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Running bodies and the affective spaces of health in and beyond marathon running in China

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Citation

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Abstract:

This paper explores the affective formation of health and space/place through an examination of the affective and bodily practices of marathon runners in China. By elaborating the idea of "affective spaces of health", we investigate not only how the affective potential of running bodies enables a therapeutic and individualised form of selfhood in response to China's post-socialist transformation, but also how affective atmospheres might condition and discipline runners' affective capacities for health. The paper therefore questions the simplistic association of health with particular qualities of place, and calls for research to focus on the affective, dispersed and fluid spaces of health instead.

Key words: running, bodies, affect, affective spaces of health, affective atmospheres

1. Introduction

Geographers have been successful in stimulating interest in the role of space/place in shaping health and health practices through, for instance, the study of therapeutic landscapes (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2012), the embodied experience of illness (e.g. Butler & Parr, 2005) and the spatialities of inequitable access to healthcare (e.g. Cummins, 2007). However, instead of linking health to the particular (or therapeutic) qualities of place, or simply examining spatial patterns of health, some geographers and sociologists have started to focus on the relational dynamics of health in/and space and place (Conradson, 2005; Cummins, 2007; Duff, 2012). This relational approach argues that spaces/places of health *emerge from* relationalities, interactions and assemblages of body/self, social discourses, more-than-human subjects, and the broader social-environmental setting (Conradson, 2005). In particular, bodies are placed at the nexus of these relationalities. Health practices are not instinctive but learned, conditioned, and disciplined through bodies such that they become part of the care of the self (Little, 2017; Parr, 2002). Bodies are not only "object-targets" through which the social construction of health and wellbeing is materialised, but also agents that actively mediate the production of health-enabled space/place (Conradson, 2005; Little, 2012).

Although this relational approach acknowledges the role of embodied encounters in the process of health-making, the affective nature of the body and its implication in the production of spaces/places of health has, however, been largely unexplored. Unlike embodied experiences *per se*, affect is a relational and inter-subjective force that shapes body and space (Massumi, 2015; Anderson, 2014). As such, it can help us to better comprehend the socio-spatial relations of health-making. In this paper, we therefore advance a relational approach to the geographies of health by elucidating the role of affect in the formation of spaces/places of health. We achieve this by elaborating on the concept of "affective spaces of health", which acknowledges not only the affective potential of the body (Woods, 2019; 2020) in constructing new subjectivities/spaces of health, but also the affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2014) that condition individuals' practices and bodily capacities of health.

These ideas are examined by an empirical study, conducted in China, of marathon runners' bodies and health practices. Over the past few years, marathon running has become a popular and even fashionable sport in China. The number of marathons staged across the country dramatically increased from 51 in 2014 to 1581 in 2018, with more than 7 million participants in 2018[1]. As Ronkainen et al. (2018) notes, "the surge in enthusiasm for distance running [in China] is largely attributed to the country's economic growth, which has led to a rapidly growing, health-conscious and affluent class". In particular, rapid urbanisation and the shifts in lifestyle from pursuing *wen bao* (温饱, subsistence) to *xiao kang* (小康, moderately well-off) have facilitated people's concerns for their bodies and health. Ideologically, the emerging neoliberal values and governmentality have increasingly switched the focus of Chinese middle-class from collectivist ideologies to more individualised projects of self-making and self-enrichment (Anagnost, 2004; Ronkainen et al., 2018; Zhang, 2012). Overall, cultivating "self-health subjects" has become a form of bio-citizenship of urban Chinese that aligns health-making with desired citizens and especially the utility of a person in a market economy (Sun 2015). This social-political transformation therefore provides a social niche for the development of marathon in China and for examining how marathon can produce new ethics of the body and the self.

Against this backdrop, we first look at how the growing popularity of marathons creates affective running bodies that enable new spaces/subjectivities of health in response to the post-socialist social transformation in China. In particular, we highlight how the affective potential of running bodies (Woods, 2020) engenders narratives and exploration of the self beyond the

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[1] Chinese Athletics Association: http://www.athletics.org.cn/

prescription of the society. Second, we examine the affective atmospheres that float *in and beyond* the field of marathon running, suggesting that runners' bodies are shaped by a variety of atmospheres through which self-exploration can be affectively felt and constituted. Overall, this paper not only calls for research to move beyond the normative association of health and place to a close examination of the affective, fluid, and relational spaces of health, but also enriches the understanding of body and health in China's social-political transformations.

