

Between 'face' and 'faceless' relationships in China's public places: Ludic encounters and activity-oriented friendships among middle- and old-aged urbanites in Beijing public parks

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Abstract

Based on thorough ethnographic descriptions, this article analyses retirees' collective activities in Beijing public parks where co-presence and interactions between formerly unacquainted individuals have evolved into achieved relations of familiarity and friendship. Focusing on how people define, enact and manage the relationships with those they 'have fun' with, I show that the forms of mutual knowing developed through joint participation often blur the boundaries between the private, parochial and public realms on the one hand, and between community and anonymity on the other hand. While the urban experience in the Chinese context has been viewed as constituted through both 'face' (i.e. communitarian) and 'faceless' (i.e. anonymous) interactions, I argue that these are but two conceptual poles which cannot exhaust the complex nature of social relationships that arise from urban encounters. Activity-orientated friendships in Beijing parks involve wide-ranging forms of mutual knowing, which shape a pleasurable urban experience as much as they are infused with the 'ethics of indifference' peculiar to city living. As retirees initiate and sustain pleasurable interactions, these forms of sociality do not entail tight reciprocal commitments. Instead of viewing the situations in which friendships are produced as an instantiation of the 'broader contexts' in which they are embedded, I suggest that these everyday spatial practices and convivial interactions should be considered for their intrinsic analytical value rather than as a response to external processes.

Keywords

friendship, public parks, public places, sociality, urban China

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Introduction

Ways of imagining the urban have been continually framed by the 'anonymity-community' axis on the one hand (Lofland, 1973,

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1998; Tonkiss, 2005), and by the 'private, parochial, and public' typology on the other hand (e.g. Kusenbach, 2006; Lofland, 1998; Madanipour, 2003; Watson, 2006: 159–166). While emphasising differences between these realms, this literature also heuristically helps to conceive of situations in which their boundaries may become blurred. Drawing on recent works on friend relations and the 'urban encounter' (Kathiravelu, 2013), this article shows that friendship is a fertile terrain for studying these intricate aspects of urban sociality. It does so by describing and analysing situations in urban public places where co-presence and interactions between formerly unacquainted individuals evolve into achieved relations of familiarity and friendship. It pursues, like other contributions to this special issue, the exploration of 'the spatial grounding' (Coleman, 2010: 202; Desai and Killick, 2010) of friend relations. As it seeks to understand 'how the locations in which [these social ties] function configure their formation and enactment' (quoted from this volume's rationale),¹ it is also concerned with the ways in which they transform the 'world of strangers' of urban public spaces (Lofland, 1973) into familiar territories. Such questions are explored through fine-grained ethnographic descriptions of retirees' gatherings in Beijing public parks.

In China's capital as well as in other Chinese cities, parks have become meaningful sites in the everyday experience of middle-aged and elder residents. They lie at the nexus of 'place-making' processes, understood as 'the centring and marking of a place by the actions and constructions of people tracing salient parts of their daily lives as a homing point in their trajectories' (Feuchtwang, 2004: 10). In Beijing, retirees' intersecting spatial practices and 'overlapping timetables' (Morgan, 2009: 65) centred around public parks have been made into deliberately reproduced paths, which, at specified timeslots, bring into being specific

places within these enclosed spaces. Pavilions, squares, benches and other features of the built environment have become gathering places for men and women who until then knew nothing of each other. Routinised encounters in ephemerally appropriated corners of parks have engendered the formation of 'self-organised' (i.e. distinct from official, state-organised) collective activities, which often take the form of public performances: choral singing, dancing, *Taijiquan* and callisthenics, traditional and revolutionary opera and the like. These unplanned uses of public places transform each park of the city into festive time-spaces with distinct rhythms, soundscapes and sights.² If passers-by are often free to come by or join in, the gatherings are mostly attended by regulars. In their own words, partaking in these leisure activities responds to a need for 'physical exercise' (*duanlian shenti*) and 'entertainment' (*wan'r*). For park-goers, this bustling ambiance sharply contrasts with the 'depressing' (*men*) atmosphere of their homes experienced after retirement. Like other social sites in urban China such as dance halls, parks have become 'play spaces' (Farrer, 2000: 227) for middle-aged and elder city dwellers.

Scholars have pointed out that repeated encounters in the context of 'foci of activity' may give rise to friendships (Feld and Carter, 1998; Froerer, 2010). In the vein of previous careful examinations of friend interactions in specific settings (Marks, 1998), I aim to understand the nature of the interactions and relationships which arise from ludic encounters in public parks. How do social actors engage with each other? How do they define, enact and affectively experience these relationships? How do they handle them? I show that these activity-oriented friendships involve complex, wide-ranging forms of mutual knowing, which shape a pleasurable urban experience as much as they are infused with the 'ethics of

indifference' peculiar to city living, that is, a mode of 'being with others in the city which preserve difference and maintain separatedness while recognizing shared claims to social space' (Tonkiss, 2005: 4). In public parks, the boundaries between public, private and parochial on the one hand, and between anonymity and community on the other hand, blur altogether. These forms of friendships therefore call for a deeper consideration of the *multiplicity* inherent to situations. More than the sequential transformations of one realm into another (Lofland, 1973, 1998), or the relational process between divided types of space (Madanipour, 2003), what is to be grasped is the simultaneous coexistence of these realms in the same situation or place.

