

Special Issue Research Article

Working Out in “Sunlight Happiness Gym”: Fitness, Well-Being, and Temporal Rhythms in the Contemporary Tibetan City

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Abstract

What might it mean to strive for well-being and a viable life in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)? What are the temporal rhythms of urban life for government-employed Tibetan women in their mid-twenties? This article engages with these questions by foregrounding seemingly mundane activities related to fitness and sport as they are experienced by Yangkyi and Tselha, two highly educated government workers in their mid-20s. It draws on seven months of ethnographic research, followed up by communication on social media, to examine the everyday routines and concerns of the two women, exploring how “Sunlight Happiness Gym,” a high-end fitness studio catering to the city’s growing middle classes, emerged as significant in their efforts to be well. The article shows how working out created its own temporal rhythms for Yangkyi and Tselha and opened up potentials for self-making that were more difficult to create in other domains of their lives. By demonstrating that, for Yangkyi and Tselha, ideas and practices of well-being, self-care, and fitness get intertwined through going to the gym, I argue that working out plays an important part in their attempts to create joy, meaningful relationships, and a viable life in an environment characterized by often overwhelming structural conditions.

Keywords

Well-being; fitness; temporal rhythms; self-making; Tibet

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Introduction

The first encounters I had with Yangkyi and Tselha took place in the women's changing room of "Sunlight Happiness Gym" in the spring of 2015.¹ "Sunlight Happiness Gym" was a high-end gym catering to Lhasa's white-collar workers, many of whom worked for the government. According to its staff and members, it was the city's most upscale and popular gym. On a rainy evening, I was getting ready for the "Fashion Dance" class, along with a few other gym members. Twenty-six-year-old Tselha, whom I had become acquainted with during previous visits, was chatting with Yangkyi. When I overheard Tselha mentioning that her legs were fat, I chimed in to say that she should not say such crazy things, and the two of them let me join their conversation. On that day, Tselha attended a spinning lesson while Yangkyi and I danced together in the first row of class, facing our teacher Sonam on a small stage, with the large floor-to-ceiling mirrors covering the front wall of the studio space. Above the stage, a red banner declared that we were in "the great lecture hall for perfect health and knowledge" (Ch. *wanmei jiankang zhishi da jiangtang*). "Yi, er, san, si", Sonam was counting through her face microphone. As usual, she conducted the class in Putonghua, singing along to English and Chinese pop music that she played from her iPhone to encourage us. However, several participants gave up early. Sipping from their water bottles, they took a rest at the side, their red faces focused on observing the others. Yangkyi kept going until the end. Throughout the fifty-minute workout, we made eye contact a few times and smiled at each other. I remember being in awe of how quickly Yangkyi picked up the movement sequences. While dancing, her body seemed to move lightly and effortlessly. I, on the other hand, struggled to keep up with the fast-paced motions.

What might it mean to strive for well-being and a viable life in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)? What are the temporal rhythms of urban life for government-employed Tibetan women in

their mid-twenties? In keeping with this special issue's aim to engage ethnographically with the "ordinary" and the margins of Tibetan and Himalayan worlds, I think through these questions by drawing on conversations, interviews, online chats, and time spent with Yangkyi and Tselha, whom I met while I was studying at Tibet University and carrying out seven months of ethnographic research on the making of urban belonging and gendered subjectivities in 2014–15 (Kukuczka 2019). As young civil servants working for government institutions, Yangkyi and Tselha grappled with existential questions such as how to be well and to make life viable under challenging circumstances. As Tibetans living in the TAR, they are structurally marginalized citizens. Yangkyi's and Tselha's socioeconomic and educational location, however, did not place them in the margins of Lhasa's urban fabric at the time I met them. Despite this, their personal circumstances and status as government employees often made them feel vulnerable and painfully aware of the constraints shaping their lives.

The quest for well-being and a life worth living is a shared human condition (Hage 2019, Jackson 2005; 2011, Mattingly 2014). In "Life Within Limits," Michael Jackson reminds us that we should understand human well-being "not as a settled state but as a field of struggle" (2011: ix). Yangkyi and Tselha had struggled with "being well" due to political, social, and biographical circumstances in school, university, and the workplace. Their struggle for well-being and their efforts to create a viable life that transcends what Ghassan Hage (2019) terms mere "bearability" take us to an unexpected place: a gym. When they narrate their lives, Yangkyi and Tselha emphasize that going to the gym means more to them than simply keeping fit. To them, gym-going is also crucial for their sense of well-being and their pursuit of "struggling to move from the domain of bearability to that of viability proper where life can also be enjoyed" (Hage 2019: 83).²

There is no doubt that Yangkyi's and Tselha's experiences are not only shaped

by the gendered temporalities that frame Tibetan women's lives, but that they are also embedded in socio-economic, political, material, as well as affective forces and ruptures in urban Tibet at a particular historical juncture, namely the 2010s onward. Their everyday lives unfold against the backdrop of public employment as a central career path for university graduates in Lhasa, the ongoing structural violence Tibetans experience within the People's Republic of China, Chinese media and state-promoted discourses of happiness and self-development, and the cultural imperative to care for parents. However, by attending to "women's own ideas of their work and daily lives" (Mohanty 2003: 74), I hope to provide glimpses into Yangkyi's and Tselha's everyday routines and concerns while exploring how the "Sunlight Happiness Gym" emerged as significant in their efforts to be well. By doing so, I tune into the existential questions that surfaced in fleeting moments and interactions I shared with Yangkyi and Tselha as they sought to craft a sense of well-being through routine gym visits and workouts—activities that appear ordinary or mundane, perhaps even insignificant at first. Although these glimpses speak to broader structural forces, they cannot simply be reduced to them. Above all, they show how two individuals, with their personal wishes and dreams, biographies, subjectivities, and family dynamics, try to make sense of and navigate the personal and political constraints and dilemmas arising in their everyday lives.