2. Running, bodies, and affective spaces of health

2.1 A relational approach to health and space/place

Geographical studies of health and fitness tend to associate specific discourses and practices of health with particular places and landscapes (Little, 2017; Atkinson et al., 2012). In particular, the concept of the therapeutic landscape has been used to describe the ways that particular qualities of places are implicated in the processes of healing and health-making (Williams, 2016; Conradson, 2005). Research on therapeutic landscapes emphasises the interactions and encounters between people and particular social-environmental settings that engender embodied, emotional and spiritual experiences or health outcomes (Williams, 2016). For example, natural environments such as remote "wildernesses", coasts, and Native American landscapes have been shown to not only stimulate spiritual aspiration and enable personal renewal (Bell et al., 2015) but also provide "an important space for the care of the self and the regulation of the healthy body" (Little, 2017: 322). However, rather than framing specific places as having intrinsic health properties, some research argues that health-enabling spaces and places are also discursively and relationally constituted and susceptible to not only social narratives of health but also individuals' projects of care and self-making (Conradson, 2005; Cummins et al., 2007; Little, 2012).

This approach to "relational dynamics of place and health" (Conradson, 2005: 338) is influenced by Massey's (2005) relational account of spaces/places and geographers' interest in actor network theory (ANT). Especially, geographers focus on the spatiality of ANT by tracing the relations and structures among a variety of actors (human, non-human, discursive and material) that enable the formation of particular events and processes (Bosco, 2006). As Conradson (2005: 338) suggests, experiences of health are better understood "as a relational outcome, as something that emerges through a complex set of transactions between a person and their broader socio-environmental setting". While inspired by this work, the relational approach to health and space/place has two theoretical emphases. First, this approach

deconstructs the "false dualism between context and composition" by emphasising the embodied encounter and "a mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationship" between people and place (Cummins et al., 2007: 1825). For example, Little (2012) argues that the natural environment (as a location of practices and experiences) is integral to individuals' regulation and discipline of their bodies to achieve "care of the self" – the affinity with nature (e.g., through outdoor exercise) is perceived as an authentic form of health. In particular, some research has explored running as a form of embodied encounter that creates sensory and emotional experiences of nature and "existential capital", through which "bodies gain competences within the landscape" (Little, 2017: 324; Nettleton, 2015). In sum, these insights indicate that the health subjectivities and health effects of place emerge from the relational dynamics of body and place.

Second, people's experiences of health are also situated within the social, physical and affective relations through which the body is imbricated and shaped. These contextual relations may include physical environments, atmospheres and even the larger socio-spatial system that conditions, shapes or disciplines individuals' practices of health (Nettleton, 2015). Some geographical research has suggested that health subjectivities/spaces are structured by discursive power, which works through the normalisation of subjects to produce a "regime of health" that defines the "medical understanding of what a healthy body should consume, how it should move and what is should look like" (Parr, 2002: 92; Bambra, 2007). In particular, neoliberal states have increasingly individualised accountability for health, and those who fail to meet the disciplinary expectations of society (e.g., overweight bodies) are construed as incapable subjects or threats to the general wellbeing of society (Bambra, 2007).

However, current research on the relational constitution of health-related spaces/places is still deficient in reflections on the affective, fluid, ambiguous and non-representational dimensions of the body in/and space. First, the research needs to explore not only the embodied and discursive experience of health per se but also how bodies, place, and material objects "may affect and be affected" (Anderson, 2014) in such a way that new subjectivities/spaces of health emerge. Second, while recognising that space/place matters in health-making, the research also needs to capture the non-representational and ambiguous forms of space and especially atmospheres and their influences on health making. In this paper, we therefore advance the relational approach to geographies of health by elaborating on marathon running as an affective practice that constitutes what we call "affective spaces of health".

2.2 Recreational running

Human geographers in recent years have exhibited growing interest in studying running as "an inherently geographical practice" (Howe & Morris, 2009: 308; Qviström et al., 2020; Little, 2017; Edensor and Larsen, 2018). However, most geographical studies of recreational running primarily focus on the significance of particular events (e.g. fun runs and road runs) and places (e.g. parks and trails) in eliciting or shaping running practices and public health spaces, while an "understanding of the geography of running nevertheless remains piecemeal" (Qviström et al., 2020: 576). In essence, as an exercise that calls upon the body to move across/through space and place, running not only shapes the bodily and affective capacities of runners (Larsen, 2019) but also creates new spatialities of health (Hitchings and Latham, 2017; Little, 2017).