Thus, in this article, the situations in which sociality and friendships are produced are considered for their intrinsic analytical value, rather than as an instantiation of the 'broader contexts' in which they are embedded. In cities like Beijing, where residents 'have seen their everyday landscapes transformed in a blink of an eye' (Chen, 2010: 22), it is tempting to view the social activities taking place in public parks as a collective means to 'eschew the overarching forces of modernization' (Qian, 2014: 27) or as a 'tactical resistance to the colonization of everyday leisure by capitalist economic relations and commodity logics' (Qian, 2014: 34). Approaches of this sort have become common in research on attachment to spaces of convivial sociality in global cities (e.g. Mele et al., 2015). I do not endorse these perspectives, which epitomise what Latour has criticised as 'the automatism that leads from interaction to "Context"' (Latour, 2005: 172), the latter being viewed as 'what makes actors behave' (Latour, 2005: 169; see also Steinmüller, 2011: 266). By interpreting the attachment to convivial places as 'a collective, social response to an ongoing process in which *the present, itself, is being erased by*

a shifting urban landscape' (Mele et al., 2015: 105, original emphasis), we may fall back into a somewhat romanticised vision of everyday encounters. Moreover, by focusing on broader dynamics, we may bypass important questions raised by the situations themselves. Friendships are, at least partially, 'personally constructed through agency; they entail people making decisions about which specific others they are going to engage with, and about the contents of the informal solidarities which arise' (Allan and Adams, 1998: 190). In Beijing public parks, the people who make these decisions are aging city dwellers whose memories are marked by the personal political violence of the Cultural Revolution (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005), and who often lament a 'loss of trust' (Boermel, 2006: 406–407) affecting social relations as a result from the transition to market economy. The situations examined below suggest that neither the fear and uncertainty that infused social ties in the Mao era (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005: 309; Vogel, 1965; Whyte and Parish, 1984: 345–349) nor the distrust brought about by economic reforms have achieved the permanent destruction of friendship and pleasurable sociability. But what particular forms does desire for human contact take? How much of the personal is brought inside of these circles of familiar others? And, more broadly, what do the particular restraints and license (Goffman, 2010: 192) inherent to the relationships observed in public parks tell us about the senses of self and others in contemporary urban China?

The remainder of this article is structured into four sections. I begin by outlining the research methods and theoretical framework underlying this study. I then locate park regulars' spatial practices within the city and its histories. The next two sections form the substantive core of the discussion. First, I describe an example of the social activities in which collective and interpersonal

engagements are established. ‘Engaging in numbers’ (Oldenburg, 1997: 44) to produce vibrant, ludic forms of sociality, people sustain interactions resulting in varied forms of personal knowing and self-disclosure. Familiarity and friendliness also involve distance. Second, I demonstrate that space and time function as resources to initiate, maintain but also manage, over time, pleasurable forms of sociality which involve affection without tight commitments, and which sit between ‘face’ and ‘facelessness’.

Research methods and theoretical framework

Observing encounters

My research aimed to grasp how actors engage with each other in situations of co-presence during social activities, and how they manage these relationships. Over the course of more than three years, I completed five periods of fieldwork (October–December 2011, May–July 2012, March–June 2013, September–December 2013 and April–June 2014). Although a number of parks were visited, systematic ethnographic investigations were conducted in Jingshan and Beihai Parks, once former imperial domains, in the historical centre of the city, and in Zizhuyuan Park, in Haidian district.

By repeatedly attending the same group activities on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis, I observed and recorded regulars’ and newcomers’ behaviours. Naturalistic and participant observation were combined. The former proved convenient to examine interactional styles within the gatherings. Drawing on interactionism (Goffman, 1963, 2010), I spent hours taking extensive notes of situational details: the spatial layout and temporalities of the activity, verbal exchanges between participants, sensory and gestural dimensions of public performances. Visual material, mainly photographs, also

helped me grasp fleeting interpersonal engagements – brief glances, smiles and face work at large – as well as the shifting attention of participants, from moments of involvement in the dominant activity to ‘minor’ modes of being in public (Piette, 1992). Beside naturalistic observation, a more participative presence as well as sustained interpersonal engagements with some park-goers allowed me to gain access to more private thoughts, inner feelings and attitudes towards fellow participants. Unlike previous ethnographic studies of encounters in public spaces (e.g. Mele et al., 2015; Watson, 2006) which heavily rely on interviewing, I made limited use of formal semi-structured interviews, for informants were often unsettled by this practice – an issue commonly raised by students of urban China (e.g. Boermel, 2006; Engebretsen, 2012). As mentioned later in this article, norms of interaction between regulars, albeit fluid, often entail the maintenance of a certain distance in verbal inquiries regarding individual identities. Moreover, acquaintanceships and friendships in the park are often confined to this particular space. To some extent, these ways of sociality sometimes prevented me from gaining precise knowledge of my interlocutors’ sociological status. Awareness of these norms, however, helped me build interpretations of these types of social relations.

Accounts of encounters in public space often re-create *typical* situations of what usually occurred during field research (e.g. Mele et al., 2015; Watson, 2006). In contrast, when possible, I used direct quotations of fieldnotes, presenting detailed descriptions of *actual* situations.

Friendship, personal knowing, ‘face(lessness)’

The themes of friendship and familiarity arose inductively from the ethnographic data. Park-goers often designate their

relatedness to other participants as activity-oriented friendships. In Chinese, the character *you*, which etymologically means 'friend' or 'intimate' is associated with the activity people partake in, such as in *geyou* (literally, 'singing friend'), *quanyou* ('taiji friend') or *jiuyou* ('drinking friend'). These terms are distinct from the usual word for 'friend', *pengyou*. Although my interlocutors' categorisations may exemplify the 'consistent emphasis on the contexts within which things occur' deemed typical of Chinese culture (Smart, 1999: 133), I contend that in the context of public parks, these linguistic practices rather serve to delineate the scope of the designated relationships. They therefore provided a point of entry into a study of friendships. In what follows, I briefly review some of the relevant literature on the topic and specify my contribution.

