

WOMEN'S FITNESS CONSUMPTION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: A MARKET INTERACTION PERSPECTIVE

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WOMEN'S FITNESS CONSUMPTION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: A MARKET INTERACTION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Sport, as a social institution and modern phenomenon, has been recognized as a potent tool for women's liberation in their fight against gender oppression. However, during the Maoist era, women's bodies and sports were instrumentalized by the state, socially appearing strongly masculine. Since the reform and opening-up, women's bodies have been liberated from the politicized management during the Maoist era, and fitness activities seem to have built a space of effective resistance to instrumentalization. The market-oriented transformation has substantively facilitated the development of capitalist dynamics within Chinese society, allowing market logics to increasingly dominate social relations and individual life trajectories. As a result, women's bodies were re-bonded by the new constraint: the interaction between capitalism system and patriarchal structure, which leads to the complexity of women's sports development. During this time, commercial fitness goods and services have emerged as a crucial means to support women's sports participation. Women's fitness consumption, thus, represents an appropriate domain for interpreting the multifaceted nature of contemporary women's sports development. From a perspective of the interaction between suppliers and consumers in the market, the research shows that, market's self-regulating mechanism has contributed to suppliers' various offerings that cater to women's individual fitness needs. This supports women's development, reduces social barriers to women's sports participation, develops a female-centric sports narrative, and expands female-friendly public sports spaces in China. However, meanwhile, fitness-oriented women's emotions, attention, experiences, and bodies have been incorporated into capital's tracks of circulation and accumulation and transformed into means of production and objects of valorization, which reproduces the gender inequality. Capital constructs the predetermined choices and ideals of women's fitness, and commodities gradually act as agents for women's expression and practice, suppressing their authentic, intrinsic experiences in physical practice and the potential for their critical social solidarity in the existing male-dominated sports domain.

Plagiarism Declaration

I declare that this manuscript, which I submit for the assessment on the PhD programme, is my original research work and does not involve any intellectual property disputes. All references to the achievements of other researchers have been clearly marked with their sources and included in the bibliography list.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Research goal

In the late 1970s, leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), represented by Deng Xiaoping, formally implemented the policy of reform and opening-up, which marked the beginning of a social and economic transformation in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the context of this policy-driven transformation from a socialist planned economy to a market economy, policies on sports marketization, such as the *Opinions of the National Sports Commission on Deepening the Reform of Sport* (1993), *Certain Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption* (2014), and *Guiding Opinions on Unleashing the Potential of Sports Consumption to Further Promote High-Quality Development of the Sports Industry* (2025), were successively promulgated and implemented. As a result, women's sports, an important area of mass sports participants in contemporary China, has been transformed and is now booming. The rise in fitness consumption by women was a significant phenomenon during this transformation.

An increasing number of women are actively consuming commercial fitness products and services to improve their fitness experience. In the fitness market, commercial actors offer diversified fitness sites, flexible scheduling options (such as 24-hour gyms and on-demand online fitness classes), and specialized services, thereby aligning opportunities to participate in physical activity with the fragmented daily schedules and diverse fitness needs of contemporary Chinese women. Women's involvement in sport, driven by personal enjoyment and self-investment, receives great support. The potential for sizeable profits drives media and brands to continually produce female-centric fitness content. Consequently, the image of the sporty woman has gained prominence in public discourse, creating an expressive space for more diverse narratives surrounding the female body. Such marketing has prompted numerous women-friendly sports narratives,

fostering psychologically safer opportunities for female athletic engagement. This improvement has effectively stimulated interest in fitness among a significant population of previously inactive women. However, there are also various problems in this market, such as low-quality services and substandard products, over-consumption, and badly chosen consumption. Driven by strong commercial forces, the fitness program has been propelled into the daily agendas of an increasing number of Chinese women, marking a milestone of societal progress. Nevertheless, the fitness lifestyle advocated by the market or capital is deeply embedded within consumerist orientations and the imperatives for capital appreciation.

This research, therefore, focuses on female fitness consumers, aiming to discuss the complicated influences of a rising fitness market on the fitness experiences of women. In this new era, participation in sports has progressively evolved into an economic and social behavior with complex individual psychological processes. Female fitness consumers represent an ideal sample group for observing the state of women's sports lifestyles in urban China amid the market transition. Their choices regarding sports and fitness not only involve issues such as body politics (like aesthetic discipline of the body), time poverty, and the negotiation of multiple social identities but also the influences of consumerist culture and capital which shape, and at times even alienate, women's fitness consciousness and their exercise environments.

While acknowledging the diversity of consumers in the fitness market, this research concentrates specifically on women. First, since the reform and opening-up, the discourse on women's emancipation in China has transformed from a class-based, labor-oriented framework in socialist ideology to an increasingly individualistic paradigm centered on personal empowerment and self-realization. Thus, women's sports and fitness participation, from the pursuit of physical strength to embracing a more diversified aesthetic of the body, presents more significant changes than men's. Second, in China, with the advancement of gender equality, the consumer confidence and capacity of Chinese women achieve the similar level of men; furthermore, 'women are the primary decision-makers' in 'household consumption', and can exert influence on the consumption behaviors of their spouses and children (Ni, 2012). Thus, female

consumers have become increasingly important, even exceeding male consumers, in the investment decision-making of many global enterprises (Ni, 2012). As one of the most intensively targeted groups in the consumer market, women are deeply influenced by consumer culture. Their experiences often reveal how capital and market logic influence, and at times alienate, individual practices. Thus, investigating this group offers a critical lens to understand sports marketization in China. In this study, ‘women’ refer to biological females who self-identify as women.

My own experience explains my personal interest in this issue. I used to work out at the gym. This fitness experience brought me enjoyment and a sense of achievement. Gyms emerged as an important form of private sector fitness consumption following China’s reform and opening-up, they represent the main services in the fitness industry, and reflect a broader shift in market-oriented development, women’s lifestyle, and health consciousness. In contemporary China, the gym is one of the important ways for women to access exercise, especially in the area of paid fitness services (Sport Chengdu, 2022; Xiong, 2014b). First, women exercising in the gym generally demonstrate a clear intention in investing money to enhance their fitness experience. Second, women who go to the gym generally have a regular fitness routine, and, thus, the gym serves as a platform to directly observe women’s physical exercise and body practices in a commercial setting. Therefore, I have observed the fitness activities and consumption experiences of other female fitness participants, which presented interesting attitudes towards consumption and bodily practices as well as new, unique lifestyles. As a result, driven by personal research interest, I developed the PhD program focusing on Chinese women’s fitness consumption.

In addition, I gained my bachelor’s degree in national economic management at Sichuan University in China and my master’s degree in business management at Durham University in the UK. During my studies at Sichuan University and Durham University, I obtained academic knowledge of the consumer market and became interested in this issue. Furthermore, as a Chinese woman born after the 1990s, I have deeply felt and experienced the series of social changes, including marketization, globalization of capital, and the transnational universalization of Western values. Therefore, I am

interested in studying the economic and social life of Chinese women after the reform and opening-up, especially the rise of women's fitness consumption in China.

More specifically, this study focuses on fitness-oriented women who have easy access to commercial fitness offerings and possess purchasing power, as well as the fitness market in which they are situated. Accordingly, during the implementation process, this research focuses on discussing urban female consumers from the working class and above. Urban residence implies 'have easy access to commercial fitness offerings', while belonging to the working class and above indicates 'possess purchasing power'. The fitness market refers to the segment of the fitness industry where value exchange takes place. The interaction between consumers and suppliers brings about value exchange, and the space in which this exchange occurs can be defined as the market (Walras and Jaffe, 2003). The fitness industry, an important component of the sports industry in China, can be defined as a series of economic activities that offer relevant goods and services to the public through sport, with mass experience and participation as its main form, and with the main purpose of promoting physical and mental health, covering facility construction, fitness services, equipment and equipment manufacturing, and other forms of business (General Office of the State Council, 2016).

In exploring the influence of the fitness market on women's fitness experiences in contemporary China, this research plans to ask three questions: 1) what changes have taken place in Chinese women's participation in sports and fitness activities against the background of the transition of China from a socialist planned economy into a market economy; 2) what are the fitness-related needs and patterns of Chinese women, and what types of goods and services does the fitness market offer to these women; and 3) how do the strategies surrounding these offerings by commercial actors (as well as gender, class, and technology) shape women's consumer decisions and fitness practices?

In order to fully understand this issue, this study further unpacks women's consumption through the lens of the consumer-supplier interaction logic in the market. This interaction is primarily constituted according to the relationship between market demand and supply. However, this interaction is not just transactional, it involves values, social structures, and evolving identities. In the context of the political and economic transformation of

China, this interaction involves intersecting forces of women's interests, gendered social structures, cultural norms, and suppliers' interests. Further, this research constitutes a theoretical framework based on the consumer decision-making process to elaborate the consumer-supplier interaction patterns and the dynamics. Throughout the research process, I have integrated critical analysis of the specific circumstances faced by fitness-oriented women in China into each stage of the consumer decision-making process, such as the need for recognition and reinforcement, alternative evaluations, purchase decisions, and post-purchase decision evaluations.

Overall, this research aims to investigate how women's subjectivity and physical fitness practices are shaped by the intersecting forces of gendered social structures, market dynamics, and cultural norms. The consumer decision-making process serves as a critical setting where these social forces manifest, offering a lens through which the concrete and micro-level impact of macro-social forces becomes visible. This research delves into the psychological base of micro-level consumption decisions while also examining how macro-level gender dynamics, capital logic, and technological environments shape these choices. Ultimately, the study not only maps the consumption choices of fitness-oriented women but also deciphers the broader implications of these choices, thereby providing a crucial reflective lens for understanding contemporary Chinese transformations in gender relations, body culture, sport, and consumption patterns.

This study contributes to uncovering the restrictions of societal expectations, bodily discipline, and the structural logic of capital in the practical sphere of women's fitness consumption. The study also reveals the aspirations, opportunities, challenges, reflections, and potential for reform for women in the current market-oriented fitness environment. It outlines how, under manifold social pressures and commercial imperatives, some individual women still dynamically and assiduously construct their envisioned fitness lifestyles amid various competing consumption choices. These often-overlooked nuanced experiences and struggles reveal transformative potential residing within female communities. Such potential may promote advancements in business ethics, improvements in public sports policies, and a renewal of collective knowledge regarding gender culture, along with corresponding social actions and improvements.

Currently, public attention and media demonstrate a highly visible level of participation and consumption among Chinese women in the fitness domain; however, the underlying generative mechanisms, psychological dynamics, and social implications remain inadequately examined. This study aims to bridge this critical gap. It systematically integrates fragmented consumption behaviors and identifies recurrent patterns across diverse individual fitness experiences. Then, through situating these behaviors within specific social structures (such as gender norms, family systems, and consumerism) for analysis, the research elucidates the formative logic behind observable phenomena and uncovers structural issues underlying individual representations. The academic concern for this research is to establish a cross-disciplinary understanding of women's fitness experiences as well as more generalized aspects of women's lives to examine the changing identities, ideologies, and mentalities of contemporary Chinese women. Consequently, this investigation into the daily practices and private experiences of female fitness consumers may contribute meaningful insights and agendas regarding gender equality, consumer culture, and women's fitness experiences to public discourse, academic reflection, and policy formulation.

At the practical and operational levels, the research findings may offer profound insights for optimizing sports policies, enabling governments to more rationally harness the substantial participatory momentum and infrastructure generated by market forces. The findings may help generate targeted regulation of capital's alienating tendencies, steering the fitness industry toward providing genuinely supportive services. These efforts can foster a safer and more sustainable fitness consumption environment, maintaining the intrinsic values of sports around bodily autonomy and authentic experiential joy and advancing the development of fitness spaces that promote greater gender and social equity. Through reflecting the tensions between women's individual agency and the structural forces behind the consumption patterns, the research outcomes may help fitness-oriented women gain critical awareness and realize their position and capacity in the market context to advocate for more favorable consumer choices. This should foster heightened awareness and discernment by women of the intrinsic significance and value of fitness, alongside supporting consumer rights protection. These practical applications

have the potential to improve women's sports and fitness participation in contemporary China.

1.2 Research background

1.2.1 Contextual overview of China

This section will briefly introduce the locus of this research – China. China, a country operating under a communist political system, possesses a vast territory, a dense population, and is home to multiple ethnic minorities. What is commonly referred to as 'China' can also be considered a conceptual matrix that is bound to the dimensions of culture, population, and history, going beyond the geographical concepts and limits. In the physical dimension, the geographical area of 'China' can be divided into several major regions or groups: Mainland China (the PRC of the inland); Special Economic Zones of the PRC; Special Administrative Regions of the PRC (Macao and Hong Kong); the Autonomous Regions of the PRC (including Xinjiang, Guangxi, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Ningxia); the ethnic minorities groups; Taiwan; and Chinese people of the Diaspora (ethnic Chinese residing abroad). In this research, I confine my discussion to Mainland China, hereinafter referred to as China. Building upon a holistic understanding of China, I have further refined the research to focus on the investigation of a specific micro-market. At this stage, I chose to conduct my field work in Chengdu. Chengdu is a large city of rapid market-oriented development, located in Mainland China and not in a special economic zone, special administrative region, or ethnic minority autonomous regions of China.

Ethnically, China officially recognizes 56 distinct ethnic groups. The Han ethnic group is the largest, constituting over 90% of China's population, and what is globally perceived as 'Chinese culture' is predominantly rooted in Han civilization. Nevertheless, the 55 ethnic minorities, dispersed across China's expansive regions, have preserved their own customs and traditions, all of which form an integral part of Chinese culture. Within common usage and scholarly research, 'Chinese culture' is widely regarded as strongly traditional, particularly in terms of gender, family, and Confucian ideology, despite decades of Communist governance (Meskill, 1973).

In terms of the economy, since the late 1970s, the socialist market economy has gradually taken shape and developed. In 1978, at the pivotal Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, the CCP announced the start of several significant changes in domestic and foreign policies. The historic decision to initiate the economic reform and opening-up were the central focus of this plenum. In 1984, the CCP adopted the *Decision of the Central Committee of the CCP on Economic System Reform*, which broke with the traditional notion of opposing planned and market economies, and gave initial recognition to the role of market mechanisms. In 1987, the 13th National Congress of the CCP systematically elaborated on the primary phase of socialism and established its fundamental guidelines. The congress emphasized that China was in the primary phase of socialism, and that the principal contradiction was between the backward level of social production and the growing material and cultural demands among people. The main task of the CCP and the state was to develop productive forces and advance socialist modernization, with economic development at the center and a continued commitment to reform and opening up (Xinhuanet, 2021). In 1992, the CCP formally put forward that the objective of China's economic reform was to establish a socialist market economy.

It is widely believed that the free market is an ideal and vital form of the market economy. A free market refers to a market free of government coercion, control, regulations, or force, which means the freedom to act without government interference in pursuit of the values needed to live, thrive, flourish and prosper. In this market, people can act freely to produce economic value and to create and produce wealth (Brook, 2023).

Although the free market is commonly associated with capitalism in popular culture and contemporary contexts, some models of socialism have also included the free market form (Bockman, 2011). As an economic system, capitalism is primarily characterized by the private ownership of the means of production for the purpose of generating profit. Under the framework of free-market capitalism, every owner of property, wealth, or production acts as the decision-maker and determines their investments in the capital market with resulting profits mainly belonging to the private sector (Gregory and Stuart, 2013). In terms of the economic form of market socialism, its core assumptions are that the model of employee-owned companies strongly encourages workers to maximize

productivity, and that profits generated by socially owned firms may be used in various ways, such as serving as a source of public finance for society at large, directly remunerating employees, or being distributed among the population as a social dividend (Marangos, 2004). Furthermore, some socialist proponents of the free market, like Benjamin Tucker (1854–1939) and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), believed that, in the context of capitalist exploitation, genuine voluntary exchange and free markets could not exist (Horvat, 2020).

Academic views on China's socialist market economy are quite complex. Cui (2012) argues that the liberal socialism model mentioned by economist James Meade shares similarities with the socialist market economy in China. This kind of model involves public ownership of firms with independent management. The state will act as a residual claimant to the profits from these firms, but it will not exercise controlling rights over the operations or management of these firms. This model has the advantage of providing the state with a source of income independent of debt and taxation. This enables a decrease in the burden on the private sector and individual incomes, while promoting greater equality. In China, regions can utilize the profits from state enterprises as a main source of public finance to fund public services, like housing, and enable the lowering of the corporate tax rate (Cui, 2012). However, Du and Xu (2008) claim that China presents an unstable form of capitalism as opposed to a market socialist economy. The reason is that in China's contemporary economic system, financial markets exist that allow for private share ownership, a characteristic that is not typically discussed in the economic literature on market socialism. Some socialists and Marxists believed that in China, the working class has been disempowered as the Chinese have embraced several characteristics of market capitalism, such as privatization and commodity production, which have led to the development of a fully-fledged capitalist economic system (Fabbri, 2006). Furthermore, Milhaupt and Zheng (2015) classify the Chinese economic system as state capitalism because the state exercises control and guidance over all major aspects of the Chinese economy, encompassing both the private and state sectors. They argue that given China's institutional environment, successful and large corporations, whether state- or privately-owned enterprises, exhibit substantial similarities in these areas:

proximity to state power, market dominance, execution of the state's policy goals, and receipt of state's subsidies (Milhaupt and Zheng, 2015).

To sum up, these different views reflect how in China's market economy, privatization plays an important role, while state guidance still significantly influences the development of the economy. Thus, the socialist market economy in China cannot be equated with the broader idea of market-based socialism.

Since the implementation of a series of 'market-oriented' policies, China's economy has expanded dramatically. From 1978 to 2000, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew from approximately 370 billion RMB to over 10 trillion RMB, growing from the tenth largest to the sixth largest economy in the world. In 2006, it exceeded 20 trillion RMB, surpassing the economy of the UK to become the world's fourth-largest economy. In 2010, it grew to over 40 trillion RMB and surpassed the economy of Japan to become the second-largest economy in the world, which subsequently increased to 114 trillion RMB by the year 2021 (GuangMing Daily, 2018; Sina Finance, 2022). This economic growth has improved the living standards of the Chinese people and transformed their lifestyles from static, generalized, and monotonous patterns into dynamic, diverse, and varied forms.

Chinese people, especially urban residents, have experienced rapid and impressive financial gains since the Maoist era. Savings of urban households increased from US\$ 1.85 billion in 1978 to US\$ 192 billion in 1994 (Davis, 2000). Data released by the People's Bank of China indicated that the nationwide household deposit balance reached 167 trillion RMB in 2025 (Sina Finance, 2026). Consumer durables such as refrigerators and washing machines, which were previously only accessible to a minority with special connections, became common commodities. Additionally, a variety of products that were once considered exotic became readily available in commercial establishments across urban China. In Shanghai, there were 52 dance halls and discos in 1985, and by 1994, the number had increased to over 1,000 (Davis, 2000).

The market mechanism promoted a leap in production for a large number of goods. These goods also needed to be consumed, which required massive purchasing power. That is

to say, after the initiation of the reform and opening-up policy, the Chinese government expected that consumption, one of the three engines driving economic growth, would vigorously encourage the development of the Chinese economy.¹ Xinhua News Agency (2013) reports that the Central Economic Work Conference proposed that the fundamental role of consumption in economic development needed to be fully exploited, including economic restructuring and the exploitation of reform dividends to unleash consumption potential. From a more micro perspective, as businesses hope to expand sales, they strive to achieve commercial publicity that will attract the public and stimulate the public's desire to consume. As a result, China has progressively transitioned from a production-oriented society to a consumer-oriented society. The correlation between consumption and negative values, such as concepts of extravagance and waste, gradually weakened in Chinese society. Today, the social environment tends to encourage and support consumption. For Chinese women, these changes led to great changes in their sporting life as well as to their attitudes towards sports and consumption.

Beyond the economic progress, the 'market-oriented transformation' has also played an important role in driving fundamental changes in every aspect of Chinese society (Duo, 1998). This mechanism was conducive to fostering people's ambition, competitive awareness, and innovative awareness, which would make a significant contribution to progress in various societal aspects, including production technology, social and cultural forms, ideology, and individual development, as well as modernization. Modernization involves a societal shift that includes industrialization and the political, economic, cultural, and other transformations that come with it. In China, modernization emphasizes enhancing people's quality of life, encompassing both material and spiritual aspects (People's Daily Online, 2023).

Regarding the societal and cultural aspects, the 'emancipation of the mind' brought about by the policy of economic reform and opening-up to the world community and the relaxation of cultural policies greatly stimulated Chinese society. This has led to a long-term and significant transformation of social ideology and culture, together with the

¹ In the Chinese context, the three engines for economic growth are consumption, investment, and net exports.

infiltration of various Western ideological trends and theories, which have significantly influenced the construction of modern life in contemporary China.² The resurgence of humanism in the new era constituted a key foundation for the vigorous development of cultural knowledge and practice (Wang, 2015). Under this trend, the concept of individualism and individual subjectivity, popular in Western capitalist societies, was considered. It has a greatly different connotation from the collectivist ideas of the Maoist era (1949–1978). In this way, great changes have taken place in Chinese women's material and spiritual life. Specifically, although Chinese women achieved equality in aspects of most basic social rights in the Maoist era, the unique lifestyle and individual consciousness of female identity were not considered (Jin, 2007). After the reform of China (post-1978), it became possible to achieve a modern lifestyle, emphasizing individual needs, acknowledging the value of diverse aesthetics, and enjoying products and services focused on women's unique needs. Overall, a revolutionary stance of promoting women's identity, self-realization, and equality was advocated in contemporary China (Lin, Liu, and Jin, 1998). During this transformation, the influence of state power decreased in individual lives, particularly in sports practices and economic activities. The changing relationship between the public and the government, the rise of individualism, and the great abundance of material goods have transformed women's lifestyles in Chinese society, including the way women participate in sports and fitness activities.

Additionally, market-driven vitality has stimulated the progress and development of science and technology in China. Information and digital technology have developed rapidly, transforming the marketing systems used by sellers or suppliers. It has also contributed to more diversified forms of fitness products and services, including digital fitness applications and online fitness courses. This has lowered the barriers to access to fitness services for Chinese women and brought greater convenience to their fitness activities. Advances in digital technology have also changed the access to expression, performance forms, and values of women's fitness. Additionally, China's advanced industrial development has driven down the costs and prices of fitness products.

² Modern life is built upon modernization (mentioned above) in society.

1.2.2 Societal status and sports participation of women in China

The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of the historic evolution of women's sports, explaining the significant transformations that have emerged in this field following the reform and opening-up era. It further delineates the key focus and research significance of this study.

In dynastic China, women suffered a long history of oppression. Confucianism, the mainstream ideology during this period, put women in a subordinate position and private domains through the emphasis on 'wives' responsibility in the family, 'a husband as the standard for his wife,' and 'men are superior to women' (Liu, 1998). Hence, women were highly marginalized in society, especially in the economic system, and women's participation in sports was greatly constrained as a result. It was significantly reflected by the restrictions gender norms placed on the female body, specifically, foot binding. Foot binding represents a form of bodily tyranny and social subjugation imposed on Chinese women under patriarchal dominion from traditional societies to modern times (Hong, 1997). The custom of foot binding required women to shape their feet into small feet about three Chinese inches (10cm) long by means of cruel methods (such as binding cloth strips on their feet) (Gao, 2009). This custom was mainly derived from the aesthetics of women in traditional China (slender and fragile), and would cause irreversible damage to the bones and muscles of women's feet (Gao, 2009). It must have been extremely difficult for most women with such feet to take part in social labor and sports activities, especially intense activities with a lot of footwork.

Since the Industrial Revolution, which started in Europe in the early nineteenth century, human and manual production started to be replaced by mechanized production (Stavrianos, 1999). The traditional agricultural society began to transform into a modern industrial society. Industrialization deconstructed complex production processes into simple jobs with low physical requirements, which greatly promoted women's participation in the labor market (Stavrianos, 1999). As a result, some women achieved a certain degree of economic independence. In line with the dissemination of basic principles of capitalism, such as equality, democracy and freedom, and the concept of urban industrialization and liberalism, the women's liberation movement sprang up and

gradually expanded with greater influence (Rampton, 2015). Technology and thought from Western countries were introduced into China in the nineteenth century following the Opium War (1839–1842). By the late nineteenth century, Chinese enlightenment thinkers, educationalists and reformers, like Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) and Qiu Jin (1875–1907), also began to pay attention to female liberation, women's education and women's rights (Hong, 1995). During this period, in many areas of the world, including China, the situation of most women was changing in a variety of social fields, including in the area of sport. Women began to be aware of the unfair experience they had suffered and began to actively strive for the right to participate in sports.

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, Chinese women were completely liberated from the physical constraints like foot binding and encouraged to cultivate a robust physique perceived as more egalitarian. Women started to be encouraged to join the workforce. Furthermore, they started to be encouraged and organized by the government to engage in sports and physical education. However, sport in the Maoist Era mainly contributed to nurturing healthy and strong bodies for socialist modernization, industrialization, and national defense (Cui, 2008). Furthermore, women's sports, which can cultivate powerful female bodies, served as an effective instrument to achieve the goal of breaking gender stereotypes and establish a new image of the socialist country on the international stage. Overall, during the Maoist Era, women's involvement in sport was strongly promoted, and Chinese women's sports did very well as a result.

Against the background of the transition of China to a market economy from the late 1970s, the professional development model in the field of elite sports has brought more business opportunities and income growth potential for female athletes (Shao, 2015). In the field of mass sports, the sports consumer market has shown huge business potential in recent years. During this time, the key aim of mass sport has shifted from political and national development targets to public personal needs, well-being, and social functions. In the past decades, together with the development of the market economy and the rise of China as the world's factory, China has achieved some of the fastest economic growth rates in the world. The growth of the Chinese economy has had a significant impact in unleashing the potential talents of Chinese women. It has provided women with more

opportunities to compete in various fields and has created appealing employment opportunities for women in many sectors. As a result, an increasing number of women choose to consume fitness goods to promote their individual fitness development.

Sport is an important platform for women to improve health and quality of life, achieve self-fulfillment, seek self-independence, and emancipate their bodies (Liu, 2016). However, it required specific economic, cultural, and political conditions to foster its growth. Historically, Chinese women's emancipation from traditional, patriarchal gender constraints, like foot binding, guided the empowerment of the female body, which initially created various athletic opportunities for women. Further, the Communist model of sport, which advocated for androgynous ideology, greatly promoted women's participation in both elite sport and mass sport. In contemporary China, women's sports involvement during this time encountered specifically societal complexities, characterized by the collapse and persistence of traditional culture, the domestic transformation of the economy, as well as the impact of Western ideology. One of the motives of my research on women's fitness consumption is to look at the influence of contemporary sports marketisation as well as rising economic conditions on women's sports participation, especially on aspects of the convenience of sports participation, their personal well-being, freeing their bodies culturally and physically, and equality in the sports arena.

Given the particular sociocultural context of China, this study undertakes a critical exploration of the inherent contradictions in women's sports participation during the reform and opening-up era. It examines how, in this commercialized society, consumption enables women to exercise personal agency, as opposed to state-defined ideals, in their sporting engagement, granting them a sense of bodily empowerment while simultaneously subjecting them to renewed commercial disciplines centered on efficiency, self-regulation, and physical appearance. Within this era of increasing individual freedom, the research further investigates more subtle structural constraints (as opposed to state's collectivist guidelines) underlying personal fitness choices. Against the background of contemporary social stratification and diversified lifestyles, it highlights class-based and familial divergences in women's experiences, thereby

avoiding the homogenized perception of Chinese fitness-oriented women.

Within this multidimensional contextual description, factors bearing high relevance to various specific research issues will be elaborated in greater detail in subsequent chapters. These explanations ensure that the analysis of female fitness consumers' decision-making processes engages in a substantive dialogue with the broader societal contexts about Chinese women, thereby preventing the discussion from being an isolated procedural description.

1.3 Literature review

1.3.1 Women's participation in sport and gender equality – from a global perspective

For a historical perspective on the development of women's sports, some scholars have examined the historical evidence for women's participation in sports and tried to elaborate the social significance behind women's sports based on the corresponding historical background. Guttmann's book is a representative study of women's sports from a historical perspective. This book describes women's sports from Egyptian times; ancient Greece, mainly in Sparta; the Victorian Age; and through the modern and contemporary periods following the industrial revolution (Guttmann, 1991). Guttmann's research reveals gender conflicts in history and the changing status of women in Western culture through regarding athletics as a mirror or a stage. Some other researchers have examined women's sports in specific periods and provide rich academic resources. For example, Christensen's study describes how, although there were limitations, compared with women in other regions, Spartan women had more opportunities to participate in sports in ancient Greece (Christensen, 2012). Additionally, women involved in some significant sports activities or eye-catching sports have also been paid special attention by scholars. For instance, the study by Murray (2003) explores the circumstances of female gladiators including their dilemmas and the respect they might get in the ancient Roman world. From a historical perspective, in societies before modernization and industrialization, although there were some women participating in sports at different

times and places, on the whole, women's sports were still subject to men's sports and to the demands of male-dominated society on women.

After the industrial revolution, women's participation in sports gradually became universal. Industrialization greatly promoted women's participation in the labor market. Based on the fact that some women achieved a certain degree of economic independence through their participation in social labor, the dissemination of basic principles such as equality, democracy and freedom, and the concept of urban industrialization and liberalism, women and feminists hoped that women could strive for more rights to participate in society. With the emergence of the first wave of the feminist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, the status of women changed in all fields of society to some extent. As a part of social life and cultural practice, sports activities became a stage for women to obtain corresponding rights. Today, although women have as many rights in athletics as men in many parts of the world, there are still significant differences in the acceptance and attitude towards men and women in sports. Women are considered unsuitable for some sports and are usually excluded from such sports, such as football in China region. A gender division still exists in the field of sports and exercise. In this field, it is difficult to eliminate the traditional gender views on participation, physical and mental characteristics (Molnar, Amin, and Kanemasu, 2019). In terms of female sports research, with the promotion of the feminist movement, academic research on women's sports is also growing and is explored from the standpoint of women.

In this part, I will first explain the relationships between women's sports and different feminist schools of thought to highlight the key research perspectives and issues feminism raises in sports studies for the progress of women's sports and gender equality in sports. A comprehensive review of literature highlighting gender equality in women's sports, including studies about women's sports consumption, will then be presented to provide more details of academic context for this study.

Feminism can be understood as a doctrine that is independent of class struggle and dedicated to improving women's status (Beauvoir, 2018). Starting with the women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, numerous feminist ideologies have developed, contributing to different schools of thought in the field of

feminism. Although feminists all focus on women's rights, they represent different viewpoints and aims on women's issues and offer different explanations for the sources of female oppression as social beings. Liberal, socialist/Marxist, and radical feminism are known as the 'Big Three Schools' of feminist thoughts. Other forms of feminism have also developed, such as ecofeminism and postcolonial feminism. This section mainly examines branches of liberal, socialist/Marxist, and radical feminism and explains the application of these theories in providing a perspective on women's experiences in sport.

Liberal feminism sees the root of women's oppression as being caused by the lack of equal civil rights and educational opportunities for women, so therefore emphasizes equality and advocates for women's right of freedom from coercive interference, based on considering women as self-owners (Baehr, 2007). Liberal feminists primarily aim at reforming the existing social system rather than transforming existing social structures. This liberal feminism perspective, focusing on ensuring equal opportunities and free choices for women, inspired some scholars to discuss institutional barriers that limit women's access, explore measures aimed at gender equity, and cultivate an environment that facilitates the physical self-development for women in the sports field. Tuyckom et al. (2010) conduct a cross-national study of sports participation in 25 European countries, presenting improvements and underscoring the structural barriers in women's sports participation. Senne (2016) provides a foundational and multifaceted analysis of gender equity in sport, emphasizing the legal and institutional frameworks, such as the USA's Title IX, and revealing aspects where disparities about equal opportunities exist.

Radical feminists 'conceive of contemporary society as a system organized in a way that accords privilege to men as a group and allows them to have systematic coercive power over women' (Xiong, 2006: 62). To legitimize domination, men create cultural ideologies and constructs that define women as inferior (Beauvoir, 2018). Hence, this school of thought supports a radical social restructuring to eradicate male supremacy. From the perspective of radical feminism, which critiques the inequality of institutionalized gender, some studies explore the relationships between patriarchal systems, the formation of male-dominated sports spaces, and the underrepresentation of

women in sport, the exciting experiences of physical accomplishment, and refusing patriarchal rigid notions, like ‘body beautiful’, in women’s sport. Podoler (2020) examines persistent patriarchy in sports across Asia, illustrating how cultural and institutional norms marginalize women. The research by Schneider (2023) on female boxers and Imbrišević (2023)’s research on women’s rugby separately explores the potential of women’s participation in sports as a challenge to patriarchal norms and its complexity.

Socialist feminists argue that material life shapes human consciousness and the economic system decides the superstructure, and this is applied to understand gender inequality and the oppression of women by focusing on material and economic factors, class oppression, and the interaction of capitalism and patriarchy (Gunew, 2013). From the perspective of socialist feminism, which examines the dual oppression of women based on economic inequalities and institutionalized gender norms, some studies analyze the interplay of economic systems and patriarchy in limiting women’s opportunities in sports. Hall (1985) discusses how women’s roles in sports are constrained by both economic exploitation and gender subjugation. Sveinson et al. (2022) explore the relationship between the invisible labor of women under the capitalist system and gender inequity in the sports industry.

These gender perspectives present the analysis of women’s right to participate in sports as critical to realizing the universality of women’s sports. The right to exercise and physical education, along with physical strength, constitutes a critical feminist issue (Park, 1994). Wollstonecraft (2013) argues that women need to strive to acquire strength of body and mind and should be allowed to gain the same physical freedoms and participate in the same physical activities as boys. A similar view can also be found in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (2018): women should ‘swim, climb mountain peaks, pilot an aeroplane, battle against the elements, take risks, go oi for adventure, and she will not feel before the world . . . timidity’.

As a part of social life and cultural practice, sports activities became a stage for women to obtain corresponding rights. In 1920, women first qualified for the Olympic Games (Morris, 2016). Furthermore, against the backdrop of the revival of the women’s

movement in North America and the United Kingdom during the 1960s, an increasing number of women engaged in competitive athletics (Bandy, 2005). During and after this period of time, a lot of research on issues that pertain to women and sports focused on the female athlete. One of the core issues is the conflict of gender roles and solutions of that conflict (Xiong, 2014a). Sage and Loudermilk (1979) claim that athleticism and femininity are at two extremes and two opposite cultural elements. Many women do not participate in sports as they are afraid of losing their femininity, while those women who do participate in sports often suffer from the conflicts and perplexities between the roles of 'athletes' and 'women' (Sage and Loudermilk, 1979). Colker and Widom (1980) demonstrate that the key to solving the role conflict for female athletes was to reduce the requirements on female athletes' sports ability, not to overemphasize achievements and performance, and that people should reduce the excessive emphasis and requirements on the feminine aspect of female athletes, such as discussions on makeup, clothing, boyfriends and family. However, in the current male dominated society, many female athletes, under the pressure of image evaluations, dedicate considerable time and attention to femininity, thereby constraining their willingness to participate. In terms of the will of female athletes themselves, Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013: 273) claim that 'when sportswomen were given a choice regarding self-representation, they emphasized their physical power, strength, and athleticism'. However, the research from Delorme (2014) and Crossman, Vincent, and Gee (2010) demonstrates that there is a gender difference in sports reports, for example, often reporting on non-sports topics with female athletes, especially their beauty and sexiness. Obviously, this role conflict for female athletes is one of the dilemmas sporting women face in a society where they are still constrained by unequal gender norms.

The difference in the media coverage of women's events and that of men's events is not only a difference in both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, but also indirectly reflects the gender inequality in society and the sports space, which cannot be ignored. The research from Simiri (1979) and Kidd (2013) shows that there is a lot of gender discrimination and prejudice in sports, such as unequal treatment of women in the Olympic Games, gender separatism, lack of female leadership in sports organizations,

unequal opportunities and resources for men and women to participate in sports, and women's oppressed status in sports. This reflects how the patriarchal nature of sports and gender discrimination ideology pervades sports. More seriously, the interaction between the gender system (patriarchy) and capitalist system generates profound impact on women's sports participation (Bray, 1983). Beyond sports in capitalist societies, research by Lee (2019: 42) on female football in North Korea reflects that sports in socialist countries have 'been shown to be both hierarchical and male-dominated'. Lenskyj (1986) argues that the ideological foundation for the exclusion of women from sports has historically rested upon the control of female sexuality by males (within scientific, medical, and religious domains), as well as invidious ideological assumptions about female nature. Particularly, medical notions of women in the late nineteenth century justified the practice of regarding women's physiological functions as requiring regulated levels of physical activities and limited athletic opportunities (Vertinsky, 1989). According to Scraton and Flintoff (2002), the root of men's persistence in excluding women from sports is that muscular females are viewed as embodying agency, independence, and power, thereby representing a threat to the idea of a male dominated society.

In sports, the exclusion of women begins at their birth. In childhood, girls are often encouraged to play with dolls rather than be tough and participate in contact sports. With regard to physical education, there are many benefits for girls from participating in sports, including increasing physical and mental health, and improving education and intelligence (Brady, 2005; Sport England, 2017). However, research from Love and Kelly (2011) and Clark (2012) demonstrates that school spaces are also shaped by broader societal norms where sports continue to be deeply intertwined with masculinity. As a result, girls suffer from unequal treatment, including the routine evaluation of girls' bodies according to their physical appearance and sex segregation, which results in detrimental effects on girls' sporting participation. Das, Bankar, and Verma (2019) profoundly rethink the constraints in the process of parents raising their daughters for women's participation in sports against the social background of Mumbai, a region dominated by a gender logic driven by male hegemony.

The dilemma of female sports participation is not only in school spaces or physical education, but also in the general public social space. The pattern of a male dominated urban sphere leads to the unreasonable distribution of urban space according to gender, and the gender imbalance in sports space is particularly obvious (Saegert, 1981; Spain, 2008; Xiong, 2011). In addition to the restrictions on women's sports participation caused by social ideology, Xiong (2012) argues that women who are willing to participate in sports are also limited to a relatively narrow sports space because of family factors, which resulted from the concept of 'convenience', an embodiment of gender power in a male-dominated society. Overall, females, generally, face sexism, stereotypes, and lack of opportunities in the wider public sphere, and not unnaturally, women face all the same issues in the sports space. However, it is worth highlighting that while gender-based oppression persists, sport can serve as an arena for women's emancipation. According to studies by Brady (2005), Xiong (2014b), and Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993), sports opportunities for women may be valuable in helping enhance female self-awareness, transform outmoded gender norms, redefine feminine identities as roles with their own physical capabilities and sense of power, and give young women 'a safe space of their own' that enables them to be in the public sphere with confidence.

Studies of women's sports consumption mainly encompass a multifaceted examination of the influences on women's sports consumption, the motives and behaviors of female consumers, and strategies for growth. Many of these studies highlight the influence of gender factors. Ridinger and James (2002) explore the role of gender dynamics in shaping sports consumption motives. Xu et al. (2021) reveal how entrenched gender norms mediate women's perception of sports and also highlight the role of media consumption in perpetuating these biases. Johnson et al. (2020) explore consumer behaviors around women's sports, emphasizing the importance of women's unique preferences and challenges in marketing strategies. Many studies on women's sports consumption focus on the influence of gendered factors on consumption or leveraging gendered factors to formulate business strategies, but there is a lack of research exploring the deep-seated, long-term implications of business strategies on women's sports development. This is the core focus of this study.

1.3.2 The research on women's sport in China

Women's studies hold a crucial position in China's academia. The participation of women in sports is seen as a symbol of women's liberation in China (Hong, 1995). As the sports system progresses, research on women's sports has become a popular topic. Christensen et al. (2001) highlight the diversity of women's sport, and suggest a broad definition of sport, including dance and yoga practice, rather than just focusing on competitive sports that involve explicit criteria for determining the winner and two or more contestants. Two core components of Chinese sports system are mass sport and elite or competitive sport. Elite sport is primarily governed by governmental authorities, aiming to cultivate high-performance athletes to achieve success in both domestic and international competitions. Mass sport refers to physical exercise undertaken by the members of the wider society during their leisure time, also including physical education (Yuan et al., 1998).

In this part, I will first examine the literature on women's sports in China through the framework of elite sport and mass sport. Secondly, on the basis of the particular interests and aims, this research will specifically discuss the studies on women's sports and fitness consumption in China. It is an important part of female mass sport in contemporary China.

Among Chinese women's sports issues, the most popular topic is the performance of female athletes in competitive sports, especially in the Olympic Games. Since Chinese women entered into competitive sports, they have reached the world's highest levels in track, field, shooting, diving, and many other sports events. Moreover, Chinese female athletes have often far surpassed the performance of their male compatriots on the international sports stage, which means that the nation's international sporting success owes quite a lot to its women (Dong, 2007a; Riordan and Dong, 1996). Research from Hong (1995), Zhao and Chen (2008), and Zhang (2008) shows that more active participation and outstanding performances by Chinese female athletes in the Olympic program can improve Chinese women's societal status and national reputation in the wider world and also play a positive role in the global development of the Olympic program. The rise of Chinese women's sports, especially competitive sports, in the

decades after the establishment of the PRC was not an accident. In addition to the cause of the women's liberation movement, according to Hong (1995), another important factor was that Chinese women's sports can emphasize the official political values among young women and help ensure political cohesion, continuity, and conformity. Though women's sports in China are mainly promoted from top to bottom with political goals, the development of women's sports does promote gender equality to a certain extent (Brownell, 1995).

Although female athletes have made remarkable achievements in sports, the phenomenon of gender imbalance still exists in sports reports in China. A study by Zhao (2015) shows that most of the sports favored by the media are male sports, and the coverage of male sports is significantly more than that of female sports. A study from Lin (2008) explains the reasons for the gender differences in media reports, including the influence of traditional male chauvinism, the fact that there are very few women in relevant authorities, the imbalance of media audience structure, and the influence of commercial culture and consumerism. The gender bias in sports reports needs to be changed. Qu (2013) points out that media coverage of women's sports will affect the formation of ideas of women's sports to a certain extent, and shaping the image of female athletes on the field also has an important impact on promoting international exchanges and improving the status of female athletes. Besides media information, Nehring (2019) finds that self-help books in China show a series of gendered notions on fitness and sports which imply gender inequality, while ostensibly advocating a gender-neutral fitness approaches. Gender imbalance in sports significantly echoes gender inequality in society.