In response, some researchers have started to explore the affective, sensual and non-representational dimensions of running and place (Edensor and Larsen, 2018; Larsen, 2019). For example, drawing on Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, Edensor & Larsen (2018: 731) investigate the embodied rhythms of marathon runners – that is, how runners train and manage the spatial-temporal arrangement of the body in order to "experience a collective eurhythmia with fellow runners" and to avoid the fear of "the collapse of the mobile rhythms for which they have prepared into arrhythmia". Similarly, Larsen (2019) argues that running is also a rhythmic habituating of place and landscape and a process in which emotion and affect flow in/through place. Other research on running and weather suggests that running bodies are constituted in relation to how "concrete and situated weather conditions are felt in our multi-sensorial embodied relations to the 'outer environment'" so that a situated and relational self can emerge (Larsen and Jensen, 2020). These insights open up opportunities to challenge the normative association of health practices with particular places or events. In this paper, we therefore advance the inquires of running, health and place by theorising "affective spaces of health".

2.3 Affective spaces of health

In human geography, affect is understood as a crucial form of spatial force that has the capacity to shape and alter the relations between/among human bodies and objects (Thrift, 2004). Affect can be viewed as a bodily capacity – the capacity to "affect and be affected" (Anderson, 2014; Thrift, 2004). For instance, Thrift (2004: 60) defines affect as "a set of embodied practices that produce visible conduct as an outer lining". However, although affect pertains to bodies, it is not embodied experience or a psychological mechanism *per se* – it is "formed though encounter and relations that exceed any particular person or any particular thing" (Anderson 2014: 102). Therefore, it is through the encounter and relation of different

bodies or things that affect becomes a "force of existing" that shapes what is thinkable and doable. In this sense, affective spaces of health are not only embodied spaces in which health is corporeally practiced and felt, but also inter-subjective spaces in which different bodies and things interact. They are derived from the affective qualities of the body but are not determined by embodied experiences *per se*.

In taking affect into theoretical consideration, we can see a more complex relationship between the running body and the wider social-spatial relations in which it is embedded. There are two particular insights of affect that contribute to the studies of running and the theorisation of the "affective spaces of health" in this paper. First, affect theory helps to overcome the limitation of a Foucauldian approach to health that over-emphasises discursive power (e.g., the discourses of healthism) and the docility of body. Instead, affective bodies are unstable and excitable, imbricated in but not necessarily determined by processes of subjectivation (Massumi, 2015). For Massumi (2015), affective bodies are not always docile and determinable, because affect is pre-discursive and conserved in the flesh and therefore remains autonomous. Similarly, Woods (2019; 2020) emphasises the "affective potential of the body", through which individuals may forge affective modes of being or self-fashioning that do not accord with the top-down processes of normalisation imposed by society. He demonstrates this argument by analysing the embodied practice of dancehall in Singapore, suggesting that the embodied encounters of dancers can engender "a decolonised self" – an affective freedom of the body that temporarily emancipates it from the hegemonic expectations of society (Woods, 2020). He further emphasises that the sensory stimuli can trigger the affective potential of the body, thus bringing about some sort of transcendental or spiritual experience (Woods, 2019). As we elaborate, this state of meditative transcendence is commonly felt by runners in their embodied encounters with particular spaces/places. In this sense, the affective spaces of health can be understood as affective and embodied spaces of encounter that always already imply the potential for the formation of reflexive or transcendent kinds of self-understanding and health subjectivity.

Second, affect theory can shed light on how collective feelings or moods of health are formed and how they influence individuals' practices of health. For Anderson (2009; 2014), affect is not singular and individual but always shared and collectively *felt*, constituting spaces that he terms "affective atmospheres". "Affective atmospheres" are formed through encounters between bodies or between bodies and things, which in turn condition the behaviour and capacity of human beings (Anderson, 2009). Therefore, an affective atmosphere can be understood as a "spatially discharged" feeling that "envelopes" and exerts pressure on the

collective "from all sides with a certain force" (Anderson, 2014). Citing Duff's (2010) work on affect and place, Edensor (2012: 1106) suggests that (affective) "atmospheres provide the conditions for orienting potential action in place, furnishing 'an array of resources useful for the realisation of specific experiences, ambitions and capacities' that can facilitate 'personal enrichment' (Duff, 2010: 882)". Yet, Edensor (2012: 1106) also notes that although atmosphere "orients us towards particular actions and expressions", it is through shared or collective practices that it can flow inside the body. This is particularly the case for marathon running in which atmospheres are felt through collective, mobile and rhythmic bodies. In this sense, we argue that (affective) spaces of health are not necessarily attached to the biophysical presence of health but can also be the affective atmospheres in which the potential and capacity of bodies are immersed and shaped. As we show in this paper, the affective spaces of health can be the "performance, creation and perception of something unseen but profoundly felt" (Williams A., 2016: 46), something that disperses and floats within individuals' everyday life. These affective forces of atmospheres in turn trigger the affective potential of runners' bodies, stimulating a sense of freedom and transcendence.

