to develop a set of questions in a manner that provoked the greatest response from the informants. In May 2005, I met with and described this study to my research assistants and we commenced the interviews that were conducted in Chinese and lasted from 10 minutes to an hour, depending on the willingness and gregariousness of the interviewee. Most subjects were disinclined to give their names, so we decided to differentiate respondents simply by age, occupation, the chosen activity, and a randomly assigned number.<sup>6</sup> At one site, the interviews occurred from 7am to 8:15am, at all other sites; the interviews were at night, between the hours of 7:45pm and 9:30pm. The interviews took place on the street, where the informants were found dancing or performing other exercises over the course of the summer in 2005.

### **Study Site Descriptions**

The six sites for the interviews were:

- (1) Yihueyuan (The New Summer Palace). Located in the NW outskirts of Beijing, near the university district, this large park is a popular tourist destination and a World Heritage Site. An entry fee is charged for admission at this park, and because the park is closed at night, we conducted interviews here in the morning. The area of the park is over 700 acres – slightly smaller than Central Park, one major difference being that 540 acres of the park is covered by a large water body, Kunming Lake. The users in this park consisted mostly of smaller-sized user groups despite the large size of the site. We interviewed a couple out for a stroll around the lake and Beijing residents participating in *taichi*, *qigong*, and sword-dancing in small groups of ten.

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<sup>5</sup> The kind assistance from other graduate students out in the field is in order here. Spanning fields from public interest law, sociology, anthropology, women's studies to history, here, I thank Hyeon-Ju Rho, Ling-Yun Tang, Priscilla Song, Mei-Ling Ellerman and John Delury for their help and suggestions in adapting fieldwork methods from their different disciplines on the fly.

<sup>6</sup> For example, one respondent would be referred to as "57year old retired military captain who is now a fan-dancer" or "Interviewee 27."

- (2) Yongding Gate. A large concrete, paved plaza at the foot of the monumental southern entry gate to medieval Beijing, this area has been completely repaved and renovated within the past five years. Here, we encountered groups of 40 to 100 people. The large crowds here were engaged in people-watching, singing and dancing, roller-skating and line dancing.
- (3) Guangming Overpass. A paved concrete area near a major traffic overpass near the SE portion of the central city, we encountered groups of 50 to 150 people here. They were practicing “old age” exercises, social (ballroom) and line dancing.
- (4) Beihai Park. A centrally located park in the heart of Beijing, this site is part of the Imperial chain of lakes. Here, we encountered groups of five, up to thirty people, engaged in modern dance and *taichi*. We also here found middle-aged and elderly men “walking their birds” – an activity that we did not find in the other study sites. This activity entails the men walking or bicycling their pet birds inside cloth-covered bamboo birdcages to places where there are trees, hanging the birdcages on tree branches, removing the cover cloth, and then sitting nearby to listen to their singing.<sup>7</sup> This is usually done in small groups and we seemed to disturb them by our presence and attention to their activity.
- (5) Desheng Gate. On a concrete, flat area with nearby steps, we encountered large groups of fan-dancers and roller-skaters of mixed ages.
- (6) Zhongguangcun Yi Overpass: In an underpass area, we found a group of elderly women playing with children.

## Subjects

Over the course of the summer of 2005, we conducted a total of 30 interviews. Interview subject ages ranged from 13 to 82 years old. Education levels ranged from no schooling to a university degree, with the greatest number of informants – one third - having a high school education. Income ranged from none (retired) to 500 RMB/month (about \$62/month, a worker) to 4500RMB (\$560/month, a bank clerk). Occupations ranged from a government employee, to

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<sup>7</sup> I have never seen a woman engaged in “bird walking.”

a bank clerk, a few workmen, a material liquids scientist, a roller-skating instructor, a travel agent, a military captain, a housewife, an elementary school teacher, a couple of university professors, a railroad department worker, a junior high school student, and an entrepreneur.

## **Regular Users**

The study population of this study consists of the legal residents of Beijing who dance in the streets. While there is an additional, estimated three million “floating population” of migrants from the countryside who do not have legal residency in Beijing, this inquiry focuses on the permanent residents of Beijing who are impacted by the city’s massive urban transformations – greatly accelerated since winning the Olympic bid to host the 2008 games - but more generally, since the 1980’s, as a result of the post-Maoist reforms. All of the interview subjects were regular local Beijing residents – with the exception of one out-of-town entrepreneur. Roughly two-thirds of the informants participate their chosen outdoor activities *everyday*, with the remaining third that participates either almost everyday; three times a week; everyday except when on vacation or on weekends; or everyday except for the weekends. These spaces and activities occupy a central place in the normal, everyday daily lives of the interviewed subjects.

With regards to how long they have been engaging in these activities, the subjects gave varied responses. At Yiheyuan, the subjects reported practices that ranged from half a year to over twenty years. The users at Yongding Gate ranged from half a month to over one year, possibly reflecting the continuing and final completion of the renovations that were just until recently completed. The subjects at Guangming Overpass have been there from one month to four years, while the subjects at Beihai Park reported patronizing the park for a range of one to seven years. There were many long-time users at Desheng Gate, reporting using the park one year to over eight years.