Friendships vary in their forms, emotional intensity or durability (Bell and Coleman, 1999: 16; Bowlby, 2011: 607). Scholars have increasingly recognised the heuristic value of 'opening up the definition of friendship' (Killick and Desai, 2010: 1; see also Bell and Coleman, 1999: 15), thus acknowledging the 'messy gradations of relationships between close bonding, familiarity, acquaintanceship, etc.' (Bell and Coleman, 1999: 16; see also Abrahams, 1999). In this vein, students of social relations in urban China have devoted attention to the overlap and distinctions between idioms of interaction (Smart, 1999; Wang, 2000; Yang, 1994) and forms of relatedness (Jankowiak, 2008). With less consideration towards emic definitions of friendship, sociologists have investigated cross-class ties (Zhang, 2006). Relations enacted in particular socio-spatial settings are often left unexplored, though Wang (2000) has investigated how entrepreneurs 'cultivate friendship' with business partners in Shenzhen's bowling alleys.

While this article touches upon the 'ways of talking about connected others' (Smart,

1999: 119), it also shifts the focus from the idioms of social interaction to observable situations in which ties are constructed. Informed both by park-goers' own characterisations and by scholarly criticism of a narrow conception, friendship is used as a 'sensitizing concept' (Blumer, 1969: 147–148). Sensitising concepts, in contrast to 'definitive' ones, 'lac[k] such specification of attributes or bench marks' and 'giv[e] the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances'. As a sensitising concept, friendship directs attention to the enjoyable co-presence and interactions sustained on the basis of voluntarily contacts.

One question, addressed in the literature on acquaintanceship (Goffman, 1983, 2010; Morgan, 2009) and public space (Lofland, 1973) but which remains surprisingly absent in studies of friendship, is the 'sense of "knowing" the other people' usually involved in these relations (Bowlby, 2011: 612) (though see Dulsrud and Grønhaug (2007) on mutual trust and friendship among economic actors). Reflecting on forms of 'mutual knowing' (2010) and 'knowership' (1983), Goffman has distinguished between 'anchored' and 'anonymous relations' (Goffman, 2010: 189), which respectively involve different 'framework[s] of identification' (Goffman, 2010: 188). While the former imply personal knowing – that is, the imputation of a 'unique organic continuity' to an individual, 'established through distinguishing marks such as name and appearance, and elaborated by means of knowledge about his biography and social attributes' – the latter are built on the basis of the 'instantly perceived social identity' (Goffman, 2010: 189). But while 'the establishment of a framework of mutual knowing ... retains, organizes, and applies the experience the ends have of one another' (Goffman, 2010: 189), Goffman notes that the knowledge individuals have of each

other may not always be conveyed through their *actual* mutual treatment, thus rendering inoperative 'standard dichotomies, distance-intimacy and impersonal-personal, a particular relationship being described in terms of degree' (Goffman, 2010: 190). Hence the oft-noted 'blurring of the boundaries' (Morgan, 2009: 8) between acquaintances and intimates in everyday experience.

Drawing on Goffman, Lofland has shown that while the city is a world of anonymous others, shifts from 'categoric' to 'personal knowing' are integral to the urban experience. Individuals create 'home territories' in small pieces of urban space by 'transform[ing] what were initially strangers into personally-known others' (Lofland, 1973: 122), and thereby use these settings for private uses.

Writing on the 'cultural construction of anonymity in urban China', Ellen Hertz has reflected upon the different 'kinds of sociality that result from [distinct forms of] knowing and seeing' others (Hertz, 2001: 275). Anonymous relationships can be conceptualised as 'facelessness', in opposition to 'face' (*mianzi, lian*), an indigenous discourse which 'operates with reference to a conglomerate of institutions and values that might be characterized as communitarian'. '[T]he loyalty associated with kinship' or the 'reciprocity that makes good neighbors' (Hertz, 2001: 276) can be considered as manifestations of the strong mutual commitments involved in face interactions. In contrast to this 'communitarian mode of sociality' (Hertz, 2001: 277), facelessness suspends the 'particularizing strategies of give-and-take face' (Hertz, 2001: 291). It refers to 'the experience of being part of a crowd in which one can neither have nor lose face because one's personal relation to the community is not at issue' (Hertz, 2001: 280). Hertz argues that in the Chinese urban context, anonymous interactions do not suppress the links between the individual and the collectivity

but 'problematize' them in alternative ways: social actors sacrifice their 'individual identity to a collective design'; their "'ego"... defines himself fleetingly, as others' (Hertz, 2001: 291).

Bringing together the themes of mutual knowing and friendships in urban public places with the literature on face(less) interactions is one of the key contributions of this article to the understanding of social life in urban public places, and more specifically to the literature on urban China. As I will show, one of the common statements of park-goers revolves around the ambivalence of, at once, knowing without really knowing others. Focusing on these activity-oriented friendships, I show that if 'face and facelessness are characteristic moments in the Chinese urban experience' (Hertz, 2001: 275), these are but two poles of the wide-ranging modes of sociality and sociability that shape urban life. Engaging in public activities typically gives rise to pleasurable forms of sociality in which mutual knowing does not involve 'face' relations. Neither can these interactions be pinned down to a crowd or collective group. I will particularly highlight how individuals preserve this inbetweenness.