In summary, we propose an affective and relational approach to examining how bodies/spaces, affect and health mutually shape one another. Rather than arguing for the affective and perceptive quality of place and landscape, the idea of affective spaces of health emphasise that health subjects and spaces are the product of *interrelations* and are always in the processes of *becoming* and *mediation* (Massey, 2005; Anderson, 2014). Affective spaces of health are not simply about how space/place itself is felt but about how new affective subjectivities of health can emerge from the relationalities of human bodies, discursive bodies, material objects and the situated social-environmental setting.

3. Methodology

The original data for this study were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews, from runners' dairies, and via a virtual ethnographic exploration of runners' online practices and communities (Hine, 2008). The interviews were conducted with 29 amateur runners (20 men, 9 women), all of whom participated in marathons or half marathons on a regular basis. The ages of the runners ranged from 25 to 49. The sample roughly reflects the

demographic profile of marathon participants in China, 73% of whom are men[2]. Most participants were well-educated professionals or university students who can be categorised as the "modern", middle class in China. For most correspondents, cultivating healthy bodies and pursuing self-development and self-exploration are their primary motivations to participate in marathon running. Three interviewees documented the experiences of running each marathon in their dairies, which were copied, with permission, and analysed as part of this research project. The principal researcher is a runner herself, meaning she has an intimate and personal understanding of running as well as the lives of the runners she interviewed. The principal researcher's positionality as an insider therefore provides greater ease in establishing rapport with participants and hence more reliability in the interpretation of data on account of a shared cultural outlook and knowledge (O'Connor, 2004). The interviews were largely unstructured to encourage participants to express themselves and compose a "narrative of the self".

Most interviews were primarily conducted in local cafés, tea shops, restaurants and participants' homes. The principal researcher also participated in marathons to attain a sense of "emotional resonance" with other runners. Therefore, some informal interviews were also conducted *while* running a marathon. Although these interviews were not recorded, runners were asked to share their immediate experiences while running a marathon. This method can help researchers obtain a more interactive and reflective knowledge of running, and to understand runners situated affective experiences. With the permission of one "gatekeeper", the principal researcher also joined online running communities to observe runners' digital cultures, with a focus on how they utilised wearable health-tracking technologies. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours and were recorded and transcribed in full. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of participants. Data is organised and coded into three areas of inquiry. First, we analysed runners' narrative about their affective and sensory practices of running. Second, we delved into how runners make sense of themselves and their bodies. Finally, we analysed runners' interactions with their situated places and environments and the collective moods or atmospheres that emerge from these interactions. That said, it should be noted that it is impossible to fully capture all human and non-human actors in the formation of the affective atmospheres of running, so we only emphasis the social, ritualistic and aesthetic in the creation of atmospheric spaces/places in this paper. The major focus was on how the running body, affect and health interact with one another in the Chinese context.

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[2] Chinese Athletics Association: http://www.athletics.org.cn/

4. Marathons and the construction of affective running bodies

Over the past few years, marathon running has become a popular sport in China. The "marathon fever" in China is facilitated by the neoliberal social transformation and individuals' increasing attention to the body, health and self-cultivation. In Mao's socialist era, collectivism and communist utopian ideals informed the normative definitions of personhood: concerns for the self were largely subordinated to concerns about collective benefits and the causes of the party-state (Zhang, 2018). This means that the values and exploration of the self in the communist period were predominantly confined to revolutionary impetuses, collective production and the project of state-building (Zhang, 2018). In the post-socialist era, the neoliberal reform and especially the rise of consumerism and individualism have somewhat emancipated people from the normative expectations and norms of the collective, enabling new and more hybrid forms of selfhood. Today, therefore, self-care, health, and well-being have become the central concerns of living a good life for most Chinese people. This is evident in the phenomenon of *yangsheng* (self-cultivation or therapeutic concerns) that prevails in Chinese cities (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005). In particular, the pursuit of the therapeutic self and emotional coherence has become a major concern of the Chinese middle class (Zhang, 2018). However, these social transformations do not mean that the normative socialist definition of the self has been eclipsed by an individualised and therapeutic form of self during the neoliberal transition. In essence, Chinese people live in a hybrid situation characterised by the entanglement of self-realisation and socialist expectations imposed by the collective. These broader social-political processes are crucial to understanding the emergence of marathons and how individuals constitute their body/self.