Self-making Through Sport and Fitness

Scholarship on sport and fitness demonstrates how women carve out space for self-care, sociality, and the creation of belonging through embodied practices that provide them with novel possibilities for gendered self-making (Archambault 2021; 2022, Leshkowich 2008; 2012, Rana 2022; 2023, Samie 2013, Sehlikoglu 2021, Spielvogel 2003, Thangaraj 2015: 188–195). Although reasons for working out may vary greatly within a given context and often evolve over time, what ethnographies on

Istanbulite "sporting aunties" (Sehlikoglu 2021), young Dutch Muslim kickboxers (Rana 2022; 2023), Vietnamese and Japanese urban middle-class women (Leshkowich 2008; 2012, Spielvogel 2003), and women from diverse social locations in a small Mozambiquan town (Archambault 2021; 2022) highlight is that working out is a crucial site for complex self-making projects that hold the promise of transformation, of alternative ways of becoming and reimagining life well beyond the confined space-time of exercise. In addition, this literature highlights sports' gendered dimensions and makes them visible as a relational pursuit embedded into hierarchies of class, labor, and care. Multiple societal and family demands are commonly placed on women's bodies and time, and it is relational care work that in turn shapes the ways women imagine and pursue working out.

This article foregrounds Yangkyi's and Tselha's quest for well-being, the temporal rhythms it creates, the potential for self-making it opens up at a gym in Lhasa, and thereby a thematical lens that has until now been marginal within Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, namely sport and fitness. I build on recent ethnographies on Tibetan women's everyday lives in Eastern Tibet that attend carefully to women's gendered, embodied, and material engagements with the world (Cho 2015, Fitzgerald 2020) as well as analyses scrutinizing desires for beauty and body modification within China, largely centering on Han Chinese women's practices and narratives in megacities such as Shanghai and Beijing (Lotti 2020, Starr 2023, Wen 2013, Yang 2011; 2017). Contributing to this literature, I deliberately centralize sport and leisure as a way to better understand Tibetan women's concerns and everyday experiences within the TAR.

Educational Trajectories, Educational Ruptures

Both Yangkyi and Tselha were born and grew up in Lhasa. Back in 2015, Yangkyi was a twenty-five-year-old unmarried civil servant who lived with her parents. Her

younger brother attended high school in a Chinese city. From the outset, Yangkyi's life trajectory up to that point seemed straightforward and perhaps not that unusual for a woman born in 1990s urban Tibet. After her schooling, she received a university education at Tibet University. She then took the civil service examination (Ch. *gong-wuyuan kaoshi*) and scored high, which meant she got invited to a job interview not just anywhere in the TAR, but in her city of choice, Lhasa, where she was successful in securing a position. While not providing an extraordinarily high salary, the job was stable and enabled her to provide for her family. Yet, Yangkyi's life could have turned out rather differently at several crucial junctures.

Over a cup of tea and a bowl of noodles in a restaurant overlooking the roof of the Jokhang temple, known to Tibetans as the Tsuglakhang, Yangkyi lowered her gentle voice and shared with me that her family had suffered hardship at the time when she finished elementary school. As a consequence, her parents wanted her to stop her education after the six years of elementary school. She remembered pleading with them desperately to let her continue going to school. A teacher came to intervene on her behalf, attesting that she was a hard-working, outstanding student. Ultimately, her parents agreed. Yangkyi continued studying. Due to her excellent grades, she later attended the best high school in Lhasa.

In more recent times, Yangkyi had also experienced hardship. She suffered from a mental health crisis during her first year at university that once again changed her educational trajectory. Originally, she had attended a university outside of the TAR where one of her fellow students became highly competitive toward her. The competition made Yangkyi feel extremely unwell. Eventually, she got sick from the pressure and stress. She recalled not wanting to do anything and being afraid of meeting people. Withdrawing from life and her studies, she stayed inside the dormitory. Yangkyi was sick for a year and spent months recovering in hospital. She then quit

her studies at that university, registered at Tibet University, and moved back in with her parents.

Tselha's educational trajectory was similar to Yangkyi's in some regards. However, their experiences also differed. By 2015, Tselha had been working for nearly four years as a civil servant in a city office. As a child and teenager, she grew up with her grandparents and paternal aunt's family because her parents lived in the countryside. Tselha was an only child, but her aunt's son was like a younger brother to her. Because Tselha's grandfather did not see any benefit in a Tibetan language education and, by extension, exposure to Tibetan culture and religion in general, Tselha attended a Chinese school in Lhasa, where she was one of the few Tibetan kids. Tselha's childhood was devoid of pilgrimage trips or learning about Tibetan Buddhism; her grandfather despised religion.³ Because of his disregard for transmitting Tibetan culture to his children and grandchildren, Tselha never learned to read and write Tibetan properly, something she felt embarrassed about and regretted deeply. In fact, the very first time we met in the gym's changing room, ready to change clothes after a sweaty workout, Tselha wore a T-shirt decorated with Ume script (Tib. དབྱེད་), a common fashion among young adults at the time. During this encounter, she praised me for studying the Tibetan language. Tselha was trying to learn Tibetan on her own by practicing with children's books in the evenings after returning home from the gym. However, it was proving difficult for her to become proficient in reading and writing.