Parks and the city

In today's Beijing, the spatial practices and social relationships which revolve around public parks are a relatively new phenomenon. During the Maoist era, socialist urban planning made the city into 'a jigsaw puzzle of spatially demarcated work units surrounding the old city core' (Lu, 2006: 49). For a great majority of urbanites, 'social life was largely confined within one's own work unit, which was separated from other parts of the city physically and socially' (Lu, 2006: 69). Many commentators have noted that 'spatial proximity served as a basis for the construction of an individual's web of relatedness' (Jankowiak, 2008: 72; see also Bray,

2005; Friedmann, 2011). Rather than anonymity, a 'small community atmosphere' characterised the urban experience (Lu, 2006: 68). This proximity was sometimes experienced negatively (Whyte and Parish, 1984: 340–343). Since the decline of the work unit in the Reform era, despite government endeavours to promote resident communities through the new model of 'neighbourhood construction' (Friedmann, 2011), actual patterns of spatial practices often extend well beyond these 'planned communities' (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 43). Retirees use their free time to travel to other parts of the city and appropriate its public places in creative ways conducive to the development of bonds outside their neighbourhoods. Apart from people living in the surroundings, a huge number of regulars make their way from remote areas to the parks. These itineraries often entail a long bus ride across the city, which sometimes exceeds two hours. Crucially, encounters with familiar others do not result from the extension of already existing private or parochial bonds to public spaces. Most of these relations had no previous anchorage outside of parks.

Recent institutional regulations have contributed to the stabilisation of these routinised, albeit unplanned, spatial practices. Municipal policies greatly facilitate mobility across the city for the elderly. Residents over 65 years old with a local household registration status are delivered Seniors Cards and benefit from free public transportation. As a number of parks are national or world heritage-listed sites, entrance normally requires admission fees. Since 2009, Seniors Cards holders have been granted free access to all municipal parks. Younger retirees can purchase an annual pass for 100 RMB, while those who have reached 60 years old can get one for half this price. If these policies clearly privilege registered residents' access to public space, non-locals (*waidiren*) sometimes join Beijingers in public activities.

The emergence of this 'grassroots leisure class' (Qian, 2014) visible in parks is entrenched in historical processes. The development of a 'politics of private time' in the era of economic reforms (Wang, 1995) has played a crucial role. In the Maoist period where everyday life temporalities were highly politicised people had to partake in political education and working hours left them with little spare time. Leisure mostly meant participation in collective, ideologically-charged activities. Since the launching of the Policy of Reform and Opening (1978), people have become freer to dispose of their time. Interestingly, despite the 'depoliticization' of leisure (Wang, 1995), the activities carried out in parks retain many aspects of what is often referred to as 'socialist culture'.

Considering how friendships are 'embedded in wider social and political formations' (Bunnell et al., 2012: 492), the generational dimension underpins both the uses and the social relations established in China's parks. A large proportion of regulars belong to what is known in China scholarship as the Second, Third and Fourth generations of the People's Republic (Rosen, 2000: xiii). Members of these cohorts all grew up under state socialism and experienced the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), albeit at different stages of their lives. While the Second generation reached adulthood during the first decade of the PRC, the Third had been entirely raised under the new regime. Growing up in the 1950s and 1950s, lots of them enrolled in the 'Up to the mountains, Down to the villages' movement in 1968, during which they were sent to remote rural areas. If mass movements and socialist 'art' were part of the everyday of ordinary citizens all over China, in Beijing, given the political centrality of the city, the Maoist era was experienced even more intensely.

Since the 1990s, retirement and layoff policy have brought together in public parks individuals from working class and lower-

middle-class backgrounds with a shared, albeit heterogeneous, experience of Maoism. But 'what *brings people together* in friendship may not be what *keeps* them together' (Bell and Coleman, 1999: 6, emphasis in the original). Similarities in social status, age or life history cannot fully account for the establishment of friendship ties (Bunnell et al., 2012: 491). In the existing literature on the public life in Chinese parks (Farquhar, 2009; Orum et al., 2009), little has been said of how and what type of mutual engagements sustained among formerly unacquainted people derive from such encounters. Participation in group activities has been described as 'strategies' through which old aged people cope with social change (Boermel, 2006). If others have dwelt upon the display of 'private pleasures' in public (Kraus, 2000; Qian, 2014), these forms of comingling are often dismissed under the label of civility (Donald, 2011). The specificity of mutual knowing and relations developed within these playful gatherings hitherto remains largely unexplored.³ In what follows, I attempt to fill this gap, addressing the

following sets of questions: What kinds of sociality and interpersonal relations arise from public activities in parks? How does space itself contribute to the maintenance of pleasurable encounters? Are these relations extended beyond these particular sites or do park users resemble the 'friends by the set' typical of 'third places' in Western cities (Oldenburg, 1997)?

'Engaging in numbers': Collective affect and interpersonal connections

Fun and 'social heat'

Every Sunday afternoon, between one thirty and two o'clock, one of the numerous choirs of Jingshan takes place under the pavilion that regulars call the 'three-room pavilion'. Talking to the woman next to me, I enquire after Mr. W., the choir's accordionist. She tells me that he has been sick [with cancer] and has not come in a while. Later in the afternoon, Mr. W. finally turns up. As he comes to the front of the gathering, the group finishes singing



‘Offering Oil to the Fatherland’ [a revolutionary song]. Some clap their hands and scream “*Hao* (good)!”, an exclamation which often marks the end of a song. ‘W. *laoshi* (Teacher W.)!’,⁴ some cheers go up from the crowd, first from a man, whose shout is soon echoed by others. Some start applauding, and Teacher W. makes an announcement. Some participants directly address him in response, others laugh back at what he says. He ends up his speech by calling ‘everyone to have fun (*dajia wan’r de gaoxing*)’. ‘*Hao* (good)!’ Some enthusiastically shout back, others clap their hands along to the singing as the activity resumes.