China is a country with a huge territory and population. The social status, economic level and education level of Chinese women varies greatly. Hence, in the study of mass sport, many researchers divide women into different groups based on economic background, the urban-rural divide, age differences, and other factors to study the similarities and differences between different groups. Specifically, in terms of age, middle-aged and old women, young and middle-aged professional women, and female students are the primary research groups attracting academic attention. Personal background factors,

such as women's income, educational background, occupation, and family role, are included in the scope of investigation and analysis. Additionally, there are some studies of women's sports that take a certain region or province as the research object. These studies reflect how the motivations, patterns, and challenges of Chinese women in participating in physical fitness activities are multi-level and diversified. The items, forms, places, and consumption patterns of female sports participants display characteristics obviously related to their personal backgrounds, including age, social class and so on (Dong, 2007b; Guo and Dai, 2024).

Regarding the age of female sports participants, Meng (2004) investigates the exercise behavior of men and women in different age groups and finds that the male sports population is larger than that of women by varying degrees in most age groups. Sun and Wang (2004) and Yi and Hu (2004) concentrate on young female college students to discuss their exercise routines and the influencing factors. In terms of regions, Jiang and Wu (2004) conduct an investigation of the main motivations for women to exercise in Jiangsu Province. Yu, Wu, and Cao (2004) investigate the schedules and financial distribution around physical exercise for elderly women in southern Jiangsu.

In terms of occupations, teachers and administrators are more inclined to participate in sports activities with friends and colleagues (Dong, 2007b). Research by Ma (2016) on women in Changsha City shows that professional women's sports leisure culture is invested with the three-dimensional expression of cultural adaptation, cultural conflict, and cultural construction, and contains consciousness of and resistance to traditional symbols of the female role. Their sports behavior expresses their group's heightened consciousness of self-identity, social status and self-awareness, as well as their social demands for social communication and resource networks. Married and professional women with dual roles in society are the majority of Chinese women. The pressures of dual roles may constrain women's time to participate in sports activities. Specifically, heavy housework, busy employment, lack of time, and dislike of sports are the main elements influencing their participation in physical activities (Dong, 2007b).

Women's sports participation across different social classes shows obvious differences. A survey by Wu (2004) in Henan Province shows that levels of sports participation

among the urban and rural jobless, unemployed, and semi-unemployed classes are the highest of all female population classes. It seems that these women have more available time. Wang (2013) demonstrates that economic income and educational background lead to an obvious social stratification phenomenon within female sports participation. The degree of sports participation of the married female group is significantly lower than that of the unmarried female group (Wang, 2013). According to the research from Ma et al. (2015), sports time investment significantly improves the living standards of urban women to varying extents, but there are great differences in the time investment and consumption costs of the various classes.

From the societal perspective, Xu (2008) indicates that women's extraversion and aggression after participating in sports do not conform to traditional Chinese culture's expectations of the female role, which impedes women's participation in sports. This view uncovers how women's gender roles and gender consciousness have a strong impact on women's participation in sport. Xia (2014) admits that male hegemony is still regulating and controlling women's bodies, sports thoughts, and culture, but this scholar believes that Chinese women's sports culture already contains the concepts of self-awareness and voluntariness. According to Xiong (2016), in the field of women's mass sports and fitness in China, there are some practical problems: the space of sports activities is squeezed and fragmented; the selection of sports is limited; there is a lack of women's sports organizations; women's mass sports culture is marginalized; and there is unbalanced development of female sports in the three fields of public, commercial and social arenas. She suggests that women's sports participation should meet women's social communication and cultural demands and can promote the growth of women's collective cohesion and discursive power. Qiu, Liang, and Xu (2012) demonstrate how the restrictions on the process of women's leisure sports are determined not only by physiological factors but also gradually formed under the specific social and cultural background of contemporary China through the three aspects of gender differences, gender roles and the gender system. Regarding the societal benefits of sports participation for women, studies from Qiu, Zhou, and Tian (2020), Xiong (2014b), and Xiong (2021), point out that women's participation in sports can improve their

competitiveness in the workplace, promote further physical and mental emancipation of women and self-awakening, promote the construction of female social spaces, impact the stereotypes of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ in society, and help women express their diverse needs. This reveals the potential in sports participation to dismantle gender inequality and its restrictions on women.

In addition, there are many studies on Chinese women’s mass sport that give attention to sports consumption, which is strongly related to the topic of this research. The following paragraphs will elaborate on this research field in detail.

In the early twenty-first century, with the steady improvement in women’s economic and social status in China, Shi put forward the concept of the ‘She-economy’, which was formed on the basis of the economic phenomenon that women’s consumption and financial management has attracted the attention of many scholars (Xue, 2015). Gao and Xia (2020) are concerned with the ‘She-economy’ and indicate that women’s economic independence and independent consumption rights may be reflected in the growth of women’s sports consumption. On the other hand, the female sports consumption market in China is characterized by an imbalance of supply and demand, and a lack of convenience (Gao and Xia, 2020). Luo and Wu (2025) further delve into the multifaceted challenges within female sports consumption from the perspective of the ‘She-economy’. Nonetheless, Ma and Ji (2015) think that for promoting gender equality, consumption of female sports competition has symbolic significance. However, an earlier study from Yuan (2008) demonstrates that sports consumption by Chinese women was lower than that of men at that time. With the rapid development of women’s consumption, female sports consumption has significantly increased, and the gap between male and female consumption is also evolving. By focusing on the current state of women’s fitness consumption, this study may reflect changes in women’s positioning and gender equality within the sports domain.

In addition to research on the overall characteristics and scale of the women’s sports consumption market, many studies also explore how to increase the scale of women’s sports consumption. According to Xie and Ji (2005), businesses can analyze consumption psychology and use marketing methods in order to improve levels of

women's sports consumption. Li (2009) states that there is potentially high commercial value in exploring the potential for sports consumption among urban women. Various studies concentrate on the specific design of marketing strategies in the women's sports market. For example, Luo and He (2010) state that fitness marketing should pay attention to portraying the image of the modern women and guiding trends of fitness consumption. With regard to the development of the women's sports consumption market, Ma and Ji (2011) indicate that while strengthening publicity and increasing recognition among female consumer groups, it is also necessary to promote the opening of male sports events to female consumers and the development of an enjoyment-oriented consumption market. Zhang and Wang (2025) investigate the influence of key opinion leader characteristics on female consumers' purchase intention for sports products. Although this research explores certain aspects of the consumer decision-making process, it primarily focuses on the impacts on female economic activities.

In terms of consumers, many researchers have paid attention to the motivation or driving factors of women's sports consumption, and some of them explore further the social mechanisms and implicit meanings behind these factors. As early as 2004, Hu, Chu, and Zhang (2004) discussed the topic of female consumption in a survey of *female consumers in commercial sports fitness places in Jiangsu Province*, and point out that the top three consumption motivations of these consumers were health, recreation and hobbies. Song and Bai (2012) focus on aesthetic motivation and found that young Chinese women's aesthetic appreciation of their external image is embedded in stereotyped standards of 'beauty', and that they try to reshape their bodies through sports consumption in order to realize an ideal of external beauty. This finding shows how women's bodies in sports are still constrained by the traditional shaping of femininity in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, Yuan (2008) reveals that many young women pursue a personalized lifestyle, strengthen their health and improve themselves through sports consumption, for example, by participating in aerobics and yoga. Yan (2021) elucidates the multifaceted value orientations of contemporary Chinese urban women through a discussion of their consumption behaviors toward fashionable athletic apparel. These studies uncover the driving force of women's self-expression and self-awakening

in their sports consumption. However, Liu (2016) realizes the incompleteness of self-expression in such consumption. He claims that although modern female sports consumers show a stronger subjectivity and can form a unique self-experience at the individual level, it is still controlled by the capital culture in a consumption society and just shows incomplete individualism in attitude. Ye and Chen (2024) demonstrate the interplay mechanism among economic, cultural, and social capital, and the ecosystem of women's leisure sports consumption. Pan (2019) describes the difficulties facing women's body expression through sports in the layers of power regulation. She highlights how this expression cannot get rid of the influence of nationalization and consumer culture. Therefore, women's bodies in sports fall into a dual contradiction and are split between pursuing liberation and constantly falling into another discipline. Focusing on these notions to conduct a further analysis, this study examines the specific implementation pathways through which consumer culture or capital culture discipline women's fitness practices and views.

Some studies discuss the constraints of women's sports consumption, which are connected with the universal social predicament faced by women. According to Zhang (2007), low levels of income inhibit the motivation of women for sports consumption. Moreover, the traditional Chinese family concept of 'male dominating the outside and female dominating the inside' still constrains modern women's lives, including women's sports consumption. Kong and Gao (2017) investigate the leisure time of urban professional women and find that their leisure time is mainly occupied by housework and childcare. This contributes to the lack of time for physical activities and sports consumption, thereby making it difficult for them to realize the importance of sports consumption. Nevertheless, Zhou and Xie (2008) focus on different family structures and point out that structures of extended family, nuclear family and children-centered family positively affect the attitude of middle-aged urban professional women towards participating in sports consumption. The structure of husband-centered families has a negative impact on women's sports consumption, but there are few such family structures. This finding uncovers how Chinese women are still not completely free from the situation of being restricted in the private space, but the traditional gender norm of

‘husband guides wife’ has been gradually dispelled. On the other hand, Wu and Li (2017) highlight the decisive role of women in the field of family consumption and believe that they play an important role in the growth of sports consumption. In addition, research from Xie (2007) suggests that there is gender segregation in sports culture atmosphere, which hinders the sports consumption of intellectual Chinese women.

1.3.3 Summary

The review of research on women’s sports highlights the key perspectives, issues, and context for this study, which provides theoretical support for subsequent critical analysis in the research. The review of domestic studies uncovers a research gap in the research field of women’s sports and fitness consumption in China. Specifically, in this research field, some studies provide descriptive findings of consumer behaviors and preferences or conduct some analysis through the lens of social or cultural perspectives, particularly focusing on the social and cultural construction of gender. Against the backdrop of the growing consumption in women’s sports and fitness and the awakening of female consciousness, some studies conduct sociological analyses of women’s consumption features and patterns. However, there are few studies providing a profound and critical understanding of the specific construction processes of consumption underlying commercial narratives. Previous research on women’s sports consumption has largely centered on understanding the role of women within such consumption in isolation. These studies have predominantly focused on the behavior of female sports participation itself or done quantitative descriptions of consumption levels and structures. As such, these discussions lack a qualitative in-depth exploration of the emotional dynamics and identity negotiation within the consumption experience. In contrast, this study investigates how women interact with commercial actors in the context of sports consumption, and how such interactions influence their fitness lifestyles and the construction of their social identities, thereby enabling a dynamic tracking of the complete consumption experience.

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the consumer roles of fitness-oriented women and thus notices the commodity characteristics of fitness consumption. Distinct from general commodity consumption, fitness consumption entails high bodily

involvement, sustained time investment, and deep emotional engagement. Consequently, this research uncovers the unique significance of fitness consumption for women's identity construction and development compared to other female-oriented consumer goods, which represents a currently under-explored area in the existing literature.

Furthermore, some studies discuss how to leverage these factors to formulate business strategies to promote the market development and expansion of female sports consumption at scale, but there is a lack of research on how these business actions further influence and shape Chinese women's sports participation. My study fills in these research gaps by employing the lens of a consumer decision-making process framework as well as recognizing the dynamism and interactions in the market, constructing an interplay of the market perspective and the sociological perspective. There is some research analyzing the influence of economic factors on women's sports consumption but that research primarily focuses on macroeconomic factors, such as the market-oriented transformation and the prevalence of consumerism in China. This study pays attention to the micro level of market dynamic, the particular behaviors of consumers and suppliers, to explore women's fitness consumption. This reveals the micro-level implementation pathways underlying macroeconomic phenomena, which constitutes the innovative contribution of this study. Furthermore, the application of theories related to the consumer decision-making process to analyze the experiential dimensions of female fitness consumers in China represents an innovation in the theoretical application aspect.

To conclude, women's fitness consumption serves as a key issue in understanding how the participation models, goals, and functions of women's sports have changed in China in line with the market-oriented economic development. Through a comprehensive review of hundreds of core journal articles about women's sports research in China, Guo and Dai (2024: 104) conclude that 'expanding research in the field of women's sports consumption' is warranted, underscoring the timeliness and relevance of this study. More importantly, this topic holds significant potential for academic contribution or innovation and is therefore worth further investigation.

1.4 Research organization

This research is divided into six parts. The dissertation comprises of Chapter 1 – Introduction; Chapter 2 – Methodology and Theoretical Framework; Chapter 3 – The Historical Transformation of Women’s Sport Participation in China; Chapter 4 – Consumer Behaviors, Resource Distribution and Motivations of Female Fitness Consumers in China and Consumer-related environments: Products, Services, and Marketing in China’s Female Fitness Market; Chapter 5 – Supplier-Consumer Interaction: Practical Consumption Experiences of Women in Fitness; and Chapter 6 – Conclusion.

Chapter 1 outlines the topic, goals, and significance of my research, and maps and assesses the relevant literature about women’s sports to explain the research innovation and academic contribution of my study.

Chapter 2 introduces and justifies the research methodology and theoretical framework, and outlines the specific methods and analytical pathways employed to fulfill the research aims. A mixed method with qualitative and quantitative investigations has been employed, and women in Chengdu have been selected as the investigation object for this research. In the analysis of Chinese women’s fitness consumption, the experiences of women in Chengdu holds a certain level of generalizability and representativeness, which resonates with broader trends in China. The strategies of data collection are the interview for qualitative investigation and the questionnaire for quantitative investigation. An interview survey is used to gain an in-depth understanding of contemporary women’s experiences of fitness and consumption, and their views and attitudes toward the services, products, and marketing offered by suppliers, which reflects suppliers’ influences and women’s agency in decisions around fitness consumption. A questionnaire survey has generalized findings from the interview phase and reveals the significant ordering of some preferences, viewpoints, and behaviors, and shows some significant relationships within women’s fitness consumption. The explanation of needs, patterns, and experiences of female fitness consumers is primarily based on this first-hand data, as well as literature, reports, and the press.

This research constitutes a theoretical framework based on the consumer decision-making process. The theories about consumer behavior and decision involve an

interdisciplinary domain, integrating psychology, sociology, economics, and marketing knowledge. Given the focus of this study on female consumption, a gender perspective is also incorporated into the analysis. This theoretical framework explains the psychological mechanisms and external influencing factors underlying individual consumers' purchasing decisions, thereby offering insights into how and why they purchase. This framework not only helps understand specific purchasing decisions made by female fitness consumers but also provides a basis for interpreting some broader phenomena within women's fitness consumption. Since suppliers often design sales strategies based on consumer behavior and decision logic, this framework concurrently reflects the operational logic of suppliers. Overall, this theoretical framework is adopted to elaborate the consumer-supplier interaction patterns and dynamics in the female fitness market, which contributes to fully examining the consumer experiences of fitness-oriented women.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the historical transformation of women's sport participation in China: the transition of women's sports from dynastic China to the Republic of China (pre-1949), the development of women's sports in the Socialist Era (1949–1978), and women's sports and the sports marketization in China's socialist market economy (post-1978). This review mainly demonstrates the significant influence of traditional Chinese culture on women's engagement in sport, the impact of female social roles and status, the response of contemporary women to the suppression of personal development in the collectivist era, and the impact of sports commercialization or the market economy on women's involvement in sport. This outlines the background to the transformation of contemporary women's fitness.

Chapters 4–5 are the main body of the research, which exhibit and discuss the key outcomes of the research.

Chapter 4 first explains the findings around consumer-related behaviors for women in fitness. It introduces the fitness modalities adopted by female fitness consumers and analyzes women's resource distribution, such as time and money, in relation to fitness, and the motivational factors behind their involvement in fitness activities. This reflects women's fitness needs and expectations, and examines the behavior-driven logic of the

demand side in the market interaction. Second, this chapter focuses on the consumer environment in which fitness-oriented women are situated, examining the suppliers' products, services, and marketing activities in the female fitness market. This section examines the behavioral patterns of the supply side in the market interaction.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into the exploration of the findings of Chapter 4 through the lens of the consumer-supplier interaction. Specifically, this research adopts the model of the consumer decision making process to investigate the specific goals and practices of the mutual responses between female fitness consumers and suppliers, and explore the ways in which these interactions influence women's fitness experiences. This analyzes the role of market forces in shaping women's fitness needs and practices.

In the concluding chapter, the main findings of this study have been succinctly recapped, highlighting the most important results and the core contributions of the research. This chapter also integrates the research findings with the existing body of knowledge to situate the research within the broader academic conversation. Further, it discusses the implications of the findings for social theory and explains the practical applications of this research. Specifically, based on the research findings, policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the commercial fitness environment, along with practical suggestions for individual fitness women, have been provided. Finally, this chapter demonstrates the meaning of this research for future research related to Chinese women's fitness participation and consumption, and identifies areas where further research is needed, proposes new research questions, and indicates new directions for inquiry.

Chapter 2

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Methodology

This chapter focuses on the methodology used in this study. It links the research methods adopted to the study objectives and examines the methods used for gathering the fieldwork materials to explain the path to achieving the objectives. First, this chapter identifies the methods adopted, explaining the methodological details and justifying why this approach is suitable for this study. Then, this chapter explains the selection of research subjects and site, discusses the sampling strategy and data collection process, and explains the process and methods adopted for the data analysis. Finally, the limitations of this research are addressed. Additionally, during the design procedure and the implementation process of the research, ethical issues have been thoroughly evaluated.

2.1.1 Research methodology

A mixed method with qualitative and quantitative investigations has been employed in this research. Nau (1995) suggests that ‘blending qualitative and quantitative methods of research can produce a final product which can highlight the significant contributions of both’. This research aims not only to illustrate the important trends in consumer-related behaviors and experiences of fitness-related women but also to explore how these experiences influence women’s fitness development and how these experiences are shaped. With the mixed method, the qualitative phase achieves depth in investigation for analyzing ‘how’, while the quantitative phase attains breadth in research scope, which identifies general trends.

Creswell (2009: 194-198) identifies six major types of mixed methods study designs: ‘sequential explanatory strategy’ with a first phase for quantitative data and a second phase for qualitative data, ‘sequential exploratory strategy’ with a first step for

qualitative data and a second step for quantitative data, ‘sequential transformative strategy’, ‘concurrent triangulation strategy’, ‘concurrent embedded strategy’, and ‘concurrent transformative strategy’. The sequential exploratory strategy is appropriate for the design of this research.

According to Creswell (2009), this sequential exploratory strategy entails a two-phase study, starting with the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Further, quantitative data are collected and examined in the second phase, building on the outcomes of the first phase findings. ‘Weight is generally placed on the first phase’ for qualitative data (Creswell, 2009: 195). The quantitative survey mainly serves as an extension of the qualitative study design, so it is appropriate for the second phase of quantitative data to have a lighter weight. This research attempts to reveal the trends (or priority ranking) of preferences, viewpoints, and behaviors in Chinese women’s fitness consumption to identify the key issues requiring in-depth analysis within the qualitative research findings. Therefore, in this research, it is suitable to conduct the qualitative research in the first phase with a heavier weight. In the second phase having a lighter weight, the quantitative study seeks to generalize the findings in the qualitative phase to a larger range of samples.

Qualitative research emphasizes ‘the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants’ (Bryman, 2001). Hence, this method helps me collect women’s interpretations of fitness and consumption to fully excavate details for their fitness consumption and relevant background information. For the background of this research, economic transformation, the sports system, and women’s social roles and norms as three individual social ‘properties’ do not exist independently of one another. On the contrary, they interact and exert mutual influence, presenting direct correlations. The qualitative research is adopted to facilitate a deeper comprehension of the interrelationship of these three social properties. Secondly, the paradigm of qualitative research advocates for the discourse articulation through comprehensive and in-depth data that captures the subjectivity of individuals (Cottle, 1982). This principle construction allows Chinese females’ own voices about fitness and consumption experiences (which might reflect women’s agency and reflection in fitness consumption) to be heard. In summary, applying the qualitative analysis in the first step

to this research has allowed the voices of female fitness consumers to be heard and the details of their consumption experiences to be presented.

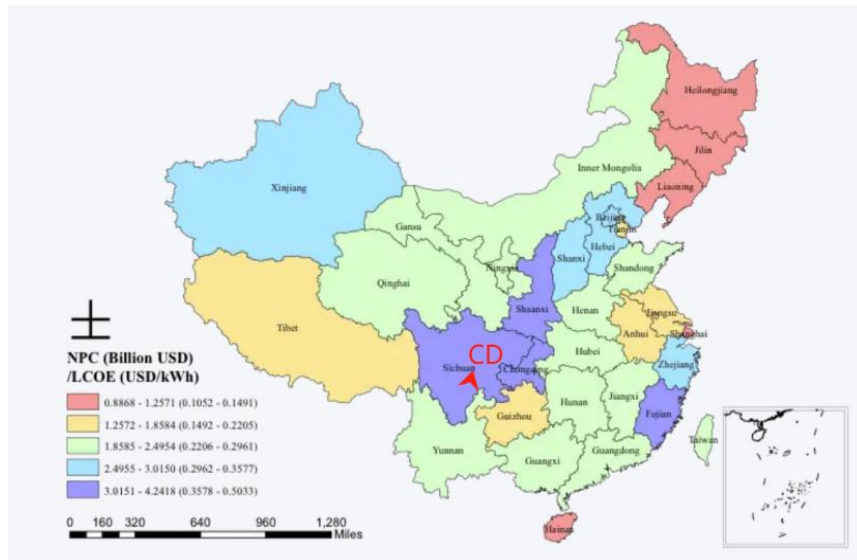
In the second step of this research, the qualitative results are examined to explore more regular outcomes through the quantitative data. According to the quantitative data, some findings from the first phase could be validated, and more general patterns and relations could be uncovered and complemented.

2.1.2 The selection of the research site

The criteria for choosing the research site are intrinsically linked to the target of the research. This study tries to analyze women's fitness consumption, particularly their needs, purchased goods, and practical consumption experiences in China. Thus, the selection for the site took three critical societal backgrounds into consideration. They were the Chinese economic transformation, the Chinese fitness market, and the shift of Chinese women's lifestyle, social roles, and status. At the macro level, the selected region must be able to reflect the general political, economic, social, and sports environment in China. At a more micro level, the fitness market in the selected region must be representative, which could reflect the general environment and trend in China's fitness market.

This research investigation was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the strict personal travel restrictions and regional quarantines implemented in China during this period, the study solely selected women in Chengdu (CD) for this research. The city of Chengdu has a permanent population of 2,1268,000 and an area of 14,335 square kilometers, with 12 municipal districts, 5 county-level cities, and 3 counties under the jurisdiction of the city. Chengdu, located in the southwest of China, is the capital city of Sichuan Province, a populous province in China. In recent years, it has been one of the fastest-developing cities in China. The map of China in Figure 2.1 shows its location. The following paragraphs shall state reasons for the selection of Chengdu.

Figure 2.1 Chengdu's geographical location in China



A core feature of China's regional governance is 'unified leadership and hierarchical management'. Under this system, except for special economic zones, ethnic autonomous regions, and special administrative zones, local cities operate under the centralized leadership of the central government with relatively limited autonomy. Chengdu operates under the strong leadership of the central government, and economic, sports, and women-related policies are implemented under the guidance of central government policies. Hence, the situation in Chengdu does not exhibit obvious economic, religious, or ethnic specificity in China, which can represent the economic, political, social, and sports environment of most cities in China.

Moreover, Chengdu, which could represent the big and medium-sized cities in China, has a well-established fitness consumer market. Currently, the fitness industry is predominantly concentrated in large and medium-sized cities, while the sports and fitness markets in smaller towns and rural areas are still in the early stages of development (Tan, 2021). In addition, in the process of urbanization, small and medium-sized cities imitate and learn from the development experience of the big and medium-sized cities. The big and medium-sized cities represent the future of small and medium-sized cities to a certain extent.

More importantly, in China, the evolution of fitness markets in major Chinese cities follows a similar trajectory, mainly influenced by the economic and sports policies of the central government in the post-Maoist era. Many national chain gyms and branded

fitness apparel and equipment stores are prevalent in various cities, offering similar services and goods. The rapid growth of e-commerce platforms in China has made it convenient for women in different cities to access a diverse range of fitness products, and they can buy the same product at comparable prices (possibly with varying postage costs based on location). Overall, the nationwide homogeneity of chain gyms and branded fitness apparel and equipment stores, coupled with the nationwide circulation of e-commerce products, creates a certain degree of similarity among regional fitness markets with a certain level of development in China, and the fitness and consumption patterns of women in Chengdu can be seen as representative of those in major cities across China.

Additionally, Chengdu ranked first in the China Fitness and Sports Cities List in 2021, released by CCTV Finance (Guangming Net, 2021). Numerous international and national-level sporting events of various types and levels have already been held in Chengdu, driving the steady growth of the city's sports and fitness industry (Tencent, 2024). Another reason for choosing Chengdu is that I have lived in Chengdu for many years. Consequently, this city is familiar to me, and I have established valuable investigation contacts with this city. This experience can facilitate access to data. To sum up, in the analysis of Chinese women's fitness consumption, the experiences of women in Chengdu hold a certain level of typicality, generalizability, and representativeness, which resonates with broader trends in China.

2.1.3 Data collection

As indicated above, this research is explored by the strategy with qualitative and quantitative data collection. This approach means the use and integration of multiple measures and observations, and emphasizes that by integrating research outcomes from two or more methods, a more comprehensive conclusion can be derived than that obtained through any single approach alone. This research mainly employs interviews to gather qualitative data and then employs a questionnaire inquiry to gather quantitative data for analysis. In addition, secondary sources (e.g., the existing literature, reports, the pictures of fitness women on social media, and media coverage of women's sports and consumption) are used as important sources to supplement the survey.

Interview

The interview is a widely applied approach in qualitative studies. The interview has several crucial advantages, including the revelation of mechanisms linked to phenomena, the exposure of hidden behavioral patterns, the understanding of gathered information in a wider context, and the interpretation of variation (Edward et al., 1994; Kitay and Callus, 2018). This section shall state which type of interview this research chooses, why to choose this type, and how to conduct the proposed interview.

This research selected semi-structured in-depth interviews for collecting data. The semi-structured interview is a type of qualitative interview, which ‘permits interviews to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview’ (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021: 1358). With the semi-structured interview, the key questions were raised step by step, and a clear thematic focus was maintained throughout the process. Moreover, the interview also provided space for discussing topics of interest to the interviewees. To support the questioning procedure, an interview question guide was prepared in advance of the interview sessions (see Appendix 2). The criteria for the interviewed participants are that women have experience as consumers of fitness goods and services. In semi-structured interviewing, the collected text revealed women’s interests, pursuits, barriers, and perceptual experiences of fitness, the main fitness products and services they consume, and their views on fitness products and marketing, and described how these women experience sport and fitness in a commercial fitness environment.

This research mainly employed snowball sampling for selecting participants. Snowball sampling is ‘one of the most popular methods of sampling in qualitative research, central to which are the characteristics of networking and referral’ (Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019: 3). At the initial phase, the investigators often come into contact with a small number of individuals meeting the research criteria and then invite them to become respondents in the study. The agreeable participants ‘are then asked to recommend other contacts who fit the research criteria and who potentially might also be willing participants, who then in turn recommend other potential participants, and so on’ (Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019: 3). In this study, interviewees were selected according to the

appropriate sampling criteria, and some particularly focused questions were asked. To be specific, I interviewed some women who had the experience of consuming commercial fitness goods and services within my social networks and the social or professional networks of the fitness coaches I know. Then, these initial participants recommended some appropriate participants for my research.

According to the review of research on Chinese women's sports participation in the section of Literature Review, factors such as age, income, family background, occupation, and social class should be paid attention to in the discussion of Chinese women's sport. Hence, the selection of the interviewees involved diverse backgrounds, including women of different ages, incomes, social classes, family backgrounds, as well as occupations. These diverse female samples are more likely to produce an understanding of more general and broader information about women's groups on the topic. Without clear criteria for diversity in the sampling process, the samples may lack representativeness. For instance, overlooking age variation might result in a sample largely composed of older women, making it difficult to draw conclusions that reflect broader patterns. Moreover, the internal diversity among these samples may reflect factors that influence women's consumer-related behaviors and experiences. For example, data from samples with different family backgrounds presents consumption differences, which uncovers multidimensional influences of family-related factors on women's fitness consumption. Overall, by analyzing consumption differences in relation to the diverse social backgrounds represented, this study can explore the impact of different social factors on women's fitness consumption.

Prior to the formal interview, each respondent received a copy of the 'Informed Consent Form' (see Appendix 1). This form outlined the objective and approaches of the research and requested respondents' cooperation. The respondents were assured of anonymity, with numbers and pseudonyms used to identify respondents in the interview records. With full consent from respondents, the interviews were executed. In this study, the interviews were carried out when interviewees completed their exercises, or appointments were arranged for their convenience. The interviews generally took about one or two hours, with a possible brief rest. Most interviews were face-to-face, but due

to the pandemic, telephone or online interviews were also used to solicit information from the interviewers for some supplementary information.

In total, this research carried out 20 ‘formal interviews’ among participants (see Figure 2.2), which were recorded and shortly afterwards transcribed for later analysis. According to Bekele and Ago (2022), the orientation of the researchers and the purposes of their qualitative research will be significant in deciding on a justifiable sample size, and for the qualitative interview research, the minimum number of interviewees needed seems to be not less than 20. In this research, the qualitative phase aims to explore the fitness and consumption experiences of Chinese women, and the economic and family background of women is emphasized in the interview.

Figure 2.2 Demographic Information on Participants (Interview)

No	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Occupation	Annual income (RMB)	No	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Occupation	Annual income (RMB)
1	33	Married	1	Public servant	100,000	11	51	Divorced	0	Public servant	180,000
2	47	Married	2	Teacher	150,000	12	38	Single	0	Public servant	200,000
3	30	Married	1	Office worker	120,000	13	26	Single	0	Public servant	90,000
4	33	Married	0	Tea Specialist	36,000	14	28	Married	1	Self-employed	
5	40	Single	0	Teacher	100,000	15	34	Married	2	Housewife	
6	55	Married	1	Office worker	150,000	16	33	Single	0	Public servant	200,000
7	24	Married	0	Administrative staff	45,000	17	51	Married	1	Office worker	
8	51	Married	1	Housewife		18	46	Married	1	Public servant	190,000
9	35	Married	1	Accountant		19	54	Married	1	Office worker	110,000
10	28	Single	0	Lawyer	300,000	20	25	Single	0	Salesperson	50,000

The interview data includes women from different economic backgrounds and family situations (such as married and unmarried, with and without children) as well as women of different ages. For the age, the sample consists of women aged 24 to 55 across a range of age groups. Women aged 18 and above are the main consumers of leisure-oriented fitness. The physical activity of women under 18 is typically centered around school-based physical education and examination-related training. Thus, the age diversity within the sample is adequate to support the objectives of this research.

For various economic backgrounds, this sample of 20 total respondents consists of

women with an annual income range of approximately 36,000 to 300,000 RMB.³ The median number is approximately 120,000 RMB. Respondents come from ‘working-class’ (工薪阶层) and higher-class backgrounds. In the Chinese context, the working class refers to a social group whose primary or sole source of income comes from labor-based earnings (such as wages and bonuses), rather than asset-based income (such as rent or dividends). Their income is always fixed and typically covers basic living expenses, with some discretionary funds available for non-essential spending such as leisure activities. This suggests that women within this socioeconomic group possess a certain level of purchasing power for fitness-related goods. This research focuses on urban women with the ability to afford fitness consumption. Thus, the current sample includes an income range that appropriately reflects the population relevant to the research topic.

For the marriage situation, in this sample, the unmarried proportion of women aged over 30 is 20%. According to *China Population & Employment Statistical Yearbook 2024*, the unmarried rate of 30-year-old women in 2023 was 20.16% (the NBS, 2024). Considering the trend that the unmarried rate declines with increasing age, the unmarried rate in this sample is relatively high. However, the *China's Single Economy Report* released by Nielsen in 2020 shows that 42% of single consumers consumed for self-pleasure, which was higher than the proportion of non-single consumers (27%) (Ren, 2020). Therefore, as an important category of consumption for self-pleasure and self-investment, it is reasonable that fitness consumption has a higher proportion of single consumers. For the fertility status, in today's China, the vast majority of births occur within marriage, and most married women choose to have children; furthermore, between 1990 and 2020, the average age of first birth for women increased from 24.1 years to 27.9 years, with this average exhibiting a continuous year-on-year upward trend (NetEase, 2026). In the sample analyzed in this study, there are 13 married women, among whom two are childless. One of the childless respondents, aged 24, has not yet reached the current national average age of first birth. On the whole, the fertility status of this sample does not deviate from the general pattern of fertility among contemporary Chinese women.

³ Chinese people's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in 2020 was 80,632 RMB (The World Bank).

Overall, it can be concluded that the sample size has reached saturation to some extent. Although the sample size is limited, this study enhances the representativeness and explanatory power of the samples for general phenomena by ensuring the diversity within the samples. Additionally, potentially valuable heterogeneous samples are added during the quantitative phase with larger sample sizes.

The interview data provided a good basis with which to refine the questionnaire in the following phase for quantitative data. The questionnaire survey is to address the limitations of sample representativeness and the generalizability of findings in the interview-based phase.

Questionnaire survey

In the second phase, this research gathered quantitative data by conducting a questionnaire survey of female fitness consumers. The qualitative method is appropriate for exploring the range of experiences and attitudes among contemporary Chinese women in fitness consumption, but not for calculating the proportion that holds such attitudes and experiences or the priority ranking. The quantitative method (questionnaire survey) could reveal the proportion to some extent.

Non-probability sampling techniques were used to select participants linked to the purpose of my research. Lavrakas (2008) defines non-probability sampling as the selection of samples through subjective judgment. Participants were mainly from the fitness consumer groups introduced by fitness associations, fitness coaches, and managers in fitness clubs. Volunteer sampling was involved in this process. It involves individuals who self-select to take part in a survey or interview, volunteering to do so after being asked by interviewers or responding to an advertisement (Jupp, 2006).

During the survey, with managers' and coaches' help, I shared the online link of the questionnaire of my research in some fitness consumer groups on social media, and we explained that the survey targets women who have consumed fitness goods and services. These women participate in the survey on a voluntary basis. In other words, individuals who are not interested in the research project are less likely to participate. In the formal questionnaire, this study collected results from 251 women in China. After collating all

the information and documents, 38 invalid questionnaires were discarded, and 213 effective questionnaires were acquired. The effective rate is about 85%. Various rules have been established for removing invalid data. The rules of ‘removing respondents who don’t meet the target criteria’, ‘removing respondents who straightline’, and ‘removing respondents who provide unrealistic answers’ have been taken into account during the survey data cleaning, considering the data results and objectives of this study (Gitlin).⁴ This survey aims to investigate women who engage in fitness consumption. However, there were some fitness enthusiasts who just did free exercises without consumption experiences participating in the survey. Thus, the analysis phase ignores these participants who do not match the criteria by filtering them out. Furthermore, for example, the respondents who chose ‘non-purpose’ for all questions in the section of ‘The purpose of fitness’ and did not specify their purpose in the optional question about ‘other purpose’ have been filtered out. It seems that ‘without any purpose’ falls beyond the scope of answers from realistic female consumers, and these respondents consistently selected the same answer across different questions without apparent reflection. In other words, the data from these respondents subtly involves a straight-line problem, and the data may be somewhat unrealistic. Overall, the filtered sample of the questionnaire is appropriate to support the research objectives.

The questionnaire survey in this research involves consumer experiences and viewpoints, along with regression analysis. Some studies discussing the sampling in business, marketing, or consumer research indicated that, broadly, about 200 samples are an acceptable sample size for this survey with fewer than 40 items that want to be analyzed (Gacula Jr and Rutenbeck, 2006; Hair et al., 2009; Rahi, 2018). The research of Kotrlik and Higgins (2001), which mentions regression analysis, indicates that about 200 samples is an acceptable size for this survey involving regression analysis. Hence, the sample size of 213 is sufficient to support the research. In terms of demographic information on respondents (see Figure 2.3), the average age of respondents is approximately 35, and the majority of them work in white-collar jobs. The participants’ income information indicates that they come from working-class and higher-class

⁴ ‘Straightlining is when a respondent chooses the same answer choice over and over again’ (Gitlin).

backgrounds, predominantly consisting of middle-class women. This background information accords with the condition of female fitness consumer groups in China. Additionally, the survey has been pre-tested with a small number of fitness women, allowing me to identify and correct problems. For example, the formatting issues of the online questionnaire and some content that may be easily misunderstood by respondents have been revised based on the pre-tested questionnaire.

Figure 2.3 Demographic Information on Participants (Questionnaire)

Income state	n	%
Having income	179	84.04
No income	34	15.96
Age	n	%
Under 20 years old	2	0.94
Between 20-29	60	28.17
Between 30-39	96	45.07
Between 40-49	38	17.84
50 years old and above	17	7.98
Marital status	n	%
Unmarried	75	35.21
Married	125	58.69
Divorced	12	5.63
Widowed	1	0.47
Filial condition	n	%
No child	100	46.95
One child	95	44.60
Multiple children	18	8.45

The content of the questionnaire mainly focuses on women's interests and experiences of fitness-related consumption and the barriers to their fitness and consumption (including the influences of social labor relations, reproduction, and socialization of children) and also contains questions about demographic information on participants.

The result of the questionnaire could achieve cross-comparative analysis of the aforementioned factors.

In this research, gatekeepers are involved in conducting the questionnaire survey as well as the interview. According to Lavrakas (2008: 299), a gatekeeper is ‘a person who stands between the data collector and a potential respondent’. In China, in general, getting significant responses to questionnaire surveys in fitness groups in social media is difficult without the assistance of relevant managers; and if someone goes into a fitness club and asks a female consumer ‘strange’ questions, she is likely to decline to answer. In the fieldwork, this survey gained cooperation from managers and coaches in fitness institutions. They were willing to offer me information and to help me connect with potential respondents for my research.

2.1.4 Data analysis

This study organized data materials for analysis, combining primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included interview data, questionnaire data, and field notes. The secondary sources primarily comprised publications and media information. Publications mainly include official data (from the China General Administration of Sport (CGAS), the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS), the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), and the China Population Information Centre (CPIC)), academic articles, and conference papers. Media information includes information from newspapers or magazines (People’s Daily (人民日报), Xinhua News (新华消息), China Sports Daily (中国体育报), etc.), the Internet portals (the website of the Chinese Sport (www.sport.gov.cn), Sina (www.sina.com.cn), Sohu (www.sohu.com), etc.), and social media (Little Red Book (or REDnote) and Douyin (or Tiktok)). Both female fitness consumers and fitness product suppliers manage their accounts on social media platforms. The pictures on social media display various images of fitness women, which may help in understanding women's aesthetic preferences, particularly within fitness culture. Posts and comments by fitness women reveal their experiences and views, which may reflect their fitness interests and consumption preferences. Posts by fitness good suppliers and influencers’ posts that involve commercial products reflect marketing

strategies. These patterns of supplier behaviors reflect consumer-related environments for fitness women.

The primary sources identified significant trends or patterns among women's fitness consumption. The secondary sources firstly illustrated the background information and historical transformation of women's sport participation as well as consumption in China. Secondly, these sources assisted in identifying the key issues in the analysis of women's fitness consumption and supplemented the explanation of the results from the survey, especially the explanation of the products and marketing these fitness women encountered in the female fitness market.

Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is 'a process of the description, classification and interconnection of phenomena with the researcher's concepts' (Graue, 2015: 36). In the qualitative analysis phase, this research gives contextual details of the study object and connects it back to the theory and literature. Then, the research fits it into the discussion of wider patterns of females' experiences of fitness consumption, as well as the market's influences on women's fitness and, more broadly, women's sports participation in China. In order to make sense of and organize the qualitative data into an acceptable form, this study explores women's fitness consumption experiences from various angles.

During the interview, firstly, questions related to respondents' age, career, income, and family backgrounds were asked. In the qualitative analysis, the 20 interviewees were categorized according to various parameters (age, employment situation, income, and family background). The trends or patterns among women with different backgrounds (or parameters) may be different in fitness consumption.

Then, in the interview, this research used the topic around women's fitness consumption as a guide for exploration and questioning and encouraged interviewees to freely share their experiences and views based on their answers to basic questions. To be specific, the interview investigated the barriers faced by women in fitness consumption, their motivations, their practical consumer experiences, and their feelings about these experiences, for analysis.

In terms of barriers, questions in the interview included ‘Have you ever encountered barriers in your fitness practices or spending?’, ‘What are they?’, and ‘How do these factors affect your fitness?’. The result of this investigation could be used to explain what barriers Chinese women need to overcome or what costs they have to bear to be eligible to enjoy fitness consumption, especially about money and time distribution around fitness consumption.

For the fitness motivations, questions in the interview included ‘What are your purposes for investing in fitness?’, ‘Do you have a preference for body shaping? Which type?’, and ‘Does fitness exercise make differences in your life? What are they?’. The data from these questions shows what fitness women’s demands are and what benefits fitness brings to women, which could explain why they decide to invest in fitness.

In terms of practical consumer experiences, questions contained ‘How much do you spend on fitness?’, ‘What kinds of fitness products and services do you consume?’, and ‘Do you prefer certain types of fitness services, clothes, or activities? Which ones?’. The data from these questions explains the types, price range, and functional, gendered, or cultural features of the design of products and marketing in women’s fitness consumption. This uncovers what fitness women can get in consumption or, in other words, exhibits the consumer-related environment in which they are situated.

Regarding feelings about consumer experiences, questions contained ‘Why are you willing to spend money on fitness instead of taking part in free exercise?’, ‘Have you ever had unsatisfactory (and satisfactory) fitness consumption experiences? How were these experiences?’, ‘Have you ever noticed fitness offerings catering to women and advertisements about women’s fitness? How do you view them?’, and ‘Have you noticed the popular topics and information about women’s fitness? How do you view them?’. This investigation shows the evaluation of fitness-oriented women regarding their personal consumption experiences and their potential views and reflections on the prevailing female fitness products and marketing strategies, as well as the broader consumer culture surrounding women’s fitness. This data may reveal the opportunities gained and challenges faced by fitness women in the consumer-related environment.

For the actual administration of data processing, in the first phase, data was managed through transcription. According to Strauss (1987), following each interview, field notes related to this session were promptly written and compiled. This practice served to build connections between the most recent interview and previous ones, while also generating questions to guide subsequent interview processes. In the second phase, the data was organized according to thematic domains and manageable categories (Jones, 1985). I assigned a number to each interview and divided the field notes into different parts according to different characteristics of female consumers. The categorization accounted for respondents' income, age, marital status, and occupation. Each respondent was assigned a code number. A secure document linked these code numbers to the original respondents, and this remained confidential, consistent with standard research protocols. Narrative data were referenced using line or paragraph numbering to ensure traceability of each text unit to its original context. The third phase involves familiarization, during which I repeatedly reviewed the data prior to formal analysis, generating notes and key points.