## **Transportation**

Nearly all the interview subjects walked to their destinations. All of the users at Yiheyuan arrived on foot. At Yongding Gate, seven arrived on foot, one by bicycle, and one by car.<sup>8</sup> At Guangming Overpass, five arrive on foot and one by bicycle. At Beihai Park, two arrive on foot,

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted here that the informant who arrived by car has become a roller-skating instructor, so when he drives, he is actually arriving at his workplace.

one by bicycle, and one by bus, four stops away. All the informants at Desheng Gate arrive on foot. The informant at Zhongguancun Yi Overpass walks, also. Travel time averaged ten minutes, with the exception of many of the Beihai park users who walked over two miles to participate in modern dance or to walk their birds.

## Motivations

There are many reasons why people are dancing in the streets of Beijing. As I will discuss in detail more below, nearly all subjects cited physical health as the reason why they participate in their outdoor activities. Interview subjects at Yiheyuan, the large park furthest removed from the downtown area mentioned breathing good air as one of their motivating factors.<sup>9</sup> Interviews at Yongding Gate and Guangming Overpass mentioned seeking the company of others,<sup>10</sup> to aid digestion<sup>11</sup> and having fun.<sup>12</sup> Two ballroom dancers mentioned increased leisure time and lack of other entertainment as a motivating factor.<sup>13</sup> Many cite the healthful and relaxing effects that moving the body provides.<sup>14</sup> Others like to listen to their birds sing,<sup>15</sup> while others mention remembering days of youth when he was “young and free” as a reason to dance.<sup>16</sup>

## Physical Activity and Health

In this section, I will briefly discuss a recurring reason interviewees mentioned as relating to their dancing and other exercise activities: circulating *qi* to promote long life and health. I believe it is important to address this topic here, because when asked whether their chosen activity was related to personal health, all the subjects answered affirmatively. In light of this shared, common and widespread sentiment, it seems particularly reasonable to consider the performance of these chosen spaces in relation to supporting the intended health-promoting activities of its user-patrons. As the residents come to these spaces to breathe fresh air and to

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<sup>9</sup> “Breathing the fresh air” Int. 1 (fast walker); “to exercise my body and breathe fresh air.” Int. 2 (*taichi*).

<sup>10</sup> “relaxation, chatting with others.” Int. 8 (people-watcher); “to relax with the breeze in these surroundings; to chat with my wife.” Int. 15 (old-age exerciser); “I hope that after working and feeling tense, I can relax here.” Int. 29 (disco-dancer).

<sup>11</sup> “aftermeal exercise to help [me] digest food.” Int. 16 (ballroom dancer)

<sup>12</sup> “to have fun” Int. 9 (roller-skater); “for fun, I like to dance.” Int. 21 (modern music dancer); “I walk here for fun; [here, there is a] familiar feeling.” Int. 29 (disco-dancer).

<sup>13</sup> “[I] have nothing to do in the evening and want to learn something new” Int. 8 (ballroom dancer); “there is nothing else to do; exercise for good health.” Int. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Int. 19; “to exercise my body and keep good relations with the neighborhood. If I keep mentally and physically fit, I won’t get sick!” Int. 20 (“whole-body” exerciser)

<sup>15</sup> Int. 22 (bird walker)

<sup>16</sup> “[I like to] exercise for my body; to exercise with other people. It was my hobby when I was ‘young and free.’” Int. 27 (fan-dancer).

circulate their *qi*, is the surrounding environment in fact filled with good air and adequate room for full movements? These are some questions that I would like to explore in future studies.

In the research to date, most informants believe that keeping healthy is the personal responsibility and moral duty of an upstanding individual. However, they believe that the government has the responsibility to provide spaces for them to fulfill their task of staying healthy. Asked whether they believed the public's health was improving, two-thirds of the respondents agreed. However, informants were quick to add that in recent times, individual responsibility in this area is gradually eroding: "There are too many sick people who exercise too little."<sup>17</sup> The moral imperative to stay healthy is echoed in the words of another interviewee, in an almost paradoxical statement: "Health conditions are decreasing because the standard of living is improving; people are becoming lazier and lazier."<sup>18</sup> Understood in the light of a duty that lies unfulfilled, the interviewee criticizes those who are lulled into complacency by increasingly comfortable lifestyles; they are not fulfilling their personal duty to exercise and this will result in moral and physical corruption.

Consciousness of the connection between physical activity and health exists for all the subjects;<sup>19</sup> so conceptualized, the city begins to resemble an outdoor gym to which all local Beijing residents have membership. One seventy year old bird walker with liver cancer explained the link between the city and his body, between accessible city spaces and his own personal survival:

The health care system is bad. I got sick without money to see the doctor, so I self-medicate. There are no good traditional healers – *'modern' medicine has side-effects,* so I exercise here.<sup>20</sup>

From this respondent's words the question arises to which exercisers are dancing for fun, for nostalgia, for their lives, or for a combination of psychological and physical needs.