Tselha had not only missed out on attending school with Tibetan children, but also the staff in the office in which she worked mostly used the Chinese language. The general absence of the Tibetan language even extended into the intimate space of her home. Her grandfather and father preferred speaking Chinese within the family. Being an only child, Tselha imagined having two kids in the future. They would receive their schooling in Lhasa, she once stressed, learning their language among

other Tibetan children. For her university education, Tselha spent four years in a province located 2700 km northeast of Lhasa. She enjoyed her studies there and remembered this time fondly as one of independence and possibility. After graduating, her family expected her to return to Lhasa. At the age of twenty-two, she moved in with her parents, who had relocated to the city after their retirement. Tselha's grandparents were now splitting their time between her aunt's and her parent's houses, a living arrangement for the elderly that Tibetans in Lhasa would traditionally consider "bad care".

Paths Taken, Paths Foreclosed: Struggling to be Well

When Yangkyi and Tselha talked about their work, no spark or element of excitement was apparent to me. On a warm day in July, Tselha and I met during her lunch break in a popular coffee shop located within walking distance of the Barkor, the heart of the old city and the circumambulation path around the Tsuglakhang temple. As a civil servant working for the Chinese state, she was not allowed to enter the circumambulation path, so I had suggested a coffee shop far enough from the Barkor to avoid any issues. After some initial talk, during which Tselha spoke rapidly in Tibetan, occasionally relying on a Chinese-English dictionary app to make our exchange flow smoothly, the conversation became more serious. Perhaps encouraged by the atmosphere of a café frequented by Lhasa's affluent middle classes as well as Han Chinese and foreign tourists, she shared with me her previous aspiration to travel. After graduating, she had planned to travel around China, visiting different places and taking on occasional jobs. However, her family, especially her grandfather, emphasized the infeasibility of this dream, given Tselha's gender. "I wanted to travel. Maybe I would take a job as a waitress. I wanted freedom. But they said I shouldn't do that. I should take the government exam and a government job." Pondering her current situation, Tselha expressed her view that a person only has one life and that this was now her life. "Now

I am *surviving*. But there is a difference between *surviving* and life," she said. She used the English term "surviving" as if to lend more substance and urgency to her thought and perhaps to ensure that I would grasp the severity of her situation.⁴

Yangkyi was also trying to come to terms with the path she had taken. Upon graduation, she had worked for a private company. When I didn't understand what kind of company this was, she made a reference to the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness," explaining that the main character, played by Will Smith, worked for an investment company in a similar office. While she found meaning in her job and felt that she could learn a lot of skills, including how to make money, her parents were not content. During her year at the company, her parents pressured her to find a permanent and stable job, such as in the civil service.⁵ "My parents are old," Yangkyi explained. Her mother and father were in their early forties and fifties, respectively, and were no longer working, making her the family's primary breadwinner. Respecting their wishes, Yangkyi gave in. In our conversations, she never questioned the responsibility to care for her family and provide them with a sense of financial stability, but I sensed that it weighed heavily on her. Yangkyi disliked her job, which mainly consisted of handling paperwork and did not feel meaningful to her. The strict work routine, stress, and severe restrictions that extended into her personal life, such as being prohibited from participating in public religious acts, were challenges Yangkyi accepted for the sake of honoring her parents' wishes. Like other young government employees whom I got to know in Lhasa, Yangkyi dreamed of a different life from the one she led. She loved learning English and wanted to study in the US. However, despite the few success stories of Tibetans from the TAR attending universities abroad, she did not have any illusions about the slim chances of obtaining a passport.

Becoming civil servants had not been Yangkyi's and Tselha's first choice: in fact,

quite the contrary. Although financial responsibility towards family was absent when Tselha narrated her professional trajectory, she too had respected her grandfather's and parents' directives. Accepting family responsibilities and demands meant that other possibilities were foreclosed for Tselha and Yangkyi. During the brief moments they addressed their work routines and civil servant status in conversations with me, I sensed a profound sense of loss and sadness about imagined paths that could not be taken and lives un-lived. Tselha's emphasis on "surviving" as opposed to "living" is present in my mind, even though it has been years since the conversation took place. Her words address an existential concern: that of living a life one does not truly feel at home in, a feeling that there is more to life than what currently appears, and the sense that life should be more than just bearable.

As daughters, granddaughters, and sisters, Yangkyi and Tselha navigated and cared about their family members' needs and opinions. As agents of the state, they were faced with multiple constraints impacting possibilities for self-expression and for experiencing work as a meaningful domain. For Tibetans in Lhasa, challenges to well-being are plentiful. A sense of being unwell due to government work is not uncommon. Similar sentiments as those raised by Yangkyi and Tselha were shared by government workers in the women's ward of Lhasa's Traditional Tibetan Medical Hospital in the 1990s. Many of them were diagnosed with a form of what Tibetan traditional medicine terms "wind disease" (Tib. རྩུང་ནད་), a cluster of illnesses manifesting as imbalances of wind in the body. These imbalances are embodied conditions of suffering that, for patients and doctors alike, were often linked to yearnings for a better life, difficult social conditions, and the emotional and personal conflicts that emerged from working for the state. In some cases, the causes of a "wind disease" were directly conceptualized as the results of political oppression (Adams 1998, Janes 1995).

Scholarly definitions of well-being abound.⁶ One basic definition highlights well-being as "the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced" (Dodge et al. 2012: 230). In light of overwhelming personal and wider structural circumstances, striking this balance is a difficult and ongoing project. In his account of well-being in war-torn Sierra Leone, Michael Jackson also addresses finding balance. He writes that, in struggling for well-being, people strive towards "striking a new balance between being an actor and being acted upon" (2011: 59). His words resonate with Yangkyi's and Tselha's experiences. Despite constraints on their self-expression and freedom of movement, unsatisfying jobs, and unfulfilled longings and dreams, both set out to be well in their everyday lives and to find the joy and strength to keep going. Going to the gym—back then and for years to come—has played a central role in this endeavor.