Quantitative data analysis

By involving a larger sample size and quantification of women's views on fitness and consumption, the quantitative approach not only enhances the overall applicability of the findings but also helps expand upon patterns observed in qualitative interviews.

To be specific, this phase of the study serves two primary purposes. First, by presenting the proportions, trends, or significance ranking, it helps identify or prioritize the key issues or patterns among various findings initially uncovered through the qualitative phase. This helps to highlight the most representative topics. The questionnaire examined the participation levels in key fitness activities, which may reflect the preference ranking of fitness activities that respondents like to participate in, as well as the trend of fitness forms among female fitness consumers. The questionnaire also examined the significance ranking of possible purposes and barriers, which may reflect key motivations and key elements that influence the participation of women in fitness practice and fitness consumption. The questionnaire also provided respondents with the options for filling in 'other fitness activities that respondents participate in', 'other

purposes’, and ‘other barriers’. This option ensures that the survey accounts for comprehensive coverage of potential activities or elements. Additionally, the questionnaire tested women’s attitudes toward beauty, health, and some fitness services, and their perception of several important scenarios about fitness consumption decisions. This data may reflect some significant references of behavior, aesthetics, and consumption of women’s fitness (These were identified as issues for further exploration during the qualitative stage).

Second, the quantitative analysis further explores whether statistically significant associations exist among some factors, particularly associations identified as correlated in the qualitative phase. This provides an empirical foundation for more in-depth analysis of the interactive mechanisms underlying these dynamics. Specifically, the questionnaire included some questions related to parameters, including respondents’ age, career, income, and family backgrounds. Hence, the questionnaire’s data could help further explore the consumer behavior differences across women (especially women with different parameter information) discovered in the interview. A larger range of samples in the questionnaire allows the quantitative data analysis (such as the regression analysis) to uncover a more specific direction and relation about these differences. For example, in this phase, ‘Does marital status significantly influence women’s attitudes toward male fitness trainers and male trainees?’, ‘Do women’s attitudes toward fitness-related males significantly influence their preferences for women-only fitness spaces?’, ‘Is there a significant relationship between fitness women’s clothing choices and their attitudes toward fitness-related males?’, and ‘Do women’s motivations for beauty and health change with age, and if so, what are the specific trends in this change?’ were explored. This analysis might validate or supplement the results of the qualitative stage.

2.1.5 Limitations

Admittedly, there are a number of limitations in this study. First, the interview in my research is limited by a small number of subjects. The discussion in this research focuses on urban female consumer in China, yet the investigation area is restricted to Chengdu City, just one of many areas where the fitness market is developing well in China. Through the analysis and comparison of relevant data in Section 2.1.3, the marital status,

fertility status, as well as income level of the samples in this study have been confirmed to be consistent with the general background of female consumers in China's fitness market. However, the sampling pool is relatively small, not large enough to endow it with high authority for the generalization of my findings.

In addition, description of some questions may cause misunderstandings due to the absence of contextual details. When respondents expressed a lack of understanding, I slowed down the speed at which I spoke and explained the questions in different ways, especially using well-known news events to help them quickly understand the social background related to the question, until the interviewees understood. For example, when mentioning whether maintaining their own safety is a motivation for fitness activities, I used the incident of women being beaten by men at a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan, which is a nationally known event in China, to make them understand the complex social background (the vulnerability of women in society) and reasons for raising this question and not think that the problem is abrupt or difficult to understand. In general, respondents can quickly realize this social context behind the question through just the keywords of 'beating in Tangshan in 2022' (唐山打人事件). The advantage of using news events is that the complex social backgrounds or issues can be described or displayed in the brains of respondents through just some keywords about the event. The keywords can remind them of the information they have read about the news event, including the social situation revealed by the event. Furthermore, based on these interview experiences, I have improved my explanation of the questions in subsequent interviews.

Third, women in contemporary China attach importance to privacy. Moreover, within Chinese culture, individuals are generally expected to refrain from expressing their views in a radical manner. As a result, there is sometimes a reluctance to voice opinions openly, particularly among women. Thus, some respondents may avoid answering some of the questions about their personal lives and express some opinions with reservation, especially those they perceive as potentially radical. To address this problem, I reminded the participants from time to time during the data collection process that the research data was being collected for the purposes of academic research only, and the complete

anonymity of participants was ensured in the research process, including the display of eventual findings at a later date.

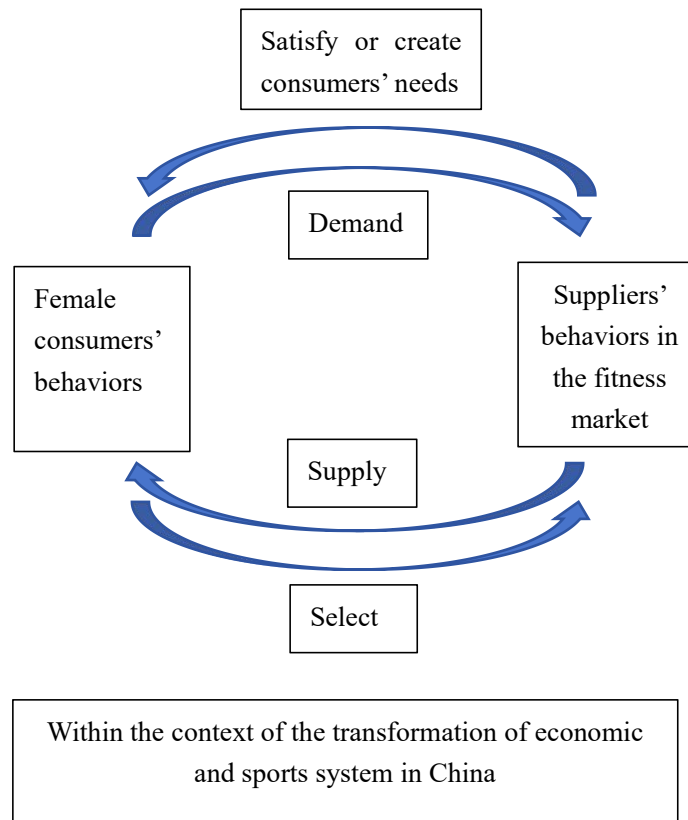
Fourth, as I grew up in Chengdu city, I am familiar with the local culture and society. This can be an advantage, but may also lead to drawbacks. It may lead to the neglect of some potentially insightful issues. As a form of cognitive inertia may be shaped by the shared cultural background common to the participants and me, I might perceive some special factors as things taken for granted. As a Chinese researcher, my cultural background and ideology may influence my study as well. Although it is impossible for a researcher not to bring some value judgment to the research process, I constantly reminded myself to maintain the necessary and sufficient degree of objectivity at every stage of the research. Interviews were also prepared in such a way that there were no leading questions.

Although the research has some limitations, I believe that this study is practicable for obtaining meaningful results. Interviews, questionnaires, observations, and the text data and visual data from secondary sources have provided me with reliable data to analyze and make the findings convincing.

2.2 Theoretical framework

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, Chinese women's participation in sport has undergone significant changes compared to the planned-economy period (1949-1978). During this period, policies on sport marketization were successively promulgated and implemented, leading to the development of the sports and fitness market. Under this context, an increasing number of Chinese women have been actively consuming commercial fitness products and services to improve their fitness experience. As consumers, these women engage with fitness products and services provided by suppliers in the market, who, in turn, seek to boost sales by responding to or actively shaping consumer needs. This establishes a dynamic interaction between suppliers and consumers within the marketplace (see Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4 The interaction between consumers and suppliers



This research will firstly explain resource distribution and motivations around fitness of women, which displays what their demands might be in the market. Furthermore, it will demonstrate fitness products and marketing, which explains the market supply for female fitness consumers. Further, this research will analyze these fitness consumption experiences of women through the lens of the consumer-supplier interaction. Through this analysis framework, this study constitutes the interplay of gender perspective and market perspective to conduct an in-depth analysis of women's fitness consumption with the understanding of the context of the political and economic transformation of China. This macro-level context of the Chinese background will be elaborated in Chapter 3.

This perspective interplay is constituted according to the dual role of female fitness consumers: female fitness participants and actors in the market. According to the gender perspective, women's fitness practices involve complex experiences of embodiment and self-development influenced by intersecting forces of gendered social structures as well as sociocultural norms. Within market discourses, the behavior of fitness-involved women will be framed through the lens of consumer roles and patterns. This research constitutes a theoretical framework based on the consumer decision making process to

examine women's role of consumer in details, which also helps elaborate those suppliers' behavioral patterns.

2.2.1 Female fitness consumers

Consumer behavior involves how people make decisions or plans to spend their resources (money, time, or effort) on consumption-related activities. During the economic transformation, the free market became an integral part of China's economic system. In a free market, with limited government intervention in microeconomics, people can act freely to produce economic value and to create and produce wealth (Backhouse, 2005). Within this system, the basic logic of consumer behavior can be summarized as that consumers, based on their preferences and income constraints, maximize their benefits by trading off the buying of more of some products for the purchase of less of others, and consumers also need to 'decide how much of their incomes to save', 'thereby trading off current consumption for future consumption' (Pindyck and Rubinfeld, 2017: 26). Limited incomes restrict the quantities of goods they can buy, so they would consider prices. In economics, preference refers to the order in which individuals rank alternatives based on their own perception of relative utility. Preferences refer to concern matters and evaluations of value, which result in an 'optimal choice' (whether real or theoretical) (Broome, 1993). The price consumers are willing to pay depends on the perceived utility of or satisfaction with the goods and services (Samuelson and Nordhaus, 2009). In the market, the behavior of consumers significantly influences the interests and actions of suppliers. For this research on female fitness consumers, key elements of Chinese women's participation in fitness consumption, including resource distribution around fitness consumption (available time and money) and motivation of their consumption, are identified through the lens of consumer roles in the market.

As a dynamic and evolving social and cultural phenomenon, sports need to be understood by studying the interrelationship between sport and other social phenomena (Beedie and Craig, 2010: 9). Specifically, within the market dynamic framework, this research also explores women's fitness experiences and associated consumer behaviors through the lens of the social and cultural construction of gender. In doing so, it illuminates the social

conditions, underlying motivations, experiential significance, and structural constraints that shape women's participation in fitness activities and consumption in contemporary China. This, meanwhile, unpacks the social dimension of (potential) market demand and the desire of women for fitness-related consumption. This research framework thus emphasizes the interplay of gender dynamics and market forces, revealing how women's fitness consumption is shaped by and reflective of broader gendered structures and contributing to an understanding of the reshaping of women's embodied fitness experiences and Chinese women's fitness patterns within the realm of the market.

Among studies on women's sport, studies introducing a feminist perspective have challenged the traditionally theoretical framework of sports sociology dominated by men, integrating the often-overlooked female perspectives, experiences, values, and rights into the analysis of sports phenomena (Boutilier and SanGiovanni, 1983; Xiong, 2010). Since the late 1970s, scholars such as Ann Hall, Susan Greendorfer, and Susan Birrell have conducted multi-level analyses on women in sports, gendered social structures, and gender inequality (Dong, 2009). Delaney and Madigan (2021: 279) provide a comprehensive historical and contextual analysis of women's involvement in sport and summarized that women historically lacked 'equal access to sport participation', which 'had to do with the patriarchal (male-dominated) design of most nations around the world'. Hong (1997) assesses the influence of women's sports on the social status of women in China and revealed the traditional patriarchal structure of repression of women's sport in Chinese history and the emancipation of the female body in modern sports participation. Although contemporary women generally believe that there will be plenty of opportunities to play sports, their actual participation continues to be constrained by persistent sociocultural barriers, such as the expectations of 'femininity' that often conflict with the physical assertiveness, competitiveness, or bodily exposure associated with many forms of sport (Delaney and Madigan, 2021). 'Femininity' refers to a collection of actions, attributes, and roles that are typically linked to women or girls, and it is believed that behaviors perceived as feminine are primarily influenced by social norms, cultural influences, and biological factors (Hale and Finn, 2010; Shehan, 2018). In contemporary China, 'femininity' has become a defining feature of societal female

identities and images, significantly influencing Chinese women's sports participation (Song and Bai, 2012).

To sum up, these scholarships of women's sport research offer several critical analytical perspectives for exploring gender dynamics in the context of women's fitness consumption in China, revolving around several interconnected themes: gender equality in sport, women's development, patriarchy, the intertwining of patriarchy and institutional social systems, and corresponding social female roles and images within systems. In contemporary China, the social structure constructed by the intersecting logics of patriarchal tradition and the socialist market economy system shapes the roles, norms, and idealized images of women, significantly influencing the forms and purposes of women's participation in sports.

Within the Chinese context, the Soviet-style planned economy and collectivist system in the Maoist era (1949–1978) have undergone a significant transformation into a market-oriented model that embodies substantial capitalist features. Against this backdrop of structural transition, both gender and sports policies in China have experienced corresponding shifts. During the Maoist era, women were encouraged to participate in sport to develop strong, muscular bodies, which contributed to developing healthy socialist labor forces and advocating an equitable society with a national goal of minimizing gender differences (Xiong, 2008). Then, since the reform and opening-up (post-1978), the ideal image of women shifted to a renewed embrace of femininity and the female body, and women's social roles embodied more diverse constructions.

During this reform period, the socialist-era discourse of 'gender equality' has gradually faded, and patriarchal structures in traditional Chinese society were no longer subject to strong official criticism. Thus, the influence of patriarchy has significantly re-emerged, now intertwined with the market-oriented institutional system. Although women appear to possess greater freedom of choice, they are increasingly, subtly positioned as the primary bearers of domestic responsibilities. Overall, the social roles of women have shifted from the socialist-era ideal of 'nation-builders' and 'productive workers' to more diversified identities that encompass participants in the labor market and labor providers within the private sphere. Fundamentally, the trajectory of women's development has

moved from being state-planned and collectively oriented to being individualized and shaped by market-oriented forces. Accordingly, social gender constructions have been reconfigured into narratives of ‘gender difference’ that naturalize biological distinctions and align with culturally specific gender norms within the Chinese context. The dominant representation of the female image has undergone a significant shift from strong, muscular, and androgynous female workers to the image of slimness and soft, feminine curves. In the context of contemporary China, where mass culture and capitalist logics are increasingly intertwined, female bodily ideals are shaped by the interplay of women’s agency, gendered social structures, cultural norms, and market dynamics.

In the sports field, the goals of women’s sport in China have shifted from serving national development to enhancing individual well-being. With the state’s declining intervention in private life, women’s sports organizations have moved from collective structures to self-organized, individual practices. With the change of sports functions and organizational forms, women’s participation in fitness and fitness-related consumption is primarily influenced by personal development goals and socio-economic conditions. However, these seemingly personal factors are deeply shaped by the construction of gender roles, societal female ideals, and prevailing aesthetic models of women, which must lead to gender inequality in sports development in contemporary China. As China becomes more integrated into global systems, women’s fitness practices are also influenced by Western cultural influences, such as individualism, Western standards of femininity, and fitness culture. In sum, women’s fitness practice in contemporary China is shaped by the dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural social and cultural forces. The social structure perpetuates institutionalized gender roles and cultural expectations rooted in historical patriarchy, while also embedding market-oriented mechanisms of profit and resource distribution that may reinforce patriarchal norms. The cultural context is where global and local discourses intersect.

As the fitness market developed, commercial fitness services have become key avenues supporting women’s individual fitness engagement. Fitness consumption requires both time and financial resources, which are factors considered under women’s autonomous resource allocation. However, this autonomy is widely influenced by gendered norms

and expectations, especially within the context of Chinese transformation. The marketization of the labor sector has intensified competition, leading to income stratification among women and reducing their practical, available leisure time for fitness. Gender-based discrimination in the workplace, resulting from patriarchal resource distribution, further exacerbates these issues. This reflects an intersectional oppression of gender and class. The patriarchal gendered division of labor contributes to the disparities in leisure time schedules among women of different marital and reproductive statuses.

Motivated by the pursuit of personal interests, women's fitness consumption motivations typically combine health management (such as disease prevention and alleviating sub-healthy conditions) and beauty aspirations (such as body shaping, fashion, and aesthetic trends), thereby addressing both physical needs and facilitating the construction of self-identity and social status through fitness practices. In the post-reform fitness market in China, women's consumer behavior has increasingly exhibited a form of 'self-investment' (Law, 2023). While seemingly centered on motivations like health and beauty, this framing conceals a capitalist logic that reconstructs gender differences as natural, against the background of the fading of the socialist-era discourse of 'gender equality and non-difference'. Under market logics, capital converts gender differences into criteria for market segmentation. Motivations about health and beauty, such as achieving a soft, feminine figure or postpartum recovery, are socially constructed within this framework. By naturalizing both biological and social differences, consumerism commodifies the female body, reinforcing gender discipline through 'beauty consumption' (e.g., shaping women's bodies into curvaceous figures or promoting an 'elegant feminine image').

2.2.2 Suppliers of fitness products and services

Supplier's behavior includes how businesses or providers respond to consumer demand, set prices, design products, and market their offerings. Within market discourses, the behavior of suppliers is always guided by the pursuit of maximizing profits. This research offers a more detailed account of the economic and market context, primarily highlighting the background of the market-oriented transformation and the emergence

of consumer society characteristics in China, to display suppliers' products, services, and marketing in the female fitness market. Building on the initial results, the study analyzes these products, services, and marketing through the lens of the suppliers' strategies exposed by the theoretical framework to delve deeper into the explanation of the consumer environment in which fitness women are situated.

Against the background of China's socio-economic transformation, the analysis of supplier behavior should pay close attention to the market competition degree, as well as digitally driven strategies. From the competition perspective, the market can be roughly classified into these categories: perfectly competitive market, monopolistic competitive market, oligopoly market (little competition) and monopoly market (no competition) (Mankiw, 2012). Specifically, the fitness market is characterized by the elements of a monopolistic competitive market. In a monopolistic competitive market, the product differences contribute to the suppliers' ability to differentiate and establish a certain level of monopoly. However, because the difference among products in the industry is not so huge that products cannot completely achieve irreplaceability, there is a certain degree of substitutability (Mankiw, 2012). The competition among suppliers arises due to the mutual substitutability of their products.

In China's fitness market, the level of competition is relatively intense, and the degree of monopoly is relatively slight. For example, the important component of the fitness industry, the gym sector, primarily consists of business models such as direct chain operation, franchise chain operation, and independent operations. Gyms in direct chain operation can be viewed as commercial communities with relatively aligned interests. In the franchise business model, franchisees generally are required to pay franchise fees to the enterprise. While franchisees utilize the enterprise's fitness brand, their operations are typically relatively independent and managed by the franchisees. Consequently, there may also be intense competition among franchisees. In short, at present, it is difficult for gyms or yoga studios to collude with each other to control the market. Furthermore, nowadays, there are many independent, different sellers providing similar fitness services, equipment, venues, as well as fitness courses, but these products and services may vary in their content and quality. These differences are mainly related to quality,

function, trademarks, geographical location, service attitude and methods, etc. In other words, suppliers employ strategies such as formulating, offering differentiated products, and implementing branding strategies to gain market share, which reflects the feature of a monopolistic competitive market. In line with the technological development, many suppliers leverage digital technologies to implement these business strategies, encompassing the development of diversified product formats and marketing approaches. However, the differences between these products are not significant enough to make them completely irreplaceable in the market. Consequently, these suppliers still need to compete with each other.

Furthermore, in the specific context of the women's fitness market, consumer demand may appear to reflect women's individual preferences and subjective needs. However, these demands are significantly shaped by underlying gender structures as well as cultural norms. As such, women's fitness consumption becomes a site where gendered social structures and market forces interact. The fitness product and service development is shaped by a broader structural condition, while the market actively mobilizes or packages corresponding gender roles and expectations to expand commercial potential and achieve a certain degree of monopoly. Thus, the women's fitness market is a critical space where gender norms are reproduced, negotiated, and potentially transformed.

Within the context of rapid urbanization and the growing wealth of the middle class, a substantial consumer potential has emerged among urban populations, especially urban women. As a result, women's consumption potential has driven many suppliers to target the women's fitness market. Women's demand has prompted innovations on the supply side, aiming to enhance women's perceived value of fitness-related products and services. For example, the pursuit of 'beauty' has led to the refinement of fitness programs, such as muscle building and posture correction. Product innovation, empowered by technological advancement, has developed increasingly diversified business models. In the context of digital media development in China, the rise of online fitness platforms has improved the flexibility of women's fitness arrangements. At the same time, suppliers actively shape consumer culture through television advertisements, social media, and other channels. For instance, marketing strategies often associate fitness with

narratives of ‘female empowerment’, reinforcing consumption motives through ideologies such as ‘fitness as freedom’. These strategies resonate with women’s own social expectations and serve to ideologically empower their fitness practices, thus elevating their perceived value across multiple dimensions. However, the fitness industry’s marketing discourses about ‘health, beauty, and empowerment’ implicitly reflect reinforcing gender constructions by consumerism. Beneath the surface, these discourses transform women’s bodies into instruments of capital accumulation and further entrench existing patriarchal structures.

2.2.3 Consumer-Supplier interaction

The consumer-supplier interaction refers to the dynamic relationship between consumers and suppliers as they influence each other. It is primarily constituted according to the relationship between market demands and supplies. However, this interaction is not just transactional, and it involves values, social structures, and evolving identities. In the context of the political and economic transformation of China, the consumer-supplier interaction in the women’s fitness market involves intersecting forces of women’s agency, gendered social structures, cultural norms, and market dynamics. Moreover, unlike fully laissez-faire markets, China’s state occasionally intervenes (e.g., national fitness policies and projects), subtly influencing consumer-supplier dynamics. By embedding the interaction within these broad sociocultural frameworks, the analysis may also be extended to encompass an understanding of the social-level implications of the market’s influences on fitness women.

Among the interactions between the suppliers and female consumers in the fitness market, suppliers supply corresponding products or design some marketing strategies in response to these women’s individual demands. The research will examine these behavioral patterns to explain how suppliers attract or even induce consumers, exploring what other influences exist in the fitness market beyond just meeting the needs of women. This could uncover the opportunities and challenges of fitness women in the market context, which may contribute to recognizing the ways in which the market promotes and constrains women’s fitness and, more broadly, women’s sports participation and gender equality of sport in China’s society. In addition, the research examines the

dynamic interactions that follow, focusing on how female fitness consumers respond to supplier behaviors. To be specific, it further discusses female consumers' reflections on fitness consumption and their perspectives, and how they navigate the influence, appeal, or pressure of persuasive marketing and product promotion.

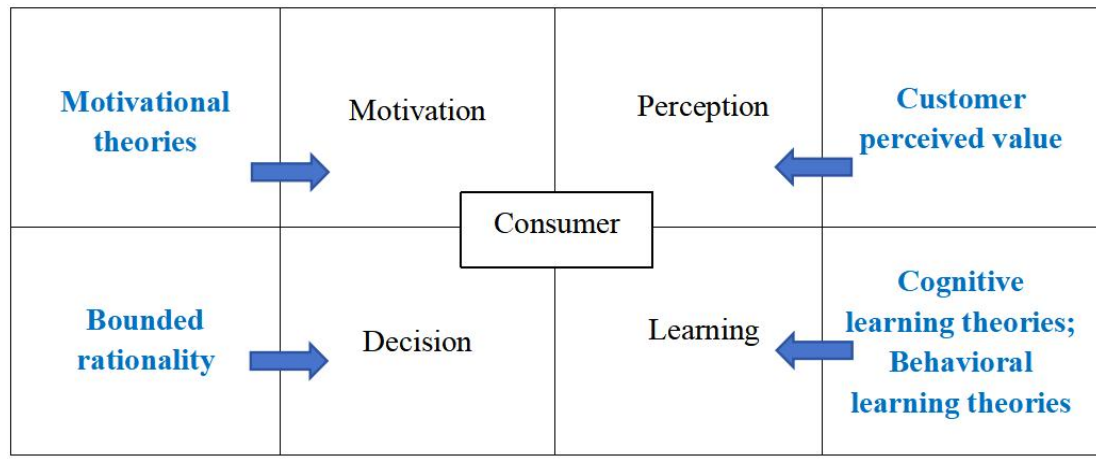
In contemporary China, the fitness market has undergone a transformation from a welfare-oriented model to a commercialized and diversified consumer model. As the core demographic in the fitness market, women's behavioral patterns, consumption motivations, and the strategies of suppliers form a web of interactions. Specifically, female consumers are both the disciplined objects and strategic agents within the fitness market; meanwhile, suppliers not only cater to women's needs but also continuously reconstruct the symbolic system of consumer culture. Since both female consumers and fitness product suppliers possess agency, their relationship involves both alignment and tension, thus forming multi-dimensional and complex dynamics of interaction. These dynamics include the interplay between rational consumption and marketing strategies that influence women's value judgments, or the contradiction between self-presentation, privacy, and data security under the prevailing trends of body commodification and consumer culture. Ultimately, this interaction drives market expansion and also reveals the tension between consumerism and individual autonomy.

The driving forces behind women's fitness consumption include rising economic status, growing health awareness, and the reconstruction of gender roles. In a market context where women's agency is increasingly activated through consumer power, the market's response to women's individual fitness needs has led to the diversification of fitness options, product innovation, technological empowerment, and service upgrades. This supports women's development, reduces social barriers to women's sports participation, develops a female-centric sports narrative, and expands female-friendly public sports spaces in China. However, suppliers constantly shape or influence women's preferences, particularly reinforcing the symbolic identification through consumer culture, and over time, fitness commodities themselves become agents for women's expression and practice. This commercial intermediary attenuates the direct, unmediated interaction between women's fitness engagement and their own bodies. Moreover, private

consumption (such as paid gym memberships) may compensate for the lack of gender-sensitive design in public fitness facilities (e.g., the absence of nursing rooms), but this may diminish women's critical awareness of gender imbalances in the allocation of public fitness service resources. In effect, this tendency of privatization of women's fitness spaces spatially segregates their practices into commercial domains, further entrenching the structurally gendered inequality in the spatial dimensions of the sports environment. Faced with an increasingly stimulated consumer desire, some fitness women begin to reflect critically on the alignment between the effects of fitness products and their actual needs, prompting a shift toward more rational consumption. This rationalization compresses the profit margins of suppliers, which in turn drives a new round of innovation in fitness products and symbolic consumption, aiming to generate fresh consumer demand. These micro-level, complex interactions eventually aggregate into macro-level market trends. According to these broader trends, this study will further analyze the social-level impact of the market on women's fitness and, more broadly, women's sports participation in China's society.

This research constitutes a theoretical framework based on consumer decision making process to elaborate these complex consumer-supplier interaction patterns. Consumer decision making process involves the process of consumers 'searching for purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs' (Panwar et al., 2019: 36). This research constitutes the theoretical framework on the basis of four important factors in this process: motivations in initial consumer intention activation, perception for the process of consumption selection, learning around the formation of consumer behaviors, and the final step of decision (see Figure 2.5). The Chinese fitness market is relatively competitive, with consumers in a relatively advantageous position. As a result, suppliers in this market focus on consumers when planning their business strategies. Therefore, this framework not only examines the behavioral patterns of consumers, but also presents the key elements and approaches through which suppliers shape consumer behavior.

Figure 2.5 Theoretical framework



Motivational theories

Motivation refers to the driving forces or psychological energy that push people to strive for their goals. A goal refers to ‘the cognitive representation of a desired state’ (Niosi, 2021: 87). Motivation can thus be defined as a series of behavioral responses that motivate people to achieve goals and to reduce drives by comparing their current state with a desired state in the end (Lawrence, Carver, and Scheier, 2002). Motivational theories explore these behavioral responses.

Drive theory emphasizes that drives, the ‘tension’ individuals feel when their body ‘is out of balance’, may motivate individuals ‘to resolve’, which represents a behavioral response about motivation (Niosi, 2021: 85). Maslow’s theory explains the particular categories of these driving forces. Maslow conceptualized the personalities through a pyramid-shaped hierarchy of motivations, and these motivations from the lowest level of the pyramid base to the highest level are needs of physiology, safety, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and eventual self-actualization (Jerome, 2013). Modern research on needs hierarchy asserts that individuals ‘often pursue multiple needs simultaneously’ (McLeod, 2025: 2). Physiological needs primarily refer to ‘biological requirements for human survival’, including air, drinks, food, clothes, shelters, and warmth; safety needs refer to the state in which ‘people want to experience order, predictability, and control in their lives’; a sense of belongingness is an emotional need, involving connectedness, interpersonal relationships, and affiliating; esteem needs include the need for reputation and respect from others and esteem for oneself; the desire of self-actualization can be described as the potential or state of ‘to become everything one is capable of becoming’

(McLeod, 2025). Fitness activities, particularly commercial fitness services, are typically undertaken after individuals have achieved basic survival security. Consequently, women's fitness consumption seldom relates to physiological needs but rather encompasses the subsequent four dimensions of human needs. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs has been generally adopted in the marketing strategies (Solomon, 2019). This theory could help commercial actors to understand the particular needs that their target consumers try to satisfy and the means to market their products to spark these needs.

The models about consumer buying behaviors generally separate out motivators and determinants in the process (Panwar et al., 2019). The motivators are primarily linked to the first stage of the purchase process. They trigger need recognition or problem awareness among people, which may arouse their desire for consumption. These motivational theories could be employed to identify the various driving logics behind the demands of female fitness consumers.

Customer perceived value

Perception describes the process by which people interpret and organize the information they obtain and the sensations they experience. In this research, the analysis of perception mainly involves the consumers' perception of products. Consumer preferences can be identified by consumers' perception of a product's value. This consumers' perception is a multidimensional construct, co-constituted by objective attributes of a product and by their subjective judgment and interpretations, which may at times diverge from reality. However, this 'perception' holds significant influence on realistic consumers' purchasing decisions and behavioral responses.

Building on seminal contributions from 'Holbrook and Corfman, Monroe and Krishnan, and Zeithaml' to research on this 'perceived value' in the 1980s, the view of customer perceived value emerged as 'an issue of growing interest to academia and practice' in the 1990s (Zauner, Koller, and Hatak, 2015: 3). Although definitive agreement on the definition of customer perceived value has yet to be established, there is some consensus in conceptualizing customer perceived value among the scholars, which involves the

relationship between customer and the product, multi-dimensional construct with some sort of dynamic facet, and the perceptual nature of value (Aulia, Sukati, and Sulaiman, 2016: 151). Initial studies considered the concept of customer perceived value as a unidimensional structure, concentrating on the economic aspects. These studies discussed consumers' rational behaviors, including maximizing 'the utility of their choices' and accounting for alternative offerings in the market (Zauner, Koller, and Hatak, 2015: 4). Afterwards, an increasing number of researchers realized the multidimensional construct of this concept. For example, Sweeney and Soutar (2001) demonstrate four interrelated dimensions of customer perceived value, including the economic value about price or money, the emotional value, the societal value about the individual's societal self-concept, and the functional value about quality or performance. To sum up, customer perceived value reflects the subjective recognition of the value of a product, which is distinct from the objective value of the product and encompasses multiple dimensions, including economic and utilitarian aspects, the quality–price relationship, emotional dimensions, an ethic sense, spirituality, and the hedonic, symbolic, and esthetic aspects of the consumption process (Zauner, Koller, and Hatak, 2015). The concept of customer perceived value could help explain the standards and dimensions of consumers' value evaluation.

From a supplier's perspective, the meaningful marketing activities are directed at creating value (Babin and James, 2010). This value judgment is determined by the customers rather than being defined by the enterprises. It is commonly believed that customer perceived value is a key source of competitive advantage in the 21st century (Zauner, Koller, and Hatak, 2015). With economic reforms in China, suppliers have been able to freely run their business in the market, and they always attempt to develop various strategies to increase sales. As a result, suppliers in China's consumer market often design their business or marketing strategies around customer perceived value. In this context, two dominant strategies emerge. On the one hand, suppliers may engage in value enhancement, improving relatively objective utility to reinforce customers' perceptions of quality. On the other hand, they may rely on value simulation, modifying consumers' perception through marketing tactics.

Cognitive and behavioral learning theories

Learning refers to the process that certain experience results in relatively permanent change in behavior or knowledge. Learning is ‘a broad topic that is used to explain not only how we acquire new knowledge and behavior but also how we acquire a wide variety of other psychological processes’, including the development of consumers’ behavior (Niosi, 2021: 47). Specifically, the process that consumers refine or change their behaviors after gaining experience and information can be regarded as a form of learning. Theories about learning are generally divided into two major systems, the stimulus-response theory and the cognitive theory. Many learning patterns are at the heart of advertising efforts (Niosi, 2021). This research mainly uses cognitive learning theories and behavioral learning theories to explain how women acquire consumer behavior, which uncovers the patterns of female fitness consumers’ perception and feedback on the actions of suppliers.

Behavioral learning theories focus on individuals’ responses to external events and stimulus-response connections, researching how to shape behavior by controlling the environment (Hawkins, 2007). Cognitive learning theories regard consumers as solvers who learn abstract concepts and rules by observing others to address complicated problems or learn from mental processes (thought, memory, problem-solving, or belief), exploring how to construct knowledge and perception through promoting understanding (Bandura, 1986). Particularly, cognitive theories focus on how information is processed, stored, and retrieved in the mind, revealing the process by which learners actively construct knowledge. To some extent, these theories explain the intermediate step in the process from the input of external stimuli to the output of behavioral responses, which is of interest to behavioral learning scholars. Modern marketing typically incorporates these two modes of behavioral construction, such as the point reward system based on behavioral learning principles and the exploratory, situational sale activities of experiencing products based on cognitive learning principle. These learning theories could be used to examine how suppliers enhance women’s consumption motivations and perception of value.

Bounded rationality

Bounded rationality represents a constrained decision-making model situated between perfect rationality and irrationality. Harstad and Selten (2013) define the boundedness as a deviation from the optimal decision or standard model. Herbert Simon emphasized the concept of bounded rationality primarily to dispute the foundation underlying neoclassical economic and management theories, specifically, the assumptions that conditions and future changes are inherently predictable and that all possible outcomes of available alternative solutions and strategies are known (Sent, 2018). This notion rectifies the extremities of the traditional rational choice theory, bridging its presuppositions more closely with real-world contexts. The foundation of bounded rationality is not only tied to incomplete information (not knowing all outcomes) but also involves ‘fundamental uncertainty’ (Dimand, 2021). Under the concept of incomplete information, all possible values of a variable and the probability of each value occurring are determinate. However, fundamental uncertainty refers to situations where both the possible values of a variable and the probability of each value are indeterminate (Dimand, 2021). Fundamental uncertainty primarily arises from endogenously social uncertainty generated through interactive human decision-making instead of exogenously given natural indeterminacy (Iván, 2023).

The theory of bounded rationality examines consumers’ decisions in the actual market through the lens of accounting for decision-makers’ physiological constraints, environmental complexity, altruistic behavioral tendencies, and cognitive costs (Sent, 2018: 1374). Specifically, first, individuals’ problem-solving abilities may be constrained by their limited cognitive capacities. Under certain circumstances, some contextual influences may trigger the direct judgment system, intuition, to process, thereby limiting the efficacy of rational analysis (Rubinstein, 2005). Second, decision-makers operate in complex environments characterized by incomplete information, which means the boundedness of information. Furthermore, cognitive costs illustrate limited computational capacity and attention scarcity, which means bounded willpower. Thus, individuals may make selections that are not in their interests, especially long-term interests. Finally, bounded self-interest reflects that people may be willing to sacrifice their own interests for others’ benefits. In general, bounded rationality indicates different

things to different humans (Sent, 2004).

The concept of bounded rationality is employed to reveal the process by which female fitness consumers' decisions deviate from their benefits, as well as the limitations in consumer decision-making. Furthermore, this concept has extended beyond individual decision-making to encompass social influences. Even when information is fully accessible, computable, and collectable, the aggregation of perfectly rational individual decisions may lead to irrational societal outcomes, reflecting a form of bounded rationality (Bicchieri, 2004). This notion can be employed to analyze the contradiction between personal choices made by women and the broader development of women's sport in more 'open' and 'liberal' contemporary China. 'Sensible' fitness-oriented individual women make decisions that appear aligned with their self-interest, while the overall environment for women's fitness is increasingly characterized by anxiety, divergence, and complexity.

Chapter 3

The Historical Transformation of Women's Sport Participation in China

Since the implementation of the economic reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, the Chinese people have embraced new ideas and embarked on a new path to promote national development. This significant reform has introduced more diversified views and cultures into what was once a closed society, leading China towards a market-oriented economy and an open and inclusive social environment. This reform has also had a direct impact on Chinese women's social status and their participation in sport in modern-day China. The participation of Chinese women in sport has evolved within highly intricate and distinctive social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. Therefore, it is important to examine the changes in circumstances surrounding women's sports participation during the period of and the period prior to the reform and opening-up era in China.

The historical trajectory of women's sport in China represents an evolutionary path from 'physical limitations' and 'bodily liberation' to 'national contribution', and toward 'self-realization'. From initial exclusion from sports pursuits to becoming an indispensable force in Chinese sport, the development of women's sport profoundly resonates with the changes in Chinese women's social status and roles. This chapter focuses on these critical shifts of women's sport to conduct a historical review, showing the influences of the social context on women's status and women's sports participation in different periods in China.

This discussion is organized on the basis of three periods: The first section focuses on the pre-1949 period. It displays women's sport and socio-economic state from dynastic China to the Republic of China, focusing on the transition from limited women's participation in sport in traditional Chinese society to the expansion of sports opportunities for women in modern time of China. The second part introduces the background and development of women's participation in sport in the People's Republic

of China (PRC) during the Socialist (or Maoist) Era (1949–1978). In this period, women became an indispensable force in Chinese sport, which greatly supported national construction and strove to bring honor to the state. The third section explains women's sport and consumption during the reform and opening-up era (the post-1978 period), an era when women's self, individual needs are liberated.

This historical review uncovers the deeply entrenched factors influencing women's sport. It also highlights the key characteristics of contemporary transformation in women's sport, which helps explain the function and positioning of fitness consumption within women's fitness practices in contemporary China.

3.1 The transition of women's sport from dynastic China to the Republic of China (pre-1949)

In dynastic China, women's participation in sport was profoundly constrained by their economic dependence and the social structure that emphasized 'men's dominance in public spheres and women's domestic roles'. Within such a society, the culture of ritual propriety reinforced feminine virtues of 'demureness, and submissiveness' and an idealized aesthetic of fragility, which significantly restricted women's bodily practices and activity spaces. Consequently, physical activities among Chinese women in traditional Chinese society were generally characterized by non-competitive, recreational, and domestic features.

China in the dynastic era was predominantly characterized by a patriarchal system (Liu, 1998). With the formal adoption of Confucianism as the state ideology during the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220), a more defined patriarchal ideology took root, which emphasized a structured societal order and familial hierarchy (Freedman, 1961). Afterwards, Confucianism continued to have significant social and political influences in later dynasties, such as the Tang (618–907), Song (960–1279), and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Confucian philosophy advocated for women's adherence to the 'Three Obediences' to their father, husband, and son, which reinforced women's roles within the confines of the family.

Such social norms greatly resonated with the economic necessities inherent in the

traditional Chinese societal framework. Agriculture, which served as the cornerstone of societal sustenance and stability in traditional China, positioned the family not only as a societal unit but also as an essential unit of consumption and production, particularly in rural settings (Fei and Malinowski, 2013). Men were predominantly regarded as the primary labor force in agricultural production, bearing the responsibility to expand and sustain the family's resources (Sung, 2023: 71). This role, while often viewed as a privilege, also entailed significant pressures, as men were expected to ensure the continuity of the family lineage and provide for the collective needs of extended family members. The preference for sons in many traditional families often demonstrated practical and cultural considerations. Sons were traditionally seen as the bearers of familial duties, leading males to act as the primary financial supporters of their families.

Women, on the other hand, were primarily engaged in household labor, a role that was pivotal for the internal management within the private domain of the family but often limited their visibility in the public economic sphere. While their contributions were crucial to the fabric of daily life, encompassing everything from food preparation to managing domestic finances, these roles were less recognized outside the household. Despite this, women's participation in the economy was not absent. In agricultural settings, many women worked alongside men in the fields, although their labor was often considered an extension of their domestic responsibilities. Admittedly, the economic experiences of women were not universally uniform, and there were some variations across different regions and historical periods (Sung, 2023: 74).⁵ Education and formal employment, particularly in bureaucratic roles, were largely inaccessible to women, with notable exceptions during progressive periods such as the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Such examples highlight the adaptability and resilience of women under the constraints of their societal roles, and they underscore a significant point: the gender hierarchy is often a response to socio-economic status.

As a result, these prevailing societal norms and economic conditions profoundly shaped

⁵ For instance, during the early nineteenth century in the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1911), some women who resisted traditional marital expectations formed independent communities, like the sisterhoods in southeastern China. These groups engaged in the silk industry, carving out a niche that allowed them economic independence and social autonomy.

the role of women in sport. Research by Zi and Meng (2016) and research by Liu (2012) have illuminated that women's sport was often centered around family and local community events. This situation reflected a broader context where women's public participation was generally restricted, aligning with the norm of 'men's dominance in public spheres and women's domestic roles' prescribed during that era. Moreover, the practice of foot binding, extending from the noble class to the common folk, drastically limited women's mobility, severely restricting their ability to engage in most forms of physical activities (Wen, Yang, and Zhang, 2014). The foot binding, which emerged during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), developed based on an aesthetic ideal centered on fragile and delicate physicality. This aesthetic greatly aligned with the virtues of 'demureness, and submissiveness' expected in 'women's domestic roles'. This dynamic starkly illustrates how deeply ingrained cultural norms could significantly impact women's physical capabilities and their participation in sport. Comparatively, Western societies of the traditional period also exhibited restrictive practices, such as corsetry, which similarly aimed to mold women's bodies to fit a particular aesthetic ideal, often at the expense of health and mobility.

Nevertheless, there were exceptional periods in the development of women's sport, such as during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). During this dynasty, renowned for its economic and cultural prosperity, there was a significant improvement in the status of women, partially attributed to the lessened influence of rigid Confucian ideals during this period (Wang, 1996). Admittedly, the application of Confucian principles somewhat varied across China's vast geographical and cultural landscape. The principles served more as a moral and ethical guide than a strict set of enforced laws, and their influence on the everyday lives of women from different classes, regions, and eras and their participation in sport varied accordingly. This era saw an expansion in the variety and participation in women's sport, such as polo, an activity in which even Wu Zetian (624–705), the female emperor in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), was known to participate (Jiang, 2007; Wang, 1996). Scholars like Zou and Han (2014) have highlighted that this era's social prosperity fostered a vibrant sports culture that was more inclusive of women, demonstrating a progressive shift in societal attitudes towards women's participation in sport.