All the interviewees share the idea that prevention is the best cure. One subject bluntly stated her health care strategy: "don't get sick."<sup>21</sup> Many others echoed this point of view, stating the

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<sup>17</sup> Int. 16 (ballroom dancer)

<sup>18</sup> Int. 28 (fan-dancer)

<sup>19</sup> "health and activities are very related." Int. 27 (fan-dancer); "good health and exercise are very connected," Int. 29 (disco-dancer); "if one constantly exercises, there should not be any big illnesses." Int. 10 (roller-skater).

<sup>20</sup> Int. 22 (bird-walker).

<sup>21</sup> Int. 21 (modern dancer)

clear instrumental function of exercise: “Nowadays, everyone is afraid to get sick because it is too expensive.”<sup>22</sup> One interviewee who was watching the activities as she walked her dog does not yet participate in dancing, but stated her intent to engage in outdoor exercise as she ages:

I don't know anyone in the fan-dancing group, so I have not participated, but I will wait until I am retired, and then do some kind of exercise like jogging. My income is limited, so I cannot go to any other places.”<sup>23</sup>

This extreme health-consciousness shared by all the interviewed subjects reveals an interest in health, more than motivations that are related to physical aesthetics. Dancing in the streets is an affordable, integral part of a personal, daily, health ritual for a number of the subjects we interviewed. Accessible urban spaces where they can participate in their exercises are part of the personal strategic repertoire to ward off disease. Residents explain they cannot get sick because they cannot afford the costs of seeking medical attention. Many fear accidents that may obliterate their daily efforts at keeping their health in one fell swoop.<sup>24</sup>

A 55-year old retired fan-dancer spelled out a different personal health care plan:

For good health, what is needed most is: (1). Psychological health; (2) good health exercises are also related, but the most important is psychological health; (3). Cancer is the third concern – especially female diseases like cancer; and (4). One must also think about diet.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly enough, the response of this interviewee cited “psychological health” as the foundation for good health, preceding physical exercises alone. This raises the question of how designers can help support the maximum physical *and* psychological enjoyment of the residents. Beyond the physical availability of competently designed space, what are the orderings of space that promise to take the experience of the city to the next level?

Demonstrations of the strength and resilience of the Beijing public, continuing their daily routines despite massive urban changes, are what motivates my interest in studying improvised uses. After all the fits and starts that Beijing's urban morphology has undergone and continues to impose on its residents, unplanned uses within the urban system are a uniquely human response to unimaginable overnight transformations of routine, perspective, aesthetic and

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<sup>22</sup> Int. 20 (whole body exerciser)

<sup>23</sup> Int. 26 (dog-walker)

<sup>24</sup> “[I am] afraid of sudden family problem; a car accident that will cause illness or handicap.” Int. 8 (people-watcher).

<sup>25</sup> Int. 28 (fan-dancer)

lifestyle. How can the city be a successful outdoor gymnasium for the needs of an actively health-seeking public? Accessible urban spaces are intimately linked to Beijing residents' personal health regimes; inadequate spaces could put residents in harm's way, by depriving them of their main means to keep healthy.

### **Proposed Future Research**

From this preliminary research, new directions for further research present themselves. For example, diagramming to show - viscerally and visually - improvised uses of space by local Beijing residents across the city over time would allow analysis of patterns that arise in response to different urban planning initiatives within differing neighborhood contexts. Additionally, zooming down to street level to see the city from the perspective of the local resident and conducting walking interviews with residents along their daily path would allow one to glimpse the phenomenological world a local resident experiences each day. Gaining access to local spatial knowledge and insight into the experiential quality along path structures and between urban spatial sequences could enable designers to begin to grasp how local residents interpret their surroundings. This data may help to reveal the hidden orderings of space implicit in local culture that lie within local Beijing residents' range of perception.

### **“Form follows Culture”<sup>26</sup>**

In conclusion, form that follows culture is central to this inquiry into improvised uses of urban spaces in Beijing. An experiment that that has already started, Beijing provides the shifting, transforming backdrop for these human activities taking place on a daily basis. These unforeseen occupations underscore the tensions inherent in how people of a particular, non-Western culture are reacting to, competing to appropriate, are being repulsed by, or are perhaps re-inventing established spatial typologies imported from abroad. Examining what is happening on the ground raises the question how spaces can be designed to enhance the psychological and physical enjoyment of local Chinese residents. Perhaps the improvising dancers are suggesting to designers the kinds of physical space they need, but no one has bothered to ask whether the phenomenological qualities of these spaces – or the spaces that they encounter while traveling to and from these spaces - are optimal.

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<sup>26</sup> Conversation with Timothy Duane, Berkeley, California, September 2006.

The Chinese body – joyous and loud - in urban space is the subject of the study; this on-going doctoral research seeks to locate, describe and analyze the import of improvised uses of urban spaces by local Beijing residents who dance or exercise. By examining the genealogy of public space use in Beijing, understanding culturally-prescribed social relationships and studying improvised spatial uses inspired by these cultural practices, this research seeks to discover orderings of space that will best support the physical needs and touch the sensitivities of urban Chinese residents. It is my hope that through these investigations, we may learn new ways of enhancing high-density urban environments in countries like China to support daily human activities, while in the process, discover generative and new design typologies - that places without impacted population pressure have not yet conceived.