The Happiness Imperative

The opening of "Sunlight Happiness Gym" in the late 2000s and its appeal to Yangkyi and Tselha must be understood against the backdrop of wider socio-economic and political transformations. Since the mid-2000s, Lhasa has seen rapid urbanization and the emergence of a novel beauty and wellness industry. This mirrors a nationwide trend wherein the development of a service-oriented consumer economy serves the state's interest in creating social stability and market development by reframing women as consumers (Yang 2011; 2017). Scholarship on China has been concerned with new modes of subject-making during the country's post-socialist modernity in the light of new moral landscapes, mass unemployment, and the socioeconomic dislocation of millions of people, as well as the emergence of new middle classes (Kleinman et al. 2011). What many anthropologists observe as a stress on individual self-improvement is linked to new "imaginaries of modernity" (Rofel 1999: 31) and the self.⁷

From 2010 onwards, positive psychology, workshops for interpersonal skills, and

therapeutic services—often government-sponsored—were central to reshaping the ways in which the self and well-being are imagined among China’s urban middle classes (Yang 2013, Zhang 2020, Hizi 2021). Jie Yang (2013) argues that the high value the government places on psychotherapy is aimed at political stabilization; by diverting attention from the structural forces that negatively affect people’s lives, such as economic marginalization, it places the responsibility for happiness on the individual. Similarly, Gerda Wielander writes that “raising levels of happiness has become an official government target” (2018: 1). The Chinese Communist Party communicates notions of the “good life” that locate the achievement of happiness in the realm of individual responsibility, linked to the ability to learn correct values and attitudes (ibid.: 9). An increase in happiness is targeted through development and its associated public campaigns, state education, and TV shows. These serve to legitimize the Party and turn happiness into a required emotional state for Chinese citizens (ibid.: 13).

Tibetans face an even stronger happiness imperative due to their ascribed status as minority citizens. The official state discourse and the popular media portray the TAR, an administrative entity created in 1965, as a frontier requiring the development and progress brought by the guidance and generosity of the Han Chinese. The state expects Tibetans to show gratitude, loyalty, and, importantly, happiness in return (Yeh 2013, Lama 2018). An annual review of happiness, conducted since 2007 by state television broadcaster CCTV, has named Lhasa as China’s happiest city for six of the years since the survey began (Lama 2018). This index, which equates happiness with economic prosperity, belies the lived realities of Lhasa’s Tibetan residents, whose lives are overshadowed by various forms of structural marginalization and violence under settler colonialist conditions. Tibetans are denied fundamental political, religious, and cultural rights, are economically disadvantaged compared to Han Chinese settlers

and live in an everyday atmosphere of suspicion, fear, and surveillance.⁸

Fit bodies created in outdoor fitness parks or indoor gyms do not challenge but rather confirm the state’s narrative regarding the happiness it confers upon its Tibetan population. In Lhasa, “the distribution of bodies,” Emily Yeh notes, “into the secular, developed, and advanced and the dangerous, guilty, backward, and religious is accomplished by practices of disciplinary power that work to further reinforce the production of the state effect” (2013: 38). Understood against this larger political framework, “Sunlight Happiness Gym,” just as the cafes, shopping malls, or spas that have been mushrooming all over the city, emerges as a permissible space of self-making where fit bodies—that can be read as modern, secular, and happy—are crafted.

Temporal Rhythms of Urban Life

The temporal rhythm of Yangkyi’s and Tselha’s work weeks was structured by office hours and three-hour lunch breaks, during which Yangkyi attended English classes as well as working out in the evenings. Yangkyi had first heard about “Sunlight Happiness Gym” from a Tibetan colleague in her work unit. After accompanying her colleague once, a year after becoming a civil servant, Yangkyi purchased an annual membership for a discounted rate of 3300 RMB (430 USD), which amounted to a little less than her month’s salary as a low-level government employee. The prices at “Sunlight Happiness Gym” were steep. The holiday offer Yangkyi got was by far the cheapest option. Tselha remembered calling a hotline to inquire about gyms but was only able to locate two. She took along a friend to check out the facility and registered for a one-year membership.

“Sunlight Happiness Gym” was located in a slightly dated shopping mall in the eastern part of town. It was close enough to the Lingkor, Lhasa’s outermost circumambulation path, that it could be easily reached without much hassle from all over the city. Around one hundred members, men and

women, Tibetans and Han Chinese, arrived in the gym every weekday. After repeatedly meeting them in classes such as body pump, yoga, and dance, I realized that Yangkyi and Tselha were regulars. They visited the gym four to five evenings per week. Tselha even attempted to visit on a daily basis, which included weekends. Going to the gym had become such an integral part of everyday life that she told me laughingly, “Immediately, when the time arrives, I think about going to the gym. When the time arrives and I don’t go, I feel nervous.”

The first of the two daily group classes was scheduled for 7 p.m. This time was convenient for office workers whose work finished at 6 p.m. At times, Yangkyi and Tselha skipped the first class and warmed up on the treadmill instead. Tselha preferred attending the daily mixed-gender spinning class over some of the popular dance and yoga sessions. After the peak hours of 7 to 9 p.m., the gym quickly emptied. Yangkyi and Tselha often continued their workout for another hour or so. They had started their own mixed-gender self-study group for abdominal training. After group classes finished, their male gym friends would come over from the weightlifting and cardiovascular workout room to join a handful of women and exercise together. Easily three hours would pass, after which Yangkyi and Tselha changed their clothes and returned home, which they often did not reach before 10 or 11 p.m.