Pursuing a healthy body is often considered to be the chief motivation for taking up distance running. As Little (2018) notes, unfit bodies, the anticipation of ill health and the social-medical construction of "appropriate" body shape/size trigger the decision to pursue one's desired body through running. In particular, the biophysical presence of being less-than-healthy, or ill, often pushes people to transform their bodies. For example, a 40-year-old teacher, Ming, told us that his decision to participate in marathons was made in response to the warning delivered by his medical examination report: "The report really affected me – hyperlipidaemia and fatty liver. I was very fat at that time. So, I decided to change." However, Ming could not participate in marathon running, an intensive endurance sport, without training. For Ming, the impetus to run a marathon opened up an affective and hopeful space of change in which he could be more self-disciplined and healthier:

I had no ideas of marathon running at the beginning. I just ran around in the playground (to train) and hoped to be ready to participate one day… When I was first running a marathon, I didn't force myself. I relaxed my pace and walked when I was extremely tired. The point was that I must finish my goal… After that, you would be more confident and self-disciplined – a morning jog and regular diet have become a lifestyle.

It is noteworthy that the motivation to run is not necessarily associated with the biophysical presence of illness or unhealth but is largely influenced by the discourse of *yajiankang* (suboptimal health status), a concept that is widely discussed in the Chinese media. *Yajiankang* actually describes an ambiguous state between health and unhealth characterised by minor psychological or physical disturbances with no pathological features (Li et al., 2013). The epistemology of *yajiankang* strongly coincides with the philosophies of Chinese traditional medicine and particularly the idea of *yangsheng*, which explains its popularity in China. Despite its ambiguity, *yajiankang* can be contextually interpreted and thus affectively *felt* as real: for many informants, *yajiankang* is often associated with fatigue, anxiety and "the loss of control in my life". In this sense, the discourse of *yajiankang* has actually created a common sense of anxiety and panic about the vulnerability of bodies among individuals. Therefore, for many runners, running marathons is an efficient way to ward off *yajiankang*, as Ming expressed: "Running can increase the blood flow, facilitate the metabolism and most importantly flush out the toxin from your body, and in this way it can help you maintain a healthy body."

However, we argue that people's construction of running bodies through marathons often goes beyond concerns for health and contributes to the formation of "affective bodies", through which individuals can engage in self-exploration and reclaim control over and autonomy of the body/self to negotiate social transformation and social expectations. In post-reform China, neoliberal values such as self-entrepreneurship, self-responsibility and social progress have become overwhelmingly accepted among elites and the middle class. However, the reconciliation of neoliberalism with socialism in China has produced a contradictory state of the self – it enables more individualised forms of self-exploration, but the value of the self is largely constrained by the self's utility and productivity in the market.

Instead, marathon running and especially embodied encounters with spaces/places enable Chinese runners to rediscover the affective potential of the body. That is, the value of the body is not subject to either socialist or neoliberal forms but is self-discovered. Guan, an architect

working in a state-owned institution, recorded his experiences of running a marathon in his diary:

At 28 kilometres, I could see the Nanchang Bridge far away. My body was extremely exhausted, but I was very satisfied – I had never run so far and it was a miracle for me… I looked towards the other side of the Yangtze River; I was recalling the time when I was 28 years old. After 7 years of working, I had been deeply tired of the job. I could not find any passion. Running may help me break up this patterned life trajectory that I can anticipate continuing for the next 30 years.

The quintessence was in the last 10 kilometres – the stable and constant speed made you feel a sense of freedom. When you almost reached the limit of your body, you were still sane, but your legs [felt] like [they were] filling with lead. Then you slowed down to walk and but soon you struggled to restart running. You had to repeat these struggles periodically until you finished the race. It seemed masochistic. After I finished, I swore I would not participate in this again. But soon, I started my second and third races. That felt like riding a roller coaster, which made you addicted and kept you pushing the limits of your body. If you didn't do this, you would never know your true potential.

For Guan, through disciplined and "masochistic" practices, he attained an affective state of transcendence, in which he detached from the patterned and ordinary self to the "true potential" of his body. Similarly, Lijun, a 35-year-old teacher, told us how the negotiation of painful moments in her first marathon enabled her to attain a new understanding of pain and herself. Lijun articulated a positive interpretation that being in pain was a normal part of experience rather than something she should avoid:

When I reached 25 kilometres in my first marathon, I thought I had pushed my body to its limits. My legs started to go into convulsions. I could clearly hear my heartbeats, and I breathed painfully… I think this is a weakness of humans: when we experience pain and suffering, we try to determine how did it happened and prevent it from happening again. But, when I came back from it, I realised pain was just a part of my experience that I didn't need to avoid. In marathons, you learn to attain happiness from being in pain.