This fieldnote excerpt provides one example of what happens during retirees’ ludic activities. These are primarily routinised, almost ritualised, forms of interactions. The park has become a place for relatively predictable engagements, as people meet one week after another with the same others to pursue a defined activity. Yet, as illustrated by Teacher W.’s announcement, room is left for more impromptu interactions.

Such gatherings epitomise (and are often deemed to correspond to) ‘hot and noisy’ (*renao*) or ‘red hot’ sociality (Chau, 2008). This emic term refers to a ‘cultural imperative’ (Chau, 2008: 495) to make social events as bustling and lively as possible. Considered the ‘best way to cement a relationship’, having fun (*wan’r*) has to conform to this ideal (Steinmüller, 2011: 268). Places where individuals partake in the production of ‘heat and noise’ sociality are ‘social sensorium’, that is ‘sensorially rich social spaces’ (Chau, 2008: 489). As illustrated in the excerpt, sounds constitute one of the most salient sensory aspects of public activities: not only the sound of music, but also cheers, applause or laughter. In the choir, a feeling of togetherness arises out of the mingling of voices powerfully raised in unison and blending with the instruments’ sound, and of the proximity between bodies in this relatively bounded space.

If foci of activity are central to the formation of friendships (Feld and Carter, 1998; Froerer, 2010), the possibilities, contents and modes of expression of newly formed relationships are affected by the interactional and spatio-temporal layout required by the purpose of the activity (Allan and Adams, 1998; Bowlby, 2011: 613; Marks, 1998). Here, in contrast to Oldenburg’s (1997) ‘friends by the set’ in Western ‘third places’, conversations, albeit important, may punctuate the time spent with others. The main involvement (Goffman, 1963) is mostly allocated to the activity per se – when two acquainted persons come into each other’s presence, their exchanges remain brief, conforming to the dominant, collective definition of the situation. A thorough observation of the temporalities and spaces of the activity (short breaks, or spatial margins) nonetheless reveals changes in the possibilities of the allocation of involvement. For instance, in the case of this group, the ledge of the pavilion enables some regulars to sit around and chat with others most of the afternoon.⁵ When the music stops or when group leaders give participants a 10 minute break, some of the singers move slightly away from the pavilion and strike up conversations in small numbers. However, given the lack of ‘visual or aural privacy’ as well as the ‘norms about behaviour permissible in that public space’ (Bowlby, 2011: 613), two persons who define themselves as very close friends seldom show signs of these privileged ties in public.⁶

In terms of affect and emotional intensity, co-presences in collective activities give body to a sense of emotional intimacy (Morgan, 2009: 2). Developed within certain social activities, intimacy is ‘contingent upon its forms of expression’ (Rapport, 1999: 101). In the case of choirs and other group activities where most participants go away when time is up, the closeness which arose during the activity seldom survives the dispersal of the gathering.

'Familiar faces, unknown names': Personal knowing and self-disclosure in public encounters

If emphasis on 'hot and noisy' sociality grounds friendships in the production of collective affect and emotions (Bunnell et al., 2012), it lays stress on the collective dimension and downplays interpersonal dynamics at work in the gatherings. For participants, others are far from forming a faceless crowd. Questions of *who* matter: who do people choose to have fun with? How do they relate to one another? What and how do they come to know of each other?

Sustained involvement in one group partially depends on particularised affinities. In the aforementioned choir, a closer look at the structuration of space reveals that the crowd is fragmented into interactional units formed on the basis of dyads or small groups of acquaintances. One week after another, regular participants occupy the same position in the gathering. Upon arrival, some frequently manifest recognition to one or several participants already standing in the choir, waving and smiling at him or her while walking in the person's direction. When they finally get next to each other, greetings or verbal interactions remain short, and both or all of them soon return to the object of their main 'involvement' – the ongoing song. While the collective dimension of fun is central, these ludic encounters also imply a relative non-interchangeability regarding who one has fun with, as shown through more private interactions unrelated to the main activity at hand.

Commenting on their relations with other park-goers, the men and women I talked to variously described their knowledge of those they meet on a regular basis. Beside references to familiarity and knowing (such as *dou renshi*, '[we] all know each other'), some people emphasised that they remain, if not strangers, at least anonymous to one

another. 'Their faces are familiar (*mian shou*), but I don't know their name or surname', said one woman who often joins the choir described above. A distance seems to be voluntarily maintained, as some claim 'not to ask for [each other's] name (*ming ye bu wen*)'. While some thereby affect a lack of interest in the people they meet in the park, others imply that the very act of asking may be felt as improper. Personal knowing results from mutual visual availability, while gaining information about others through direct verbal exchange may require an appropriate reason to interact. A female conductor told me about one of the choir's accordionists: 'It seems that he's named Li, but I didn't ask'. The two of them nonetheless come to spend every Sunday afternoon in the same place, jointly organising the activity, and this for several years. Implied in these comments is also the idea that there is little need to seek for biographical information which is irrelevant in the context of the park.