Apart from experiencing their bodies through new rhythmic movements, going to the gym created a temporal rhythm that afforded both women a new way of using their time and a welcome change in their otherwise monotonous routines. This new temporal rhythm in Tselha’s and Yangkyi’s lives was a self-chosen rhythm linked to a self-understanding of being active and healthy. Once, I shared with Yangkyi my observation that she seemed to be constantly busy. Yangkyi replied that recently a friend had made the same remark, asking her, “Are you not exhausted? You go to work, you go to the

gym, you go to English class. Is this not too much for you?” Her answer was simple: yes, she was busy and outside her home a lot, but she liked it that way. As for Tselha, I believe she appreciated being busy as well. Once, she confided in me that she felt a sense of estrangement from her parents, which she linked to growing up apart from them. “They don’t trust me”, she said, adding that her parents kept her on a “short leash” and she did not feel they treated her as a grown-up, independent woman. Possibly then, going to the gym provided a much-needed, family-approved form of leisure and time spent independently during evenings and weekends outside of the home.

“Sunlight Happiness Gym” was a familiar social space for regular visitors such as Yangkyi and Tselha. Yangkyi’s warmheartedness and the affectionate way she related to others made it easy for her to form friendships. For example, when arranging and putting away workout equipment such as barbells, bench tops, or yoga mats, she was quick to lend others, including me, a helping hand. If we had not seen each other for several days, she would sometimes welcome me with a hug. This was something no one else did. And after a ten-day work trip to Beijing, she returned with cookies that she offered to trainers, staff, and friends. Tselha was also popular in the gym. She was talkative and liked to joke around with everyone. As she attended almost daily and did not limit herself to the usually women-only studio classes, she also knew fellow male gymgoers. She kept convincing friends to join the gym, which not only earned her a month extra on her membership for each person she brought along but also led to her extending the activities she engaged in with them.

Particular spaces in the gym, such as the changing room and the juice bar in the entrance area, and the flow of evening workouts—including short breaks before and after classes as well as Yangkyi’s and Tselha’s informal self-study training group—provided a relaxed atmosphere and opportunities for casual chitchats. Yangkyi

and Tselha often stood around with others in small groups during breaks, exchanging news, talking about the events of the day, or discussing workout and fitness-related ideas. Commenting on one's own and each other's body parts and shapes, discussing favorite classes and teachers, goals for the evening workout, or lifting up T-shirts to pinch the skin and show levels of body fat were common activities. Together with like-minded members, many of whom were office workers in their mid-twenties to early-thirties, both women engaged in and worked toward the mastery of new bodily routines. By doing so, they learned to observe, measure, and experience their bodies in new ways while generating embodied knowledge on the effects working out had on their bodies and minds.

Yangkyi's and Tselha's friendship extended beyond the closed space of the gym where they had first encountered each other. They sometimes met and had lunch in the city together during their working week. Both mentioned to me that they were pleased to have found each other and that this was unlikely to have happened outside of the gym. Although they both worked in government offices, they did not have any friends in common prior to working out. They occasionally gathered for karaoke evenings and weekend hikes to the mountains with members of their informal training group. Yangkyi enjoyed the social aspect of "Sunlight Happiness Gym" a lot. Reflecting on working out, she expressed to me that it not only improved her health but also allowed her to make new friends. For Yangkyi and Tselha, gym-going was a relational experience. Regular meet-ups, chats, and physical activities that involved learning new movements and bodily skills together allowed them to experience their bodies anew. The gym was also a space where a community of practice based on a shared interest in particular notions of a healthy, fit body was brought into existence. This community consisted of members from similar educational and professional backgrounds who had the time and financial means to work toward their ideal bodies in an upscale gym. In this sense, "Sunlight

Happiness Gym" became a "horizon of belonging" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011: 10) in Yangkyi's and Tselha's lives; importantly, a horizon of "belonging by choice" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013: 16) that contributed positively towards their social well-being.

Transformative Sweat

In conversations with Yangkyi and Tselha, working out emerged as an aspirational pursuit at the intersection of health, well-being, beauty, and self-care. Overall, Yangkyi did not foreground a desire for physical beauty as a major motivation to exercise. However, physical appearance came up in our conversations. Once, she remarked that her mother and brother were fat. And here, she did not mean "fat" (Tib. རྩུགས་པ་) in the flattering way other Tibetans in Lhasa, mainly women over thirty-five, used the term to comment positively on a person as healthy and beautiful. "Fat" for Yangkyi meant "out of shape": Her brother and mother were quickly exhausted when going anywhere and, in her view, did not eat well. Yangkyi was conscious of what she ate and did not, for example, snack in the evenings; she viewed herself as possessing a body consciousness and discipline her brother and mother lacked. In contrast to them, Yangkyi was also slim, something she said she had in common with her father. Fellow gymgoers complimented her on her body. For Yangkyi, however, the main goal was not to be thin. She wanted to transform her body to be muscular and toned. Back then, her profile photo on WeChat (Ch. *Weixin*), a popular social media platform, hinted at her preferred body ideal: The picture showed a sun-tanned female torso with a visible six-pack.

"Why did you choose this picture?" I inquired once. "To have the motivation to work hard!" she replied cheerfully. Yangkyi avoided joining spinning classes, which she said were aimed at weight loss, because her goal was to develop an athletic body. Her favorite class was body pump, a fast-paced barbell-based workout with motivational music aimed at attaining a lean, fit, and muscular body. The group workout, she described, made her feel energetic and

powerful. “I am sweating a lot in this class,” she added. Like other gymgoers, she had learned to appreciate sweat as an indicator of the bodily transformation she desired.