However, the post-Tang periods witnessed a regression in women's roles in sport as societal attitudes once again hardened, influenced by a resurgence of Confucian culture and more stringent societal norms (Hong, 1995). Overall, traditional Chinese society did impose significant restrictions on women, including women's sports participation. Furthermore, this fluctuation in women's sports participation across different dynasties illustrates the complex interplay between cultural, social, and political forces in shaping gender roles within Chinese society.

During the final years of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), China underwent a transition from a traditional society to a more modern one. Amid this remarkable societal transformation, women, to some extent, achieved bodily liberation, leading to significant advancements in women's sport. After being defeated by the British Empire in the Opium War of 1839–1842, in an effort to strengthen the nation and protect against further colonial and imperialist expansions, the Chinese social elites, like Tan Sitong (1865–1898), Kang Youwei (1858–1927), and Liang Qichao (1865–1898), actively promoted the proposition of 'the learn from foreign nations to compete with foreigners to rescue China'. 'Foreign nation' mainly referred to Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and France, viewed by these intellectuals and social elites as powerful and advanced civilizations. Afterwards, the continuous introduction of Western culture, including feminist ideas, played a role in laying the foundation for the liberation of Chinese women (Siu, 1982).⁶

The Taiping Rebellion, a peasant revolt which broke out in the mid-nineteenth century, saw the first major attempt to implement gender equality in China (Lu, 2004). The leaders of this rebellion advocated that both males and females were children of God equally, based on the Christian Bible's teaching. Subsequently, leading Chinese intellectuals and reformists began to call for the end of the Confucian-based social hierarchy as well as women's oppression. For instance, Qiu Jin (1875–1907), a female activist and revolutionary leader, contributed to the publication of *Chinese Women's Daily* (中国女报), trying to promote gender equality and encourage women to achieve

⁶ The first wave of feminism emerged in the 19th century, primarily advocating for women's fundamental political rights, particularly suffrage. The impact of this movement extended far beyond Western societies, exerting considerable influence in Eastern nations such as China as well.

the economic independence and personal autonomy. Moreover, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), a co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), launched the journal *New Youth* in 1915 with the goal of educating Chinese people with Western ideas of science and democracy. In this way, a variety of Western scholars' works, including works on women or about feminism (such as the English socialist philosopher 'Edward Carpenter's *Love's Coming-of-Age: A Series of Papers on the Relations of the Sexes*'), were introduced into China (Zheng, 2016: 4).

In practice, various reforms advocating for equal rights for women (such as issues related to women's education, the treatment of female bodies, and the inhumanity of arranged marriage) were carried forward to varying extents. For example, in 1907, the Qing (1644–1911) government formulated the *Regulations for Women's Primary Schools* (女子小学堂章程) and *Regulations for Women's Normal Schools* (女子师范学堂章程), which introduced women's education to the national education system (Shu, 2003). This increased the potential of women as highly valued members of the labor force in society. In 1913, the *Provisional Ban of Traditional Midwives* (京师警察厅暂行取缔产婆规则) was issued by the newly established government of the Republic of China (1912–1949) to regulate midwives, which aimed to guarantee women's reproductive health. The implementation of the Republican Civil Code in 1929 marked the first time that women were granted equal rights to men in terms of divorce and property inheritance under the law (Bernhardt, 1999). Additionally, the government called for the end of the traditional practice of foot binding, and promoted Western medicine, hygiene, and physical education to improve women's health and physiques. In 1930, the government issued the Civil Code of 'Relatives', which recognized the right of both male and female parties to independently decide their marriage (Li, 2010). This contributed to the end of traditional arranged marriages.

During this period of significant social and political changes, progressive forces in China paid attention to the issue of women's liberation, and some women's consciousness of independence gradually awakened. The situation of women started to change in various social domains. In the realm of women's sport, Hong (1995) notes that this transitional period witnessed the emergence of modern Chinese women's sport. Reformers began to

focus on women's rights issues, and physical education served as a platform for launching the liberation of Chinese women (Hong, 1995). Since then, a few women's sports departments in colleges and schools were established, while women had more opportunities to engage in physical exercises. In consequence, there was a growing trend among women to showcase their newfound physical independence. Additionally, Chinese sportswomen got the opportunities to participate in the Far-East Asian Games and even attend the Olympic Games at this time, which significantly shows the development and transition of Chinese women's sport (Hong, 1995).

3.2 The development of women's sport in the Socialist Era (1949-1978)

After the civil war between the CCP and China's Nationalist Party, the PRC was established by the CCP on October 1, 1949. During the period between 1949 and 1978, women became an indispensable force in national construction and Chinese sport. Chinese women's participation in sport experienced rapid growth compared to dynastic China and the Republic of China era (1912-1949). Women were not only encouraged to engage in physical activities at the grassroots level but also to receive professional training as athletes. However, due to a weak economic foundation, a highly unstable political climate, and underdeveloped social conditions, the development of women's sports participation in China was a difficult and challenging process during this period. Furthermore, the underlying forces and goals behind the promotion of women's sports participation, as well as women's feelings, experiences, and self-fulfilment, were significantly different from those observed in women's sport after 1978.

Since the early 20th century, Chinese society has undergone a revolutionary process aimed at fundamentally transforming almost every aspect of its semi-colonial and semi-feudal structure (Zhu, 1991). At that time, China was heavily influenced by foreign powers, plagued by rampant corruption, and faced widespread famine. In order to rebuild the country, after 1949, the CCP implemented a totalitarian cultural system and a centralized political system. The goal was to develop China into an ideal society with equitable social development and a high level of economic production (Zhu, 1991). Faced with the challenges of poverty resulting from decades of external military threats, the PRC prioritized the development of its economy and the strengthening of its national

defense. Mao Zedong (1893–1976), the then Chairman of the PRC, asserted that the immediate tasks at hand were the establishment of a robust state power and economic growth (Guo and Yang, 2019). The new government adopted an economic planning system modeled on the Soviet Union, where resources, including intermediate products, were all distributed centrally. Setting targets, which covered both output and all major inputs, regulated the production operations (Liu, 1991). Following the Soviet model, investment was prioritized for heavy industry, with light industry receiving secondary emphasis, while agriculture was given lower priority. Furthermore, labor forces were centrally allocated, meaning that graduates would be assigned to specific units for work without having to compete for jobs in the labor market. Once assigned, their employment at the workplace was guaranteed for their entire lives.

During the process of industrialization, heavy industry experienced significant growth, while the production of light industrial goods necessary for daily life fell short, resulting in low living standards for the people. Within the planned economic system, products were not allocated based on market and open rules but rather through redistribution channels (Davis, 2000). Starting from the mid-1950s, most Chinese people were required to use specialized official vouchers to purchase corresponding goods. For instance, industrial products could be purchased with government-issued industrial vouchers, while food required official food vouchers. Consequently, consumption activities among the public were restricted. During that time, the socialist economic model overemphasized industrial production while neglecting the demand for daily consumer goods by the population. This phenomenon resulted in people being primarily seen as producers rather than consumers. This presents a notable contrast to the consumer environment after the reform and opening-up.

To fulfill the goal of consolidating the revolution, reinvigorating social production, and ultimately leading China towards a communist society, the state hoped to build up a healthy and strong workforce. Sport was seen as a means to develop a healthy labor force, particularly among workers. Zhu De (1886–1976), the then Vice-President of the PRC, defined sport as ‘a part of cultural and educational work and a part of health care’ and underlined that ‘in the past, sport was divorced from the masses of the people. Now our

sports cause must serve the people, and must serve the goals of national defense and the health of the people' (Cui, 2008: 8).

In 1952, Mao Zedong advocated for 'the development of sport and the promotion of physical fitness among the people' (Cui, 2008: 8). This slogan reinforced the primary role, goal, and task of sport during this period and helped establish the significance of sport in people's lives. As a result, sport, particularly mass sport, experienced rapid development in Chinese society. The main evidence of this development was that the development of sports infrastructure paralleled the construction of public services and facilities, particularly in the cities. Prior to 1949, China only possessed 26 gymnasiums and sports fields nationwide. However, by the 1950s, 38 medium- and small-sized sports venues had been newly constructed in major cities like Beijing, Wuhan, Yinchuan, Tianjin, and Changchun (Xiong, 2008). In preparation for the First National Sports Meet in 1959, the Workers' Sports Stadium was established in Beijing, which had a seating capacity of 80,000 spectators (Rong, 2009). Moreover, some national sports campaigns had been promoted. For instance, 'Sport Weeks' and 'Sports Months' were organized, while a campaign of 'Ten-Minute Broadcast Exercises' was carried out nationwide (Xiong, 2007). In addition, in 1952, 'Preparation for Labor and Defence' (劳卫制) from the Soviet model was adopted, which emphasized the physical exercise standards and encouraged the public to actively participate in physical activities (Cui, 2008: 48). During this period, sports activities were scheduled for workers during their morning rest time, and various amateur sports events were organized for them.

Due to women's significant role in the reconstruction of the PRC, the physical health and strength of women became a key consideration within the sports system. Traditionally, Chinese women were confined to the role of housewives. However, given the objective of the PRC to establish a robust industrial foundation, an increasingly dynamic female workforce was essential to the expansion of societal production, particularly within the industrial sector. Furthermore, based on the Marxist theory about women's emancipation, the CCP maintained that women's liberation could only be achieved when they participated in large-scale societal production rather than being confined to the domestic spheres and household duties (Li and Su, 2012). Hence, women

were encouraged to leave their homes and participate in productive activities, entering domains that were traditionally dominated by males. A series of government policies, such as the expansion of industrial and rural sectors of the economy, land reform, and the agricultural collectivization, provided women with new opportunities to actively participate in production. These policies encouraged women to take on a full and diverse range of roles in various sectors of the economy. For example, in 1949, the proportion of female employees in China's workforce was only 7.5%. In 1978, there were over 31.28 million female employees in collectively owned and state-owned enterprises and institutions nationwide, accounting for 32.7% of the totality of employees (Tong, 2011). This growth shows that, with the support of national policies, an increasing number of Chinese women engaged in social labor.

The distribution of income in this period was characterized by egalitarianism, which generated the evolutionary trend, equalizing the possession of means of subsistence. According to Sun and Han (2010), under such institutional patterns, the income gap was gradually narrowing separately in both urban areas and rural regions internally, and the incomes even tended towards average, which exhibits a low Gini coefficient.⁷ It indicated that the wealth gap during that time was far below the large gap with a high risk of social unrest. Under this context, with the emphasis on gender equality, the income gap between men and women was relatively insignificant.

The shift in female employment led to changes in the domestic system. The implementation of the Marriage Law in 1950 aimed to eliminate the traditional marriage system, seen as a barrier to gender equality. In a word, Chinese women gained more rights in areas such as education, employment, public affairs, and decision-making in marriage (Andors, 1983). Furthermore, after the economic system was reorganized, the long-standing extended-kinship structure to some degree vanished, particularly in urban areas.⁸ Instead, in many regions, the work unit took the place of the family unit, serving as the fundamental unit for accounting and production (Li and Li, 2000). Therefore, the

⁷ The Gini coefficient is one of the commonly used indicators to measure the income gap of residents in a region or country.

⁸ Extended-kinship structure refers to an economic support system based on kinship relations (relying on not only two parents but grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters).

domestic sphere was no longer the sole domain for women's lives, like childbearing and taking care of their husbands. Their lives also encompassed the workplace, economic responsibilities, public engagement, and political involvement.

As a public activity with distinct societal implications, sports participation was thus widely encouraged among women. With the changing roles of women in both the family and society, their involvement in sport and exercise expanded across various public domains. In workplaces, female workers were mandated to participate in organized exercise programs and sports events or team competitions with various work units, garnering significant attention through their outstanding performances. Female workers now engaged in various physical activity programs organized by trade unions on a larger scale than ever before, with the aim of ensuring fitness for optimal productivity (Dong, 2003). In schools, the mandatory component of the curriculum encompassed physical education, with boys and girls being obligated to attend three physical education classes per week, in addition to one hour of extracurricular sports activities (Gu, 2003). The new portrayal of women was that of being healthy and robust, demonstrating their unwavering commitment to the cause of socialist development.⁹

In addition to regulating women's involvement in sport, work units also provided assistance and encouragement for their aspirations. To address the conflicts between women's roles within and outside the family, the socialization of household chores was implemented. As the state encouraged women to participate in the labor market and extra-familial activities, the responsibility for housework was assumed by the state (Song, 2016: 64). During this period, the Women's Federation started to take on the responsibility of urging factories to offer their female workers nursery services and facilities. Work units also offered washrooms for female workers, restrooms for pregnant women, canteens, and even dormitories for mothers and children. In the collectivist era of China, the state's support for household chores improved the environment for women to engage in public activities and work, ensuring women's time to take part in physical exercises. As a result, grassroots women's sport began to emerge across the country. In

⁹ A poem written in 1959 exemplified the shift of women's portrayal and the transformative power of exercise on this shift. This poem stated that exercise has brought about transformations in women, turning a frail girl into a strong and resilient individual (Zhuang, 1959, as cited in Xiong, 2006).

this manner, women were able to break free from the traditional constraints imposed on their lives and bodies and embark on their new lives on the stage of the PRC.

From the ideological perspective, the communist goal of women's emancipation was to eradicate gender inequality. The CCP's leadership believed that gender inequality stemmed from physical differences, particularly women's perceived physical disadvantages. Therefore, promoting gendered equality required women to challenge these physical disadvantages and strive for an androgynous image. In doing so, many women followed Mao's famous words of 'anything men can do, women can do'. As a result, there were no significant gendered differences in social labor. For example, young educated women who were sent to the villages worked alongside men in the fields. They had to work hard to demonstrate their capabilities, often referred to as the women's power of 'half the sky'. Strong, muscular, robust women who excelled in traditionally male-dominated jobs received high praise and were known as 'Iron Girls' (Croll, 1995). In addition to their physical work, both men and women dressed similarly, with minimal stylistic differences, in an effort to negate or minimize particular gendered distinctions. Within such a circumstance, women were encouraged to engage in physical exercise to develop robust physiques, capable of performing labor traditionally designated for men. This ideological climate was particularly pronounced during the period of the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution aimed to completely eradicate the negative impact of traditional, old values and views, and to 'proletarianize' the public consciousness. It sought to revolutionize Chinese culture and also intended to oppose any capitalist tendencies to establish a pure proletarian order in society (Xi and Jin, 2006). During this time, cosmetics, tight trousers, colorful clothes, and skirts were considered to be decadent 'bourgeois goods'. As Chang (2008) has argued, during the Cultural Revolution, any discussion regarding female particular issues was deemed bourgeois, and images of females highlighting gender distinctions or any proposition of distinct women's identities were criticized and rejected. In the realm of specific ideological propaganda, 'Model Operas' were displayed on a large scale to present a revolutionary image of militant heroines who sacrificed family lives for revolution and their careers (Judd,

1991).¹⁰ The aim was to challenge the concept of the historical images of females and the traditional family. Overall, with the compulsory erosion of female gender characteristics, the new portrayal of women was constructed to promote unity and oppose sexual differences, hierarchy, divisions, and asymmetry, aiming to symbolize gendered equality (Croll, 1995). The government presided over the elimination of gender distinctions in public discourse and visual mass media. As a result, women were expected to participate in sport to correspondingly showcase their physical strength and exhibit the 'one gender' qualities.

Besides the advancement of mass sport, the government also aimed to achieve a high standard of elite sport. Following the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952, the state recognized the influential role of elite sport in attaining international recognition and status. Sport was regarded by senior government officials as a platform to reflect the superiority of socialism and the new China's force and image (Cui, 2008).

These new priorities bestowed upon sports another significant responsibility, which was to reshape the image of China both domestically and internationally. That is to say, the state strove to strengthen national identity by dispelling the perception of China as a weak nation and gaining global recognition by exceptional performances in international sports competitions. With substantial government investment in sports and a hopeful atmosphere that pursued rapid and ambitious goals in every sector across the country, the system of elite sport was established and developed (Hong, 2003). Thus, the number of sportswomen and female coaches experienced a significant increase. The rise of female elite sport led to a group of women who were eager to dedicate themselves to sports and actively challenged traditional notions regarding women's involvement in competitive sports field. They established a new standard of societal expectations for women (Dong, 2003). The success of women in elite sport must have encouraged women's engagement in mass sport and broken the gendered stereotype in the sports field to some extent. These national heroines brought glory to the state and the party. Meanwhile, they were seen as representatives of gender equality and icons of women's

¹⁰ Model Operas refer to works as role models of art during the Cultural Revolution.

liberation.

Under the aspirations of national rejuvenation and socialist construction, the Chinese sports system was designed to progress through a ‘two legs walking system’, where both mass sports and elite sports simultaneously developed (Wu, 1999). Consequently, women’s mass sport and elite sport largely flourished under state encouragement. However, the female sports development during the Maoist time faced numerous challenges and obstacles, resulting in a journey marked by ups and downs. Major historical events in China, the Great Leap Forward (GLF) and the aforementioned Cultural Revolution, have had complex impacts on women’s sports engagement.

The GLF refers to a mass campaign launched nationwide from 1958 to 1960 for economic construction. From 1953 to 1957, China’s economy experienced significant growth, with a nearly triple increase of factory output from 6,450 million RMB to 17,260 million RMB (the NBS, 1959). The economic advancements instilled confidence among the Chinese people in the socialist reconstruction, with the aim of catching up with Western countries. Consequently, in 1957, Chairman Mao advocated for mass mobilization and engaged the entire nation in a campaign for progress. This initiative, known as the ‘Great Leap Forward’, emphasized the need for the entire population to work towards surpassing previous production achievements and accelerating economic growth (Gu, 2016). However, the GLF was a severe setback in the CCP’s exploration of the path to socialist construction. During this economic campaign, the government had prioritized the rapid growth of the urban industrial sector, often at the expense of the agricultural sector. Consequently, the unbalanced development between industry and agriculture, like the outflow of rural laborers, caused great social unrest, including food shortages, a lack of raw materials for industrial development, and the deterioration of industrial facilities.

Due to the failure of the GLF, the production of heavy industries was reduced by half, and the government scaled back on state investments. Reduced investment in sports sector and the widespread famine made it difficult to organize large-scale sports events among the general population (Wu, 1999). The GLF failure also resulted in the loss of jobs for twenty million workers, with a large portion of them being women (the China

Population Information Center, 1988). Accordingly, people's living standard witnessed a sharp decline (Gu, 2016). Due to unemployment and the reduction of sports participation opportunities, women's engagement in grassroots sport decreased.

Nevertheless, women's elite sport continued to develop to some extent during this period. In order to increase resource utilization efficiency, the government decided to allocate limited resources to the training of potential sportsmen and sportswomen in some sports programs. The focus of sport shifted from cultivating healthy citizens to training elite athletes, leading to women's sport becoming a part of the elite sports development. Central and local governments, as well as sports departments, offered financial support and training opportunities to talented young women. In doing so, the government reaffirmed its gender policy emphasizing the capabilities of women – 'women can hold up half of the sky' and also utilized it as a political strategy to obtain global recognition for China.

The Cultural Revolution was a political movement carried out nationwide in 1966. This movement, initiated by Mao, aimed to develop a 'correct consciousness' among the public and emphasized the need for 'ideological remolding' in a cultural sense (Xi and Jin, 2006). Specifically, the Cultural Revolution aimed to establish an egalitarian society by challenging long-standing authorities, like male domination and intellectual authority. Additionally, it criticized individualism while promoting totalitarianism, collectivism, and nationalism (Xi and Jin, 2006). Thus, the campaign of women's liberation can be seen as aligned with the revolutionary goals. In this particular political climate, women's sport was somewhat reinforced.

At the grassroots level, women's physical activities flourished in both urban and rural areas. In urban areas, efforts were made to combat gendered discrimination in the sports domain by organizing female sports teams, like basketball teams, in most major factories or workplaces (Wu, 1999). With regard to rural areas, a media press in 1975 showed that in 'Nanyao County, Hebei province', over 70 per cent of 'the women in Daxin Brigade participated in' sports activities (Sports Daily, 1975, as cited in Xiong, 2006). Phoenix New Media (2015) describes the condition that female volunteers in Fujian province conducted shooting training during the Cultural Revolution. Despite the poor sports

infrastructure, during that period, physical exercises were among the few leisure projects that faced relatively fewer restrictions from the government. Overall, due to the political climate that promoted the portrayal of strong and androgynous women, participating in mass sports was relatively safe for women to avoid criticism. With regard to ideology, women's mass sport continued to serve as a favorable means of showcasing female physical capabilities and challenging traditional norms and discipline.

However, female elite sport in China went through periods of decline and subsequent revitalization. During the Cultural Revolution, due to the radical ideological imperatives, Chinese society suffered from the rise of social instability, the destruction of urban public places, facilities, and services, and economic collapse (People's Daily Online, 2013). According to the NBS (2010), the gross national product of China decreased from 186.8 billion RMB to 177.4 billion RMB between 1966 and 1967, and continuously dropped to 172.3 billion RMB in 1968. The government's investment in sport decreased annually due to economic decline at that time (Cui, 2008). As a result, there was a decrease in the number of elite sports teams and athletes. The Chinese elite sport faced severe attacks, and, thus, women's elite sport suffered a significant decline during the early years of this period. Additionally, the criticism of the elite sport, which was a part of the challenge to authority during the Cultural Revolution, was one of the crucial elements contributing to the decay of female elite sport. However, as the economy began to improve in 1971, women's elite sport started to recover. With the social and economic restoration, the focus of the state shifted towards international engagement. Sport served as a key means to reestablish diplomatic relationships between China and Western countries (Wu, 1999). Following this, elite sport, including female elite sport, regained the attention of the state.

In summary, women's sport was influenced and consolidated by the particular political climate brought about by this social change to some extent. The Cultural Revolution aimed to establish a society of absolute equality, suppressing bourgeois thoughts and lifestyles while emphasizing collectivism over individualism. Women were expected to actively engage in this 'Great Revolution' and play a crucial role in constructing a new social order characterized by androgyny. Women's sports engagement was seen as a means for them to challenge the traditionally masculine world. As a result, despite the

significant challenges faced by many institutions in Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution, with a long period of social chaos, women's sport managed to survive. Women's mass sport experienced overall growth during this period. While women's elite sport suffered a decay initially due to the sharp decline of resources, it recovered in the later phase. After the Cultural Revolution came the era of reform and opening-up. In this new era, 'feminine' was no longer perceived as an inferior quality, and women ceased to be expected to emulate masculine robustness. To a certain extent, female identity reclaimed its position within Chinese society.

3.3 Women's sport and fitness consumption in China's socialist market economy (post-1978)

Since the late 1970s, China has shifted from a nominal 'socialism' to a practical hybrid pattern of 'capitalism'. More and more industries are no longer only controlled by the government but are also driven by the mechanics of the market. Following extensive economic transformation over the years, ranging from the development of entrepreneurship to the policy relaxation of foreign investments, China gradually evolved into a core force in the capitalist world. Accordingly, many industries and markets in China have become increasingly prosperous. The material life of Chinese people has been greatly enriched and satisfied.

During this new era, the development of women's sport has evolved in tandem with economic and social progress. Amid increasingly open social attitudes, Chinese women's sport has witnessed a transformation from 'state narrative' to 'individual expression'. The market-oriented transition has provided women with greater choices in sports participation. The sports notion emphasizes self-actualization and healthy living, while the sports projects present a more diversified pattern. These changes in women's sports concepts, forms, and means not only reflect the guidance of national policies but also demonstrate the awakening of women's self-awareness and the improvement of their social status. This section, firstly, introduces the transition in women's sport. It subsequently examines the development of the fitness industry and the evolving fitness options for women under sports marketization, which resonates with the broader shifts in women's sport.

3.3.1 The transition of women's sport

Before the late 1970s, Chinese sport was focused on military and political targets rather than on social discourse. According to Wei, Hong, and Lu (2013), Chinese sport served as a valuable diplomatic resource and political instrument for the Communists, which took credit for China's reconstruction and the improvement of the external and internal social image of Communist China. At that time, sport for the masses was primarily intended to keep the Chinese people fit for the purposes of national regeneration and as a means of training them for military service (Hong and Tan, 2003). Hence, many national sports campaigns were organized by the government. The state power strongly influenced and managed mass sport, including women's mass sport, during that era. Since the late 1970s, in conjunction with the extensive transition in China, the sports infrastructures, sports participation, and sports values have changed. These changes contribute to the emergent forms, spaces, and values for Chinese women's sport.

In the new era, although Chinese elite sport, both male and female elite sport, is exploring commercial reform, female elite sport remains relatively strictly controlled by the government as a political instrument. However, female grassroots sport was reformed as a social or personal activity at an early stage of China's economic reform and served as a crucial factor in empowering women's lives.

When reviewing the history of sport in China during the collectivist era, it is clear that politics and sport have always been closely intertwined. According to Wu (1999), the *Olympic Strategy* in 1985 declared that elite sport should be given top priority, which emphasized the political aspect of sport. Hence, the participation of mass sport as a sports ideal was surpassed by a concentration on elite sport. However, in line with the transformation of the economy and social culture (especially the understanding of individual needs and consciousness), the changes in the roles of the market and the state and their influence on individuals raised emerging concerns in debating how individuals can live a more fulfilling life. New concerns have sparked a socio-political argument on how to redefine the relation among the individual, the state, and sport. The political and social functions of Chinese sport have consequently been required to undergo changes.

During the 1980s, the book *The Dream of a Strong Nation* (强国梦) by Zhao Yu raised questions about the *Olympic Strategy*, and sparked a heated debate over the dialectical relation of elite sport to mass sport. Zhao (1988) supports the argument that the pursuit of Olympic gold medals deprived a large number of Chinese people of opportunities to engage in sports for the benefit of their health. This research pioneeringly emphasized the significance of human beings in sport instead of that of sport itself. Accordingly, the function of sport has been redefined. The Document titled *The Suggestions on How to Strengthen and Improve Sport in the New Era* in 2002 stated that:

Sport serves to fulfill both material and cultural desires of people. As a widely participated activity, it can enhance public health and instill values of bravery, cooperation, competition, and justice among people. Elite sports competitions can foster patriotism, nationalism, and social cohesion. In addition, sport can act as a conduit for social interaction and relationship building and plays a vital role in international diplomacy, fostering global connections and promoting harmony across societies... (the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council, 2002).

In an interview in April 2001, Wu Shaozhu (1939–2012), the former Director General at the Ministry of Sports, highlighted that a nation's gold medal count doesn't guarantee global sports dominance. Priority should lie in enhancing public sports awareness and participation in fitness activities. Increased societal investment in mass sport development is essential. China's journey to sports superpower status hinges on balanced growth in both mass and elite sports. The primary goal of the CCP and the government in managing sport is to 'improve the overall physical fitness of the nation. Elite sport is important because it helps in the advancement of mass sport. If elite sport does not promote mass sport, it is not considered important' (Gu, 2007: 3).

In practice, in 1993, the State Sports Commission put forward the ideas and tasks of formulating a national fitness program in the *Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Sports* (the CGAS, 2019). In 1995, the National Fitness Programme (NFP) was launched by the State Council of the PRC. The aim of the NFP was 'to promote mass sport activities on an extensive scale, improve the people's physique, and spur the socialist modernization of China' (the State Council, 1995). The State Council (1995) states that

the more specific goals of the NFP were ‘by the end of the twentieth century, to increase sports participation at the grassroots level intensively and extensively, establish a national fitness management system in conjunction with the market economy preliminarily, and form an industrialized, socialized, scientific, and legally-based national fitness system’. As a long-term and nationwide policy, the NFP is continuously updated to adapt to the constantly changing sports demands and the development of the Chinese people. So far, the National Fitness Programme (2021–2025) has been issued and entered its final stage (the State Council, 2021).

With the guidance of the NFP, a series of policies and regulations supporting national fitness were promulgated, while many sports facilities, fitness instruction, tests, and events were provided by the government. By the end of the year 2000, the China General Administration of Sport (CGAS) had built ‘2,200 fitness paths’ and completed ‘1,182 fitness projects’, while local authorities had established about ‘30,000 fitness paths’ (Xiong, 2006: 149). The CGAS concluded that, by 2009, at or below the provincial level, there were about 53,000 sports clubs for national fitness, with 213,000 members. By 2010, more than 250,000 sports guidance sites and fitness activity sites had been established across the country, and more than 2,200 national physical fitness testing sites were established nationwide, with a total of nearly 2.832 million people undergoing physical fitness testing. By the end of 2010, China had invested a total of 4.1 billion RMB to build over 3,400 various ‘national fitness activity centers’; government agencies had carried out more than 230,000 ‘Sports Fitness Projects for Peasantry’ with an investment of 11.8 billion RMB, giving one third of the administrative villages in China a public sports venue. By the end of 2010, there were over 1 million public sports venues in China (the CGAS, 2012). Further, the National Fitness Programme (2021–2025) proposed the goals of building or expanding over 2,000 fitness sites or facilities including sports parks and public sports venues, equipping more than 5,000 national fitness sites in townships (community level), building skating rinks, and upgrading and digitizing over 1,000 public sports venues (Chinese government website, 2021). Overall, many sports grounds and facilities have been constructed, and these state-owned sports grounds and facilities are regulated as a public service system for national fitness,

improving Chinese people's health, and promoting comprehensive personal development for individuals (Xinhua News Agency, 2021).

These official statements and national projects reflect that the national government has been giving more attention to mass sport and the societal function of sport, separate from the political function. They highlighted that the policies for mass sport promotion are fundamentally rooted in the individual and social needs to enhance fitness and health. The central government realized that health has both public and private benefits. The promotion of sports participation may encourage the Chinese population to adopt healthier lifestyles. A healthier workforce would result in enhanced productivity with reduced absenteeism due to illness, and a more joyful atmosphere less susceptible to work stress. Governments have suggested that an individual's physique symbolizes the modernization and development of a nation (Li, 1995, as cited in Xiong, 2006).

The NFP was aimed at the entire nation, with particular focus on sports participation among children and youth, women, the disabled, soldiers, workers, peasants, minorities, and senior citizens. As a key target group within the official documents, Chinese women received much support from the national policy for sports participation. Rather than only concentrating on nurturing a small group of elite sportswomen to compete internationally for national pride, the new sports policies supported and encouraged a much larger number of general female demographic to engage in sport as a creative, meaningful, and expressive path for their individual growth. For example, the NFP recognized women as a group with specific needs, emphasizing the importance of focusing on women's fitness, health, well-being, and interests. This initiative introduced an emerging dimension to female sports practices, as well as policy formulation, since the late 1970s.

Initially, the NFP reflected the Chinese government's commitment to upholding women's equal rights in the sports domain. Aligned with broadening health concepts and enriching women's cultural experiences, the state emphasized the significance of physical activity for women's overall well-being. The government aimed to promote widespread female participation in sport, which signals societal advancement. Engaging women in sports and physical activities emerged as pivotal to realizing the 'sport for all' objective (Ma, 1999).

Furthermore, in addition to enacting laws ensuring women's involvement in mass sports, the government established a comprehensive framework to facilitate women's access to sporting opportunities. As per the NFP guidelines, the central government bolstered women's sports engagement, while local sports authorities, enterprises, commercial entities, and voluntary organizations were tasked with specific operations. It required local authorities to develop female-friendly sports infrastructures. Enterprises, sports associations, and communities were encouraged to hold fitness programs and sporting events for women. It also required sports agencies and institutions to provide some fitness assessments, instruction, and supervision of women's sports involvement (the State Council, 1995). The CGAS also stated that for provisions catering to women, the guiding principles should include accessibility via public transport, implementation of robust safety measures, creation of pleasant social spaces, proximity to residential areas, and more (Chinese Women's Movement, 2000).

Third, the NFP promoted the implementation of fitness programs for women. Align with the NFP objectives, in 2000, the CGAS and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) initiated a campaign with a slogan of 'A hundred million women participating in fitness activities' nationwide (GuangMing Daily, 2000). The program strove to instill a scientific, civilized, and healthy lifestyle among women by means of sports participation. It advocated diverse activities tailored for women, including family sports events and recreational fitness exercises. Additionally, it mandated the construction of women's sports centers by local governments and encouraged women's leadership in grassroots sports for sustained and comprehensive development of women's own interests. It also leveraged female fitness role models and mass media to increase female participation in sport. In 2023, with the guidelines of the NFP, the CGAS, the ACWF, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (2023) jointly carried out the *Ten Thousand Village Women's Social Sports Instructors Training Program*, which supported rural revitalization and promoted the high-quality development of women's causes in the new age. Overall, these initiatives underscored the societal significance of female physical activities and introduced innovative strategies for promoting women's sport.

Overall, the main aim of women's mass sport is to improve their individual physical and

mental well-being and to make efforts to guarantee women's equal rights and opportunities to engage in physical activities. Policies and programmes around women's sport showed that the key aim and content of women's mass sport shifted from political and national development targets to women's individual needs, health and well-being, as well as social functions. Moreover, although the government provided many guidelines for women's sport, the specific official measures for the development of women's mass sport demonstrate that women are mainly encouraged to engage in sport based on voluntary principles rather than being required to participate. Hence, sport as a social activity and an individual affair has been given more space to develop. In this context, in addition to government agencies, private or commercial organizations also become important forces contributing to the progress of women's sport. As the fitness market developed, commercial fitness activities, services, and products have become key avenues supporting women's individual fitness engagement.

3.3.2 The rise of a market-oriented sports industry and an increase in fitness options for women

Through economic reforms, the Chinese state sports policy strongly encouraged the market-oriented transition of China's sports system, thereby enhancing the quality of life for its citizens (Gu, 2007). The *Suggestions on How to Strengthen and Improve Sport in the New Era* in 2002 stated that:

‘Sport is a symbol of the economic and social development of a country; sport is a new economic force. The rise of the sports industry has become more important in the market economy in China ... Overall, the market economy has been regarded as an important force assisting in the development of sport, especially mass sport, and meanwhile sports commercialization must play an important role in the development of the Chinese economy’ (the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council, 2002).

Wu (1999) emphasizes that the sports sector in China has undergone a substantial transition toward industrialization, privatization, commercialization, and decentralization. This sports transformation was promoted in the context of the policy-

driven transformations of China to a socialist market economy. In practice of this economic system, government intervention in economic development has been substantially reduced, and a variety of forms of public ownership, in conjunction with significant private and foreign-invested companies, collectively play a leading role (Ding, 2009).

In these circumstances, many national projects and plans for sport and fitness were supported both by government finance and private capital. Indeed, because of limits on funding, the government admitted that government finance could not meet all the capital requirements needed for the full implementation of national sports and fitness projects (Yang, 2004). Therefore, the sports lottery was set up in 1994 to help solve this problem.¹¹ Much of the lottery's revenue was utilized for public projects, covering fitness programmes, sporting and recreational events, and maintaining sports facilities. 'A report on the distribution of lottery funding conducted by the Sports Ministry in 2004 noted that 1,750 million RMB was channelled to mass sport and 1,190 million RMB went to elite sport' (Hong and Lu, 2012: 186). China News Service (2023) reports that in 2022, China's sports lottery had a turnover of 276.522 billion RMB throughout the whole year, raising 67.747 billion RMB of public funds for the country. To date, China's sports lottery has accumulated over 730 billion RMB for public funds.

Regarding sports funding, authorities also encouraged public organizations, government-funded institutions, enterprises, and individuals to provide financial support to fitness and sports projects. Authorities also actively developed the sports industry and explored the multiple social functions of the sports market. In 2009, China became 'the world's biggest sporting goods manufacturer' and 'one of the world's largest sporting goods markets' (Hong and Lu, 2012: 185). Accordingly, new economic organizations, especially the private sector, proliferated across the sport sector. This industrial development and institutional structure change enlivened women's sports life at the grassroots level, greatly satisfying women's demand for sports and fitness services.

¹¹ The Chinese sports lottery is a written certificate issued to raise funds for the development of sports. It is printed with numbers, graphics, or text, and people can voluntarily purchase it to have the chance to win a prize based on specific rules.

The Chinese government regards sport-centred commerce and consumption as crucial driving forces for the development of sport and national fitness. Policies related to sports consumption have been successively introduced, emphasizing the importance of sports consumption. In 2014, the State Council (2014) issued the document *Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption*. This document not only elevated national fitness to a national strategy but also clearly stated that by 2025, the total value of the sports industry should exceed 5 trillion RMB, becoming a crucial force in facilitating sustainable social and economic development. Driven by the state policy plan, the sports industry as an investment sector received much attention, resulting in various business forms and models showing positive growth.

The fitness industry, which is highly linked to my research topic, is one of the largest industries within the sports industry. It involves many areas, including fitness equipment, coach training, course research and development, gyms and fitness clubs, fitness programmes, services for various fitness sectors (such as information resources), fitness supplies (such as protein powder), and more (Huajing Industrial Research Institute, 2023).

According to Rambures (2015), from the perspective of economic planning, China's market economy consists of three layers: compulsory planning, contractual planning, and indicative planning. At the highest level, compulsory planning sets out detailed targets, including the availability of raw materials, the required human resources, and the financial requirements. At the second level, contractual planning establishes the goals, the overall ways, and methods for target attainment, and then engages in negotiations with companies and relevant offices to determine the specific implementation and distribution pathways. The bottom layer of this planning system is indicative model where the government establishes industrial goals and then utilizes incentive measures (including bank lending, tax exemptions, government subsidies, and financial markets) to encourage enterprises in the targeted industry to achieve these goals (Rambures, 2015). In China's fitness industry, there is little compulsory or contractual state economic planning, so this is an industry with minor government intervention. However, there is

some indicative economic planning to support the development of the fitness market.

With the policy support of the *Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption* in 2014, China's sports industry underwent remarkable development. However, in the fitness and leisure field, the most influential element of the sports industry in public life, there were still a number of shortcomings, such as the overall small scale, an imbalanced industrial structure, insufficient effective supply, insufficient stimulation of public consumption, and lagging infrastructure construction (the National Development and Reform Commission, 2016). Therefore, in order to address these issues in a targeted manner, the General Office of the State Council (2016) issued the *Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Fitness and Leisure Industry* in 2016.

This document highlighted that 'the fitness and leisure industry is a major component of the sports industry'.¹² Further, the document stated that accelerating 'the development of the fitness and leisure industry is an essential requirement for enhancing people's physical fitness' and achieving 'a deep integration of national fitness and health'. It is of great significance for unleashing consumer potential, ensuring and improving people's livelihoods, and cultivating new economic boosters. According to this document, the decisive role of the market in resource allocation should be fully recognized and utilized, and the various market players should be guided to innovate concepts and models in organizational management, construction and operation, research and development, and production, in order to enhance service quality and better meet the demands of consumer development. It outlined that the government should transform its own functions, vigorously implement streamlining of administrations and delegation of powers, reasonably balance decentralization and management, and optimize service reforms in order to remove any unreasonable investment threshold for social capital in the fitness and leisure industry. Approval items related to fitness and leisure activities should be

¹² In various studies and reports in China, the fitness related industry is referred to as the fitness industry, the fitness and leisure industry, or the sports and fitness industry. The specific scopes of the fitness industry, fitness and leisure industry, or sports and fitness industry may vary in different reports, but the core definitions of them are same: a series of economic activities that provide related products and services to the public through sports as the medium, with public sports participation and experience as the central focus. Gym consumption is inevitably an important part of all of them.

significantly reduced, but offices concerned should strengthen industrial supervision and optimize platforms about government affairs; and that government should strengthen overall planning, policy support, and official guidelines, improve the consumer environment, and cultivate a correct concept of consumption to empower various groups within society with the motivations and opportunities to participate in fitness and leisure activities. In line with these indicative goals, this document also set out relatively specific inducements and measures, such as the development of the share and bond markets for fitness enterprises and preferential policies of the taxes and energy prices for sports venues, to provide clear support for the industrial development.

These policies promoted the market-oriented, commercial operation of fitness venues, promoted the multi-level need satisfaction in the fitness consumption, and enhanced the attraction of the fitness industry to investors and developers. Overall, the policy principles outline for the development of the fitness industry supported market-oriented transformation and minor government intervention. In this industry, private ownership is widely practiced, and profits are commonly retained by private owners. However, given the current political and economic framework in China, it is important to recognize that the Chinese government has the capacity to relatively swiftly enforce compulsory economic planning in the sports and fitness markets. In other words, the development of the fitness industry has been significantly guided and influenced by government policies.

As the fitness market developed, an increasing number of women chose to consume fitness goods to promote their fitness development in China. This has led to a design boom in women's exclusive fitness products and the realization of a considerable scale in women's fitness consumption (Gao and Xia, 2020). A research institution analyzed that China's fitness industry was expected to reach a value of 6.2 billion US dollars in 2024, with women as key consumers undoubtedly forming a significant segment of this market (GMA, 2024; Statista, 2023). To be specific, according to the survey data of Alibaba Group during the 'Double Eleven Shopping Festival' in 2018, women consumers of sports and fitness products accounted for 43%, with a rise of 10% from 2017 (Gao and Xia, 2020). In addition, an increasing number of women spend on fitness in yoga studios, gyms, and other fitness sites for more professional and scientific fitness

and exercise. According to *the Report on Women's Fitness* released by a famous fitness brand (LEFIT) in China, in 2022, the number of female members in this brand's gyms reached 54%, which surpassed that of men; meanwhile, the average active frequency of female users of online application (of this brand) was nearly a quarter higher than that of male users (LEFIT, 2022). This brand reported that while the number of male users was steadily increasing, the growth of female members was more notable.

In the fitness market, women have been provided a wide range of commercial goods and services that can meet their personal fitness needs, particularly goods specifically tailored for women. They are able to make autonomous choices and arrangements in these options. The freedom and diversity inherent in the market, to some extent, facilitate the shift of women's sport toward the goal of individual well-being and self-organizational modalities.

3.4 Conclusion

In traditional Chinese society, women often encountered societal restrictions that influenced their participation across various fields, including sport. Confucian culture, which emphasized a patriarchal family structure, is frequently cited as contributing to women's subordinate roles. In the realm of sport, the limitations on women's participation stemmed not only from coercion but also from societal expectations and the traditional roles ascribed to them. Such restrictions were not unique to China; indeed, during similar historical periods, Western societies often imposed severe constraints on women, characterized by pervasive cultural and legal norms that sharply defined gender roles and significantly curtailed women's freedoms.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Western thought, culture, and religion began to make their way into China through various interactions and conflicts. During this transformative period, reformers leveraged physical education as a platform to advocate for women's rights and liberation, facilitating greater participation for women in sports and physical activities. This shift marked a significant departure from past restrictions and contributed to the gradual transformation of entrenched gender roles within Chinese society. It's crucial, however, to approach the influence of Western concepts such as

freedom, equality, and individualism with a critical perspective. The adaptation of these concepts provided Chinese society with an opportunity to reassess traditional and collectivistic values and roles critically, which not only had an impact in the nineteenth century but also has had a significant and multifaceted impact on women's fitness and consumption since the adoption of a market economy in Chinese society after the late 1970s.