Like Guan's masochistic feelings, Lijun's negotiation of the painful moments also enabled her to explore a dialectical and transcendent understanding of the self – happiness and pain were mutually constituted. Likewise, many other runners also consider the various embodied experiences of marathons as tools of self-exploration and of rediscovery of the (affective) potential of the self. Xueyi, a 32-year-old engineer, told us how running enabled him to reclaim control of his body/life: "Actually, I became more free: I became more skilful in managing my time and stopped staying up late; I had courage to refuse some social outings that my work required me to do." In general, the construction of an affective running body provides runners a "technology of the self" through which they can transform themselves to attain a certain state of transcendence, freedom, control and self-realisation (Foucault, 1988). As Woods (2019: 181) argues, the transcendent is "is latent within every body" and "becomes manifest in response to an affective experience". In other words, the affective potential of the body ontologically exists within the body to be revealed through practice. Marathon running therefore provides an embodied stimuli that triggers runners' affective potential of the body; a bodily state that cannot be reduced to the normative subject forms of socialism and neoliberalism.

Although the affective potential of running body is largely self-explored, it is also discovered and achieved through particular "mobile and embodied rhythms" that enable runners to act in accord with the intensity and temporal rhythms of marathon (Edensor and Larsen, 2018: 731). These rhythms include not only pre-race training to build up psychological capacity and make the body "race ready" as we mentioned above, but also the rhythmic control of the body in terms of the speed, breathing and pulse during training or race as well as the habit and lifestyle beyond marathon running (Edensor and Larsen, 2018; Larsen, 2019). Runners often learn to evaluate their biological rhythms during running through the assistance of wearable technologies such as self-tracking devices, GPS and running-oriented apps. As one runner told us: "it (the watch) can help me more efficiently set up my own training plans. I can see the number and intensity of trainings that I have done and I intend to reach… These devices can help you monitor your body – whether your body has re-energised or whether it is ready for the next race".

It is noteworthy that for most recreational runners, the significance of achieving certain rhythms of running body is primarily to complete the race successfully and to prevent "hitting the wall". Therefore, most runners attempt to avoid quitting during the race, because it would threaten their psychological capacity and self-esteem. For instance, one of the respondents, Feng, shared us his experience of "hitting the wall" and how he overcame it through the rhythmic control of his body in the next race:

Sometimes losing your rhythms (*jiezhou*, 节奏) of running would really affect your mood and lead to frustration and self-doubt. I remember one time that I hit the wall during a marathon in Xi'an. It was at the midday while the temperature was growing, I found a large slope ahead of me – I abruptly collapsed. But in the next time when I made full preparation and learned to adjust my rhythms according to the temperature and heart rate. I controlled my paces during the midday to reserve power for the last 10 kilometres. I finally made it.

Feng's case indicates that affective body is *relational* and *unstable*, perturbed by the situated and sensory environments of weather and topography. In this sense, the affective running body is realised through what Larsen (2019) calls a "rhythmic habituating" of place and landscape – an affective harmony between mobile body and its situated environments. In what follows, we further elaborate on the collective affective body and the formation of affective atmospheres that in turn shape runners' affective capacity of health.

5. Affective atmospheres of health

The term "affective spaces of health" as we use it includes not only the affective body as a site of health-making but also the affective atmospheres generated by the relationalities of bodies, material objects and social-environmental settings (Anderson, 2014). In this section, we further examine how the affective atmospheres that transcend the field of marathon running shape individuals' practices and affective capacities of health.

Marathon running is not an isolating pursuit but rather an affectively atmospheric sport in which different bodies are immersed. When we asked participants about the appeal of marathons, many suggested that the "atmosphere" (*qifen* 气氛) was an important source of their enjoyment. Following the relational epistemology of ANT, we suggest that human bodies (runners, audiences), non-human and material objects (nature, architecture, running devices) all have the abilities to shape the "atmospheres" of marathon. However, in this paper, we particularly emphasise the role of ritualistic nature, aesthetics (along with spectacle), and the sociality/community in generating the "affective atmosphere" of marathons.

One of the respondents, Lijun, noted the differences between marathon and individual running and described how the atmosphere functions as a "force of existing" that pushes his body:

Marathon running and normal running are totally different in terms of atmosphere and feelings. Especially, there are lots of spectators encouraging you along the way and lots of volunteers that offer you water or energy gels. Anyway, when you are about to reach your limits, there is always a force pushing you.