When I interviewed Yangkyi formally, she reflected on the effects the gym had on her life. In her account, the body emerged as a source of relaxation and happiness. She told me, “I like to go to the gym. Sometimes I was blue; I was sad. I think exercise is helping—helping people to improve their emotions. Exercise makes you happy and relaxed.” She went on to remember the time she joined the gym:

I was so busy, and I didn’t have much time to pay attention to my health. But I know health is very important. Because I think health is the basis to do work. So, I think I need to pay money: 3300 RMB... for me, this is money to use for my family and me. But I think health is important, so I chose to go to the gym to exercise, and to be a better human, and to do most things in my future. (Interview, July 2015)

Yangkyi was almost always busy at work and experienced stress. Her workload intensified before big annual festivities such as Losar, the Tibetan New Year, or Lhasa’s summer opera festival (Tib. རྩོམ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་, lit. yogurt festival). At those times of the year, she had to work overtime and on weekends. Looking after her health, which I understood to include her mental well-being, was important to her. Perhaps she was particularly attentive to her emotional state because of the mental health crisis she had experienced as a student.

Her words also point to the relational quality she saw in going to the gym. If health is achieved by working out in the gym, it forms “the basis to do work,” as Yangkyi put it. Thus, investing in a gym membership directly benefited her family. With unemployed parents and a younger brother who was still a student, it was her work that provided for the family. If she was unwell or unhealthy, something she had experienced, she might lose her ability

to care for them in material, bodily, and affective ways. Therefore, for Yangkyi, going to the gym was not a self-centered pursuit. On the contrary, self-care through gym membership enabled her to care for her dependents. It allowed her to act ethically and respect familial obligations. The sizeable financial investment in her membership served the long-term well-being of her whole family.

Lastly, Yangkyi established a connection between exercise, self-improvement, and imagining possible futures. I did not ask her in that moment what this future might hold for her. However, being and becoming a “better human” implied that exercising was linked to “moral imaginaries of self-improvement” (Archambault 2021), invoking the notion of taking responsibility for one’s life. Taking control over one’s body and one’s life can be intimately entangled, as Jasmijn Rana (2021) shows in her research on young Dutch Muslim kickboxers. Yangkyi understood going to the gym as enhancing her abilities to care for her kin and enabling personal transformation, and thus as a positive course of action. By working out, she hoped to invite a more all-encompassing change, even if this change might have remained vague in that moment.

Tselha recounted that her initial motivation to join the gym was to lose weight, tone her body, and be healthy. She also mentioned that, due to sitting on a computer all day long, her neck and waist needed realignment. However, she soon realized that working out produced other, unforeseen, positive effects in her everyday life. Like Yangkyi, she contrasted feelings produced at work and feelings produced through working out:

We are office workers, aren’t we? Sometimes when our boss asks us to do work, and in our mind comes the wish not to do this work. And when one works—you probably know this—the more we work, the more mistakes we also make, don’t we? That’s why the boss probably scolds us. And in our minds, unhappy feelings arrive. In the gym, we go together with the

music on the bicycle. We sweat a lot, and the mind becomes very happy. If there is unhappiness in the mind, it all probably goes out with the sweat. (Interview, August 2015)

For Tselha, sweat was not only indicative of the physical transformation she desired; she also linked this bodily substance to the production of happiness. Voicing feelings about employment in the context of working out enabled Tselha and Yangkyi to experience and narrate the self as active beyond a merely physical sense. In their own accounts, they emerged as women who took responsibility for their inner states and feelings in the wake of hardship and worked through them with the help of exercise. Importantly, while mirroring the promise of “Sunlight Happiness Gym” that a fit body makes for a happy self, Yangkyi’s and Tselha’s narratives of (temporary) well-being were grounded in actual bodily and affective experiences gained at the gym.

Moreover, for Tselha, working out comprised an orientation towards the future through self-making in the here and now. First, she noticed minor changes in herself that spilled over into other spheres of her life and opened up new possibilities for approaching situations beyond the space of the gym. She expressed this as follows:

Going to the gym it seems like really changes the inside. [...] Isn’t it that we should work hard? If, for example, we ride the bicycle, the teacher says, “Let’s have a short song.” Sometimes it’s very hard, isn’t it? Then the teacher says, “Persist! Try hard! Don’t give up.” And one thinks, “Try hard, try hard, try hard.” Afterwards, when doing one’s work, when I think it won’t work, when I think I don’t know how to do this work, then I think, “Don’t think like this, but instead think: try hard! Persist!” (Interview, August 2015)

Secondly, Tselha believed that her regular attendance at the gym and disciplined approach were key factors in working

towards a healthy future and maintaining wellness in the present. Attending the gym day after day had value in and of itself in that it brought into focus how she acted differently from others who were less conscious. Her daily rhythm, the associated lifestyle, and its future orientation made her feel different from friends of a similar age. Friends who she described as sleeping in late during weekends, skipping breakfast and lunch, drinking beer, consuming meat, gambling, and staying up all night. She added that, like her uncle, a former officer whose retirement was marked by gambling and alcohol problems, these friends did not consider the long-term consequences of a careless and inactive lifestyle. Her uncle’s story, it seems to me, functioned as a cautionary tale wherein irresponsible acts in the wake of challenging circumstances lead to grave consequences. In contrast to him and others like him, Tselha took care of herself.⁹

It was by working out alongside Tselha and Yangkyi and hearing their reflections that I came to understand that their lives, which largely took place under the government rubric, became more bearable and even enjoyable and meaningful through sweaty workouts.¹⁰ In both of their accounts, working out emerged as purposeful and, in some ways, future-oriented. Exercise can serve to achieve broader life goals that move beyond immediately felt benefits (Archambault 2022: 9–10, Rana 2022: 92, Sehlkoglu 2021: 52–74). It holds the potential to serve as a vehicle to aspire, dream, and imagine. For Tselha and Yangkyi, “Sunlight Happiness Gym” momentarily enabled the opening of “new horizons of being” (Throop 2018: 73). Fitness afforded them a sense of potentiality; it enabled them to think of themselves anew while creating moments of relief within an environment that they otherwise often found suffocating. Thus, working out made it possible for both women to experience themselves as endowed with what Michael Jackson describes as the “capacity for bringing the new into being” (2005: xi). This state of being was harder for them to produce in other spheres of life, such as state work,

(international) travel, or in the context of family. Well-being created in the gym was grounded in embodied experiences for Tselha and Yangkyi, but it extended beyond this immediacy and included orienting the self to possibilities such as new temporal rhythms, friendships, and personal transformation, which emerged from working on the self through sweat and exercise.