Yet, in spontaneous conversations, situational contingencies, as well as indirectly shared experience may give someone an opportunity to comment on one's life or ask others about their family life. Situational dynamics may allow self-disclosure, although some people choose to conceal personal matters to fellow participants. Overall, although park-goers claim to have restricted knowledge of each other's life, repeated encounters and verbal interactions are nonetheless conducive to 'storing little fragments of knowledge' about others (Morgan, 2009: 110). Inherent to the formation of acquaintanceship, in the context of people who regularly come in contact with one another, this process may facilitate a reduction of distances between individuals, or, as described by Goffman, 'when persons ... come to "know about" each other and gradually acknowledge this to one another, so that knowing about becomes knowing'

(Goffman, 1963: 119). In the above fieldnote excerpt, the exchanges between Teacher W. and the choral singers illustrate this. Most of the participants knew about Teacher W.'s disease, and acknowledge it through their enthusiasm when he turns up after a period of absence. They do not only pay him respect due to his public role in the gathering, expressions are also of a more private, affective order.

Thus, activities in public parks may give rise to various forms of interpersonal engagements and mutual knowing subsumed in the category of activity-oriented friendships. When a relationship reaches more intimate levels, it may be expressed publicly through naming practices, as fictive kinship terms (e.g. older or younger brother or sisters) are employed. Co-presence in the gatherings simultaneously involves private and public experience. Others do not form a faceless crowd with which one temporarily identifies; they are experienced as a collective, through the senses, but interpersonal affinities are not totally muted.

Place bound friendships: The spatio-temporal management of co-presence

Open-ended chains of encounters and the maintenance of bonds

Park-goers know quite predictably, albeit without full assurance, who will be found as they join a particular gathering. But if the 'coordinators' of the activity (conductors, musician, dance teachers, etc.) may always be present, one norm is that suspended participation is acceptable. One can decide to come less regularly, be it by choice or by necessity. In many cases, temporary or long-lasting absence engenders the interruption of contacts, as the park is often the unique place where encounters occur. One can suspend participation due to disease, familial

obligations or lack of volition. Chains of encounters which may have cemented higher levels of intimacy between two or more individuals – through self-disclosure, discussions of family matters and the like – may be unpredictably disrupted. A regular in an opera singing group taking place every morning under the 'three room pavilion' in Jingshan used the idiom 'seeing each other in June, not seeing each other in the twelfth month of the lunar calendar' (*jian zhao mian shi liu yue, jian bu zhao mian shi la yue*) to illustrate this particularity. He described these social relations as being 'warmhearted' (*qinre*) but entirely conditioned by encounters in this particular context. Although it is frequent to hear participants in one activity express astonishment about someone's absence, be it the most loosely structured gathering, when individuals who have not turned up in a while return, rules of reciprocity do not entail the need to make a strong justification of absence. They are often welcomed upon arrival with comments such as 'I haven't seen you in a while' (*hao jiu mei kanjian ni le*) or 'you never come' (*ni mei lai* or *ni lao bu lai*). Absence is noticed, and a member's return to the park entails not only the expression of social recognition (Goffman, 1963: 113) from others, but also explicit recognition of membership, usually made in a tone of slight criticism, conveying a certain pleasure of seeing the person again. The comments, then, do not only bring to notice the interruption of the relation, they also re-open the condition for a continuity within discontinuity. Of course, mutual expectation of participation is also a function of the constraints and requirements underlying a particular group activity in the case where these constraints are acknowledged by participants. In certain situations, when someone is noticed for her or his absence, the comment may imply and be experienced as a verbal sanction by the member of the group, which may trigger a

defensive retort. However, this does not preclude possibilities for absence.

The freedom inherent to these relationships entails low levels of reciprocity. Spatiality is crucial to this process of maintaining social distance. As noted earlier, park-goers often contrast the 'hot and noisy' atmosphere of these outdoor public places to their homes. Parks are not only distinct from the domestic sphere, they are also often distant from it both in a geographical and symbolic sense. Although some may attend group activities with their spouse or sibling, relationships among participants rarely resemble the model of 'inclusive intimacy' (Marks, 1998) where female co-workers visit one another's house and include their relatives in their activities. The different 'foci of activity' are mostly kept separate: park-goers may never 'walk through the door' (*chuanmen'r*) of fellow participants and hardly know exactly where others live.

Despite weak mutual obligations, relations anchored in public activities are *achieved*, as people maintain a sustained participation in a group where no formal rules bound them to do so. It may be precisely the openness of space and the loose structure of group activities which account for the regularity of the engagement with a particular group of people. In other words, the absence of constraints and interpersonal obligations may increase the enjoyable character of being with others, and avoid the experience of discomfort that intimacies and proximity can potentially engender (Thien, 2007). In this sense, 'activity-oriented friendships' match Lofland's definition of 'intimate-secondary relationships' (Lofland, 1998: 56–58), that is, 'long-lasting social relations loaded with positive emotional colorings' (Qian, 2014: 35). Nonetheless, while pleasurable interactions are obviously central to these encounters, observation shows that annoyance, rivalry, negative moral perception of and dissatisfaction with others'

behaviours, or even conflict are not absent. Perceived difference in class status can be a source of displeasure, as a former international table tennis referee, now member of an 'art troupe' that performs every week in Beihai, told me:

Our levels (*cengci*) are different, for example, I am a retired civil servant, others were professors or workers (...) As I've received higher education, I rather enjoy things of somewhat higher standards. Sometimes, they talk and act in quite uncivilized ways (*bu tai wenming*), I don't really like that (...) so they can see that I am not really like them, I try to stay on their side as much as possible but sometimes, but I have to signal to our leader than things are not right (...) Like when they smoke or spit, 'you have to be careful not to spit on the ground, also, when you speak, you have to avoid filthy words', I told them all of this.