When we asked for their observations on the atmosphere of competitiveness in marathons, many respondents replied that competition was not the most important impetus that attracted them or kept them running. Instead, they emphasised a variety of other affective atmospheres, including the senses of ritual, equality, freedom and accomplishment. Rong, a 24-year-old university student, noted that marathons are more like a self-competition, a journey of self-exploration. However, this self-exploration was not isolating but rather collectively felt through the ritual spaces of marathon. As Rong noted, "The atmosphere of marathons is what really attracts you, makes you excited. It makes you feel that you have been rewarded. This is what we call the sense of ritual – you feel validated."

In particular, as some participants suggested, the sense of ritual was also animated by the atmospheres generated by particular landscape place or environment. Another runner told us that he preferred Beijing marathons, not because he loved the city but because the starting point at Tiananmen Square gave him a sense of spectacle and ritual. Holloway (2013: 205) suggests that ritual space is the *patterning of space-times*, a relational space composed of "heterogeneous materialities and immaterialities: texts, talk, bodies, objects, architectures, atmospheres of mood, smell, touch and sound, rhythms and emotion combine and interact to realise" particular affective atmospheres or collective feelings. In marathons, the particular kinds of clothes worn by runners, the chants and cheers from spectators, the spatial arrangement of the route, and the celebration activities after the race, etc., create a sense of ritual that distinguishes marathons from the ordinary. Collins (2004:34) states that ritualised environments emerge from the gathering of bodies in a physical attunement: "When human bodies are together in the same place, there is a physical attunement: currents of feeling, a sense of wariness or interest, a palpable change in the atmosphere." Illustrating these ideas, Tian, a 40-year-old engineer in inland China, explained how a strong sense of ritual was created by the attunement of the urban environments in a marathon held in Hong Kong, such that a standard urban space can be transformed into a ritualised space for marathon:

You know, in Hong Kong, the golden district of Nathan Road [was] the most narrow track I had ever run on. However, I was shocked by the extreme order there: the clean street, the audiences, police officers and volunteers, orderly lining up along racecourse. It made you felt that the city inclusively belonged to you at this moment.

Moreover, marathons were also experienced by many runners as a space of freedom and equality built upon an ethical relationship they called "runnerhood" (*paoyou* 跑友). As most of the runners were not athletes, competition and ranking were not their primary concerns. Instead, they placed more emphasis on the interactions and relationships of runners. The "runnerhood" created the atmospheres that transcended the everyday self and social relations. For example, a 41-year-old doctor, Kong, told us:

When you step onto the marathon course, we have common pursuits, we are fellows, we encourage each other. We put down all troubles and unhappiness; we call each other running fellow regardless of family hierarchy and social status. These atmospheres definitely enable you to relax yourself and get rid of the stress of urban life.

It is noteworthy that the affective atmospheres of marathons emerge not only from the interaction of different bodies but also from the runners' embodied encounters of places. Along the marathon route, the runners also experienced what Nettleton (2015) calls "aesthetic atmospheres" as they did not simply run through places/landscapes but ran *with* them. For example, Junfan, a 28-year-old financial manager, shared his experiences of running amidst the aesthetically beautiful landscape of Xi'an :

When you are running in nature, you experience the fresh air, the changing scenery and the shifting weather. It could be raining or intensely hot. As time goes by, you could see stars in the sky. You aren't simply running; you can't help but experience them. They somewhat purify you… When I was once running on the thousand-year-old fortification of Xi'an, I could feel my existence in history, a feeling that was different from tourists'.

Junfan's experiences indicate that runners' embodied encounters with places/landscapes are not simply sensual and visionary but are felt as affective atmospheres in which the aesthetic perception and the sense of purification and freedom are enabled (Nettleton, 2015). As

discussed in the previous section, running bodies have affective potential. However, we further argue here that the affective potential of bodies also manifests in "the body's crucial roles in aesthetic perception and experience, including the aesthetic dimension of body therapies, sports, martial arts, cosmetics etc." (Shusterman, 1999: 304, see Nettleton, 2015). Therefore, the aesthetic atmosphere is an important dimension through which the marathon as a journey of self-exploration is affectively engendered and constituted.