Limits of Understanding from a Distance: *WeChat* Fragments

Since leaving Lhasa, despite plans to return, I have not met Yangkyi again. I often wonder how she, Tselha, and other women I met in “Sunlight Happiness Gym” are doing, what old and new hopes and dreams they cherish, and how they continue to strive for well-being for themselves and their families. Worried about the potential consequences of our communication, I have only stayed in touch loosely with Yangkyi and Tselha over recent years via *WeChat*. We occasionally engage with each other’s public posts, send short greetings, and exchange wishes during Losar and other festivals.

In January 2020, I traveled to Chengdu and met up with Tselha, who was staying with her relatives there during the Chinese New Year’s public holidays. In the cold winter months, her family lived in a flat they had purchased in a suburb of Chengdu, where other retired government workers from the TAR also resided. One day, I joined Tselha and her aunt for a visit to a skincare clinic. While we were waiting in the sterile hospital hallway, Tselha’s aunt explained to me that Tselha had too much stress at work, resulting in skin issues. “She works too much, drinks too much coffee, and gets up too early to get all her work done!” Still a civil servant, Tselha had also turned into a “mortgage slave” (Ch. *fangnu*) through buying a flat in Lhasa, her aunt half-jokingly said, potentially adding another layer of pressure to her life. While happy to be with her aging grandparents, Tselha was looking forward to flying back to Lhasa. She planned to take driving lessons and return to the gym. She still worked out with Yangkyi five years after we first met. They had moved to one of several new gyms that

had opened. “Sunlight Happiness Gym,” however, had closed.

Meanwhile, Yangkyi is narrating her life on *WeChat* and *Douyin*, the Chinese version of *TikTok*. In the first six months of 2022 alone, she shared one to four posts a day on *WeChat*’s “Moments” feature, usually in Chinese. It is hard to keep up with the constant flow of images, memes, and texts that she produces. Her posts are concerned with exercise and weight loss, motivational thoughts, selfies, travels, and meetings with friends in fancy coffee houses. Scrolling through them, I catch myself wanting to understand more from these posts than they can tell. Trying to piece together Yangkyi’s life from these tiny, fragmented snippets of news, of course, is impossible. Besides, there is so much that cannot be said or talked about via *WeChat*.

In May 2022, I got in touch with her. We sent voice messages in Tibetan and wrote messages in English and Chinese. I asked her if I could share two of her recent posts during a Tibetan Studies conference. Yangkyi assures me that this is okay. There are funny posts, like a meme depicting a car on a highway right before an exit ramp with a signpost attached to a bridge. Instead of continuing on the highway leading towards “dating” (Ch. *tan lianai*), the car, next to which the character ‘P’ (Ch. *wo*) is written, takes a sharp left turn towards “fitness” (Ch. *jianshen*). Yangkyi personalized the meme by stating in an accompanying text:

Today I change from a normally working woman into a workout girl within seconds.

The ability to switch between/balance these states is trained in daily life.

The shift from woman (Ch. *xiao jiejie*, “little elder sister”) to girl (Ch. *xiao meimei*, “little younger sister”) conveys that working out makes her feel younger. From these and similar posts, I infer that working out remains important for how Yangkyi narrates who she is and aspires to be on social media. From her voice messages, I understand that working out continues

to be integral to her pursuit of well-being. Striving for well-being, however, is an ongoing struggle; its achievement temporary and porous. Yangkyi told me that life had taken a difficult turn since, in late 2018, she experienced another mental health crisis. This time she gives her disease a name: major depressive disorder (Tib. ཡིད་སྐྱེད་མེད་པའི་རྒྱུ་གསལ་ན་ཚོ་). She suffered for six months before taking medication. During that time, she stopped working out and gained around 25 kg in weight. Once she started with the medication, she began working out again to fight her way back into life as she knew it and life as she imagined it for herself. Yangkyi's main profession remains being a civil servant, someone with an ordinary job, as her meme hints. However, she has also started working as a fitness instructor. Working out seemed to have opened up a small window for new possibilities again, that of teaching, sharing her knowledge, and perhaps bringing joy to other gymgoers. These are the vague contours of Yangkyi's life in the summer of 2022 that I can sketch out from our brief exchanges.¹¹

Just as Yangkyi reflected on going to the gym in 2015, her 2022 posts intertwine fitness and well-being, care for her family, and self-care. Some posts address topics that young, educated people all over China are concerned with. Her more serious posts, I believe, speak directly from a place of personal experience and vulnerability. The following reflection accompanies two gym selfies taken in workout tights and a tank top:

I don't have time to be consumed by internal friction.

I don't care about involution.

I only care about the moment right now.

Cherishing the things that I love.

Taking good care of oneself, mentally and physically.

This is the greatest responsibility to the family,

Which is exactly what it means to be filial and successful/doing well.¹²

Yangkyi addresses involution (Ch. *neijuan*), “rolling inwards,” a widely shared sentiment in present-day China. “Involution” describes a condition of feeling hopeless due to intense (peer) pressure and competition. According to Xiang Biao, it leads people into an “endless cycle of self-flagellation” (cited in Wang and Ge 2020). During our exchanges, Yangkyi also shared a PowerPoint presentation. She had prepared it for a book club (Ch. *dushuhui*) that she attends twice a month. The forty-five-page document with the title “The story of losing fat and the changes after doing fitness” details her journey to becoming healthy after her depression, presenting it as a story about overcoming hardship and diligent work. Two slides are dedicated to the accomplishment of weight loss. They list the following: “Being self-disciplined, confident and cheerful, having meaningful days, receiving affirmation from others.”