On sharing private matters with fellow park-goers, she said:

Since we only meet here once or twice a week to have fun, there are some things we can tell and others we cannot, still, there is some distance, we can't reach this level where we can tell each other everything (*wuhua bu tan*), for we haven't lived together.

Although this may be subject to change, it appears that maintaining encounters in open, public places can be viewed as a management of both proximity and distance, a means to preserve the pleasure withdrawn from being with others without knowing too much of them.

The extension of friendship bonds from 'foci of activity' to other spaces has been examined in existing literature (Allan, 1998; Bowlby, 2011; Marks, 1998). The possibility to invite friends into one's home is sometimes constrained by issues of material comfort (Allan, 1998), which could also be the case here. Nonetheless, if hosting can be practically inconvenient for retirees, it also

seems normatively and affectively safer to keep encounters with park-goers outside of each other's domestic sphere.⁷ If the park often remains the unique space for contacts, before concluding this article, I turn to a few counter-examples to these one-place-bounded friendships I described.

Beyond the park

In some cases, the activity itself is extended into other semi-public places, as when a group finds a free indoor space for additional practice. In other circumstances, the interpersonal relations established in the context of public activities result in their spatial extension, be it having lunch after morning activities in a nearby restaurant, or planning excursions out of town. For instance, singing groups sometimes organise tourist trips to nearby mountainous areas, but also to other parts of China or East Asia. While these situations involve a large number of participants, dyadic interactions can occur outside of the park, as when some eventually 'walk through the door' of other park-goers' houses. Intimacy with specific others, however, may not be rendered visible to other participants in a public gathering.

These different configurations involve wide-ranging types of situations and performances of friendships, and I was not able to witness each of these occurrences. The following fieldnote excerpt depicts a lunch scene between group members of a choir who now practice every Wednesday morning in a Residents' committee, in addition to Sunday morning performances in Jingshan Park. Instances of interactions resonate with some points made earlier.

As usual, after their singing class, a number of participants go to a nearby restaurant, where they can have lunch and sing in a more relaxed way. Today, one of them, Mrs S., celebrates her 54th birthday. Not every group member joins in, but still, several tables are needed for

all of us to be seated. Usually, participants pay an equal share of the total bill, but on this occasion, all agree to invite Mrs S., who herself offers several bottles of sorghum alcohol. Some women prepare tea and other herbal infusions from the leaves and dry fruits they brought along. Someone shares a pack of instant coffee bought in Malaysia. During lunch, Teacher Z. [the female conductor] asks Mrs Q. whether she found an apartment [after her landlord unexpectedly asked her to leave] and that she asked for the others' help earlier this morning before her arrival. Mrs Q. thanks her and adds that there is no need to move heaven and earth to help here. Later during lunch, Teacher Z. asks Mrs S. to sing a song that best represents her mood. Mrs S. tells everyone that participating in the group is like celebrating one's birthday each day, but today, she feels particularly happy.

This excerpt furthers our understanding of the forms of mutual commitments characterising friendships among park-goers. While they extend their relationships to other spaces and thereby create new situations in which closeness can be enacted, they meanwhile uphold strict norms to avoid binding obligating reciprocity which may lead to potential disappointments. Sharing the bill is the most obvious example, while other interactions reveal 'light-touch' (Thrift, 2005: 146) forms of reciprocity and care: paying for a friend's birthday meal, buying and sharing alcohol or keeping updated about others and offering one's help. In the two women's exchange, if Mrs. Q.'s reaction to Teacher Z.'s words could be interpreted as mere politeness, and if moral or even perhaps material support may be appreciated, it is nonetheless likely that she does not look for care or help in the first place. Rather, being with others offers an opportunity to forget about one's troubles, which therefore should not become the focus of attention. Drawing on Misztal (2001: 314), it can be said that the woman did not make her 'own concerns and feelings maximally usable by

others as a source of appropriate involvement'. When others raise the topic, she does not actively seek to sustain their attention to it. Finally, the production and expression of emotions, formalised through the verbal interchanges between Teacher Z. and Mrs S., serve to reassert the importance of being with others as a group. To borrow from Marks (1998: 43), 'the fulfilment of friendship is in the gatherings themselves'.

Conclusion

There has been a growing tendency in urban studies to dismiss localised, repeated face-to-face interactions (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 43) as the locus of 'old-style notions of community' (p. 5) involving 'meaningful proximate links' (p. 27). Yet, this article suggests that we should not be too quick to discard recurring embodied encounters in specific places as insufficiently revealing of 'the multiple forms that community now takes in the city' (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 5). Imbued with pleasure, the activity-oriented friendships described in this article involve multiple forms of interactions that can neither be fully conflated with 'community' (be it 'localized' or 'distanciated', see Amin and Thrift, 2002: 42–48) nor with sheer 'anonymity'. Moreover, while recent paradigm shifts have led some urban theorists to privilege 'transitivity' over more durable patterns of city living (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 26), this article shows the significance of both processual *and* durable, albeit not static, aspects of urban social connections. If 'places' are 'twists and fluxes of interrelation', we should bear in mind that, these '*moments of encounters*' may still be experienced as 'presents' (p. 30) by those who inhabit them.⁸ Activities in parks are enacted on a repetitive and durable mode through which these 'slowly evolving relationships' (Zito, 2014: 20) can exist.