During the twentieth century, following extensive societal revolution and intense warfare, the PRC was established in 1949. In alignment with the new leadership CCP's goal of building an equitable society, there was a vigorous push to eradicate gender inequality. This led to a notable increase in women's involvement in sports activities, reflecting a societal shift towards more equitable gender participation.

During this time, the movement of women's emancipation gained significant momentum. The state endeavored to assume responsibility for socializing domestic tasks, drawing on Marxist theories of women's liberation. This effort aimed to relieve women from the exclusive burden of housework, thereby providing them with greater opportunities for physical exercise and participation in sport. However, critiques from Song have pointed out that despite these efforts, the practice of socialist women's liberation did not adequately challenge the deeply ingrained gender division of labor within the family. While there were significant strides in promoting women's rights and gender equality, the transformation of familial roles required deeper societal changes that were not fully realized during this period (Song, 2016). This nuanced approach acknowledges both the progress made and the challenges that remain. As a result, after the implementation of market-oriented reforms, household chores have been shifted towards individual responsibility, especially women's responsibility. Because the unequal gender division of labor within the family has persisted, women were seen as 'inferior' labor forces that have a negative impact on the efficiency of enterprises. This gender division of labor, consequently, has a detrimental effect on women's fitness schedules.

Confucian tradition had long been considered as promoting certain values and behaviors that seemed incompatible with the goals of socialist development. In response, there

emerged a new portrayal of women that aimed to challenge traditional family roles and historical images of females that highlighted slimness and femininity. This new portrayal of women depicted them as strong, muscular, and androgynous, symbolizing the liberation from traditional constraints and diminishing gender differences. The female sport played a key role in transmuting Chinese women's image from bodily weakness to an 'iron body' and 'masculine image'. In addition, engaging in sport was seen as improving female health to serve national production and defence. Therefore, women's sports involvement was greatly promoted after 1949. For the industrialization and the revival of nationhood, a large amount of labor with healthy bodies was crucial to achieving these aims. Women were recognized as influential laborers in the reconstruction of the PRC. As such, they were encouraged to take part in physical activities to develop healthy and strong bodies. Additionally, inspiring a collective spirit of work was seen as essential for national unity and construction. Therefore, it was expected that every woman would engage in sports activities and physical education.

In terms of elite sport, Chinese female athletes achieved significant honors for the nation and showcased the accomplishments of socialism in the sports world. They were celebrated as heroines, symbolizing women's emancipation and reinforcing the androgynous image of women.

While the official ideology of the Maoist era aimed to eliminate traditional gender roles and promote equality, it enabled women to challenge the entrenched patriarchal norms by participating in activities and occupations historically reserved for men. This period saw an increased recognition of women who took on physically demanding roles, reflecting a significant shift towards gender parity in employment and public life. This policy, however, has also been met with critique. Since the late 1970s, the institutionalized women's liberation guided by the CCP and the state after the founding of the PRC in 1949, and Marxist theory on women have been critically considered by some scholars. For example, Li Xiaojiang (1995), a leading Chinese feminist, indicates that although women's status was improved, the political pathway of national liberation limited the capacity of the women's campaign to fully address women's individual, cultural, and psychological fulfillment. From the Marxist perspective on women,

Chinese women's liberation can be achieved through the class struggle of the proletariat at the advent of communism. This has led to the condition that possible women's problems would be seen as remnants of the traditional societal norms and practices of dynastic China. Li (1989) asserts that the Marxist theories around female issues would limit a profound understanding of the oppression experienced by women, and demonstrated that it was difficult to separate women from class oppression, incorporate sexuality in women's studies, and include feminist ideologies and thoughts for studies on women and their liberation under the Marxist framework. However, without emphasizing these gender issues, women's self-awareness and subjectivity could not be effectively raised. In the historical context of women's liberation in China, the concept of women's subjectivity is closely tied to the recognition of individual needs and autonomy in their personal lives.

Overall, critics argued that in its pursuit to equalize gender roles, the policy did not fully consider the physiological and psychological differences between men and women. It sometimes placed undue pressure on women to conform to an androgynous ideal. This approach, while progressive in intent, inadvertently overlooked the diversity of women's experiences and capacities. The 'one gender' structure, aimed at eliminating gender differences, essentially pursued an equality covertly measured by male standards. The androgynous female image fundamentally represented a revolutionary rejection of traditional femininity, establishing to some extent a 'masculinized' paradigm. Within this ideological framework, the expression of femininity was regarded as a regressive act incompatible with the revolutionary ethos. During the Maoist era, Chinese women achieved equality in most aspects of basic social rights. However, the unique lifestyle and individual needs associated with female identity were not adequately considered.

Women's sport in the Maoist era was structured around national political goals and socialist ideals, with participation often motivated by state requirements rather than individual interests. This approach mirrored the broader strategy applied to sport in general, affecting both men and women, where athletes frequently served as representatives of national strength and socialist values, rather than pursuing personal athletic passions. The environment of intense industrialization, alongside ideologies

promoting gender equality and women's status elevation, created external conditions that supported the progress of women's sport. However, Xiong (2006) notes that women's sport in the collectivist era was frequently tasked with political roles, which could detach participants from experiencing the inherent joy and satisfaction of sports activities. While sports participation is an effective way to physically, psychologically, and culturally liberate women, the specific socio-political conditions of that time did not fully support such an emancipation. Instead, many women were compelled to participate in sport to fulfill governmental aims, rather than being driven by a genuine personal awakening or opportunities for self-expression. The sports system of the era, although progressive in promoting physical activity among women, was still influenced by patriarchal norms, where the state and the party often dictated the terms of participation (Xiong, 2006). The primary concern of the state was not merely the involvement of women in sport but what their participation could contribute to the state's progress. In conclusion, although women's sport during this period was instrumental in advancing state goals and improving gender visibility in public arenas, these achievements did not necessarily translate into genuine liberation from traditional patriarchal constraints for the individual women. These women were also somewhat alienated from their true potential for personal empowerment. The instrumentalization of women's sport underlined the complex interplay between advancing state objectives and nurturing individual freedoms, a balance that was challenging to achieve in the political and social climate of the time.

To summarize, the period from 1949 to 1978 marked significant developments in women's sports engagement in China. During this time, efforts were made at the grassroots level to promote and expand the involvement of women in sport. Concurrently, the Chinese elite sport and training systems were developed, leading to notable advancements in women's elite sport and a series of commendable achievements. Despite these advancements, the system did present challenges. While women were inspired to participate in sports activities, the extent to which they could pursue personal aspirations, desires, and rights within these activities was sometimes limited. This was reflective of the broader societal context and the state-driven nature of sports programs

during this period, which prioritized national prestige and collective goals over individual autonomy. Consequently, women's sports experiences were shaped within a structured framework that did not fully address or support their independence in the realm of physical activities. This period was significant for its contributions to women's sport, but also highlighted areas for further improvement in supporting women as fully empowered participants in the sporting world.

Since the late 1970s, China has embarked on a great transformation, transitioning from a socialist planned economy to a market-oriented system over the past four decades. During this period, China's sports system also underwent market-oriented reforms. These reforms were designed to encourage the infusion of private capital into the development of national fitness programs, aligning with broader national objectives. In this context, the fitness industry, one of the most important industries within the sports industry, developed accordingly. The marketization and subsequent economic boom in the fitness industry have largely been driven and guided by government policies. While commercial organizations are permitted to operate freely within the fitness industry, their activities are still underpinned by strategic state directives. The government's approach involves minor direct intervention but includes the use of incentive measures that enhance the industry's commercial viability. This method allows the state to retain a guiding hand in macro-level development and planning, ensuring that the growth of the fitness industry aligns with national interests and public well-being. Thus, while China's market reforms have introduced elements of market competition and private enterprise into the economy, the state continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the industry's landscape. This nuanced approach underscores that China is not purely a market economy but one where strategic state intervention and guidance coexist with market mechanisms.

In this new era, the power of the state also decreased in social activities and people's individual lives. In the sports field, sports organizational forms for individuals, including for women, have moved from collective structures to self-organized, individual practices. Furthermore, the key aim of mass sport, including mass sport for women, has shifted from political and national development to women's individual needs, health, and well-

being, as well as to social functions. Hence, government agencies carried out a number of fitness programmes to satisfy the individual requirements of Chinese people to improve national health and fitness, which contributed to the development of a great number of fitness centers, facilities, and activities for Chinese women. Meanwhile, social capital and commercial organizations were also encouraged to supply the goods and services for promoting women's sports participation. As the fitness market developed, commercial fitness services have become key avenues supporting women's individual fitness engagement. Among various sports activities, women are mainly encouraged to engage in sport based on voluntary principles rather than being required to participate. These changes reflect the potential of the sports system in the new era for improvement in supporting women as fully empowered participants in the sporting world.

The evolution of women's involvement in sport within China illustrates the intricate influence of dynamics between traditional values, foreign influences, and indigenous reforms on women's sport. This analysis helps to appreciate the complexities of women's sport and gender roles in historical China, highlighting that the challenges faced by women's sport were part of a wider socio-economic structure. This historical context also underscores the shared challenges in the struggle for women's sports participation as well as women's well-being, while also highlighting the distinct paths taken by different society frameworks. By reviewing the sports experiences of Chinese women within different historical periods, a more nuanced understanding of women's progress and the ongoing challenges emerges, emphasizing that the journey towards women's progress is both complex and context-dependent.

Chapter 4 Research Findings

Consumer-related Behaviors and Consumer-related Environments for Fitness Women

4.1 Consumer-related behaviors

Sports participation is regarded as an important way to help women's self-fulfilment, construction of an independent consciousness, and development of a self-identity (Xiong, 2006). In the active, mobile, vigorous, and hardy process of sports exercises, women can feel a sense of reasonable hope of success amidst rich trials and challenges (McCrone, 2013). Thus, with the decline of the state power in people's individual lives, an increasing number of Chinese women have begun to proactively shape their selves and their own bodies through fitness, for self-realization, self-progress, and self-independence. With the support of the national fitness policy, women in China can access free fitness facilities, such as fitness paths in parks. Meanwhile, in line with the development of the fitness market, there are also many women spending money on fitness. According to the *Survey Report on the Current Situation of Women in China's Workplace in 2022*, many women in the workplace allocate part of their income to fitness consumption, and women are more willing to spend on fitness activities than men (Zhaopin, 2022). According to the *2021 Research Report on the Market Status and Consumption Trends of China's Gym Industry*, 61.8% of gym consumers were women; meanwhile, women, on average, allocated a greater duration per workout session than men (iiMedia Research, 2021). Nowadays, women undoubtedly are the key consumers of the fitness market (Gao and Xia, 2020; LEFIT, 2022).

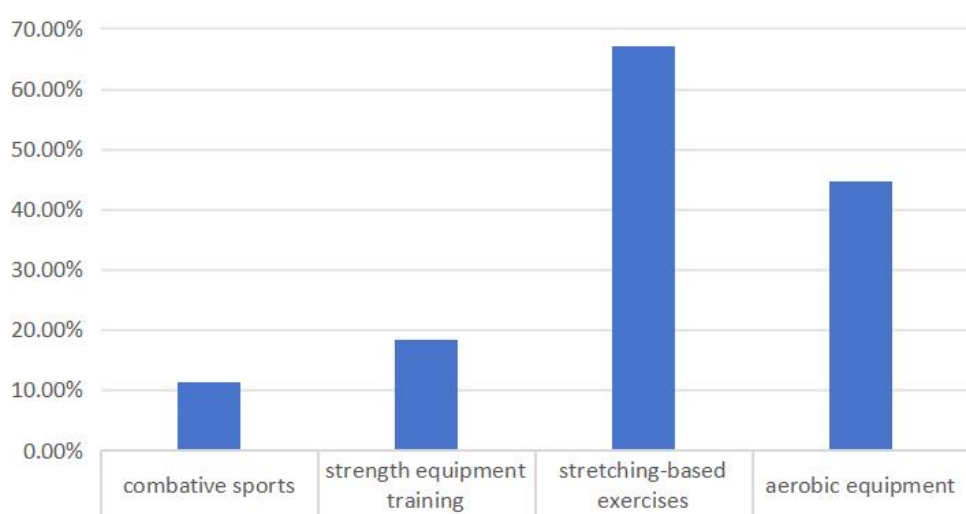
This chapter firstly concentrates on the findings of the factors influencing consumer-related behaviors of fitness women within the context of China's reform and opening-up era. It introduces the fitness modalities adopted by these female fitness consumers and examines how they make decisions regarding the consumption-related resource (including money and time) allocation for fitness-related activities. It also delineates the

goals or motivations underlying their engagement in fitness and fitness-associated consumption, thereby revealing the rationale behind their willingness to allocate resources to fitness pursuits.

4.1.1 Fitness forms of female fitness consumers

In this new era, women’s sport in China has significantly shifted. The sports goals have moved from serving national development to enhancing individual well-being. Accordingly, women’s sports organizations changed from collective structures to self-organized, individual practices. Women started to freely engage in a variety of fitness activities. According to the interview and questionnaire, women reported participating in various activities including aerobics, dance, yoga, aerobic equipment workouts, strength equipment training, boxing, Baduanjin, cycling, hiking, running, walking, tennis, badminton, swimming, and jump rope.¹³ The questionnaire examined participation levels in key fitness activities among female fitness consumers. It found the following: 11.3% of respondents participated in combative sports such as boxing; 18.3% of them took part in strength equipment training such as weightlifting; 67.1% engaged in stretching-based exercises like yoga; and 44.6% practiced aerobic equipment such as stationary bikes (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Participation levels of fitness activities



¹³ Baduanjin is a form of traditional Chinese exercise that focuses on breathing and gentle movements (China Daily, 2024).

Overall, yoga, calisthenics, and some other aerobic exercises are highly popular activities among these women. At the same time, some women are also exploring seemingly more intensive fitness options, such as strength training and boxing. In addition, Interviewee number 12 expressed interest in basketball. However, other interviewees reported a lack of enthusiasm for such sports. One interviewee even perceived sports like basketball and football as inappropriate for female participation:

Girls usually don't participate in activities such as basketball or football... I rarely see girls playing basketball or football... I think it is because it's not suitable. About playing these sports, boys must be more proactive. They have better physical strength. Girls may become tired after playing for a while... They are not as energetic as boys... For Chinese girls, I feel that they are relatively petite and weak. (No. 13)

Interviewee number 9 indicated a similar view that ball games, such as football and basketball, are all male activities so she would not take part; these sports are too confrontational and too intense, and may easily cause injuries. The interviewee highlighted an aversion to aggression. In sports requiring aggression, women frequently encounter psychological barriers (Guokr, 2024). Furthermore, these interviewees' statements show that despite women's limited engagement in high-intensity, competitive sports such as basketball and football, many women assessed themselves as being ill-suited to these activities. Liu (2020) explains that women's lower sense of self-efficacy often leads them to preemptively conclude, 'I am not capable', even before engaging in sport. This implies that perceptions of sport appropriateness do not come only from personal experience or practice. They are also shaped by broader external forces that prefigure who is deemed 'fit' to participate. As the political support from the government withdraws from the organization of mass women's participation, sociocultural ideologies are profoundly shaping women's fitness choices.

Commercial sectors and mass media have placed significant emphasis on female-appropriate fitness, nutrition, and appearance. This information also consistently warns women that some sports would pose adverse effects on women's health or create a shape that deviates from femininity. According to Xiong (2006: 188), 'scientists and nutritionists have sent a message that a reserve of energy is essential for women's bodies',

urging ‘women to take part in gentle exercise’. Wu (2012) indicates that sports news related to women in the People’s Daily, the most authoritative and widely circulated comprehensive daily newspaper in China, mainly focused on sports activities that emphasize elegance, balance, and beauty that accord with traditional female images, such as swimming, badminton, tennis, figure skating, ice dance, gymnastics, etc., while there were few reports on competitive sports involving strength or physical contact. These high-intensity or competitive activities such as basketball, football, as well as boxing are traditionally coded as ‘masculine’. In addition, some press coverage bonded women and basketball through the identity of ‘basketball babies’ instead of through the identity of players (Wu, 2012).¹⁴ In the context of commercialization, these female ‘basketball cheerleaders’ are shaped into accessory spectacles of sporting events. This positioning reduces women’s value to mere symbols for visual consumption, undermines their capabilities and qualifications in competitive sports, obscures their authentic and diverse roles in sports, and reinforces gender-based division of labor biases in the sports domain. Such a phenomenon exemplifies the dynamic construction of gender stereotypes through the interplay of commercial capital, traditional gender norms, and mass media.

The media coverage and social narratives about sports engagement present significant gendered patterns, differences, and even stereotypes. Such socio-cultural constructs engender cognitive rigidity and internalized barriers among women. Stereotypes not only delimit the range of sports in which women are encouraged to participate but also dampen their interest and enthusiasm for sports activities perceived as discordant with femininity. Through a questionnaire survey of undergraduate students from different majors in universities, Zhou et al. (2005) find that in China, boys prefer competitive and exciting sports, while girls prefer exercises such as dance or calisthenics. Such stereotypical perceptions further exacerbate the scarcity of female role models and sense of belonging, as well as the lack of structural support within sports environments. Even when some women express genuine interest in some non-conventional female sports, they often encounter practical barriers, such as a lack of available partners or inadequate access to facilities. These barriers may prompt them to abandon these sports pursuits.

¹⁴ Basketball babies refer to cheerleaders who perform to boost excitement in basketball matches, with almost all members being beautiful and energetic women (Wu, 2012).

The influence of gender stereotypes on shaping perceptions of sport suitability restricts the individual sports development of women. Further, these individual-level constraints cumulatively contribute to broader imbalances in the evolution of women's sport, reinforcing gender disparities in both societal sports discourses and institutional support. Meanwhile, although men seemingly enjoy broader sports participation space and greater institutional support than women, the binary division in gender stereotypes has structurally excluded a large number of men from 'feminine' sports such as synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics, and also restrained the richness of their emotional expression. In conclusion, this binary gender order functions as a two-way constraint that operates on all individuals. Regardless of gender, when an individual's physical practice, sports choice, or emotional expression deviates from the presupposed gendered template, they will face evaluative pressure from both external society and internal self-censorship. Therefore, the harm of gender stereotypes lies not only in the partial restriction of a certain gender, but also in that it systematically narrows the possible space for all individuals to explore physical potential, experience diverse emotions, and expand self-identity through sports practice.

It is noteworthy that with the rise of new communication technologies represented by social media, women have obtained a structural opportunity to bottom-up challenge traditional gender stereotypes in the sports field. Unlike the one-way, centralized information dissemination model of traditional media, the decentralized expression mechanism and participatory democratic characteristics of social media have effectively lowered the threshold for discourse access (Meng, 2016). This has transformed women from objects that are presented and evaluated into participating subjects capable of self-presentation. In this way, they could break through the constraints of existing media agenda-setting and independently express their authentic sports preferences and bodily practices, such as the 'unfeminine' interest in boxing and strength training displayed by this study. These expressions have allowed the long-obscured female sports experiences in the traditional sports discourse system to emerge, endowing them with transformative action potential. Furthermore, the real-time interaction and two-way feedback capabilities of social platforms have constructed a rapidly responsive field for meaning

production. Specifically, market and media actors can quickly capture these emerging female sports demands and respond to and reinforce them through algorithmic recommendation, ‘Key Opinion Leader’ content matrix, live-streaming teaching and other approaches. Driven by this dynamic mechanism and the synergy of consumption practices, the unitary female sports portrait solidified by traditional media is being significantly rewritten, pushing its evolution toward a direction characterized by greater diversity, individuality, and aesthetic emancipation. In terms of policy, the CGAS, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the Chinese Football Association (2022) jointly issued the *Reform and Development Plan for Chinese Women’s Football (2022–2035)*. This policy aims to improve the competitive level of Chinese women’s football and promote its popularization among the general public, which is expected to increase societal and female interest in and acceptance of women’s football and other so-called ‘unfeminine’ sports for women.

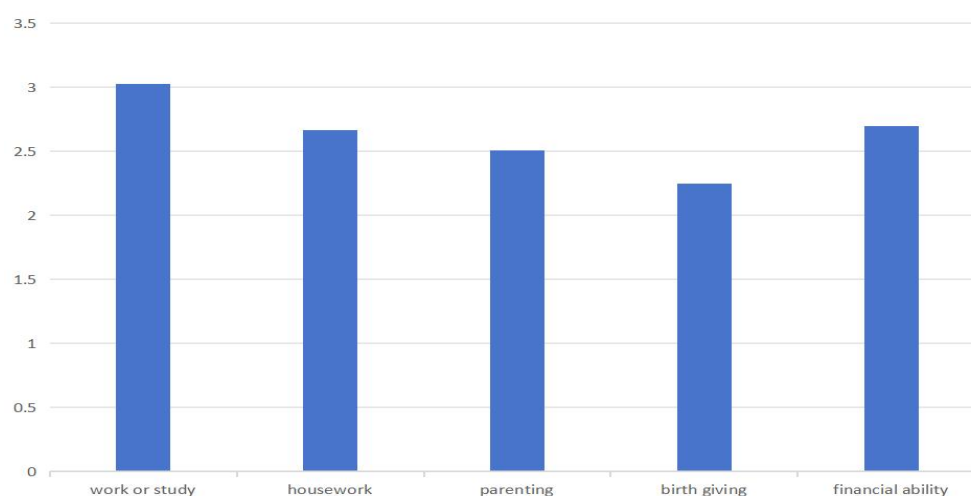
From this gendered perspective, the interest in boxing and strength training and indifference to football and basketball mirror that the physical practices of contemporary female fitness consumers exhibit a characteristic of interplay between tradition and transformation. This trend of interest shows the tension between women’s agency and the enduring forces of traditional sports culture and gender norms in women’s fitness practice. In terms of types of participation, female fitness consumers engage in a wide variety of fitness activities, but most of them are characterized by high participation flexibility or can be undertaken on an individual basis. These solo-oriented physical activities generally do not require coordination with multiple participants or dependence on specific schedules. As such, the analysis of female fitness consumers’ engagement in these activities should primarily focus on individual-related factors, particularly personal motivations and the distribution of personal time and financial resources.

4.1.2 Resource distribution of female fitness consumers

The interview and questionnaire show that when making plans related to fitness and consumption, particularly about resource distribution, women are mainly influenced by the factors of income and the balance of their family, work, and personal lives. In addition to structural elements, subjective or personal factors of lack of self-discipline or

illness also play a role. Furthermore, the questionnaire tested the influence ranking of factors that hinder fitness-related consumption among women through 5-point Likert scale method.¹⁵ The collected data shows: The average perceived impact of work or study is rated at 3.03; the average perceived impact of housework is rated at 2.67; the perceived impact of parenting is reflected by an average value of 2.51; the perceived impact of birth giving is reflected by an average value of 2.25; this number of personal financial ability is rated at 2.7 (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Impact ratings of factors that hinder women's fitness consumption



This data indicates a significant influence of work-related factors and a moderate but noteworthy influence of family-related factors. It is believed that the oppression of women's engagement in sport involves a dual problem influenced by both their domestic and economic constraints (Xiong, 2011). Hence, the resource management involved in women's fitness consumption must be understood in the context of their individual economic and domestic situations. Furthermore, this relatively moderate data about constraints on fitness (from 3.03 to 2.25) reflects that these urban women generally enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy and flexibility in organizing and planning their fitness routines and relevant consumption. However, it may also imply that fitness is often regarded as a discretionary rather than essential activity in the broader context of their everyday lives.

¹⁵ 5-point scale: 1 no impact, 2 slight impacts, 3 some impacts, 4 relatively remarkable impacts, 5 great impacts. The highest mark is 5, and higher marks represent more significant impacts.

Distribution of the budget

During this era of reform and opening-up, as the government loosened its grip on the flow of goods, it granted more autonomy to everyday social and economic activities, including individual consumption activities (Davis, 2000). In 1993, China abolished the system of grain and oil stamps nationwide, changing the supply system for food from the principle of planned supply to the principle of free trade and consumption (Hunan Daily, 2018). Thereafter, women began to be less subject to purchase quota restrictions and could relatively freely arrange their purchases according to their individual needs and interests. While nowadays Chinese people have the freedom to make purchases, the purchasing power of women from various income groups differs and also fluctuates at different periods.

The questionnaire presents that 84% of the participants had an income. Most respondents' fitness budgets come from their personal income,¹⁶ while a smaller portion relies on family support. These women are typically full-time homemakers or students. This outcome aligns with the high labor force participation rate among Chinese women, which will be further explained in the following paragraphs. For female individuals, the amount of their income generally determines the upper limit of their consumption and greatly affects their allocation of budgets among different lifestyle items or products (including fitness products).

With the development of the Chinese economy, individual incomes of Chinese people have rapidly increased. According to data from the World Bank (see Figure 4.3), Chinese people's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita increased from 385 RMB to 973 RMB between 1978 and 1985; and then doubled between 1985 and 1990 (1,916 RMB). In the twenty-first century, GNI per capita has shown miraculous growth from 8,592 RMB in 2000 to 8,0632 RMB in 2020 (see Figure 4.3). For urban households, per capita annual disposable income increased by about 15 times between 1978 (343 RMB) and 1998 (5,425 RMB). For rural households, per capita net income grew greatly from 179 RMB in 1978 to 2,162 RMB in 1998 (the NBS, 1999).

¹⁶ In China, the personal non-essential consumption of economically independent women is generally related to their income.

Figure 4.3 GNI per capita in China between 1978 and 2020 (RMB)

Year	1978	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
GNI per capita	385	496	973	1,916	5,813	8,592	16,707	35,939	53,516	80,632

Source: The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/china?view=chart>

During this economic development, women's participation was an important element in the labor force. The data from the World Bank showed that the labor force participation rate of women, which refers to the ratio of the economically active population to the working age population (female population aged 15–64), was approximately 70%–80% between 1990 and 2021 in China. That is to say, women's income has also achieved significant growth in the booming economy. This provides women with more budgets and opportunities for fitness-related consumption.

However, in the questionnaire, 77% of respondents feel varying degrees of hindrance of their personal financial level to their fitness consumption. The limitations of income drive consumers to compare prices. During this research, a yoga studio (whose majority of consumers are women) showed me its fitness course promotion strategies. One of the most important marketing terms was to resolve consumers' concerns about expensive prices. Further, women with higher incomes have more consumption choices in fitness services, but the income always plays a significant role in spending restriction.

One interviewee, with an average annual salary of 36,000 RMB at present, said that:

Previously, I went to practice yoga with one of my best friends in a yoga studio. I paid the course fee for a year in this studio ... However, now, I usually go home after work and do exercise with the app called Keep ... without spending money.¹⁷ Due to economic reasons, I currently do not have a budget for fitness. (No. 4)

Another interviewee, with an average annual salary of about 150,000 RMB, said that:

¹⁷ Keep is a popular fitness app in China, a sports technology platform dedicated to providing one-stop sports solutions, including fitness teaching, making fitness friends, fitness diet guidance, and equipment purchase.

Um, I am currently working out at a yoga studio ... The service in this yoga studio is indeed a bit expensive ... with a membership price of over 8,000 RMB for a year. In other yoga studios, you can probably spend one or two thousand RMB to apply for a membership card. Thus, I had some hesitation at the time ... Then, I inspected other yoga studios and finally found this one to be the most satisfying ... I felt that the environment of other yoga studios was much worse than that of this studio ... Hence, I decided to practice at this yoga studio (No. 11)

These statements reflect significant income disparities in China's labor market as well as pronounced product differentiation in China's fitness market. The influence of product differentiation in the fitness market on women's experiences of fitness will be explored in Chapter 5.

After 1978, the removal of collective allocation gave rise to gender-discriminating practices in recruitment (Sung, 2023). Kuhn and Shen (2013) draw on more than a million job advertisements posted in 2008–2010 and found that it was common for job advertisements to specify preferred gender, even though that was prohibited by law. Research on job postings for civil service positions in 2020 revealed that, 'of the 5,776 non-tax bureau positions' in official organizations, '35% of open jobs' stated either 'men only' or 'more suitable for men' (Zou, 2020). As a result of this discrimination, there is a significant income gap between men and women. A report claimed that, in 2022, the average annual salary of Chinese women was only 77% that of men (Kanzhun Limited, 2022). Women as a group have less independent disposable income than men, so their opportunities for consumption should be relatively fewer.

The deeper-rooted cause of gender discrimination in the labor market lies in the subtle changes in women's social roles after the reform. Through the lens of socialism in Marxist theory, women's liberation requires women to break free from the confines of the household and participate in productive labor in public. Therefore, in the collectivist era of China, when the state encouraged women to join the workforce, household chores became the obligation of the state. According to Song (2016: 64), even though the state was never able to completely 'socialize housework', 'it nevertheless remained a goal and moral obligation of the state'. However, since the implementation of the reform and

opening-up policy, the view that ‘women can choose to return to their families from the workplace’ has been accepted. For example, in 2011, during the time of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Zhang Xiaomei, a female member of the CPPCC National Committee, put forward the proposal ‘supporting some women in returning to the home’ (Zhang, 2011). Those who advocated the view about ‘women-going-home’ highlighted that this is a ‘choice’ and ‘right’ for women. This more closely resembles an one-sided compromised decision for women, packaged as a right. During the period of market reform, the course of marketization led to the gradual separation of private and public domains, in which the burden of reproductive work and housework was once again pushed back to the private sphere or family (Song, 2016). Because the traditional patriarchal gender division of labor in China had not been removed, the privatization of the family or household amounted to the feminization of domestic labor (giving birth, rearing, providing care, etc.) (Song, 2016: 65). As a result, women have become ‘less valued’ labor in the market and have been encouraged to return to the home.

In line with the growth in incomes, Per capita final consumption expenditure, referring to the market value of all goods and services (including cars, white goods, electronics, etc.) purchased by individual Chinese consumers, excluding housing costs, rose from 557 US\$ in 1995 to 818 US\$ in 2000, and further increased from 2,201 US\$ in 2011 to 4,489 US\$ in 2021 (The World Bank). Women were a crucial demographic contributing to this great increase in consumer spending. Sina Finance (2022) reports that in 2022, in China, adult women (aged 20–60) were estimated to amount to nearly 400 million consumers, their consumption covered a wide range of areas, and their total consumer spending amounted to 10 trillion RMB annually.

In addition to the significant increase in gross consumption, the consumption structure has also evolved in China (see Appendix 4). The *Chinese City Development Report* showed that for Chinese households, expenditure proportion on clothing, food, and essential daily utilities has significantly decreased, and proportionately, that on culture, telecommunication, medical or health care, entertainment, etc. has grown greatly (the NSB, 2001). Consumer leisure expenditure in China reached a scale of US\$ 291 billion

in 2011 and grew to US\$ 479 billion in 2016 (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2017).¹⁸ These changes represent further enhancements in the quality of life for the Chinese people. Because of the positive influence of fitness on women's individual lives, fitness have become crucial leisure activities and a significant component of non-essential consumption among women in contemporary China.

Distribution of time

Although economic reform was the most discernible expression of the reform and opening-up policy, reform also involved and affected other aspects of society. The power of the state also decreased in people's individual leisure time. In the collectivist time when the redistributive economic system prevailed, the political orientation of the state tightly controlled people's private space and time, such as people's leisure time. People generally worked twelve months a year with six days a week. Few had more than a week's break during the Chinese Lunar New Year, and non-official travel between different regions was expensive and difficult to arrange (Davis, 2000). The workplace was the main force leading people's participation in sport. Various amateur competitive games and daily exercise were arranged for workers by their workplace.

Since the late 1970s, the deregulation of individual lives and the depoliticization of the workplace have formed new circumstances for the average citizen. Specifically, compulsory and semi-compulsory political activities for workers declined, and society paid more attention to people's leisure life, shortening work time. In the 1990s, the number of working days per week was reduced from six to five. In 1999, the State Council (1999) issued the revised *Measures for National Holidays and Commemorative Days* to establish three seven-day long holidays, namely the Spring Festival, May Day, and National Day, on the basis of combining the holiday time of these festivals with the nearest weekends. In the year 2000, the number of public holidays per year (including weekends) increased to 114 days. According to the *Leisure Green Book: 2016–2017 China Leisure Development Report*, in 2016, the average daily working hours of Beijing

¹⁸ Consumer leisure expenditure is defined to include spending on recreational and cultural activities (including sports, cruises, theme parks, and other services, equipment, catering, accommodation, etc.) (OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2017).

citizens had decreased by 27 minutes compared to 20 years previously (1996), giving them more leisure time (Song, 2017). Moreover, a rise in commodity supply, the growth of the service sector, and the proliferation of various time-saving machines led to a significant decline in the time people spent on housework (China Economic Experimental Research Institute, 2013). These positive changes resulted in a rise in the overall amount of people's leisure time. For Chinese women, Croll (1985) states that the implementation of the one-child policy in cities and the shrinking of the family structure contributed to the rise in their leisure time.

However, in contemporary China, most women enter the labor market, which requires them to balance their fitness and work schedules efficiently. Besides pricing factors, the promotion strategies of the yoga studio mentioned in the previous section also highlighted resolution of consumers' worry about being busy with work. This marketing experience of commercial fitness venues uncovers that one of the time conflicts that many women are concerned about is the conflict between work and fitness time. The results of the questionnaire indicate that 85% of respondents feel varying degrees of barriers related to work or study to their fitness. Interviewee number 8, a housewife, said that after she stopped doing business, she found some leisure time and started to go to the gym for exercise.

Since the late 1970s, market-oriented policies have brought about freedom and competition in the labor market. On the one hand, women possess the autonomy to determine their own career, including engaging in individual business. Furthermore, they have a higher degree of freedom in the management of working time. On the other hand, the 'iron rice bowl', which refers to an employment system for egalitarian wages, lifetime employment, and welfare benefits, is gradually being abolished (Sun, 2003). Hence, employers are also relatively free to choose their employees, and they look for employees who work hard and efficiently. The huge population scale of China results in fierce competition in the labor market, leading to the phenomenon of employee burnout. One of the most significant evidences is that, the '996' system, which refers to a working system where employees start work at 9.00 am and stop work at 9.00 pm, with a total of more than 10 working hours a day, 6 days per week, has become the norm among

Chinese enterprises, especially among digital enterprises (China Newsweek, 2021). This working system has provoked widespread debate and discussion in Chinese society and has been identified as violating the Labor Law of the PRC (Sdnews, 2023). Additionally, there are significant gender-discriminating practices in the labor market. Consequently, in the new era, women have the choice to take relatively light jobs and minimize overtime to ensure their fitness arrangements. However, this may lead to a lower income and a relatively bleak career outlook. In summary, work pressure significantly affects the scheduling of women's fitness time. The issue of work-life balance is an important challenge faced by working women in contemporary China.

Since Chinese women's individual capabilities, education, and financial contributions to the family have grown, their domestic circumstances have also evolved. This transformation has offered them the opportunity to break free from domestic constraints and engage in fitness activities. However, because the influence of gender division in traditional family structures still exists, women's fitness activities are still affected by domestic constraints. One interviewee said that:

When the child was young, in order to take care of the child, I didn't have much energy and time to participate in exercise ... Sometimes I couldn't accept invitations from friends who exercise together ... Occasionally, my husband would also take care of the child, and I could exercise. However, it cannot work for a long time ... because the child was too young, and he was more attached to me(No. 6)

Another interviewee said that:

When I need to take care of my child, I just don't go to the gym ... there are no conflicts in life ... just arranging it properly ... My family thinks it [my going to the gym to exercise] doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if it doesn't affect taking care of the child and doesn't affect work... Well, you can find your own time to go (No. 9)

Interviewee number 7, a young woman, claimed that nowadays, young people are all divided into different tasks in household chores. She highlighted that she may be doing the majority of the housework, but her husband will also do it. She will ask her husband

for this. These statements reflect that, women in urban centers are still the main family members to take the responsibility for subsequent parenting tasks after childbirth, as well as other household labor. The gender division of domestic labor still significantly restricts women's participation in fitness activities. However, based on the different views of housework, the housework allocation varies subtly among different families. Some women also expect their husbands to take on responsibilities. This uncovers the feminization of housework and also implies the dissemination of the view that men and women need to share household chores in urban China.

In addition to gendered discrimination in the workplace, the unequal gender division of domestic labor more directly affects women's fitness schedule. However, the view of men and women sharing household chores is promoted in China. This may play a role in adjusting the unequal gender division of domestic labor. Dong (1964, as cited in Song, 2016) advocates that feminists in the official system highlighted women's efforts and called upon couples to embrace a 'revolutionary attitude of equality' by dividing household chores. According to a survey on the social status of Chinese women, compared to the data from 2000, the time gap in engaging in household chores between men and women in 2010 has significantly decreased, which means that men have become more active in participating in household chores (Feng, 2018). The *Outline for the Development of Women in China (2021–2030)* issued by the State Council in 2021, sequentially emphasized the promotion of sharing of household chores for gender equality; advocated for division of labor and cooperation between couples in household work; encouraged jointly assuming family responsibilities such as caring for and accompanying children and the aged, educating children, and doing household chores; and advocated for narrowing the time gap in household work between men and women (China Women's News, 2021). Additionally, according to Roderic et al. (2017), women have an opportunity to change the inequality of exchange between husband and wife, through increasing economically relevant activities. With women's participation in socially productive labor, their chances of getting paid labor will increase, and then men's resource advantage and the exchange relationship between spouses will also change. In contemporary China, the level of female participation in social labor is

relatively high, which constitutes a prerequisite for the popularization of the view that husband and wife should share household chores.

Because of these factors, coordination and negotiation mechanisms have emerged for the distribution of household chores between men and women. In this way, women are not forced to complete household chores, and men also participate in household labor, especially within the younger generations. On the one hand, this has indeed reduced the burden on women of household chores. On the other hand, seemingly fair negotiation mechanisms sometimes lead women to overlook the structural constraints of the family. When discussing the constraints on fitness, Interviewee number 6, a married woman, didn't think there was a conflict between her leisure time and household chores, even though she mentioned that raising the child interrupted her participation in fitness activities. Three married interviewees have described that they proactively arranged their fitness activities after completing their work and family tasks. As a result, they thought that they experienced no scheduling conflicts between family lives and fitness routines, but this task sequence potentially undermines their ability to make appropriate fitness arrangements for their own needs. In contrast to the fact that the majority of the domestic tasks are done by them, this subtle cognitive misalignment implies the internalization of the gender division principles among women. The actual impact of familial constraints on women's fitness engagement may be more substantial than women themselves perceive. At present, the view that men and women need to share household chores is widely recognized but not widely practised.

The majority of household chores emerge as a result of the establishment of a marital relationship. However, the interview found that the notion of remaining unmarried is gradually developing in Chinese society. Interviewee number 12, one 38-year-old woman, stated that she was the only child of her parents, and currently she was unmarried and had no children. In her future life planning, she plans to maintain her current state of life, because it gives her more time for herself.

In contemporary China, the emphasis on women's free choices and individual subjectivity has not only changed women's views on the role of wives but also their views on marriage. In the Chinese context, women's subjectivity refers to a self-

awareness that emphasizes independence, autonomy, and equality (Zhao, 2008). Recently, the concept of ‘6B4T’, which originated in the feminist movement in South Korea, has become an emerging and popular feminist proposition in China’s nongovernmental discussion of women’s issues, especially online. ‘6B’ refers to not falling in love, not having sex with men, not getting married, not having children, not buying products clearly incompatible with feminist ideology, and supporting other single women; and ‘4T’ refers to getting rid of misogynistic beauty standards, religion, otaku culture, and idol culture (JIEMIAN, 2023).¹⁹ Indeed, for contemporary Chinese women, marriage is no longer an inevitable goal in life planning. The traditional ethical imperatives that guide women into marriage are gradually losing their normative force, and the cultural construction of marriage as an inevitable life trajectory is increasingly fading. Data from China’s civil affairs ministry showed that ‘marriages in China dropped from 7.7 million in 2023 to 6.1 million’ in 2024. ‘The figure was less than half the number registered in 2013, and the lowest since record keeping began in 1986’ (the Guardian, 2025). Although the traditional family division of labor has an impact on fitness activities, women are now tolerated not to get married and not to bear the responsibility of the female role in the traditional family structure.

Among the factors related to family, childbirth is also an important factor affecting women’s social development in the public domain. In contemporary China, for women who have already given birth, most of their personal development in society, such as career development and the expansion of personal interests, is negatively affected by their status as mothers to some extent. However, according to the interview, childbirth does not always have a negative impact on women’s fitness. 10 interviewees who were pregnant attached importance to fitness for maternal health.

One of them, Interviewee number 3, claimed that before giving birth she usually exercised at home by herself. However, this life transition of pregnancy made her realize that she should invest money and more time in fitness for more professional prenatal and

¹⁹ The otaku culture refers to a subculture that creates and consumes virtual characters and worlds through media such as animation, comics, and games (Jain, 2024).

The idol culture refers to a nurturing type of star-chasing culture in which fans support, follow and project their emotions onto the artists (idols), participating in and witnessing their growth process (Lee, 2025).

postpartum care. Interviewee number 6, a woman aged 55, expressed regret that due to the underdeveloped state of the fitness market during her childbearing years, she did not find the opportunity to participate in maternity fitness programs. However, she emphasized that she would definitely engage in such programs if given the chance. Furthermore, Interviewee number 10, a childless woman, indicated that she would participate in a maternity fitness programme if she were to have a child. She explained that she was deeply inspired by a fitness influencer's sharing of knowledge about fitness and childbirth. This realization led her to understand that scientific fitness knowledge could effectively address the challenges women face during pregnancy. This displays that the catalyst of childbirth instills in women a greater awareness of fitness.

Not all women have the opportunity to participate in such fitness activities. Apart from childbirth itself, household chores related to childbirth are still considered the responsibility of the mother to a large extent. Thus, it is difficult for women with insufficient human and financial resources to participate in maternal fitness courses. Interviewee number 3, who had recently given birth, claimed that there has been anxiety about figures among women. However, there are many women who have no choice of exercise for recovering their physical condition, like her. Someone at home helped her take care of the child. However, those women often have to take care of their children, so they can't come out to exercise.

For examining the impact of women's family roles on fitness schedules, it is essential to account not only for the roles of wife and mother but also for the role of daughter. In traditional Chinese culture, 'filial piety' (孝) is the most important moral norm that children are expected to honor. That is to say, daughters are expected to be obedient to their parents, even though daughters are adults. The interview presents that, in today's China, the parents hold a relatively positive attitude toward their daughters' participation in sports and fitness activities. Interviewee number 15 said that she was encouraged by her dad to participate in running during her teenage years. Although she didn't like it so well at that age, she developed this habit. Interviewee number 4 said that her parents didn't want her to develop towards sports. However, she really enjoyed sports, so her parents supported her in enrolling in a taekwondo class. Interviewee number 9 who

currently maintained a regular fitness routine in the gym mentioned that she learned to swim in high school because of her mother's request, although those exercise processes always made her feel quite painful.