Persistence is evident in Yangkyi's pursuit of well-being through fitness. She joined her first gym in 2014. In May 2023, she and Tselha were still working out together. Yangkyi's desires and ambitions for working out have shifted as she has moved along the path life has taken her. Whereas weight loss was not a major concern earlier, this changed after she gained weight following a mental health crisis. The way she narrates the meaning of fitness on social media, thereby creating a particular image of herself, has also evolved. However, some things remain the same, such as the temporal rhythm of everyday life created by showing up at the gym day after day in a quest for well-being.

Conclusion

What might it mean to strive for well-being and a viable life in Lhasa? Which temporal rhythms does this quest create for young civil servants whose lives are entangled with the state apparatus? In this article, I explored these questions by attuning to the particularities of Yangkyi's and Tselha's lives and bodily practices. Taking fitness seriously, I have demonstrated that routine gym visits and workouts are significant in Yangkyi's and Tselha's attempts to create a sense of well-being that contributes to making their lives enjoyable and viable. Working out emerged as a relational pursuit that brought new friendships into being. It was framed as holding value in and of itself but also as enabling care toward kin.

In Lhasa, where political and religious freedoms are non-existent and state surveillance is crushing, where job satisfaction in government offices is often low and dreams of traveling or studying abroad are impossible to realize for most, working out in the "Sunlight Happiness Gym" generated fleeting opportunities to pause, breathe, and be well. Yangkyi and Tselha were finding moments of joy and relief in the shared movements, chats, togetherness, and their work toward self-improvement. These experiences were regenerating; they helped both women persevere through challenging situations, biographical ruptures, and family responsibilities. The effects of going to the gym shaped the temporal rhythms of their days and weeks, enabling them to deal with stress and find a sense of community with like-minded people. Exercising opened up windows of possibility, allowing experiences of self-renewal and, by extension, facilitating the imagination of future transformations. The fact that there are limits as to how much fitness can do for well-being and making life viable is without question. Nevertheless, through working out with Yangkyi and Tselha and listening to both of them, I learned that dismissing working out as insignificant would gloss over the multiple ways it creates meaningful experiences. In rapidly changing urban Tibet, amidst an ever-expanding landscape of

new leisure, wellness, and consumption, gyms are a social space for examining how ordinary people strive toward a sense of well-being despite the often-overwhelming structural conditions they find themselves in.

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Endnotes

1. All names are pseudonyms to protect friends and research participants. The English name I chose for the gym retains the essence of the original meaning inscribed in its Chinese and Tibetan names. Not all direct quotes are verbatim, since they partially derive from fieldnotes.
2. In contrast to a “just-bearable life,” a life worth living, according to Hage (2019), is characterized by “viability proper,” which comprises aspects such as enjoyment, a sense of moving forward in life, sociality, and ethical orientation. I follow this understanding in my use of the term “viable life.”
3. Tselha shared with me that she began witnessing her aging grandfather sometimes muttering Buddhist mantras. When I visited the family’s home in Chengdu years later, her uncle pointed out various deities of their Buddhist shrine to me. Tselha listened attentively while acknowledging her lack of knowledge. Due to the rules prohibiting civil servants from participating in public Buddhist events, Tselha and Yangkyi are banned from entering certain parts of Lhasa. Nonetheless, Tselha once ventured to the Barkor for circumambulations. She covered herself with a large hat and sunglasses and spoke Chinese with a friend to disguise herself. Overhearing fellow Tibetans asking one another in whispers if the two women were Tibetan or Chinese caused inner turmoil for Tselha. She wanted to scream that she was one of them, but she remained quiet. Hers was an experience of circumambulation marked by feelings of non-belonging.
4. Tselha and I usually spoke in Tibetan. Therefore, her use of English terms stood out.
5. Non-state formal employment options outside of the public sector were rare for university-educated Tibetans living in Lhasa in the early 2010s (Zenz and Fischer 2016).
6. Anthropologists have pointed out that well-being holds different meanings across socio-cultural and historical contexts. For an overview of the rich literature on well-being, see Fischer and Victor (2023).
7. See also Otis (2012), Rofel (2007), Wen (2013), and Yang (2011).
8. See Lama (2018) for a discussion of protests in Tibet since 2008 that challenge state narratives of Tibet as a “happy land.” Yeh (2013) and Roche et al. (2020) describe techniques of colonial governance and dispossession among Tibetans. McGranahan (2019) and Lokyitsang (2020) discuss Chinese settler colonialism.
9. This also included online research as well as purchasing and reading books on health and fitness. Acquiring new knowledge about the body was experiential but also theoretical for Tselha; self-making through fitness was imbued with a sense of being studious and becoming more knowledgeable.
10. This also holds true for other female government employees, in whose accounts of their work life and exercising, the feeling of boredom emerged more prominently than stress and pressure.
11. Exchanging messages in 2018 via WeChat, I learned that Tselha had been trying to reorient herself professionally as well, looking for possibilities elsewhere. Persistently disliking her job, she had ventured into multi-level marketing. After training in Shanghai, she became a part-time agent for a beauty brand that sold products on WeChat and ran a physical store in Lhasa.
12. Writing in Chinese, Yangkyi references the moral imperative of filial piety, a concept found in East Asian societies, including the Chinese. Among Tibetans, taking care of one’s parents is also considered an ethical responsibility that is framed in relation to Tibetan Buddhist values such as compassion (Gill 2022: 170–171).

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