Finally, what, as I asked at the outset of this article, can these particular forms of

friendship tell us about the senses of self and others in contemporary urban China? Recent analyses of light-touch forms of mutual commitment among lay Buddhist practitioners in a Beijing temple reminiscent of those observable in parks (Fisher, 2014: 135) point to a 'radical break with a *guanxi*-based morality' on the part of marginalised urbanites such as laid-off workers and retirees who seek to distance themselves from these particularistic, reciprocity-based relations which often conflate personal sentiments with instrumentality (Hertz, 2001: 278–279; Gold, 1985; Smart, 1999). Yet, I want to stress that while they do not imply strong emotional bonds or material aid, these fun-based friendships remain significant sources of support and well-being for these aging city dwellers. It is precisely because little room is left for the burdens of everyday life to interfere in these forms of sociability (Simmel and Hughes, 1949) that pleasure and self-satisfaction can be gained from these encounters. To be sure, the personal is not absent, and serious information is sometimes shared, as some of the empirical examples suggest. But instead of threatening pleasurable sociability through excessive intrusion of the personal, private matters are disclosed in such ways that collective enjoyment seems to be preserved.

In urban China, if sociability is, as elsewhere, practised *for itself*, it may take on a significance *beyond itself* when observed from the outside. For these generations who have experienced the negative impact of political campaigns on personal ties in the Mao era and who now complain about a changing moral landscape, these friendships provide the possibility to recreate pleasurable ways of being, and doing things, with heterogeneous strangers. Restraints in self-disclosure, then, are less to be understood as a lingering fear of, or distrust in others than as a means to provide new grounds for the self's encounters with others. One question

to address in future research could be then, how do these forms of limited personal knowing paradoxically help shape a sense of ontological security in a rapidly changing city?

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Notes

1 This does not imply that the particular forms of ties examined in this article are viewed as a product of these locations per se. My understanding of place combines insights from the anthropology of space and place (e.g. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003) with an interactionist stance. In the former, the spatial environment is considered as constitutive of action, while the latter focuses on the situations or 'social occasions' (Goffman, 1963: 18) that unfold in public places. Thus, in the case of activities in Beijing's parks, while the built environment provides the material conditions of possibility for these situations to unfold,

and may also, as I will show, configure the interactions between participants, it is the emplaced social occasion rather than place alone that configures the formation and enactment of these ties. I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer who helped me to clarify this point.

- 2 These activities take place throughout the year. Parks are appreciated for their 'refreshing' (*liangkuai*) atmosphere on hot summer days. While some participants prefer to stay indoors on windy days or during the coldest winter months, many choose to put on thick coats and join fellow park-goers. Heavy rain generally dissuades from going out, but I sometimes witnessed gatherings of choral singers who, umbrella in hands, were enjoying what they deemed to be favourable acoustic conditions.
3. It would be unfair not to acknowledge that some scholars have made mention of this form of 'recurring sociality' (Zito, 2014: 13; see also Qian, 2014) observable in China's public parks. Judith Farquhar and Zhang Qicheng reported on the 'new friendships' (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005: 313) their informants have made in group activities, briefly elaborating on what 'is in part a new form of social intercourse, one less informed by the older dependencies of work-unit life and made more anonymous as people move in and out of once-stable neighborhoods and exercise groups' (Farquhar and Zhang, 2012: 77). Their theoretical interest, however, lies elsewhere: 'But what is more interesting, perhaps, is the particular forms of civil sociability we are finding' (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005: 313).
4. Calling someone 'Teacher' (*laoshi*) is a common naming practice in China (see Blum, 1997: 366). In the context of park activities, the term generally applies to instrumental players, conductors or instructors. Those were often ordinary participants who have come to reach key positions in the group, due to particular skills acquired before retirement or after a training period. They are often praised for their voluntarism, and, as this fieldnote excerpt indicates, participants are

prone to express emphatic recognition to these persons. However, observance of obligations and reciprocities may vary, and examples of more casual behaviour are not rare. It can lead 'teachers' to complain about the participants' lack of involvement.

5. Fixed equipment in the spatial environment of the activity may thus facilitate sociable interactions among people. In many other cases, ledges or benches enable regulars to be part of a gathering while simultaneously engaging in verbal interactions with others without distracting those involved in the main activity.
6. For example, in another singing group, Teacher Q., a woman in her early sixties, is particularly close to Teacher Z., the female leader of the group, who is of about the same age. In some of our private conversations, Teacher Q. described their relationship as one of 'sisterhood' (*xiang jiemei yi yang*). She mentioned half-hour phone calls and occasional stays at her friend's place. Unlike most of the participants, Teacher Z. is aware of some of Teacher Q.'s most private matters. The latter nonetheless emphasised that she would not let the others know how close they were. None of them ostensibly convey particular affection in front of fellow participants. Most of the time, Teacher Z. rather displays equal, affectionate treatment to all members. Having said this, a word of caution should be added, as my observations suggest that some counter-examples to this point can be found.
7. Interestingly, my informants' views diverge on this matter: non-locals claim that Beijingers do not go to their friends' house, a Beijing park regular explained to me that the Chinese frequently visit each other, others expressed the opposite view and mentioned that they do not wish to enter others' domestic sphere to avoid discovering unpleasant habits. The evolving character of the relationships I observed, together with the diversity of these accounts, should warn us against the temptation to view the practice of meeting mostly outside of one's house as a 'Chinese' cultural pattern, as informants sometimes implied.
8. For a rather similar point, see Watson (2006: 2).

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