In traditional wealthy Chinese families, girls' education focused on intellectual pursuits such as 'music, painting, chess, and calligraphy' (琴棋书画). Xiong (2006) mentions that there was research to show that women's sports activities had long been ignored or even prohibited as inappropriate. However, after decades of modernization, the benefits of fitness, both for men and women, have been gradually popularized in China. It seems that this view has been popularized across different generations. Thus, an increasing number of parents tend to support their daughters in spending time on fitness activities and are willing to enroll their daughters in various sports or fitness courses. This has created a better sports participation atmosphere for girls during childhood, which may further have a positive impact on the cultivation of lifelong fitness interests of women. Additionally, some studies have shown that the view of 'filial daughters', which emphasizes complete obedience to parents, has gradually diminished (Xiong, 2006: 207). As a result, a daughter is able to exert her right to express opinions that challenge the authority of the previous generation and to pursue sports activities if she wants.

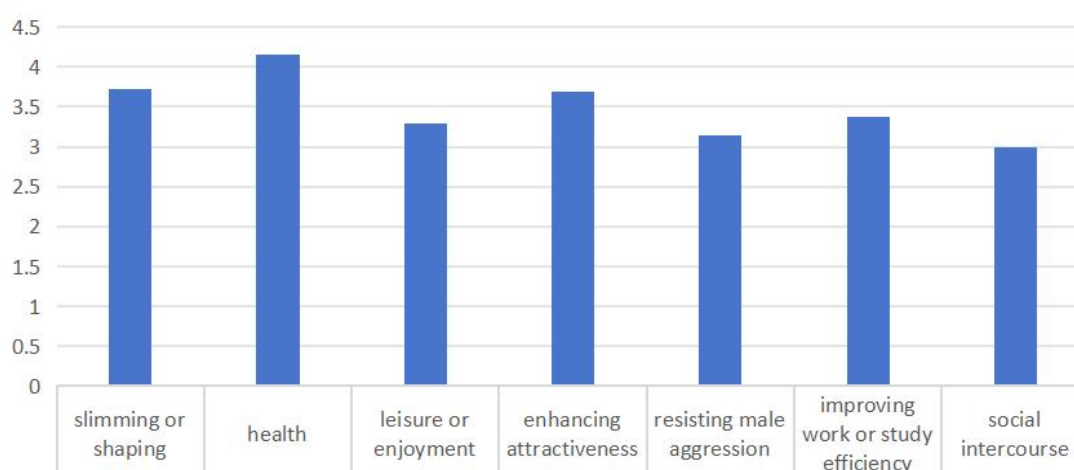
In terms of supporting parents, many women may face a greater burden since the late 1970s. In China in 1982, the family planning policy advocating for one child for each couple was officially incorporated into the Constitution (The State Council Information Office, P.R.C., 2015). Nowadays, many women are the only child of their parents. Without siblings to assist them, they have to be fully responsible for supporting their parents, which may reduce their leisure time for a fitness schedule. Recently, changes have occurred in China's fertility policy. Since the shift to 'a three-child policy' in 2021, China 'has been running national campaigns to foster a pro-birth culture' (CNN, 2024). This must bring complex changes to the family life of contemporary Chinese women.

4.1.3 Motivations of female fitness consumers

The interview and questionnaire demonstrate that women's fitness goals or motivations include health, slimming, body sculpting, improving appetite, self-cultivation, social

communication, relaxation, and enjoyment. Furthermore, the questionnaire tests the significance ranking of various purposes or motivations for female fitness consumers through 5-point Likert scale method.²⁰ The collected data shows: The perceived importance of slimming or shaping as a motivation has an average rating of 3.72; the average importance rating of the health is 4.16; the average perceived importance of leisure or enjoyment is rated at 3.3; this number of enhancing attractiveness is 3.69; the rating of resisting the risk of male aggression as a motivation is 3.14; the rating of improving work or learning efficiency is 3.37; that of social communication is 2.99 (see Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4 Importance ratings of purposes for participating in fitness activities.



This data indicates that the health-related motivation and beauty-related motivation (slimming, body shaping, or enhancing attractiveness) are the two most important motivations among these female fitness consumers. This outcome aligns with the general situation in contemporary China. Xinhua News Agency (2023) reports that in fitness consumption, Chinese women primarily concentrate on health and improvement in appearance, such as body shaping or slimming.

Motivation for health

Along with the changes in sociocultural ideologies since the late 1970s, the concept of women's health has evolved over time. During the Maoist era, health was primarily

²⁰ 5-point scale: 1 non purpose, 2 unimportant purpose, 3 general purpose, 4 important purpose, 5 very important purpose. The highest mark is 5, and higher marks represent more important purposes.

focused on physical fitness and strength, as required by the state for economic productivity and population growth. Individuals' needs were often overlooked within the overarching narrative of national development. In the post-Maoist time, the concepts of health have become more multi-dimensional and is more related to individuals, covering the range from low-level individual need for physiology to high-level self-actualization need.

Interviewee number 11 indicated that her initial purpose of going to the gym for practice was to build up a good physique and improve her health. Interviewee number 5 explained that when she realized that her body was feeling a bit sore and uncomfortable, she started to do exercise in the gym. Interviewee number 8 stated that when she had a bit of a bad mood, she went to the gym to exercise and could feel better. Another interviewee indicated that:

Because of yoga, I have calmed down and become less anxious about my own affairs. I can also regulate my emotions when encountering complex situations. Well, yoga emphasizes breathing. Yoga practitioners should gradually soothe the soul between breaths. In fact, daily yoga exercises are for cultivating the quality of practitioners.
(No. 11)

These statements, along with questionnaire data mentioned above, indicate that many women are aware of the significance of health. The survey of Ma (1999) indicates that, in 1998, more than 85% of women engaged in sports for health reasons. According to *Market Outlook and Investment Strategy Planning Analysis Report on China's Health Service Industry*, in 2019, the number of users of China's mobile application programs of female physiological health exceeded 200 million, and the proportion of female users in China's health application programs was 56%, higher than that of male users (44%) (Forward, 2020). These reports confirm women's attention to health. As a result, they have a strong desire to invest in commercial fitness services, like gym services, for effectively enhancing their health. These statements also reflect that women's health concerns encompass both physical health and mental health.

Economic modernization in China has enhanced the quality of life, making it more

affluent and convenient, particularly in urban regions. However, it has also contributed to the adoption of unhealthy lifestyles. For instance, the convenience of transportation brought by increased private cars, public metros and buses has resulted in reduced time allocated to walking or cycling, while Western fast food has become a component of the modern Chinese diet.²¹ The proliferation and accessibility of mass media, television, films, magazines, the Internet, and video or online games has encouraged individuals to stay home, resulting in less time being allocated for engaging in physical activities outside of home. In 1981, the average number of color televisions per 100 households among urban residents in China was only 0.6, while, in 2017, this number increased to 123.8 (GuangMing Daily, 2018). Meanwhile, the consumption of information products (related to the use of the Internet) has achieved great development. In 2017, the average number of computers per 100 households among urban residents reached 81, which was 8 times that of 2000 (GuangMing Daily, 2018). For 2022, 'PC (desktop, notebook, and workstation) shipments reached 48.5 million units' in China (Canalys, 2023).

As a consequence of this modern life, particularly in urban areas, the health of Chinese people has somewhat deteriorated in certain aspects, despite a growing number of individuals no longer experiencing crises related to starvation. With greater material prosperity, obesity became a more raging universal health problem. The research from Lu et al. (2017) indicates that, in 2010, the prevalence of metabolic syndrome among adults aged 18 and above in China was 33.9% (over 1/3), and it was estimated that there were 450 million people with metabolic syndrome in China. Metabolic syndrome refers to the pathological state of metabolic disorders in proteins, carbohydrates, fats, and other substances in human bodies, and most patients with metabolic syndrome show symptoms including obesity, excessive nutrition, and excessive fat storage (Mayo Clinic, 2025). Moreover, an increasing number of Chinese people have high blood pressure, a leading cause of heart and brain problems. According to statistics from the Health Department of China in 2022, the number of people with high blood pressure has reached 245 million, with 27.9% of people aged 18 and above suffering from this disease (CNR News, 2022). Therefore, many women invest in sports and fitness to address such

²¹ In the Chinese context, Western fast food is regarded as high-calorie and low-nutrition junk food.

physical illnesses or mitigate potential health risks.

In addition to physical health, mental health issues among Chinese people are becoming more noticeable. Modern life has, indeed, brought the elevation of women's living standards; nonetheless, the increase in prices of some items, particularly housing prices, and the faster pace of life have resulted in greater pressure on study, work, and life in modern China. It has caused numerous women to experience agony, depression, and mental disorders. As a result, the psychological issues and mental health of women have received increasing attention. According to the *2021 National Health Insight Report*, in China, the majority of the public expressed that they were troubled by health-related issues, with emotional distress being a significant factor. Women were more troubled by anxiety and depression problems compared to men (Dingxiang Doctor, 2021). Feng et al. (2021) mention that women's greater anxiety about societal life is a factor that contributes to this situation. Thus, to alleviate pressure for maintaining a composed state has become imperative for women. Engaging in physical exercise is a beneficial way to cope with social and life pressures, as well as negative emotions. Therefore, some women visit the gym to exercise.

Furthermore, as health awareness is being more widely and deeply spread, there is a growing focus on acquiring more comprehensive knowledge about fitness and health. The interview shows that women would pay attention to and share topics involving more professional information, such as 'understanding physiological mechanisms and bodily functions' and 'effective and scientific exercise methods'. For example, Interviewee number 8 and Interviewee number 15 provided me with a wealth of knowledge about dietary combinations for fitness. Meanwhile, Interviewee number 5 and Interviewee number 10 shared their insights on combining training for various fitness activities based on their knowledge of physiological mechanisms and their views on how to create fitness plans, with me. This suggests that the view and practice of health among fitness-conscious women are becoming increasingly comprehensive and diverse.

Moreover, in contemporary China, the health concept also encompasses a healthy lifestyle for individuals (Xiong, 2006). Based on the interview, it is evident that currently, some Chinese women have not only enhanced their health through commercial fitness

services but have also adopted a new lifestyle characterized by health, self-discipline, and self-improvement. Interviewee number 10 emphasized that she regarded fitness as a daily activity, a way of life, just like eating and sleeping. One interviewee explained the details:

At the beginning, through consumption, I tried to choose a sport to integrate into my life, which was to become a habit of my life... a healthier lifestyle... I planned to do a kind of sport every day... Currently, in general, I go to a yoga studio to practice 3 or 4 times a week. (No. 11)

Good health is not a simple state that can be easily attained. In general, a healthy lifestyle is associated with a set of norms. As women learn about this healthy lifestyle through fitness activities, they are also introduced to a set of lifestyle norms. For instance, Interviewee number 5 indicated that her coach's courses included pilates training, sports rehabilitation training, and some yoga practices. Her fitness coach even taught her some breathing techniques and the correct way to walk. Interviewee number 8 stated that the fitness has cultivated her attention to diverse health knowledge, and then she gradually developed health awareness, including health diet. She often bought some supplements, like vitamins, to support her fitness.

The healthy lifestyle fostered through fitness activities encompasses various aspects of life, such as diet and daily habits. Additionally, statements from interviewees indicate that fitness coaches, the atmosphere, and experiences in fitness centers play crucial roles in reinforcing the adoption of this healthy lifestyle. Commercial fitness centers provide superior fitness services and a more thorough understanding of systematic fitness programs, making it easier to acquire comprehensive knowledge about healthy lifestyles there. Furthermore, the prominent showcasing of numerous appealing examples of healthy lifestyles in these settings is likely to enhance women's interest and motivation. Moreover, the profit-driven nature of commercial fitness centers motivates staff to actively promote this lifestyle to broaden the range of product sales. In essence, commercial activities related to fitness, particularly services provided in commercial fitness establishments, serve as platforms that effectively encourage women to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

After the reform and opening-up, the national health agenda has shifted from a collective goal aligned with state development to an emphasis on individual well-being. Correspondingly, the responsibility for maintaining health has subtly but increasingly been transferred from the state to individual citizens. Since the mid-1990s, healthcare has become market-oriented rather than socialized (where the state assumes this responsibility through public services). The financing mode change of healthcare reduced the central government's investment in healthcare services, as well as in many other public services, shifting part of the healthcare function to the private sector and individuals (Blumenthal and Hsiao, 2005: 1166). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state media's emphasis that 'Be the first person responsible for your own health' significantly demonstrated the results of this transformation and the influence of the corresponding social ideology in China (Hui, 2022). In the process where the market replaces the state in providing certain healthcare services, the interaction between capitalism and the liberated individual demands has deepened the exploration of personal health needs, expanded the concept of health, and promoted the extension of dimensions related to a healthy lifestyle. These expanded health views must lead to more diverse consumer needs about fitness among women. As a combination of relaxation and effective health enhancement, diverse commercial fitness services are increasingly embraced by women as a key way to maintain or improve their health. However, this dynamic exacerbates socio-economic disparities in access to health resources and care. Its influence on fitness-related women will be discussed in detail and in-depth analysis in Chapter 5.

Motivation for beauty

According to Yang (1999), in contrast to the promotion of gender sameness during the Maoist era, China's modernization and integration into global capitalism have led to a greater emphasis on recognizing gender differences. Accordingly, Chinese society's aesthetic appreciation of women's appearance has shifted to an aesthetic emphasizing 'feminine charm' (女人味). In Chinese culture, 'feminine charm' refers to a soft and graceful female temperament distinct from the masculinity of toughness and perseverance, characterized by a slender and elegant physique. Since the 1980s, a

significant amount of advice literature has acknowledged that personal adornment and physical beauty are natural considerations for women, and dressing up is even seen as an empowering action for women (Honig and Gail, 1988, as cited in Xiong, 2006). Consequently, a growing number of women began investing in sport and fitness to achieve a more attractive physique.

Beauty is not a simple pursuit. Underlying this pursuit is various driving forces, especially extrinsic motivations. In the interview, respondents provided different explanations for why they or women wanted to improve their appearances or become more beautiful.²² Interviewee number 3 claimed that in terms of job search, if a woman has a better physique and appearance, the success rate of job applications should be higher. According to Lan (2001), in the market-oriented job market of China, having a pleasing appearance is often an important but unspoken requirement of women. In addition, a good appearance can give women an edge in interpersonal communication and boost their confidence in their personal lives. Interviewee number 13 thought that fitness has brought her changes. Her body posture has improved so that she believed that other people must feel much more pleasurable and become more friendly when seeing her. Interviewee number 6, one married woman, emphasized that the body change brought by fitness earned her praise from others and thus made her more confident. Furthermore, Interviewee number 1 admitted that the situation where women do fitness activities for beauty to enhance their attractiveness to the opposite sex is normal and common. She thought that it is indeed a driving force of fitness. One single fitness woman indicated that:

[About enhancing the attractiveness to the opposite sex through fitness...] I admit I have this motivation. I'm very honest to tell you that at present, my fitness also involves this factor. Well, I don't think it's a wrong matter. It's normal... It's human nature. Well, fitness is both for myself and indeed for enhancing my appearance, my

²² In the Chinese context, a woman's beauty is the harmonious unity of inner and outer qualities. It not only pursues external beauty such as graceful demeanor and slender figure, but also values the lasting charm emanating from inner virtues like blandness and intelligence (Wang and Zhang, 2005). This study focuses on women's body practices, so the category of beauty in this study mainly concerns appearance.

attractiveness. I think this attractiveness is a form of vitality of life. (No. 5)

These expressions show that in contemporary China, a woman's physical appearance plays a significant role in romantic relationships, especially in marriage. In addition, these expressions also reflect the changing attitudes of contemporary Chinese women toward sexual relationships. During the economic and social reforms, in line with the emphasis on women's individual subjectivity, rights, and choices, women's sexual rights are considered to be recognized and respected.²³ Sexual rights encompass the right to decline sexual activities as well as the right to consent to, enjoy, and express one's sexuality. As long as these choices are made voluntarily and autonomously, the desire to engage in or express a particular sexual relationship falls within the realm of sexual rights in contemporary China (Tong, 2011: 100). Due to the recognition of women's initiative in sexual relations, the idea of gaining a dominant position in sexual relationships through ways to improve appearance, like fitness, is gradually spreading among Chinese women.

This research also found that women's drive for beauty generally diminishes as they age. Interviewee number 8, one middle-aged woman, indicated that the needs at each stage were really different. When she was young, she wanted to look good and be slim. However, at this age, she really didn't feel the need to lose weight anymore and hoped to maintain a healthy state. Further, the regression analysis was used to examine the more specific relationship between age and the motivation of slimming or shaping on the basis of the questionnaire data.²⁴ The estimation of the equation showed:

$$Y = 4.659 + (-0.027) * X$$

Y represents the degree of recognition for the motivation of slimming or shaping. X represents the age data. For this estimation, the P-value of F-test is 0.002,²⁵ which

²³ In traditional Chinese culture, women were in a state of suppression and subordination. Therefore, for the majority of the time in traditional societies, most women were only permitted to express their sexual desires in a private and veiled manner. Overall, their sexual desires were generally suppressed.

²⁴ Regression analysis refers to a statistical analysis method for determining the quantitative relationship of interdependence among two or more variables (Chatterjee and Simonoff, 2012).

²⁵ P-value is an important aspect in inferential statistics and serves as crucial evidence for determining the validity of the original hypothesis (Chatterjee and Simonoff, 2012). P-value that is or is lower than 0.05 is regarded as a marker of statistical significance.

indicates that this regression model is highly significant. R-squared is 0.045,²⁶ which means that the independent variable of age can explain the variability of the degree of recognition for the fitness motivation of slimming or shaping. In a word, this analysis found the statistically significant relationship.

To be specific, this is a model applicable to the analysis of women who are over 18 years old.²⁷ For every additional year of age, the average score of recognition for the motivation of slimming or shaping decreases by 0.02 (Overall data range: 1-5 [generated based on 5-point Likert scale method]). Although the impact of each year is small, a larger age range (for example, from 20 to 40) will show a more significant effect. In a word, the relationship between age and the beauty-related motivation shows a significant negative correlation, which accords with the results of the interview.

These texts and data reflect that, in today's China, social expectations of women's beauty and body image have become a widespread phenomenon, and this beauty is highly related to age. Since the reform and opening-up, traditional female roles (Women are expected to shoulder more family responsibilities, like assisting the husband and bringing up children) are no longer opposed and criticized by the state as they were in the top-down radical women's liberation movements of the Maoist period (Women were required to step out of the household and work in society like men); instead, they are even celebrated. This has led to the promotion of corresponding female images with 'feminine charm' in the patriarchal tradition. As a result, a woman who meets this ideal beauty could achieve more social resources and opportunities in various areas of her life.

This dynamic reveals the imbalance of gender power. In contemporary society, the discipline imposed on women has evolved from the 'rigid confinement' of dynastic times to more complex 'soft expectations' and 'implicit standards' (Song, 2016). Within the framework of voluntary behavior, the gender-imbalanced social opportunities, gender discrimination, and the endorsement of specific female models collectively shape behavioral tendencies in women that align with patriarchal structural expectations. The

²⁶ R-squared indicates the degree to which the regression model fits the dataset (Chatterjee and Simonoff, 2012).

²⁷ In Chinese context, 18 years old is the legal age of adulthood.

societal expectation of female beauty essentially demands that women not only enhance their professional competencies but also excel in the private sphere and maintain physical attractiveness. These requirements, thereby, construct an invisible yet stringent evaluation system that compels women to engage in continuous self-monitoring and self-optimization. This imposes a multi-layered burden on women compared to men, resulting in a 'lagging' status for women in their pursuit of comprehensive personal development and public power. More seriously, during the market-oriented transformation, the state no longer dominated the distribution of most social resources, including job allocation and review of spouses. Women must compete to gain more social resources. This reinforces women's desire to enhance their beauty. This dynamic exposes the dual construction of patriarchal aesthetics and capitalism underlying the beauty expectations. Under this dual construction, the resurgence of emphasis on women's reproductive roles intersects with women's structural disadvantages in the labor market in a detrimental way. This dynamic reinforces the femininity where women are primarily valued for their biological capacities, caretaking, ancillary work, and emotional labor rather than for their economic or intellectual contributions. As a result, essentially, women's appearance-based capital can be amplified and instrumentalized only within a limited range of occupational sectors, subtly constraining women's full participation in public and professional life and reinforcing gender-based divisions of labor.

The relationship between age and beauty further confirms the relationship between this women's beauty and the patriarchal structure. In present-day China, the concept of the 'rice bowl of youth' has gradually become widespread. This concept is commonly used to describe a woman's capacity to leverage beauty and youth for potentially lucrative social opportunities, especially in the entertainment and service industries. The beauty standards portrayed in advertisements, magazines, and on screens typically favor women who are thin, white, able-bodied, and, most importantly, young. These stereotypes or the lack of representation in the media contribute to the devaluation of older women and their appearance in society. Age is not merely a number; it brings about not only physical transformations like greying hair but also alters how an individual is viewed by society.

In contemporary China, both genders face ageism (discrimination based on age), but older women tend to encounter more negative stereotyping compared to older men. Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) suggest that after menopause, when women no longer have the ability to bear children, which is often seen as a key aspect of femininity, they may lose their primary social value as child-bearers. Additionally, Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) presume that they have also lost their sexuality, leading to a reduction in their feminine identity and potentially causing them to become invisible. In today's China, under analogous circumstances, as women age and lose their fertility as well as their young and beautiful appearance that attracts men, many of them gradually lose interest in improving their appearance. The indifference towards their appearance by elderly women mirrors society's lack of regard for them, further highlighting the broader societal neglect of diversified women's identities (an exception to their reproductive and sexual roles).

While physical attractiveness may confer certain social advantages to women, the results from the interview present that critical or diverse views of women's pursuit of beauty, particularly in romantic relationships, have emerged among women. Interviewee number 16 argued that both men and women should pay attention to body shape management, not just women. Interviewee number 7 held a similar view, believing that only handsome men can make demands of women's beautiful looks. Interviewee number 13 highlighted that she could condone the behaviors about enhancing the attractiveness to the opposite sex through fitness, but she lacked such a motivation. Furthermore, Interviewee number 10 viewed the relationship between appearance and sexuality with a more radical and critical attitude. She highlighted that she didn't like the behaviors of enhancing attractiveness to the opposite sex through fitness, and even didn't like the kind of behavior that is just about courtship.

These expressions imply that reflective awareness or critical thinking about the gender differences in societal expectations of appearance has emerged among women. The strategy of emphasizing the significance of male appearance deconstructs the entrenched notion that 'beauty is a female obligation'. It aims to reframe 'appearance anxiety' from a gendered issue to a universal societal concern, thereby alleviating women's body

dissatisfaction (Fingeret and Gleaves, 2010). Concurrently, this strategy presents women's political aspirations, seeking to transition from being the object of scrutiny to becoming the subject with evaluative authority. The denial of beautifying for males reflects women's consciousness of reclaiming their 'subjectivity' and 'right to define', and their resistance to the patriarchal framework that positions women as passive objects serving male aesthetics and desires. This underscores the assertion of rejecting inclusion in the narrative of 'sexual competition' where men act as arbiters (Ingo et al., 2007).

On one hand, in line with modern society's emphasis on individual rights, some women believe that in romantic relationships, personal desires should be prioritized, making it acceptable for women to seek beauty enhancements to boost their sexual attractiveness. On the other hand, some women recognize the unequal power dynamics inherent in existing gender relationships. Hence, they reject the pursuit of beauty within the existing framework, striving to contest the definitions and applications of their 'beauty' and 'body' and liberate themselves from the patriarchal narratives that instrumentalize and objectify them. These phenomena reflect the emergence of progressive, feminist ideologies among fitness-oriented women. Certain commercial fitness narratives demonstrate the market's response to and utilization of these concepts. The impact of such supplier behaviors on fitness-conscious women will be discussed in in-depth analysis in Chapter 5.

The study also found that women have some subtle differences in their aesthetic preferences for their appearance. According to the interview, female fitness consumers mentioned three aesthetics: 'no muscle, slim', 'moderate muscle, slim, but fit', and 'strong muscle, robust'. According to the questionnaire, the following data illustrates the proportions of individuals who prefer these three aesthetics (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5 The popularity of different aesthetics among female fitness consumers

Aesthetic	no muscle, slim	moderate muscle, slim, fit	strong muscle, robust
Proportion	20%	77%	3%

According to the data, most female fitness consumers prefer the aesthetics of 'no muscle,

slim’ and ‘moderate muscle, slim, fit’. The ‘moderate muscle, slim, fit’ is the most popular aesthetic.

The aesthetic of ‘no muscle, slim’ accords with the standard of ‘fair-complexioned, fragile, young’ (白瘦幼), which is a mainstream aesthetic of women in contemporary China. This aesthetic is very close to the traditional Chinese feminine ideal – thin, delicate, evoking affection, and inspiring a protective instinct. The moderate interest in this aesthetic among fitness-related women reflects a tendency to reject conventional aesthetic frameworks and suggests an demand for emerging aesthetic paradigms.

The aesthetic of ‘moderate muscle, slim, fit’ is becoming increasingly popular in women’s fitness, especially in the consumer culture of women’s fitness. JIEMIAN (2023) reports that, in China, in recent years, women’s fitness demands have not been limited to losing fat and slimming down, while a growing number of women are pursuing strength and muscle in exercise. One interviewee who preferred this aesthetic indicated that:

I really like the healthy beauty... I do not like the kind of beauty of a very slight frame. Oh, when my husband and I first met... the impression I gave him was that this girl was very healthy and sunny. Yes, you don’t have to pursue a very slim figure. I think there are lines... I mean there are muscles... this kind of beauty is quite attractive. [About building those large or obvious muscles...] I don’t like that. There’s no problem with boys like that. However, I don’t accept that strong image of a girl... Well, one reason is that it is not good-looking, and moreover, I think it’s too extreme. (No. 15)

Interviewee number 12 indicated that nowadays, there is severe appearance anxiety among women, and they all want to completely shape their legs like chopsticks. However, she didn’t like that particularly skinny female figure without strength. She liked the powerful, tight girl’s type, which has exercised muscles but not lumpy ones. Further, on the basis of questionnaire data, one-way analysis of variance was applied in order to test the differences of health awareness among women with different aesthetics (see Figure

4.6).²⁸

Figure 4.6 The result of one-way analysis of variance

Aesthetics	N	Mean	SD	p (for F-test)	Cohen's <i>f</i>
No muscle, slim	42	3.86	1.07	0.011	0.180
Moderate muscle, slim, fit	164	4.26	0.86		

N refers to sample size. The range of mean, the average value, is from 1 to 5, and higher marks represent attaching greater importance to health motivation. SD refers to standard deviation. P-value (0.011) is lower than the usual significance level (0.05). The observed average difference (0.4) is significant. Therefore, this difference may have some practical significance in reality. Hence, these statements and data uncover that the fitness-oriented aesthetic standards are closely tied to the notion of health.

In my questionnaire, 66 % of respondents agree with (23%) or strongly agree with (43%) the view that ‘fitness technique for weight loss are better than other weight loss methods (such as weight-loss pills).’ Interviewee number 7 indicated that for losing weight, she was a bit scared of weight-loss pill’s side effects, so she gave up on this measure. Afterwards, she generally started exercising. She felt like she was losing weight quickly, in a healthy way. Interviewee number 15 emphasized that she never supported injections or taking weight-loss pills (for body shaping). It is not good for health. It is better to learn about knowledge of fitness and health. That is to say, fitness techniques generally can help women achieve beauty in a more healthy way, though it may not be the most efficient approach. Therefore, the fitness culture further incorporates the concept of health into the aesthetic framework. This health-related aesthetic standard must help enhance the appeal of fitness products among women.

Modern medicine has established a scientific framework for health based on human anatomy and medical principles. Within this framework, both ‘obesity’ and ‘underweight’

²⁸ One-way analysis of variance could be used to compare possible differences between various group means (Heiberger and Holland, 2015).

are considered pathological conditions that can be detrimental to physical health (Berger, 2008). In contrast to the prevailing aesthetic norms that may lead to ‘underweight’, the beauty ideals sought after by many fitness women (fit yet sensual, strong yet slender) are generally viewed as aligning more closely with health standards, at least for fitness women. One interviewee elaborated that:

I have been exercising for many years. I personally think that I have a height of 165cm... If I lose to 50 kilograms, my figure is definitely not attractive... just flat. Mmm... I actually like my current figure with the weight of over 60 kilograms, because you need to gain weight if you want to become the type with muscles. That is to say, maybe in my mind... I think it’s possible to lose some weight, but I do not want to be too thin. It won’t help me build any muscles... I hope I’m fit. Fitness means that my figure has everything it should have: it should have a visible waist, significant buttocks, and suitable legs... Just the kind... the one who looks thin when dressed, and shows sensuality or muscles when undressed... It would be great. (No. 14)

This expression shows that compared to meeting societal expectations, she seems to focus more on her feeling and aesthetic perception about her body. In a particular neoliberal, capitalist framework, health is a crucial aspect that influences women’s personal well-being. By integrating health into the fundamental aesthetic criteria, women assert their rights of definitions and applications of their ‘beauty’ and ‘body’. Hence, this fitness-related aesthetic caters to contemporary women’s pursuit of liberating themselves from the patriarchal narratives that objectify them.

Among women who prefer the fitness-related aesthetic, some of them hold a relatively negative attitude toward conventional beauty standards. In the questionnaire, 81% of respondents clearly do not agree with the mainstream female aesthetic of ‘fair-complexioned, fragile, and young’ (42%) or only hold a neutral attitude towards this aesthetic (39%). In the interview, Interviewee number 14, who appreciated the image of fit women with moderate muscle lines, thought that many images of women here (in Chengdu, China) are too fragile and not very real. She liked the figure of women in Europe and America, who do have really fit bodies. Since the 1990s, the ‘fitness boom’

influenced by Western sports cultural trends has hit Chinese society, which has formed the women's aesthetics trend of 'firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin', especially in cities (Shi, 1999). On the basis of the appreciation of such Western aesthetics, some Chinese women have reflected and criticized the prevailing aesthetic standards of 'fair-complexioned, fragile, and young', which are heavily influenced by traditional culture. Women who favor a 'moderate muscle, slim, fit' aesthetic always develop some muscles. This allows them to avoid being overly weak and makes them healthier and stronger. In this way, they are able to complete some physical tasks without relying on men and making them less susceptible to male control. Such women exhibit greater independence and autonomy, to some extent subverting the traditional aesthetic of women as protected figures.

From the perspective of capital globalization, the popularity of Western fitness culture among Chinese women constitutes a systemic operation of spatial expansion of exploitation (Harvey, 2006). Capital redefines bodily value globally, creates consumer demands, and achieves value augmentation. In essence, the resonance Chinese women find in Western fitness culture reflects the localized adaptation of ideology by globalized capital (primarily Western capital) to achieve the subtle implantation of values, thereby covertly exploiting female bodies. Western fitness values and aesthetics, with their seemingly distinct claims from traditional Chinese standards, have resonated with modern Chinese women's desires for upward mobility and self-actualization. Leveraging the outreach of globalized media and the more sophisticated commercial operations of multinational corporations, Western capital has seamlessly, naturally adapting its ideology to Chinese cultural norms, social structures, and consumer psychology, fostering deep emotional resonance. Consequently, Western fitness values have been established as a purportedly more advanced, scientific, universal standard among Chinese women. Serving capital's profit motives, these values virtually promote rigid standards of beauty and performance and essentially justify the exploitative nature of capital. Thus, women's bodies fall into a dual contradiction, splitting between pursuing liberation from traditional gender roles and constantly falling into capitalist discipline. To some extent, the incursion of globalized capital has undermined the developmental

space for the modernization of traditional Chinese aesthetics, the potential for its refinement, and the capacity for spontaneous cultural introspection among Chinese women.

Significantly, statements and data mentioned above reflect that the majority of women involved in fitness who value or embrace muscles prefer to develop moderate muscle tone and do not admire the female physique with prominent or visibly strong muscles. Interviewee number 12 stated that personally speaking, she completely cannot appreciate the body image of professional female bodybuilders (with blocky muscles). She found it difficult to identify with them as beautiful due to the lack of feminine traits. Interviewee number 15 further elaborated:

The extreme refers to... they must strictly control their diet for strong muscles. For example, the people we see participating in fitness competitions... they must control water, salt, and all of their diets in order to reach this state, right?... Additionally, it's not pretty either. I think the difference between boys and girls is that it doesn't matter if boys have this muscular image. They can do anything about building muscles, including improving their trapezius muscle. They could practice it hard. However, for girls, do you think the trapezius looks beautiful when you increase it? It's very unattractive. (No. 15)

Many feminists, such as Firestone, Mitchell, and Mackinnon, agreed that the body plays a significant role in women's studies as it helps analyze power dynamics within a critique of patriarchal society and the changing role of women in the public domain. Firestone (2003) underscores the fundamental impact of inherent biological inequalities, such as the biological reproduction, on the origins of gender-based class. Mitchell (1971) integrates the body into a structural framework of social reproduction, revealing the female body as a central site institutionalized, instrumentalized, and ideologized within the dual structure of patriarchy and capitalism. Mackinnon (1982) focuses on the relationship between gender oppression and legal structures, positioning the female body as the materialized vehicle of power relations, a key domain in which patriarchy and state legal systems converge to discipline, appropriate, and enact violence. Muscular women are perceived in society as symbolizing agency, power, and independence, as this

image challenges the foundation of male dominance – the seemingly natural physical superiority of men, thereby contradicting the notion of a male-dominated society (Schneider, 2021; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002). In essence, the key to challenging male dominance lies in questioning the physical superiority of men. However, many women seek the meaning of physical practice within existing gender structures. These women aim to develop moderate muscles that may not convey a sense of significant strength and robustness transcending the femininity framework. Despite differences in popular aesthetic standards and the fitness-related aesthetic for women's appearance, both share a commonality in not posing a significant threat to the physical superiority of men. Compared to the aesthetic of 'strong muscle, robust', both of these aesthetics generally do not contradict the patriarchal ideal of 'feminine charm'. The fitness-related aesthetic still emphasizes the soft curves of the female body and presenting an attraction to men. It does not entirely challenge or reject the patriarchal principles of the aesthetic.

Other motivations

In addition to the two important goals of health and beauty, some women have expanded their social communication scale during the fitness process or experienced the pure enjoyment of sport itself. Interviewee number 6 indicated that because of fitness, she has met people with similar interests and hobbies. She enjoyed communicating with everyone in the gym. One interviewee explained that:

Well, it's just possible... fitness is also a demand for social and emotional connections. Mmm... for example, you go to a small fitness group course, such as a course of yoga, Pilates, or dance class... Because most members are women, there must be many topics to discuss in the group. Well, you may also meet friends... I participated in these fitness classes and I made a few very, very good friends... We once travelled together... (No. 5)

They can communicate happily or travel together, implying that they not only prefer a similar lifestyle but also may have similar economic capacity. That is to say, fitness venues are valuable social spaces where fitness women are more likely to meet friends with similar lifestyles, ideologies, and even economic and social backgrounds. However,

according to the questionnaire, the importance assigned to socializing-related motivation is at a relatively low level among respondents. In the interview, Interviewee number 8, Interviewee number 7, and Interviewee number 9 made it clear that they did not intend to engage in social interaction during their fitness activities, while one interviewee, a lawyer, expressed resistance to what she perceived as excessive socializing:

Some fitness activities actually have some social attributes and enable me to make new friends... Well, I think these activities are actually very comfortable and chill, but I can't just... do this every day... I actually enjoy socializing, because my job makes me relatively expressive. However, I also think that socializing is a matter of mood. For example, when I am in a good state of fitness, I want to meet new friends. This is OK. Nevertheless, I think sports... cannot be mingled with too much socializing. This is the forced or purposeful socializing. This will make you unhappy and tired... (No. 10)

These narratives highlight the diversity of individual motivations within fitness spaces and underscore women's agency in setting boundaries and selectively participating in socializing aspects of fitness practices. Yet these ostensibly autonomous choices might be relatively passive behaviors, embedded within or shaped by broader social structures. Commercial fitness institutions or activities provide a valuable opportunity for fitness women to connect with peers, and some even form friendships with like-minded individuals through exercise. In this course of socializing, women's class identities may be both performed and reinforced. Although some fitness institutions offer premium, bespoke personal-training services that ostensibly facilitate upward social communication, such as access to affluent networks, it seems that relatively few women use this approach as a strategic vehicle for class advancement. In the interview, respondents showed a lack of inclination toward purposefully expanding their social circles or courting higher-class affiliations through fitness. They just concentrated on self-improvement within the confines of their existing socioeconomic strata. In contemporary China, commercial fitness goods and leisure pursuits have been inscribed with classed meanings. While engagement with 'high-level' fitness hobbies might serve as a symbolic marker of taste and status, for many women, fitness remains a domain of

personal development rather than social climbing. Within the context of a market-oriented sports environment, the women's fitness activities increasingly reflect patterns of class stratification and segregation rather than acting as a conduit for broad social interaction and fluidity. Thus, by opting to exercise within their comfort zones, which eschews cross-class interactions or flattery of a more elite class, women may inadvertently reproduce the social boundaries that delineate class.

In China, the majority of women exercise for the purpose of pursuing health or beauty, and many of them might not be interested in participating in sport at the beginning of fitness practice. Nonetheless, through ongoing engagement with fitness practices, some women might gradually develop a genuine interest in physical exercise itself, integrating it into their regular routines. One interviewee indicated that:

Previously, I didn't love sports and didn't exercise at all... However, in my second year of high school, I already weighed over 75 kilograms. At that time, I was in a mentality of loving beauty, so there was a shadow in my heart. Thus, I felt like I need to start to lose weight... At that time, I practiced on my own... Later, a nearby gym was organizing favorable activities, and the price of membership was... not very expensive. I came to the gym to give it a try, and I found the experience really enjoyable. Therefore, I applied for a membership card... Currently, I have established a consistent habit of exercising several times per week. (No. 7)

Interviewee number 10 also had a similar experience and emphasized that she enjoyed sports now and exercise can make her feel the direct dopamine's happiness. At the outset of fitness journeys, some women might not be driven by an intrinsic interest in sport when engaging in training. However, as they progress, the embodied dialogue between self and body may facilitate an emergent appreciation for sport's inherent appeal. Achieving fitness milestones, such as mastering a new movement or losing weight to reach the target, generates a sense of accomplishment, which enables women to feel the charm of sport. Through sustained embodied engagement, women might orient their motivations inward, valuing the processes of personal growth, skill mastery, bodily autonomy, or self-satisfaction over the pursuit of some externally imposed societal standards or ideals. This reflects the transformative potential of sports and fitness

practice.

4.2 Consumer-related environments

Since the reform and opening-up, a growing number of Chinese women gained access to new forms of leisure, new methods of communication, and novel ways of social discourse through newly commercialized models. This commercialization of consumption did more than just expand consumer options and improve the material standard of living. Furthermore, women have full autonomy in their fitness consumption choices. Nonetheless, their preferences are not solely determined by the subjectivity, and, thus, the idea of being a sovereign consumer has not been fully practiced in their real consumption. After the decrease in state influence in public life, especially the flow of commodities, since the late 1970s, it is important to recognize the influence of commercial organizations on consumers. The theory of consumer society highlights that the commercial hierarchies can systematically influence consumers' preferences and demands. Thus, encouraged by commercial actors, a growing number of Chinese people are inclined to satisfy themselves and express their identities through consumption. In line with the national objective of expanding domestic demand, this trend towards a consumption-oriented model has been generally accepted in China's society. According to Goodwin et al. (2008: 4), consumer society can be defined as a social phenomenon where many people 'always want to consume more', and, to a large extent, 'they find meaning and satisfaction in life' through 'the purchase of new consumer goods'.

The interview reflects that, in addition to gym-related services (including venue and equipment usage services, group training classes, and personal training sessions), women also invest in fitness clothing, the purchase of fitness equipment, and fitness nutritional supplements. These consumption types cover the main consumption patterns of the female fitness market. In order to fully explain these commercial services, this section outlines the structure and growth patterns of the fitness industry, paying special attention to the products and marketing practices targeting the female fitness segment. This must help understand the behavioral logic of the market supply side to explore the scope, ways, and sustainability of the benefits for fitness women in the consumer environment.

4.2.1 Fitness products and services for women

From a geographical perspective, currently, the typical fitness services, such as fitness centers, gyms, and chain brand stores of fitness products, are primarily sprouting and developing in large and medium-sized cities across the country; meanwhile, sports and fitness markets in smaller towns and rural areas are still in the early stages of development (Tan, 2021). Since the late 1970s, cities have witnessed a resurgence of commercial functions in their ‘downtown’ or economic centers in China (Gaubatz, 2005). The combination of refined interurban transportation systems, a larger population, the increase in average income of citizens, the growth of mass transit, and the increasing popularity of sport in major cities has motivated businesses to establish fitness clubs focusing on some specialized projects (such as yoga studios) and comprehensive fitness centers in commercial districts.

Specifically, in the late 1980s, China’s fitness industry saw the emergence of commercial gyms. The first commercial gym in China that met the technical standards was considered to be a gym established in Nanhai Hotel, a five-star hotel that adhered to international standards in Shekou, Shenzhen (Zhang, 2019). Later, in the 1990s and 2000s, the fitness industry experienced significant growth in China. International famous brands of chain fitness clubs, such as California Fitness (加州健身), Fitness First (健乐菲利斯), and POWERHOUSE GYM (宝力豪), entered the Chinese market; meanwhile, large domestic fitness clubs, such as Nirvana Fitness (青鸟健身) and Impulse (英派斯), were established (Chi, 2011). Currently, China’s gym industry is gradually becoming flourishing. In 2019, the estimated total size of the gym market in the top 18 cities in China was 27,600 stores and 8.79 million gym members (Deloitte, 2021). For the entire scale, China’s fitness industry was expected to reach a value of 6.2 billion US dollars in 2024 (GMA, 2024).

With the popularization of the views for health and fitness among public including women groups and state policies supporting development, the fitness consumer market has shown considerable commercial potential. For example, at the development stage of the gym industry, chain gyms were able to achieve a gross profit margin exceeding 40%, which was an attractive figure (Zhang, 2019). Additionally, the barriers to entry to the

fitness industry were relatively low, particularly in terms of the investment required for a gym, which is quite flexible. What is more, in line with the commercialization of the sports industry, the entry of private sector actors into this market was not greatly hindered by state policies. As a result, the fitness industry naturally attracted many investors' attention. China's fitness market has gradually evolved into a monopolistic competitive market structure. In such a market, consumers hold a relatively advantageous position. Consumers often prioritize the quality-to-price ratio when making purchases, thereby prompting many businesses to attract them by offering reduced prices.