Finally, we turn to discussing the affective atmospheres that float beyond the field of marathon running and disperse in runners' everyday life. In particular, we suggest that these affective atmospheres are often digitally mediated. As Ash (2015) argues, digital technologies (e.g., code and software) can shape the ways that collective feelings and moods are produced, presented and sensed. The wide use of wearable technologies among runners (e.g., self-tracking devices, running apps and other social media) has created social-affective spaces in which runners can share and compare their running performance and practices. For the new runners, these online running communities were important spaces from which they obtained information and advice from experienced runners. Yuan, a 25-year-old university student, explained how the online running community helped him develop marathon running into a lifestyle:

> In the past one year, I have met lots of running fellows online and offline. Their positive attitudes definitely affect you. Especially, their advice and encouragement helped me get through the "hit the wall" period… Through interacting with them, I have gradually become eager to learn the professional skills of running. Now I am addicted to marathons.

In addition to providing mutual help, these online communities also create "structures of feeling" characterised by a healthy and disciplined lifestyle and a positive life attitude, or, in runners' own words, "positive energy" (*zhengnengliang* 正能量). As the "felt sense of the quality of life", a "structure of feeling" is a force of collective affect that exerts pressures and sets limits on individuals' experiences and actions (Williams, 1961: 63; Anderson, 2016). In other words, as the culture of "positive energy" was deeply recognised within the online running communities, these affective atmospheres or structures directed individuals 'from all sides' (Anderson, 2014) towards particular affective registers and normative behaviours. These online communities were normally organised as WeChat groups. In WeChat, runners often actively shared their running dairies, performance, and training records and routes so that they

could monitor and exert pressure on each other. For example, when a runner finished training, he or she would send the records and data generated by his or her running apps or self-tracking devices to the WeChat page – an action that the runners called "everyday check-in". Therefore, the regular "check-in" has become an important indication of a "good" and self-disciplined runner. As, Tian, the 34-year-old engineer, noted, "The reason for sharing (data) is that we need others to monitor us and to push us so that we can maintain a healthy lifestyle." As Stragier et al. (2015) argue, sharing data on physical activity via social networking sites is an important method of self-monitoring. However, we also note that this form of self-monitoring is structured by the ideologies produced by the interaction between runners and digital technologies, because runners need to carefully manage their image and behaviours in accordance with the culture of "positive energy". Moreover, many runners believed that they should also spread the "positive energy" of marathons to their family, friends and relatives. For some runners, running not only became an important aspect of family life but also enhanced their responsibility to their family: "Now, I often encourage my child to run with me and accompany him to participate in the sports day organised by his school. I think this is a responsible attitude towards family and life." In this sense, paying attention to the atmospheric qualities of health enables us to see how affective space of running disperse and float within runners' everyday life, and come to shape their habits and lifestyles as well.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined the embodied, affective practices of marathon runners and how they were implicated in the production of spaces/places of health. China's neoliberal transformation has enabled therapeutic forms of selfhood that emphasise the care of the self. These new forms of self/body are socially and culturally constructed by both traditional Chinese epistemologies of health (e.g., *yangsheng*) and the emerging discourse of healthism. Marathon runners actually accepted the discourse of healthism and, in particular, the affective tension generated by the discourse of suboptimal health status (*yajiankang*). However, we argue that running bodies are shaped but not determined by discursive power, as bodies are always-already excitable and have the potential to create new forms of personhood beyond the processes of normalisation. Although this paper does not substantively engage with the political potential of affective bodies, future research can focus on how affective bodies interact with China's biopolitical projects and especially its recent "Healthy China Initiative".

In general, this paper contributes to health geography by drawing on an affective approach to exploring the relational production of spaces/places of health. It is the affective nature of the body – the body's capacities to affect and be affected – rather than the embodied experience *per se* that is central to runners' project of self-exploration and their encounters with spaces/places. Here, our argument interrogates the simplistic association of health with particular embodied experiences of place (e.g., therapeutic). It is in this sense that we propose the use of the concept of "affective spaces of health" to capture and examine the affective, ambiguous, fluid spaces related to health. In this study, the affective spaces of health emerge not only from bodies' encounters with other bodies, places and technologies but also from a variety of affective atmospheres in which bodies are felt, conditioned and disciplined (Anderson, 2014). The ritualised, aesthetic and communal atmospheres that we have discussed in this paper show that "affective spaces of health" are also about how different bodies come together in a physical and affective attunement (Collins, 2004) such that health consciousness and subjects are aroused. Overall, the contribution of this paper is that we provide an alternative approach to theorising the spatial-affective relations of health and health practices beyond the normative association between health and space/place. Notwithstanding, the limitation of this paper is also noteworthy: we cannot guarantee that the methods we use fully capture the pre-discursive and non-representational dimensions of affective practices. Therefore, future engagement with the "affective spaces of health" needs to be assisted with innovative methods such as qualitative GIS and mobile methods (Spinney, 2015) to explore the more complex affective patterns of health practices.

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