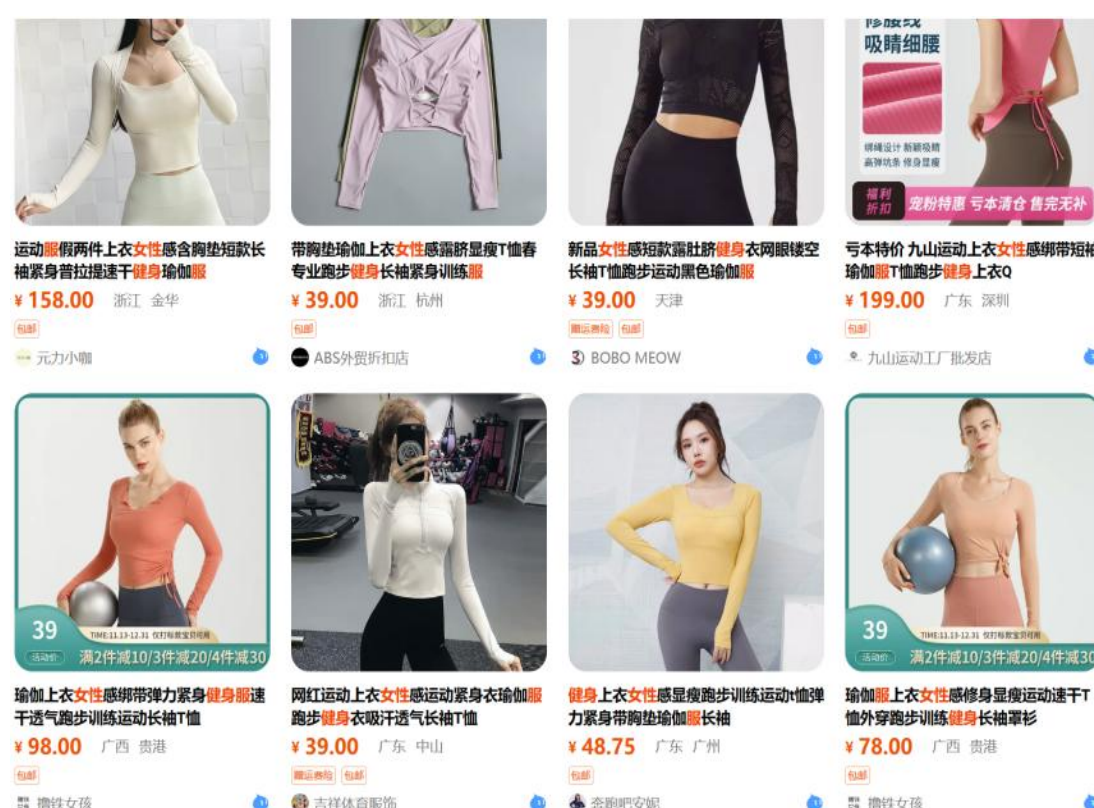
As a result, compared to the early stages of the industry, there was a significant increase in the number of gyms and fitness product suppliers and a decrease of the average prices. Specifically, in the early stage, in line with limited market supply, commercial fitness institutions were generally expensive for consumers. They were primarily consumed as leisure venues for the high-end crowd. However, in recent times, the prices of fitness institutions have become more affordable with the significant growth in the number. This fitness consumption has transformed into a leisure and entertainment activity that is accessible to a wider public in their daily lives (Tan, 2021). For example, in 2008, most gyms could still maintain an annual card price of 8000 to 10000 RMB. However, in 2018, the annual card price dropped to around 2000 RMB, and the prices of some small clubs were even only 700 to 800 RMB (Zhang, 2019).

In addition to gym services, in the fitness market, particularly on online shopping platforms in China, such as Taobao and PDD, there is a wide range of women's fitness clothing and equipment available for sale. The fitness clothing market and individual fitness equipment market in China both exhibit characteristics of a monopolistic competitive model, presenting relatively high competition. In these two markets, there are numerous manufacturers producing fitness equipment and apparel of similar but varying quality. Women have a wide range of choices for their fitness consumption. Many suppliers in these markets can exert a certain degree of influence on the market, but each supplier must accept the market price to a certain extent. While certain firms, like Lululemon, have achieved a certain level of market dominance or monopoly through their brand influence in the Chinese women's fitness product market, there are still many

affordable alternatives that are popular among women consumers. In summary, no manufacturer has achieved a complete monopoly in these markets.

Therefore, even within relatively low price ranges, there are numerous fitness product choices to choose from. Figure 4.7 shows the information about sales of women's fitness clothing on Taobao in China. Products of women's fitness clothing from different suppliers have been displayed, with many of them priced below 100 RMB which is an affordable price for interviewees.²⁹

Figure 4.7 Information about sales of women's fitness clothing on Taobao



Source: Taobao.com

At the time of doing this research, the fitness industry and national consumption in China have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 epidemic (Smith, 2021). According to *the 2022 China Fitness Industry Data Report*, some large chain brands of gyms have also gone bankrupt; there was a decrease in the number of sports and fitness venues

²⁹ According to *the 2022 Chengdu Statistical Yearbook*, per capita expenditures on consumption of urban households in Chengdu were 31581 RMB in 2021 (Chengdu Municipal Bureau of Statistics and NBS Survey Office in Chengdu, 2022).

nationwide in 2022 (School of Economics and Management at Shanghai University of Sport et al., 2023). However, some experts remained relatively optimistic about the future of the fitness industry (Smith, 2021). According to *the In-depth Research and Development trend Prediction Report on the Chinese Fitness Industry from 2023 to 2028* and *the 2021 China Fitness Industry Data Report*, compared to developed countries, there is still a gap in the penetration rate of fitness people in China,³⁰ which indicates a potential for further development (ChinaIRN, 2023). It is expected that the overall market size of the fitness industry will continue to grow.

As a monopolistic competitive market, the fitness market also provides differentiated fitness goods and services. When firms have to continuously compete with one another for sales, some of them are driven to focus on expanding segmented markets. They adjust their competitive strategies and invest their efforts in providing more attractive products that fulfil specific needs based on consumer segmentation, with the aim of offering some customers a greater sense of value to achieve a certain degree of monopoly. In China's fitness market, the female group demonstrates a significant potential for consumption. Hence, many sellers or suppliers offer a variety of fitness services and products specifically tailored for women to enhance their attractiveness and competitiveness.

Numerous commercial fitness institutions now offer fitness courses that are specifically tailored for women. To cater to women's unique physiological needs, the gyms provide fitness courses for prenatal preparation, guidance of postpartum rehabilitation, pelvic floor muscle repair courses, fitness guidance of diastasis recti repair, etc. Furthermore, in response to women's desire to shape their bodies, various specifically targeted fitness courses are offered for soft stretching and achieving the 'peach buttocks' (蜜桃臀) and 'mermaid line' (人鱼线) (see Appendix 5).³¹

In addition, many gyms consider women's lifestyles, and then provide services to make the fitness process more convenient and comfortable for female consumers. For example, some gyms have prepared face creams, makeup removers, hair bands, sanitary napkins,

³⁰ The penetration rate refers to the proportion of fitness enthusiasts who spend money in the total population of a country (ChinaIRN, 2023).

³¹ In the Chinese context, the shape standards of hip and belly – 'peach buttocks' and 'mermaid line' are currently popular among many women.

and childcare services for women during their exercise (Lanxiong Sports, 2017).

In addition to providing special courses, products, and services for women, some gyms and sports and fitness brand stores also organize regular activities focusing on various hot topics that women are interested in, such as fashion, beauty, flower arrangement, wine tasting, nutrition matching, sailing, horse riding, travelling, and child rearing. These services create a healthy and comfortable community for female fitness consumers. Moreover, many suppliers of women's fitness apparel, equipment, and health supplements claim that their products are better suited to women's physiological needs or body structures. Alternatively, they often attract female consumers through designs that align with women's aesthetic preferences.

The design of women's fitness apparel is a significant case. In the investigation, 11 interviewees demonstrated a clear preference for the tight-fitting fitness apparel. The questionnaire shows that 40.8% of the respondents exhibited a significant preference for the tight-fitting fitness apparel, which is higher than the data about loose apparel (36.2%). In the interview, in terms of the reasons why they choose this type of fitness attire, respondents emphasized aesthetic preferences and the professionalism or suitability for fitness activities. Interviewee number 15 explained that the close-fitting clothes enabled her to observe her fitness movements. Interviewee number 9 indicated that she liked the fitness clothing from Lululemon,³² and the reason was that the fabric is comfortable and this clothing in a close-fitting style displays better visual effect of slimming.

The popularity of form-fitting fitness apparel for women reflects both the fitness market's growing attentiveness to the needs of female consumers and the evolving aesthetic norms surrounding women's bodies in Chinese society. Since the reform and opening-up, women have been allowed to re-embrace their feminine identity and traits instead of advocating the image of strong, non-feminine, and muscular women. Specifically, in the realm of consumption, femininity is often associated with beauty consumption, which includes the purchase of items like high heels, skirts, and body shaping products. Regardless of the extent to which femininity is influenced by biology

³² Lululemon is a yoga fitness clothing brand from Canada. The majority of fitness clothing products are designed in a close-fitting style.

or social factors, the large scale of beauty consumption among Chinese women reflects their proactive attitudes toward embracing femininity. Under such circumstances, fitness apparel specifically designed for women, especially the tight-fitting fitness clothing (such as women's sports bras and leggings) that presents feminine traits and can accentuate female body curves, has gradually become mainstream in women's fitness attire. Such styles of clothing align with the specific aesthetic ideals pursued by contemporary women, further reinforcing bodily curves as a key visual marker of the female physique.

Furthermore, due to the significant consumption potential of women, there has been the emergence of women-only fitness spaces in China, such as women-only gyms. These gyms often take into consideration women's preferences when creating the spatial atmosphere and decorating the facilities. For example, some female-only gyms place flowers and plants all year round; toilets are equipped with disinfectants and small notes to remind women to pay attention to various details; towels and slippers are frequently disinfected. A female gym in Beijing has created an overall atmosphere that is characterized by pink and cartoon-style elements; it has provided aesthetically pleasing amenities, such as beautiful beds, to ensure that fitness-related women do not feel like they are rough and sweating profusely, but rather maintain a sense of delicacy (Lanxiong Sports, 2017).

In the fitness market, suppliers not only focus on the general needs and characteristics of women but are also concerned with the non-conventional fitness needs of women. For example, some female boxing and strength training programs have emerged in the market, enriching the forms of fitness available to women. However, not all non-conventional women's fitness needs have been echoed by the market.

One interviewee practising in a yoga studio indicated that:

In my student days, the school organized an amateur basketball team, and I joined it... playing basketball... [The reason for not considering playing basketball now...] Basketball is... also good. However, for me, it's not easy to make an appointment with playmates right now... especially for girls. You can't play basketball with boys.

If you are allowed to play, your speed and strength are far behind those of men. Men may not enjoy playing basketball with you, and you may also worry about... colliding or getting injured... About the appointment, it is more convenient for boys... In my workplace... there are male groups organizing basketball activities every week... [If it is possible to find playmates...] I am still willing to do it... (No. 12)

This expression reflects that for women seeking fitness opportunities, there is a disparity in the availability of various sports and fitness formats. Yoga and similar individual-oriented fitness classes are plentiful and accessible in the market. However, in China, once removed from campus infrastructure, women who are interested in playing basketball face significant obstacles in locating or self-organizing games for mass leisure, particularly in the market. On the one hand, the format of multiplayer or collective competition sports, such as basketball and football doesn't align with the preferences of the majority of fitness women. Furthermore, it involves greater logistical complexity, such as securing appropriate venues, coordinating schedules, and organizing groups. All the mentioned elements would lead to an increase in operational costs without a guaranteed proportional return on investment. Consequently, suppliers have largely neglected the market segment of women's collective sport. On the other hand, this neglect implies the potential for a 'blue ocean' in the women's fitness market. It is difficult for female individuals to organize or find participation opportunities for such multiplayer sport programs. By leveraging commercial networks and digital platforms to facilitate participant recruitment and event management, as well as stimulating women's corresponding interests through targeted marketing, businesses may unlock a new segment of the fitness market. Accordingly, this business action may lower the barriers to entry for women's team sport, promoting a more diversified development of women's sport in China.

The market-oriented transformation of the sports industry resulted in more effective resource allocation, contributing to a wide range of affordable fitness goods and services for women. In addition to the market-oriented policy, the production activities of manufacturers are closely tied to the local technological level. China Daily (2022) declares that China has the most complete industrial system and industrial categories in

the world, with leading industry chain support systems, great potential, and strong resilience. The development of industrial technology and scale in China, along with lower labor costs, has contributed to the production of these fitness products and services for women.

Additionally, technological innovation has significantly bolstered buyer power. Carpenter and Sanders (2014: 88) demonstrate that numerous choices, more product information for price and quality comparison, and higher consumer group prestige could improve buyer power. The advancement of digital technology in China, such as the emergence and widespread use of social media and e-commerce platforms, has facilitated women's access to information (see Appendix 6) and communication or collaboration among women, thereby helping female consumers gain relative advantages in the fitness market. In response to this empowered consumer base, suppliers must improve their offerings, giving rise to an expanding range of cost-effective, women-centric fitness products and services. Informed consumers drive supplier innovation. Meanwhile, enhanced offerings in turn demonstrate consumers' influence. This iterative feedback loop has generated a more competitive and responsive fitness market satisfying the diverse needs of women.

4.2.2 Marketing targeted at fitness women

In China's consumer market, a diverse array of marketing and promotional campaigns continues to emerge, significantly stimulating public enthusiasm for consumption and fostering a consumer culture. In the marketing, fitness product businesses are not merely limited to promoting the objective value or use value of products to women. Additionally, they enhance consumers' perceived value of products by introducing more diversified and abstract consumption concepts and meanings through a symbolic system. According to Kadirov and Varey (2011), the popularity of the symbolic dimension of marketing systems has been a significant phenomenon in the existing market, and meaning-laden products developed by this system seem to be a solution for people to attain their ideal self-identity. In China's fitness market, among numerous advertisements and promotional materials, the primary focus is often on abstract descriptions and symbolic values rather than detailed explanations of the functional benefits of products.

With the rise of new communication technologies represented by social media, more extensive penetration pathways have been opened up for symbolic marketing, enabling it to embed itself more deeply into the public's cognitive structure and daily practices. In contrast to the one-way symbolic value infusion model in the traditional media era, symbols can be co-created, negotiated, and revised by commercial actors, users, influencers, and platform algorithms in the digital age. On social media platforms, content sharing by massive numbers of ordinary users transforms brands' self-promotion into a community consensus that can be experienced and verified (Li et al., 2021). This content form enhances the authenticity and credibility of symbols. The fast interaction and feedback system constructed by social media, especially the real-time interaction function in live streaming, enables symbols to dynamically evolve into concepts that better fit the psychology of consumer groups effectively (Li et al., 2021). This mechanism allows marketing information to embed into consumers' cognitive frameworks in a highly adaptive form, significantly improving the efficiency and accuracy of communication. Furthermore, targeting specific consumer groups through algorithmic and community functions also improves marketing precision. In addition, media functions such as live streaming and short-form videos convert abstract symbols into experience-oriented contexts, which effectively strengthens the emotional connection with consumers and enables consumers to internalize symbolic value at the perceptual level.

Against the specific context of women's fitness consumption in China, the information hub function of social media is particularly prominent. According to the *2025 Insight Report on China's Yoga, Dance, and Fitness Apparel Market*, 47% of consumers take social media advertisements as their primary access to fitness apparel information, which reveals the key position of social media in the fitness consumer decision-making chain (Shangpu Group, 2026). A more profound change lies in that on social media, female fitness consumers are no longer passive recipients of symbolic meanings, but actively participate in the production and reproduction of consumption symbols. During this participation process, under the combined effect of multiple factors including real-time interaction in live streaming studios, the sense of urgency created by time-limited

discounts, and purchase verification from peers, female consumers perceive various abstract symbols in a concrete way. However, the embodiment and contextualization of this symbolic experience has tilted the balance of consumer decision-making from rational analysis to emotional identification and impulsive purchasing. In other words, in commercial contexts, a series of convenient and even free services on social media platforms, such as free online fitness courses, are essentially pre-deployment lures that introduce women into the consumption-oriented cognitive system by lowering participation thresholds, thereby enhancing women's emotional identification with the consumption system. To sum up, the new symbolic marketing paradigm generated by social media has reconstructed the logic of women's fitness consumption to a certain extent. Their consumption has been shifted from the traditional functional demand-driven model to a meaning consumption practice co-driven by symbolic identification, emotional resonance, and community belonging. In this process, female consumption behavior itself has become an organic extension of the symbolic meaning production chain.

The meaning system in women's fitness consumption is dominated by symbolic meanings derived from the core of 'health' and 'beauty'. With the rise in economic and material standards of living, as well as the increase in social pressures, maintaining good health has become a significant topic of discussion among women, particularly urban women. This is evident in the growing number of health-related columns in women's magazines, television programs, and on the Internet. In China, the media covers a wide array of issues related to women's fitness and health, ranging from dental health to maintaining 'a healthy sexual life'; and the core of these discussions is a general emphasis on the importance of engaging in sports and exercise (Xiong, 2006: 156). As a result, not only do women adopt a healthy lifestyle through fitness, but many suppliers in the fitness market also actively construct value-in-signs by linking their products with a healthy lifestyle, a lifestyle reflecting contemporary women's ideals of self-awareness, self-care, women's independence, and other appealing conceptions.

In addition to health considerations, fitness is closely linked to perceptions of beauty. This connection allows for a significant amount of symbolic interpretation in fitness

consumption. Fitness activities are a key method to attain an ideal body shape. Through exercise, women can sculpt a body that aligns with aesthetic standards. Consequently, in various fitness-related advertising and promotional activities, concepts related to beauty are constantly emphasized to women. Accordingly, various forms of fitness consumption serve not only as a means to achieve a desired appearance but also as commodities that embody certain beauty ideals. For instance, the ideal of elegant and beautiful women is often evoked in the gym's marketing. Currently, within the realm of women's fitness, the apparel brand of Lululemon has garnered increasing attention among female consumers from the middle class, particularly in first- and second-tier cities across China. A substantial number of these individuals are enthusiastic about wearing Lululemon's yoga attire as a means of showcasing their sophisticated fashion sense and their commitment to a health-conscious and refined lifestyle. Interviewee number 9's statement mentioned above has directly reflected the Lululemon's appeal of function and also implied its construction of brand loyalty, which uncovers how capitalism convinces fitness women to buy these products. Through the establishment of technological trustworthiness, Lululemon extends the context of product presentation to encompass sophisticated lifestyles, effectively transforming commodities into symbolic systems embedded with cultural significance and identity commitments. Moreover, by cultivating emotional communities, Lululemon sustains its premium pricing and market barriers. This is a quintessential operational paradigm of contemporary capital.

Overall, fitness consumption, as an effective practical tool with a use value for 'health' and 'beauty', becomes increasingly associated with a symbolic value related to these two concepts. In various fitness-related advertising and promotional activities, concepts such as beauty, health, confidence, fashion, female empowerment, and self-care are consistently emphasized to women (Huanqiu, 2021; Yidian, 2023). One interviewee indicated that:

Many fitness advertisements focus on showcasing beautiful bodies: symmetrical figures, beautiful appearance... and then express that: a woman with a good figure is more qualified to live a richer and superior life... Naturally, advertisements link these concepts of money, wealth, elitism, and happiness with fitness... Thus, it

extends the concept of fitness beyond just the function of looking good... (No. 5)

Interviewee number 16 who loves yoga shared her WeChat official account with me. One of the articles on it indicated her views about the meanings and values of yoga exercise: The life of yoga practitioners has a connection with these ideas: a regular life, a balanced diet, confidence, enjoying life, a positive attitude, etc. Moreover, in a commercial promotion about women's fitness, the views of 'maintaining confidence and vitality, finding a balanced and healthy lifestyle', 'the beauty of women should not follow the public standards', and 'bringing joy to women' were emphasized (Huanqiu, 2021). In the visual promotion, beautiful, energetic, and confident female images or bodies attract women to participate in fitness consumption (see Appendix 7). In summary, these advertisements and information targeting women indicate that sellers take catering to women's pursuits of individual development and personal needs as a significant selling point of their fitness products.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Consumption Experiences of Fitness Women in China: The Supplier-Consumer Interaction

Due to intense competition in the fitness industry, suppliers focus on meeting consumers' needs in order to provide services and goods. Many sellers offer reduced prices, conduct product innovation, upgrade services, and provide a variety of fitness services and products specifically tailored for women. They also introduce more diversified and abstract consumption concepts linking fitness and women's well-being, as well as expectations. These marketing strategies have enhanced their attractiveness and competitiveness in the female fitness market. Products, services, and marketing have responded to women's individual fitness needs. However, based on suppliers' inherently profit-driven motivations embedded in their decision-making, certain actions they undertake intensify the complexity of the market environment encountered by fitness-oriented women.

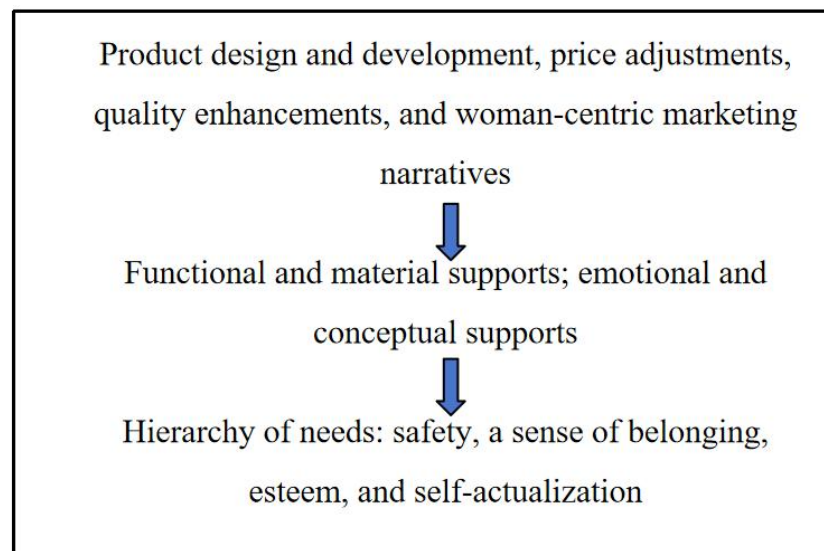
This chapter analyzes the interactions between supplier and consumer among four critical dimensions of consumer decision-making processes to explore practical consumption experiences of fitness women. First, it examines market responses to women's needs at various levels, which explains why women participate in consumer-based fitness activities. Second, the study explores the discrepancy between fitness-oriented women's perceived value shaped by suppliers and actual fitness outcomes and lifestyle expectations during the process of product value evaluation and selection. Third, through the lens of learning behavior, the shaping of consumer behaviors of female fitness participants by suppliers, as well as women's responses and the resultant impacts, are explored. Fourth, within the free-consumption framework, the actual influence exerted by suppliers and the inherent limitations in fitness-oriented women's consumption decisions are discussed through the lens of bounded rationality. Finally, impacts around market structure on fitness women are explained. This discussion reveals

what opportunities women gain and challenges faced by them through the consumption, as well as what the underlying mechanisms governing their consumption processes are.

5.1 Market's responses to women's needs at various levels

The products, services, and marketing in the fitness market have provided women with various opportunities to fulfil their diverse needs, preferences, and interests (see Figure 5.1). These commercial offerings enhance women's fitness experiences and optimize their fitness environments by providing more specialized fitness services, lowering the participation threshold, supporting the balance of women's family, work, and personal lives, creating a more female-friendly fitness atmosphere, and alleviating gender stereotypes.

Figure 5.1 Market's responses to women's needs at various levels



Product development, price adjustments, and quality enhancements are generally the most direct approaches to increasing suppliers' appeal. These strategies elevate women's fitness experiences mainly through addressing safety-related needs, including preferable opportunities for fitness and health and safety guarantee (Jerome, 2013).

In the interview, respondents provided several reasons for allocating limited budget (or income) to fitness consumption instead of just participating in free exercise services. Interviewee number 5 said that she used to practice on her own without spending money. However, later on, she realized that if she wanted to truly better understand her body and

know how to exercise scientifically and effectively, she needed to find a coach. Interviewee number 12 highlighted that spending money on fitness is necessary because there are sports injuries during exercise. The help of a professional coach can reduce the probability of such injuries. Furthermore, Interviewee number 1 expressed a desire to join a yoga studio near her home with a comfortable overall environment. Interviewee number 11 mentioned that she was willing to pay a higher price for a fitness membership card in order to have access to a better fitness environment. Indeed, she has already spent a significant amount of money on this. Interviewee number 10 explained that going to the gym was relatively controllable, safe, and proper; the atmosphere in gyms was very good, and there was sufficient professional equipment for her training. She thought free fitness activities cannot provide these.

These statements show that, specialized fitness equipment, fitness facilities, instructors' fitness courses, and a more suitable fitness environment offered by the suppliers in the market, significantly improve women's fitness experience and fitness efficiency (such as effectively achieving their fitness goals, like health or weight loss goals), and help them avoid sports injuries. In terms of the equipment, in addition to the gyms, equipment manufacturers have also actively developed professional-grade fitness equipment tailored for individual female users to use at home or in other private spaces.

In the fitness practice, the accessibility of fitness products is not only related to the richness of product choices but also closely linked to the space convenience of the consumption. Interviewee number 1 indicated that she needed to find a yoga studio near her house. Otherwise, it would be difficult to persist in practice due to the long distance. For Chinese fitness-oriented women, nowadays, there are many fitness institutions located in commercial areas, residential areas, and near office buildings. The E-commerce platform displays that, in Chengdu, the region where I conducted fieldwork for my research, fitness institutions have spread to various regions of the city, especially in bustling commercial areas; meanwhile, it is not uncommon to find gym annual cards priced below 1000 RMB (see Appendix 8). Moreover, there are many fitness product stores located in commercial areas, which offer women the opportunity to purchase professional or suitable fitness clothing and equipment. Admittedly, it is relatively

difficult for a supplier to run a fitness institution at more remote locations with fewer customer sources. Nevertheless, the advancement of digital and information technologies fostered the proliferation of online fitness services and platform (e.g., fitness online application and online live teaching) in China. It has effectively mitigated spatial constraints, thereby enhancing the accessibility and convenience of fitness-related consumption. Therefore, more women engage with commercial fitness services as a means to optimize their personal fitness experiences.

The diversity of fitness products and services is reflected not only in their functional variety but also in the broad range of pricing options available. The interview shows that there are many affordable commercial fitness services and products, including discounted gym memberships and fitness apps. These affordable products have met the sports development needs of more women, especially women with lower incomes. These products further alleviate some of women's economic pressures brought about by an intersectional oppression of gender and class, expands the social strata range of women in sports participation, and increases the number of accessible sports facilities for women in public spaces.

The functional variety of fitness products and services is manifested in the multidimensional advancement of specialization and also includes innovations and developments specifically tailored to women's physiological characteristics and lifestyle needs. One interviewee indicated that:

I think nowadays, gym members are very blissful... It is because when a child cries, the staff or coaches in the gym will help take care of the child. Hence, you can exercise well, right? (No. 15)

The unequal gender division of labor of household chores has led to the burden of childcare on women, negatively affecting their fitness schedules. For the response to this scheduling conflict, many gyms offer childcare services to assist some women in effectively managing their children. This enhances businesses' market competitiveness and also helps women better balance family, work, and fitness life.

The fitness courses about childbirth are important products and services for female

consumers in the fitness market. An interviewee who has given birth said that:

I had a child last year. During my pregnancy, I bought the courses on yoga for maternity care. Well, it has a therapeutic effect, so its price is a bit high, costing 27,000 RMB for 60 classes ... This practice made me feel a strong sense of interaction with the body ... During pregnancy, there were some back pains, various pubic pains, leg swelling, and so on. Then, the coach was more targeted to address these physical issues ... Anyway, during the process of pregnancy and childbirth, my overall mental state... everything was okay, and I didn't feel very uncomfortable, unlike other pregnant women... Of course, my condition was not as good as before pregnancy, but it was still okay. I can still handle my daily work without much delay (No. 1)

This expression indicates that specialized commercial fitness services can not only help women who give birth keep well and recover quickly, but also further enable women to more easily engage in work and public practice. Faced with the enormous physical and psychological burden of childbirth, many women attempt to better control their bodies through these fitness services in order to maintain their independence and self-esteem. This can help women break free from the traditional postpartum tasks to vent their emotions and recreate an idealized positive self, which alleviates systemic gendered oppression that childbirth brings to women (Deng, 2023: 31). Indeed, commercial services provide systematic and scientifically-based physical activities, facilitating the effective restoration of women's physiological functions. These services also afford women dedicated personal time, a temporary respite from the intensive demands of motherhood. Furthermore, through training that produces tangible bodily changes, women can regain a sense of agency over their own bodies after the experience of having their bodies appropriated by fetal development. These benefits reflect that fitness courses for childbirth not only address safety-related needs (like health) but also, to a certain extent, fulfill women's needs for esteem and even self-actualization. Nonetheless, commercial fitness programs represent merely an individual coping strategy. Only through collective political action for reforming public policies and transforming familial narratives, substantive liberation from traditional postpartum obligations and

systemic constraints can be achieved.

The survey presents that women are concerned about the gender of other members and coaches during the fitness activities. One interviewee indicated that:

I think it's better to choose a female yoga coach... [About more senses of security...]

Yes, I think this can be taken into consideration. The second reason is that I think women may have better communication with each other in some aspects, right? She has a better understanding of your situation. (No. 1)

In the further questionnaire, 35% of surveyed women are completely unwilling or a bit unwilling to learn from male fitness coaches. Meanwhile, 83% of respondents feel varying degrees of embarrassment towards the presence of males in fitness venues. The statements from interviewed women, as well as the data from the questionnaire, show that the gender of other members and coaches has a significant influence on women's fitness experience, reflecting a similar (gendered) sense of fear or insecurity among some women in public fitness spaces. The market identifies the dilemma women face regarding gender interactions in public sports spaces, prompting the rise of women-only fitness spaces, like women-only gyms. The outcomes of my questionnaire show that 39% of respondents have a significant preference for women's exclusive gyms. These spaces provide women a sense of security that encompasses physical, emotional, and sociocultural dimensions.

Several factors contribute to women's discomfort in gender interactions in a mixed-gender space. First, in traditional Chinese culture, the 'distinction between men and women' (男女有别) is a significant notion that 'continues to influence the thinking and behavior of both genders, even today' (Xiao, 2013: 68). The view of 'men and women should keep a distance in their interactions' remains important in this gender culture. Interviewee number 15, a housewife with a long experience of fitness, mentioned that she would prefer to only contact with women in the gym. She emphasized 'distinction between men and women' because she considered herself a family-oriented individual. She emphasized that this was a personal requirement she had for herself in the marriage. Further, on the basis of questionnaire data, one-way analysis of variance was applied in

order to test whether differences of attitudes towards men exist among different marital status groups (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 The result of one-way analysis of variance

Marital status	N	Mean	SD	p (for F-test)	Cohen's <i>f</i>
Married	125	2.66	0.89	0.049	0.137
Outside of marriage	88	2.89	0.75		

The group of outside of marriage includes unmarried, divorced, and widowed woman. N refers to sample size. The range of mean, the average value, is from 1 (completely unwilling to learn with a male fitness coach) to 5 (very willing), and higher marks represent higher willingness. SD refers to standard deviation. P-value (0.049) is slightly lower than the usual significance level (0.05). Moreover, the observed average difference (0.23) and the small to moderate effect size (Cohen's $f = 0.137$) suggest that this difference may have some practical significance in reality. Hence, the statement and data uncovers that family responsibilities, as norms shaping female behavior, impose constraints on interactions between men and women in mixed-gender fitness spaces.

The view of 'distinction between men and women' emphasizes that women should maintain a proper social distance from men who are not closely related by blood or marriage, including relationships like a man and his brother's wife (sister-in-law). Within such frameworks, women have historically been confined to the private, domestic sphere, thereby maintaining physical and social distance from unrelated men, a practice aimed at ensuring the 'purity' of patrilineal descent. This norm, thus, imposes a more stringent binding on married women. This spatial and relational separation reinforced a gendered division of power characterized by male dominance and female subordination. Fundamentally, this arrangement served to secure the monopolistic inheritance of family wealth and authority by men, thereby consolidating male control over political and economic resources. In modern times, men and women are not strictly bound by this

traditional norm, and behaviors that go against this norm are not widely condemned by society as morally wrong. However, this cultural norm still impacts the daily lives of women today. It sets particular spatial, physical, and behavioral boundaries for women (and men). When actual behaviors deviate from these boundaries, particularly when such boundary requirements conflict with women's practical demands, women will experience anxiety and uneasiness (Xiao, 2013). Thus, some women tend to avoid sharing fitness spaces with men, leading to a 'voluntary gender segregation'.

More importantly, even though certain traditional gender norms are no longer explicitly enforced, present-day China still exhibits characteristics of the patriarchal structure. The patriarchal structure, with the subtle and deeply ingrained constraints of boundary awareness stemming from the traditional culture of 'distinction between men and women', continues to shape social relations and institutional practices. In contemporary China, these gender dilemmas are mainly articulated and publicly discussed through the languages, analysis categories, and ideological tools provided by Western feminist discourse, such as 'gaze theory' and 'structural gendered discrimination' (explained in detail in the following paragraphs) (Wu, 2024). In terms of concrete improvement strategies, society has attempted to promote some gender-inclusive initiatives, such as all-gender rest rooms. However, the dominant and high-profile measures remain approaches with gender segregation tendencies, including separating serving windows for men and women, conversion of male toilets to female toilets, and women-only gyms (Sohu, 2023; The Paper, 2020). Consequently, although a growing number of women no longer endorse the traditional cultural conceptualization of gender issues, their practical behaviors still maintain a 'distinction between men and women' pattern. In public discourse, contemporary women's empowerment practices are sometimes even criticized for intensifying gender opposition and polarization between men and women (China Internet Information Center, 2025). Nevertheless, the increasingly fierce debates also reflect that gender issues have shifted from 'silence' to 'dialogue', which creates an opportunity to promote the realization of a fairer and more inclusive gender order in society.

Regarding the specific gender dilemmas in contemporary fitness practices, one

interviewee indicated that:

In the gym... I like loose fitting clothes because I may still be afraid of people looking at me... When I exercise in the gym...about my body, such as my chest, sometimes I feel it's very big, and I feel a bit embarrassed, especially when there are men around me... (No. 7)

Interviewee's discomfort regarding the exposure of female chest as secondary sexual characteristics implies that gendered bodies are subjected to scrutiny. Interviewee's expression highlights that male presence, particularly the male gaze, leads to increased discomfort. This reflects that women are still in a vulnerable or defensive position in socialized sexual relationships in contemporary China. The concept of sexual relationships here extends beyond the act of sex to encompass a broader range of socio-cultural dynamics, including emotional intimacies, sexual imaginaries, norms of bodily presentation, and the cultural scripts that govern sexual conduct (Tong, 2011: 90). These socialized sexual dynamics, while not always explicit, exert a profound influence on the microscopic scenes of practical sexual interaction in fitness contexts. Even if women consciously choose not to adhere to traditional behavioral norms, in line with the social context of gender hierarchy, the privileges that men have in public places and the physical vulnerabilities that women face might heighten self-monitoring, spatial avoidance, or emotional discomfort among women (Tong, 2011: 92). This structural gendered discrimination may lead female fitness consumers to perceive male fitness coaches and trainees as disturbing elements. As a result, within fitness spaces such as gyms, interactions that are ostensibly professional, such as physical guidance, may nevertheless be interpreted by some women as intrusive or inappropriate, regardless of intention. Such women's responses are shaped not only by individual experiences but by broader societal discourses that delineate what is acceptable, desirable, or threatening in gendered public interaction. Existing fitness spaces are structured by gendered power dynamics. Such environments can not provide women with sufficient safety, and women's psychological and physical boundaries are susceptible to infringement. The avoidance behavior exhibited by women constitutes a form of self-limitation, reflecting acquiescence to existing gender inequality and thereby reproducing the gendered social

order.

Actually, in China, there have been numerous reports of male fitness coaches engaging in sexual harassment or inappropriate relationships with female trainees, including touching buttocks, secretly filming private parts of women, verbal provocation, etc (Baijiahao, 2023; NetEase, 2023; Sohu, 2022). Figure 5.3 shows the information about an illegal case of sexual harassment by male fitness coaches.³³ Consequently, despite the professional requirements of fitness guidance allowing for physical intimacy between men and women, many women still prefer to maintain a certain distance from men's bodies. The driving force behind the behavior of maintaining distance from men encompass both self-regulatory conduct (mentioned above) and external risk aversion. This reflects the shaping of women's behavior by the patriarchal structure at different aspects.

Figure 5.3 An administrative penalty decision regarding a sexual harassment case

结果信息公开

当前位置: 行政处罚结果信息 > 行政处罚结果详细信息

魏某 狼表

行政处罚决定书文号:	温鹿公(门)行罚决字[2020]02037号
被处罚单位(被处罚人):	魏某
执法部门:	【鹿城区】浙江省温州市公安局鹿城区分局南门派出所
作出行政处罚的日期:	2020-06-17

行政处罚决定书 (全文或摘要)

主要违法事实: 2020年6月16日20时许, 魏某 在鹿城区锦春大厦迈索健身房康复拉伸室对女顾客王*进行肌肉拉伸时, 为了看王*的阴部, 用剪刀将王*穿着的健身裤的裆部剪开。该魏某 的行为属情节较重。

行政处罚的种类和依据: 根据《中华人民共和国治安管理处罚法》第四十四条之规定, 决定给予魏某 行政拘留十四日的行政处罚, 根据《中华人民共和国治安管理处罚法》第十一条第一款并收缴剪刀一把。

行政处罚的执行方式和期限: 行政拘留送鹿城区拘留所执行。

Source: NetEase: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/IFK62GOI0556316L.html>

Interactions with men or being stared at by men often make women feel uncomfortable during their fitness routines. This discomfort can be understood as a manifestation of

³³ The main storyline is that the male coach engaged in obscene behavior while assisting a female client with stretching exercises, leading to disciplinary action being taken against him.

socially embedded sexual relations. John Berger's (2008) articulation of the 'male gaze' explains this dynamic: men look at women, and women internalize that they are being looked at; this process not only structures inter-gender relations but also fractures women's relation to themselves. In fitness contexts, as the surveillant gaze reproduces normative gender hierarchies, women are compelled to intensify self-censorship over their own behaviors. The result of the interview (Interviewee number 7's statement mentioned above) reveals that being stared at by men significantly negatively impacts the attiring of fitness women. This embodied unease may lead some women to avoid presenting feminine body characteristics and eschew close-fitting athletic apparel in exercises, even though this clothing is considered to possibly possess more functional advantages.

Moreover, Interviewee number 7 indicated that:

I usually avoid practicing with male practitioners. When they use the equipment, I go to practice other projects. Uh, this is because sometimes, after practicing, people will sweat. Especially after a man finishes practicing, the sweat on that fitness equipment is quite abundant. Most of the time, I bring a pack of tissues to clean. I always wait for them to finish it, and then I go to practice. (No. 7)

This explanation displays that the gender difference in hygiene levels has a negative impact on women's fitness experience. The societal gender norms formed under Chinese culture impose distinct standards of physical cleanliness requirements for men and women. The notion of socialized gender foregrounds the culturally constructed dimensions of masculinity and femininity, encompassing the symbolic meanings and behavioral expectations that are produced and reproduced within specific sociocultural circumstances. In modern China, prevailing gender norms prescribe distinct standards of appearance and comportment: women, more so than men, are expected to present themselves as immaculate and well-groomed (Cao, 2022). In Chinese culture, for men, perspiration may be valorized as visible signs of exertion and markers of vigorous endeavour (Chen, 2016); by contrast, a woman who appears sweaty risks being read as negligent or uncouth, in breach of ideals of 'femininity' that equate cleanliness with feminine virtue. These divergent imperatives, born of gender's social construction, erect

subtle yet pervasive barriers to the coexistence or interaction of both genders in the shared public space. Moreover, when bodily displays of exertion are valorized for one gender but stigmatized for another, co-presence in sports arenas becomes fraught with asymmetrical expectations. Consequently, the very logic of sport participation, ostensibly predicated on universal principles of physical competence, becomes inflected by sex-differentiated norms, reinforcing patterns of gender segregation within athletic contexts.

As a result, an increasing number of women tend to join women's exclusive gyms to wear their favorite tight fitness suits without any worries, in a more reassuring, cleaner environment. Media coverage also confirmed that the popularity of women's exclusive gyms can be attributed not only to the thoughtful services provided to women but also to the absence of a male environment, which makes some women feel safer, cleaner, and more comfortable (36Kr, 2022; NetEase, 2023; Sina Finance, 2023). The emergence of women-only fitness spaces in the market helps women alleviate interruptions of an unequal gender hierarchy, social gender norms, and gender dynamics in public domains in their fitness journey. This service may also improve women's sense of belonging in the male-dominated sports environment.

Marketing focusing on women's needs and societal expectations has fostered a sense of belonging among female participants, especially in the unconventional women's fitness activities. In the fitness market, regarding the development of product diversity, suppliers are also concerned with the non-conventional fitness needs of women, like female boxing. Interviewee number 19, a middle-aged woman, said that her experience of learning boxing in the gym was very positive. The coach consistently encouraged and assisted her in practice, and she did not encounter discrimination based on age or gender. These statement presents a subtle commercial environment that differs from the mainstream patriarchal sports narrative.

In the Chinese context, boxing remains heavily encoded with masculine symbolism and is widely perceived as a sport that exemplifies 'masculinity'. Gender stereotypes surrounding boxing formed around entrenched societal norms aligning physical aggression, strength, and competitiveness with male identity. These normative gender

role expectations often result in women internalizing a sense of incongruity between their socially constructed femininity and the demands of boxing. This incongruity might engender psychological resistance and bodily distrust among women who engage in boxing practices, limiting their capacity to fully participate or see themselves as legitimate subjects within this sport (Dai, 2014). The gap between culturally sanctioned gender roles and the gendered characteristics of certain sports like boxing reinforces psychological and symbolic barriers to female participation. Yet within the commercial fitness industry, such tensions are strategically navigated by market actors. Through targeted promotional strategies, sellers seek to reframe traditionally masculine sport as compatible with females. For instance, they present boxing as a path to empowerment or self-discipline. These marketing efforts construct a more congenial symbolic and emotional environment for women's participation in non-conventional fitness. This elevates female customers' perceived value. Consequently, from a consumer perspective, women rarely encounter negative discussions about female boxing in the business environment. This, to some extent, leads women to ignore the gender stereotypes that pose an obstacle to their practical participation in sports interests. Through ingenious repositioning by marketing, the gender attributes associated with traditionally masculine sports have been redefined, thereby integrating women into athletic forms that were previously perceived as exclusion of women. This repositioning may also increase women's confidence, a key element in the needs of esteem, in the fitness practice.

Suppliers provide emotional and conceptual support to female fitness enthusiasts by adopting woman-centric marketing narratives. These actions mainly address women's needs for a sense of belonging, esteem (like confidence), or self-actualization (like inner potential). This uncovers that the market serves not merely as a physical venue for material provisions but also profoundly shapes the consciousness and cognition of fitness-oriented women. Particularly, these woman-centric promotional discourses tend to align with broader social shifts in women's roles, progress, and aspirations, positioning fitness consumption as both a response to and an instrument of women's empowerment and development. These actions encourage and even create such female needs. By tailoring fitness products to females' expectations, marketers construct a

heightened sense of value and desirability around these fitness commodities. These extensive advertising and branding cultivate or reinforce diversified notions among fitness women, such as female empowerment, discipline, and self-care. These actions even foster the practice of progressive consciousness in fitness. For example, an interviewee stated:

Women often don't regard themselves as a complete person... They regard themselves more as a role in their family... In fitness, I feel like I am in control of my body, a sense of pleasure arises naturally, and my life becomes more lively... I think fitness is a good thing. If you can persist in fitness, it is a very beneficial thing for you. (No. 2)

The respondent's narrative revealed an awareness of self-care and reflection of traditional gender norms. These progressive notions have been responded to by the marketing, such as the views about 'finding a balanced and healthy lifestyle' and 'bringing joy to women' in advertisements (Huanqiu, 2021). These promotional discourses strengthen some women's feelings that they are prioritizing their own well-being and not confining themselves to family responsibilities. Morality and inner potential exploration are important factors in the needs of self-actualization (Jerome, 2013). Such discursive support assists women in liberating themselves from the moral constraints of domestic responsibilities, thereby empowering their self-development with morality significance. Furthermore, Interviewee number 5 realized that the fitness can provide her an independent space for the progress of the body and mind. Interviewee number 10 found that the fitness in gyms fostered her sense of independence and inclusiveness. The fitness atmosphere shaped by marketing could reinforce or awaken these women's sense of agency, promoting the integration of progressive consciousness into fitness practices. Such marketing enables women to be aware of the genuine challenges they encounter in traditional fitness environments and provides enhanced fitness opportunities for them. This commercial support unlocks more women's potential in the fields of fitness practice and even women's progress.

Moreover, in line with the popularity of concepts of beauty and health in marketing of women's fitness, the aesthetic sought after by some women, particularly female fitness

enthusiasts, is highly linked to ideas of ‘moderate muscle definition’, ‘slimness’, and ‘fitness’. This aesthetic differs from the prevailing aesthetic standard for women in contemporary China: ‘fair-complexioned, fragile, and young’, which is heavily influenced by traditional aesthetics and is considered to be the female image favored by men. A woman’s body not only holds personal significance but also embodies social and cultural implications. Baudrillard (1998: 134) asserts that in capitalist societies, women’s bodies are no longer portrayed primarily as labor but as a form of symbols in the public sphere. Different bodily images are often associated with distinct symbolic forms. The term body does not refer to the individualized female body, but rather emphasizes the body as constructed through a certain universal discourse. In the fitness realm, this ‘healthy’ beautiful female image manifests distinct symbolic representations and self-identity that diverge from traditional aesthetics shaped by patriarchy. The corresponding aesthetic discourse is considered to place greater emphasis on women’s well-being and empowerment of women’s bodies. The fitness-related marketing with extensive symbolic promotion has facilitated the increasing popularity of such aesthetic and views about women’s bodies. This marketing encourages women to engage in fitness activities and inspires them to reflect on the limitations imposed by the conventional aesthetic on their bodies and focus on a sense of body empowerment in body shaping.

5.2 Discrepancy between perceived value and reality

Suppliers always employ various strategies to modify the sense of product value by consumers, including female consumers. Suppliers often increase perceived value by consumers through responding to women’s lower-to-higher order needs. However, these actions also distort, amplify, or shape women’s perceptions of their fitness needs, making women’s fitness environments more complex and, in some cases, even worse. This has contributed to various challenges faced by fitness women.

Suppliers may enhance the objective value of their products to improve the perception of value, and they might also just alter customers’ subjective perception of the product’s value, sometimes by employing high-quality advertisements that conceal the true costs or deceptive practices to increase reference prices in consumers’ minds (Deloitte, 2021; Liu, 1998). These strategies are particularly prone to occur during promotion efforts of

fitness-related products with relatively low use-value. One of the significant issues that arises is that some gyms claim to have hired professional coaches but struggle to provide relevant, authoritative qualifications, which increases the risks for gym members, including women (Sohu, 2018). Such marketing relies on value simulation to modify consumer perception.

Furthermore, on the one hand, the diversity of fitness products and services with the broad range of pricing options available offers more sports opportunities for women. On the other hand, product differentiation within the fitness market functions as a mechanism for reinforcing class distinctions, both spatially and symbolically, and these distinctions intersect with gendered oppression. Premium fitness services, characterized by elevated pricing, exclusive memberships, and curated environments, serve to segregate clientele along socioeconomic lines. It creates corresponding fitness consumption as a marker of the middle and upper classes. This type of consumption has been criticized as conspicuous and ostentatious in nature, leading to exorbitant consumption (Veblen, 2017). Participation in high-end fitness becomes a performative affirmation of status and identity. However, even among affluent women, this empowerment remains influenced by gender-inequality resource allocations that circumscribe their leisure time and disposable income.

The satisfaction of conspicuous nature by one group often implies the relegation of another to an inferior status. Women with lower income can use cheap or no-cost fitness options, but generally these services lack gender-responsive design, such as adequate privacy or ergonomic equipment tailored to female physiology. This limit impedes their effective exercise and reinforces a dual marginalization of class and gender. Moreover, women with lower income are often guided to provide uncompensated emotional labor, such as social media engagement of 'likes' or 'shares', in exchange for access to discounted fitness services or products. Beyond the realm of material transformations, people's leisure consumption behavior and consumption culture have become integrated into the capitalist industry, and they are also subject to the capitalist production process and market logic (Schor, 2007). The dilemma of women with lower income mirrors that fitness consumption becomes alienated, embedded within the framework of social

relations distortion, as well as the exploitation of labor power. The act of ‘likes’ by these women does not represent natural emotional interaction or genuine interpersonal connection, but rather represents the practice of value exchange.

The product differentiation and stratification in the fitness market lead to the manifestation of contradictions between a hierarchy of more superior products and limited personal income. This means that consumers, including women, can never be truly satisfied within the free market framework. From the perspective of market logic, the contradiction between unlimited personal needs and limited income always exists. The sense of dissatisfaction will not be significantly alleviated by the increase in income. In the commercial system, products with different qualities and effects are classified into different levels, which would ultimately be reflected in the price. There is almost no ceiling or confine in this construction of classes of value. In the consumption of fitness in China, there are both basic subscriptions costing several hundred RMB per year and others costing as much as 100,000 RMB for one fee (NetEase, 2022). Consumers always hope to enjoy higher-quality products and services. However, limited income often leads to a significant gap between the services that women could have access to and the more premium services they may desire. Under this logic, it can be accepted that for almost all women (except a few high-net-worth women), their income will restrict them from enjoying their ideal products in fitness consumption. A higher income allows consumers to afford better products, but they often continue to exhibit unmet desires directed toward more ideal, expensive fitness products. In a market-oriented economic system, this dynamic becomes almost endless. Capitalism perpetuates a cycle of stimulating unfulfilled desires to foster continuous consumption. In contrast to males, many of whose stimulated desires are directed toward external, accumulable ‘objects’, a greater proportion of women’s desires are channeled and fixated upon the ‘self-body’. Consequently, the amplification of women’s desire by capital reinforces the objectification of the female body. Moreover, the production of desires surrounding women’s bodily self-care spans nearly the entire life cycle. The alliance of capitalism and gender norms entices women to anchor their fulfillment criteria to the product price and the external alterations of the body, thereby suppressing their attention to intrinsic

self-fulfillment in fitness practices.

Modern capitalism is a mythological system formed through the manipulation of symbols, which typically present a direct referential function (Huppertz, 2011). The construction of mythological system includes the repackaging of capitalist ideologies and objectives into ostensible human nature, which is presented as universally desirable. Moreover, the mythological system appropriates positively charged terms (signifiers), such as freedom, individuality, and self-actualization, to imbue the notion of universal values with content, and then forcibly links these signifiers to specific consumer behaviors (the signified). The cycle of insatiable desire (as discussed earlier) functions as the unattainable state of 'wholeness' toward which the mythological system perpetually points. In this modern capitalism, the specific connotations of value embedded within the objects have changed. Baudrillard (1998: 10) explains that, in this society, commodities possess dual attributes of 'use value' and 'symbolic value'. Particularly, what people consume is no longer the inherent value of the object itself; rather, the essence of consumption lies in symbolic consumption. Within this context, suppliers often link their products with meaningful concepts to increase the perceived value by customers. The corporeal products are embedded with many abstract meanings, thereby becoming more valuable. Although the marketing with meaning-laden contents encouraged more women to apply sport as a means to enjoy life and express themselves and enriched the sports narrative based on women's perspectives, values, and pursuits, the diversified concepts behind the social meaning are complex. Specifically, the market focuses on various women's preferences and demands, some of which are shaped by the patriarchal norms, like requirements for appearance. These are still seen by the market as key needs to exploit in order to enhance perceived value. In China's fitness market, although non-traditional women's fitness activities such as boxing and strength training have gained increasing popularity among women, fitness practices that align more closely with conventional feminine identities, such as yoga, continue to attract broader female consumers. Within the domain of yoga, commercial actors frequently emphasize and circulate idealized representations of the female body of 'slender, flexible, and curvaceous'. Overall, in the commercial narratives in the fitness market, traditional

female images coexist with more progressive representations of women. These commercial actions just repackage women's sports participation within narrow, consumer-oriented frameworks, playing an extremely limited role in challenging structural gender norms in society.

Further, these diversified, and at times contradictory, promotional views are solidified through the construction of 'fortresses' by customized narratives. Enabled by digital technology, public narrative spaces can be effectively fragmented through the isolating nature of online communities. The development of the women's fitness market promotes the construction of a discourse centered on women's development in the sports field of China. However, the narrative's reach is surrounded by invisible 'fences'. The market tends to segment consumer groups, reinforcing its preferred narratives within each segment to maximize the perceived value across the entire consumer base. Male-centered sports narratives are promoted in male sports communities, while female-centered sports narratives are emphasized in female communities. In female communities, narratives have been further segmented according to distinct consumer groups. For example, within female demographics preferring more traditional ideals of femininity and desirable lifestyles, capital actively promotes fitness programs for enhancing appeal to male preferences. However, such notions are dismissed by the 'new independent' women. Therefore, capital also critiques such notions within 'independent' group and then creates new consumption narratives. These divergent ideologies become amplified only within their respective targeted groups, with limited capacity to have the actual societal impact on external environments. In such a structure of various isolated 'chambers', direct confrontation between contradictory viewpoints is systematically avoided. This avoidance implies the suppression of meaningful debate and exchange of sports perspectives. Under this fragmented information structure, the dissemination of female-friendly sports narratives is essentially limited in scope.

Some marketing concepts, although nominally promoting women's progress and the awakening of agency, are essentially aimed at expanding consumption. With advocating for 'healthy' beauty in fitness consumption, some fitness women tend to adhere to aesthetic standards that align with their physiological traits and health requirements. This

derives a sense of physical empowerment and establishing autonomy while they enhance their appearance. The practical implementation of these progressive gender narratives is often materialized through specific bodily aesthetic standards, which in turn stimulate new and diverse forms of fitness consumption. In the interview, fitness women who prefer 'healthy' beauty (Interviewee number 12 and Interviewee number 15) often focus on multiple aspects of their bodies, including data changes in body curves of various parts and weight. Conventional medical standards of health are predicated upon established physiological biomarkers, such as blood pressure, blood glucose, and lipid profiles. However, women who prefer 'healthy' beauty often try to foreground a more expansive array of somatic metrics. They may track changes in waist-to-hip ratio, limb circumferences, or body-mass fluctuations as goals for 'fitness'. Under the guise of promoting well-being, the notion of 'healthy beauty' essentially functions to instill aesthetic aspirations in women rather than promoting women's concerns about their actual health.

In contemporary consumer culture, female bodies have become central to female consumption, and particular body aesthetic standards have evolved into a symbolic aspect of body consumption. Women are encouraged to amplify their attractiveness and command attention within social fields through disciplined self-care and aesthetic maintenance. This symbolic regime recasts the body from a natural, biological substrate into a mediated signifier of worth, driving women to engage in continuous consumption to accrue this symbolic value. Within the domain of fitness consumption, this dynamic is performed by the fusion of aesthetic norms embedded the notion of health with discourses of women's empowerment and self-improvement, heavily influenced and manipulated by a network of consumption systems and symbols. This aesthetic framework establishes specific criteria for different parts of the female body, thereby generating diverse consumer demands. For example, many gyms provide tailored workout programs targeting specific body areas such as buttocks, back, shoulders, and more. Throughout the fitness journey, the coach's guidance and physique, the portrayal of fitness women in promotional materials, and the overall fitness atmosphere consistently highlight this intricate aesthetic standard. This emphasis with symbolic

promotion drives women to consume an ever-expanding array of specialized fitness commodities, each promising incremental alignment with the ideal form. This prompts large-quantity consumption or even excessive spending among women. In a commercially driven fitness environment, women's bodies have been recast as sites upon which commercial discourses inscribe some kind of normative beauty standard. Consequently, their bodies become repositories of commercial value within a market-driven logic. Among the fitness consumption, embedding the notion of health within aesthetic norms might even obscure this process of commodification of women's bodies, as well as the appropriation of the women's autonomy by capital.

Furthermore, in line with technological innovation, intelligent fitness devices, such as sports trackers and smart bracelets, systematically quantify female body data (e.g., caloric expenditure, waist circumference, and body-fat percentage). This technology constitutes the body itself as a site of continuous measurement and optimization within digital infrastructures, enrolling gendered bodies within algorithmic governance frameworks. Although such self-monitoring tools ostensibly offer women enhanced control over their physical well-being, simultaneously, bodily objectification of women is embedded into normative technical standards. Conveying aesthetic requirements for women through precise, 'scientific' metrics makes the patriarchal scrutiny show an illusion of incontestability. This technical framework specifically enumerates and elaborates on the commercial value of the female body as well as further consolidates gendered power relations. Furthermore, capital's mastery of female bodily data entails risks of privacy concession and exploitation. Women should be equipped with awareness of structural issues such as gender equality and environmental justice when leveraging personal physiological data, thereby avoiding falling into anxiety of isolated 'self-optimization'.

The symbolization driven by the meaning-laden products and marketing carries an inherent virtual danger. One interviewee who considered fitness and health as her way of life indicated that:

I used to exercise really hard, almost every day... Oh, I thought I had to do enough of these exercises every day, if I want to become a physically and mentally healthy

girl. Well, however, I realized that I was really tired of doing this. And in fact, even if I keep doing it every day, the results may not be as good as I imagined. Well, I found that my progress became slower and even a bit backward at times. Then, at this moment, I was anxious and skeptical. Well, then I fell into an abyss... I and my body were doing fitness, but my heart was not there. I just treated it as a task to complete... My doing so was not good for myself, but it went against that kind of health... Later on, I gradually realized this. I learned to allow myself to rest for a day or two. (No. 5)

This narrative implies a subtle distinction between the concept of health and the reality of health. Because of the marketing emphasizing the link between fitness and health, fitness commodities replace the interviewee's genuine perception of physical fitness as a representation of her health, to some extent. In fact, there have been numerous instances of sudden death or injury during fitness activities in China (China News Service, 2017; Guangming Net, 2023). It cannot be definitively confirmed that fitness is a significant cause of the sudden death. However, due to the influence of health symbols, the connection between fitness and the risk of physical injury or death has not made a profound impression on individuals. This may lead to women neglecting fitness safety during practice. They may also lack a keen awareness of their actual physical condition related to health during fitness activities. As a result, fitness women may become passive consumers or 'puppets' manipulated by capital, due to superstitions about consumption symbols. Even if the actual product does not align with the symbolic promotions, fitness women may not be aware of it. Or, women may experience a delayed recognition of these capitalist practices, while capital always generates new commercial narratives to perpetuate this cognitive lag. Consequently, they may overlook the fundamental principles of the physical world and interpret the world through the lens of the consumption symbol system. This represents a typical operational modalities of contemporary capital, whose impact on the field of women's fitness results in a divergence between female self-perception and their actual fitness practices.

The symbols linked to certain fitness consumption practices can become highly abstract and detached from actual engagement in physical activities. The interview uncovers that,

in China, many women today primarily focus on taking photos at the gym rather than actively participating in exercise routines. One interviewee noted that:

There are such people in the gym: after entering the gym, they exercise for about five minutes and then take photos for a few hours here... I don't like it, but I don't want to comment... Many young women like to take photos... (No. 8)

In this statement, the act of photographing reveals that these women's primary motivation for entering the gym is less associated with exercising itself, but rather with engaging in the visual scenario of the fitness space. The female body has become central to contemporary women's identity construction (Hu, 2021). By transforming the gym into a stage for physical expression, women demonstrate a shift from being 'passively observed by society' within traditional Chinese contexts to 'actively showcasing themselves'. This evolution reflects the growing desire for self-identity formation and articulation among modern Chinese women. These women often post their photos on social media. Social media platforms provide the technological infrastructure and instant positive feedback mechanisms (likes, comments) that greatly amplify the exhibition value of fitness-oriented bodily display.

This trend has prompted businesses to develop a range of marketing strategies, transforming 'photo-sharing and check-in' into both a consumer ritual and a key approach to augmenting perceived value. Specifically, fitness centers are often designed with photography in mind: optimized lighting, strategically placed mirrors, and iconic brand feature walls. Some suppliers even offer pre-designed video templates and composition guides to lower the threshold for content sharing. This service enables average users to produce 'influencer-style' visuals while seamlessly integrating brand messages. Furthermore, businesses incentivize sharing through discounts or small high-perceived-value gifts. They may collaborate with fitness enthusiasts to generate location-based content, thereby efficiently producing relatable materials that resonate with target demographics. The optimization of photo-friendly environments not only caters to women's desire for self-expression but also serves as a tool for suppliers' promotional outreach and customer acquisition. Consequently, capital skillfully co-opts female self-expression to fulfill commercial objectives.

This development reflects a trend where, under the prevailing business logic, the core purpose of fitness is shifting from a practice for self-fulfillment toward a spectacle-driven production aimed at pleasing others (the spectacle trend will be explained in the following section). While these may not necessarily derive the practical benefits of fitness – the use value, they may acquire value from fitness consumption as a symbolic representation. With the advancement of the internet and electronic information technology, actual fitness engagement is no longer the sole key method to attain value in fitness consumption. The dissemination of fitness images is increasingly becoming a predominant approach. On social media, it appears that by sharing images in the gym, women believe they have already embodied the high-quality and healthy lifestyle represented by fitness. Baudrillard (1998: 192) highlights that consumption driven by symbolic value can be entirely detached from real-world practice. The value-in-sign that reflects the ‘identity’ behind goods can exist independently of the actual use of those goods. The establishment of a sign value system allows for the abstraction of all tangible items. This phenomenon creates the possibility that existence in the virtual realm may seem more authentic than reality itself. Virtual personas can supplant physical individuals in expressing themselves within the public sphere of society.

The satisfaction derived from symbolic value in consumption may lead some women to overlook the true significance of fitness practices. Upon disengagement from virtual scenarios, the digitally fabricated portrayal of ‘pervasive self-improvement and fitness’ may persistently exacerbate women’s body image anxiety and exercise-related stress in real-world contexts. The idealized models constructed by societal norms are continuously reproduced in virtual environments, thereby constraining women’s autonomous self-construction. The fitness-oriented bodily displays by women are constituted by a complex phenomenon interwoven by consumer culture, media technologies, and individual aspirations. This dynamic not only reflects women’s proactive engagement in identity formation and self-expression but also reveals the profound influence of commercial capital in shaping physical ideals and desires. This commercial influence is formed based on the development of digital technology and the evolution of spectacle society, which is elaborated in detail in the Section 5.4. This

section explains why women encounter difficulties in rationally achieving a complete disengagement from this commercial manipulation.

5.3 Discipline based on learning behaviors

Stever (2011: 1) focuses on the relationship between followers or fans and celebrities and discussed it by theories about the learning process. These theories emphasized that providing exemplary models for ‘observational learning’ can help individuals learn how to behave in a certain condition or serves to reinforce a certain behavioral pattern (Stever, 2011). When women make fitness consumption selections, they (approximating followers) may refer to the advice and behaviors of popular fitness bloggers or influencers (approximating celebrities). Interviewee number 10 emphasized that a fitness blogger’s sharing has aroused her attention to the health of pregnant women and interest in pregnancy-related fitness courses and services. Consequently, businesses collaborate with influencers to deploy exemplars for ‘observational learning’ for consumers. These exemplars not only demonstrate specific behaviors, such as fitness routines, but also showcase the desirable outcomes associated with such behaviors, including idealized physique, enriched lifestyles, and social acclaim. By observing and emulating the consumption choices of these models, including purchasing recommended training programs, equipment, or apparel, consumers develop expectations of achieving analogous outcomes. This process vicariously reinforces their consumption motivation. This means the co-optation of social exemplars for fitness women’s learning by capital.

In the commercial fitness environment, women often have a sense of a direct pleasurable atmosphere, which implies a discipline measure employed by suppliers. Interviewee number 10 stated that she became a bit interested in boxing. When knowing her interest, her fitness coach successfully convinced her to purchase boxing courses of personal training through various enthusiastic and positive introductions to female boxing. These positive introductions undoubtedly encompass friendly words and gentle smiles. In the market, suppliers always create an atmosphere or advertisement that could bring positive feeling to consumers senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) (Schemer et al., 2008). Thus, these commercial factors create enjoyments in the person exposed to them. The positive commercial atmospheres serve as the unconditioned stimulus, while the

enjoyments mean ‘the unconditioned response’. Because the product is mentioned in the positive commercial atmospheres, it becomes connected to the unconditioned stimulus, which could also trigger the response. An unconditioned response triggered by unconditioned stimulus refers to ‘a natural reaction without any training or teaching’ (Niosi, 2021: 49). The business strategy based on unconditioned stimulus seems simple but can directly trigger positive responses from consumers. In the gym, businessmen use friendly atmosphere, pleasant music, and fragrant scents to bring women a sense of enjoyment and enhance their positive feelings towards their products. At the same time, it also strengthens women’s positive feelings and associations towards fitness, especially non-traditional fitness programs for women and a fitness consciousness with a certain revolutionary character.

Commercial atmosphere and strategy design also contains a more sophisticated process including the exploitation of negative feelings of women. In addition to desired end states that people strive to attain, motivations involve internal states that are activated when the physiological or psychological conditions are out of balance (Lawrence, Carver, and Scheier, 2002). When a desire or unfulfillment is aroused, ‘the thermostat turns on’ and people ‘start to behave in a way that attempts to’ achieve physical or mental balance (Niosi, 2021: 94). Consequently, businesses frequently employ strategies to sustain consumers in a state of disequilibrium, thereby continuously stimulating demand (Niosi, 2021). The interview exhibits that there is significant body-focused anxiety among fitness-oriented women, although they acknowledge that fitness services can effectively improve their appearance. This persistent tension presents a paradoxical phenomenon in the commercial context: anxiety and the methods to resolve it coexist. The promotion of seemingly effective fitness products is often accompanied by the display of idealized female image. This image, marketed by capital as the efficacy of the product, is in essence an unattainable, false perfection that can continuously fuel anxiety.

While promoting their ‘solutions’, commercial entities simultaneously engage in the continual definition and amplification of perceived ‘problems’. This dynamic constitutes an intricately designed behavioral system grounded in the principles of learning theory. These corporate strategies contain the employment of both positive and negative

reinforcement mechanisms. Positive reinforcement refers to ‘providing rewards to encourage a particular type of behavior’, while negative reinforcement means removing aversive stimuli ‘in order to encourage a particular type of action’ (Niosi, 2021: 350). In fitness marketing, the promise of an ‘ideal physique’ functions as a potent positive reinforcer. Its motivational value is further enhanced through repeated associations with secondary reinforcers such as ‘social validation’, ‘aura of confidence’, and ‘sexual appeal’. Concurrently, businesses encourage consumption behaviors by eliminating aversive stimuli. Through prolific advertising, they deliberately exaggerate the ‘shortcomings of non-conforming body types’, systematically linking physical inactivity with negative attributions like ‘diminished attractiveness’. This strategic framing positions fitness consumption as the pathway to alleviating such anxieties, thereby stimulating consumer demand.

This dynamic reinforces women’s appearance-related anxieties or insecurities and sustains the perceived necessity and value of products promising aesthetic transformation. From a market perspective, female consumers’ economic role is a crucial channel for profit generation. Their body-focused anxieties become a critical vector for profit generation. As a result, their consumption is continually stimulated by narratives related to self-worth and beauty. It constructs a closed loop of ‘anxiety, consumption, temporary relief, new anxiety, and reconsumption’. Through continuous refinement and elevation of standards, consumers are perpetually kept in a state of ‘incompleteness’ and ‘need for improvement’, thereby maintaining their reliance on commercial solutions. This process of shaping behavior through reward and anxiety represents a classic form of social discipline. Women’s agency within the fitness market is largely confined to the behavioral patterns, aesthetic standards, and value systems prescribed by commercial entities.

Furthermore, amplifying women’s anxieties about sports participation to stimulate women’s preference for corresponding fitness products even poses some risks and obstacles to women’s development in sport. For example, to maintain the high perceived value of only-women gym services, businesses continually emphasize women’s anxiety around gender interactions. This strategic framing positions only-women gyms as the

pathway to alleviating women's anxieties, including concerns about sexual harassment and self-censorship regarding fitness attire. As a result, female consumers must continue to feel the need for such spaces. Hastings et. al. (2004) reveal that marketers often employ fear to persuade consumers to consume, but the marketing implications of fear appeals may lead to potential dangers, like maladaptive threat-avoidance behaviors. The businesses' emphasis on women's disadvantaged position in socialized gender relationships must further lead women to gravitate towards gender-segregated fitness activities. However, there are a few differences between the shaped socialized gender relationships and the real-life gender interaction. One interviewee indicated that:

The fitness coach for my personal training sessions is a male coach, because there are no female coaches in the gym. I initially disliked the male coach because I felt that during tutoring, he would have some intimate contact with you... touching your buttocks, your waist, etc... However, in fact, when I am in fitness class... when the coach has physical contact with you, he always uses a tool to assist you... He won't directly touch you with his hands... which will make you very uncomfortable. If I hadn't taken a course with the male coach, then I would definitely be willing to choose a female coach... After I had a class with the male coach, I realized that both male and female coaches were the same... And the male coach's strength would be a bit stronger... (No. 7)

Interviewee number 7 initially was unwilling to accept guidance from a male coach, only to discover that her fears were unfounded through the coaching process. Then she relinquished those preconceptions. Pre-existing perceptions were shaped by sociocultural conditioning, whereas post-training perspectives were derived from her personal experiential realities. The difference of these two notions illustrates the disjuncture between socially constructed expectations of gendered spaces and the lived realities of mixed-gender fitness environments. The conceptual barrier erected by anxiety around gender interaction can manifest in concrete avoidance behaviors and rigid boundaries around male-female interaction, leading women to forgo broader peer support. Interviewee number 14 and Interviewee number 10 believed that interacting with and learning from male fitness enthusiasts can help them make more progress.

Women who adopt a preconceived avoidance of cross-gender interactions often struggle to appreciate this benefit in mixed-gender communication. Anxiety-driven marketing that champions women-only fitness spaces further frequently reinforces these fears. Both internalized norms and commercially fueled anxieties coalesce, causing women to deviate from more diverse and potentially enriching fitness experiences in real-life practices.

Through the lens of learning behavior pattern, that dynamic of meaning-laden marketing essentially constitutes a process of behavior shaping through operant conditioned reflex (Hawkins, 2007). Individuals generally interpret and make sense of the external context through ‘stimuli’ that affect different senses (Ries, 2009). The dissemination of meaning-laden fitness narratives functions as ‘discriminative stimuli’ that guide women toward specific target behaviors, namely, fitness-related consumption. Businesses employ sophisticated stimulus–response mechanisms to translate complex, meaning-laden fitness concepts into standardized behavioral patterns conducive to sustained consumption. In other words, women’s fitness goals and self-identity have been alienated into materials for marketing strategies. The purported ‘meanings’ attributed through such propaganda do not reflect genuine intellectual diversity; rather, they represent meticulously crafted repackaging of the same underlying logic tailored to different psychological demands. This logic asserts that self-worth or the remediation of defects could be achieved through the fulfillment of external consumption behaviors. For example, the packaging rhetoric of ‘shape youthful vitality, craft a girlish silhouette’ taps into an underlying anxiety centered on the fear of aging or the perceived loss of appeal within traditional romantic relationships, thereby driving women’s consumer behaviors such as purchasing back-shaping courses and related fitness equipment. Meanwhile, slogans like ‘build muscle definition and become your own queen’ cater to women’s desire for self-control and autonomy, leading to consumption behaviors like purchasing abdomen training programs. Such packaged narratives act as if applying different therapeutic labels to the same drug (fitness consumption), while its actual effect just persistently encourages sustained spending.

Commercial actors implement a highly systematic and complex ‘behavioral shaping’

program to train female fitness enthusiasts into monofunctional instruments that merely receive and execute consumption commands. Pavlov's classical conditioning theory underscored that the pattern of 'associative learning' relies on 'the repetitive pairing' of behaviors and stimuli (Niosi, 2021: 50). The behavioral logic of repetitive reinforcement reveals that the essence of so-called meaningful marketing is, in fact, an overabundance of monotonous repetition of various content and concepts, devoid of genuine communication, exchange, reflection, or critical thinking. The deluge of information from repetitive reinforcement further invades women's cognitive space, thereby diminishing their capacity for independent thought. Consequently, what purports to be meaningful ultimately dissolves into meaninglessness.

5.4 Dilemma of bounded rationality

In the fitness market, suppliers offer a wide range of products and services that cater to female consumers, significantly enhancing their fitness experiences. At the same time, suppliers often make extravagant promises regarding the effects of their fitness products and heavily emphasize women's anxieties around 'beauty', 'health', or other social expectations in large-scale promotional campaigns. These strategies guide women to envision dramatic transformations in their bodies or lives through consumption. In response to this abundance of products and marketing, an increasing number of women are consuming more fitness-related goods and services, leading, in some cases, to excessive and misdirected consumption within the female fitness market. The result of the interview shows that women are cognizant that much of women's consumption in the fitness market is excessive or misdirected. Interviewee number 12 expressed that she had impulsively purchased unsuitable fitness products. This suggests that, in fitness consumption, there are instances where women's purchasing decisions deviate from their own best interests. Although, in contemporary China, women could act freely and achieve a high level of satisfaction in fitness consumption, they often struggle to make optimal consumption decisions. This section will conduct an in-depth analysis of the behavioral mechanisms underlying such consumption decisions, as well as women's cognition and reflection on such consumption.

It is believed that an idealized, conceptual free market system can lead to the most

effective allocation of resources in society and that individual consumers can derive high personal satisfaction and pursue their personal interests within this system (Petsoulas, 2013: 2). Consumers make decisions according to perceived value, but the reality sometimes differs from consumers' perceptions of high value. Sent (2018: 1375) explains that researchers, such as Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, had discovered that in the actual market, there was a cognitive phenomenon that the actual decision made by the individual deviated from the decision with utility-maximisation. Since the late 1970s, with the market-oriented transformation, there has been a rise in excessive and misdirected consumption in Chinese society, including in the female fitness market. It is commonly believed that this phenomenon negatively impacts the true well-being and interests of women. The deviation of the decision-making based on perceived value in practice from the optimal decision-making in the market context can be attributed to 'bounded rationality'.

Herbert Simon's original program of 'bounded rationality' studied how people make rational decisions in real-world situations of uncertainty, as opposed to well-defined situations of risk, while some scholars used this term but changed it to forms of irrationality (Gigerenzer, 2020). Overall, rational decision-making involves the real-world conditions required to make optimal choices and the criteria used to define what constitutes an 'optimal' decision.

In academic discourse, the standards for determining consumer optimality have evolved over time. According to Goodwin, Nelson, Ackerman, and Weisskopf (2008: 13), by the mid-to-late-20th century, the notion of utility or consumers' satisfaction 'as a measurable entity' had 'been thoroughly dropped', and economic researchers had come to believe that utility or consumers' satisfaction 'could not be compared across individuals'. Consumer sovereignty now holds sway in a highly individualistic form. Hence, some viewpoints, particularly those from businesses, argue that women's massive consumption is not detrimental to them (JINGDONG, 2022). They claim that it is a choice made by women themselves, driven by consumer sovereignty and personal well-being and preference. They argue that labeling it as excessive or misdirected consumption is an external judgment, and that women actually derive enough

satisfaction from it according to the lens of individualistic form.

In the context of recognizing consumer preferences formed in the individualistic form, the situation where women derive sufficient satisfaction from consumption should be as follows: Any suggestion implying that consumers are acting unwisely, and that their behaviors possibly do not contribute to improving their standard of living or achieving a more general target, is typically regarded as ‘paternalistic’. The argument is that no one, other than the individual, should dictate what is beneficial for her or him. The selections and preferences of the sovereign consumer are considered sacred. The following case can help to understand this condition more clearly:

‘If someone ate a high-fat diet and developed heart disease, for example, it might be assumed that the person had calculated that her pleasure from eating the high-fat diet outweighed the drawbacks of ill health. To encourage her to eat a better diet – or to campaign to keep advertisements for junk food out of schools – would be paternalistic interference’ (Goodwin, Nelson, Ackerman, and Weisskopf, 2008: 13).

The consumers’ selection with high satisfaction must be achieved under the background that people are assumed to act rationally in their own self-interests. Meanwhile, they are assumed to be able to obtain sufficient information. However, in reality, consumers generally are not well informed about the relation between disease and diet and are not able to rationally test the drawbacks and pleasures of a high-fat diet. In fitness consumption, female consumers have also experienced similar troublesome situations with the lack of ‘perfect information’ and rationality.

Although there are different interpretations of the nature of human rationality, they are all linked to the outcome of sub-optimal decisions. Therefore, this research explains the phenomenon of bounded rationality mainly based on female fitness consumers’ perception of sub-optimal or disadvantageous decisions, which might include changes in the perceived value of the same product by women over time. This could help reveal the underlying consumer decision-making mechanisms behind excessive and misleading consumption in the fitness market, explaining why female consumers, under the dominant logic of capitalism, may make choices that do not align with their best interests

(Evaluation criteria may vary among different individuals). It elaborates on the formation of over-consumption from the perspective of consumer behavior and responses, highlighting the structural challenges fitness-involved women face in market systems.

Interviewee number 14, who currently only purchases a basic gym membership card, believed that she was not easily deceived and considered herself to be rational when it came to fitness-related matters as well as consumption. When making fitness consumption choices, she would do carefully assess her own needs and conditions to ensure that the benefits she received did match the cost. Her behavior demonstrates a certain level of rational thinking in consumption. However, the phenomenon of women unreasonably consuming products appears to be quite common in the fitness consumer market. Interviewee number 10 believed that the introduction of fitness products specifically targeting women's needs is merely a commercial strategy, selling some concepts, such as women's protein powder. It wouldn't work on her. She believed that there should not be significant differences between women and men in this regard. However, she acknowledged that there are indeed many women who are willing to pay for such products in China. Interviewee number 12, a woman with a long experience of fitness, mentioned: She no longer blindly purchased fitness products due to commercial promotion. After years of fitness practice, she has gained a better understanding of her body and knows which things or activities are truly beneficial for her fitness. However, she admitted that in the past, she had bought numerous fitness or slimming products due to the exaggerated claims about products' effects made by merchants. Being quite lazy at that time, she hoped to take a shortcut and lose weight faster through these products. However, her accumulated practical experience over time taught her that there are no shortcuts to fitness and weight loss. These products were not very effective, but she was easily enticed to purchase them back then.

Interviewee number 12 expressed regret over her past behavior of purchasing a large number of fitness products based on commercial promotion. The sense of regret is the result of returning to rationality after engaging in irrational consumption. In the Interviewee number 12's experience, 'shortcut' shows her ardent desire, 'not very effective' reflects the actual value of the product, and 'exaggerated claims' reveals the

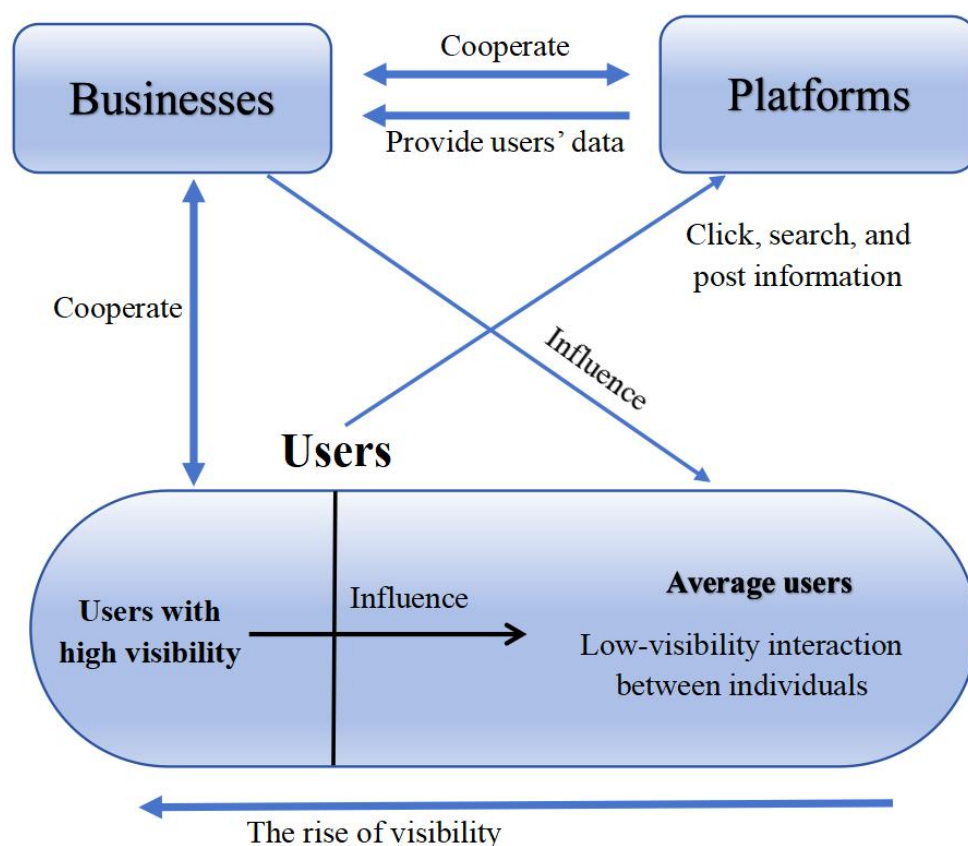
sources of perceived value. This uncovers that there is the mismatch between her demand and the product's effects, and suppliers always offset this value gap with marketing strategies. In situations where businessmen make extravagant promises about the effects of their fitness products, women are guided to imagine the stunning transformation of their body after using them. Some women may perceive high value in products and impulsively tend to believe the authenticity of these promises. In such scenarios, enticed by the vision of a beautiful future, many women find it challenging to rationally realize or may be unwilling to believe that these beautiful descriptions may contain many exaggerated or even false information. Her expression also reflects that experience and knowledge are the cornerstone of the return of rational thinking, yet this accumulation is often predicated on some irrational consumption decisions.

According to Sent (2018: 1379), in the actual consumer market, 'decision makers may take decisions based on incomplete information', leading to violating the principles of rationality, which is considered a case of bounded rationality. Thus, in addition to the possibility of subjective irrationality of female consumers, more importantly, women are always not informed by 'perfect information', which makes it difficult for them to make optimal consumption choices in the fitness market. In China, where information technology is rapidly advancing, women have access to a wealth of diverse information for their fitness, especially on the Internet. However, this information is essentially biased, so average users, including individual women, are still in a relatively disadvantaged position in the dissemination of information.

With the development of information technology, indeed, various types of information are provided to consumers. However, in practice, collecting and understanding information requires time and effort costs. Therefore, most of the information that consumers come into contact with is easily accessible or consciously pushed to them. With the market-oriented transformation, the fields of media and information platforms are also showing a trend towards privatization in China. Hence, driven by the maximization of benefits, many media outlets are naturally willing to place commercial promotion that can directly benefit themselves or capital-supported viewpoints in the most prominent position of information presentation.

In this digital era, individuals now have the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions with broad audiences on the internet. Prior to the widespread adoption of networked information technologies, potential buyers often lacked access to a wide range of authentic, peer-generated evaluations, which are essential for making well-informed purchasing decisions. The advent and proliferation of digital network technologies have significantly diminished the constraints imposed by geographic distance, enabling the exchange of consumer information among previously disconnected individuals. This shift has restructured the flow of market information, facilitating more democratic and distributed forms of knowledge sharing in consumption practices. It seems that individuals can expect to become empowered and take power away from the media and other institutions thanks to new technology. However, Turow (2011) argues that the new technology would not necessarily empower consumers, because commercial institutions consistently had stronger control over information (see Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 An ecosystem diagram of information influence on the Internet



In real-world commercial contexts, there may be a certain degree of gap between the evaluations of consumers presented online, especially on e-commerce platforms, and

their actual thoughts. In contemporary China, e-commerce platforms present female consumers with a wide range of information about fitness products and services, including the reviews and evaluations of many other consumers towards products. However, although suppliers do not have the right to modify or delete negative but potentially genuine evaluations from consumers, they can use the welfare feedback methods to persuade consumers to leave more positive evaluations. For example, many businesses promise consumers a cashback if they provide positive and meaty reviews. As a result, some fitness women may use these somewhat distorted evaluations as a reference for consumers' true feelings, making consumption choices that are not conducive to themselves.

In the online space, influential personal expressions are not only found on dedicated commercial platforms, such as product reviews or user feedback, but are also widely distributed across more public or open platforms that reach broader audiences. The interview presents that many fitness women browse content and discussions posted by fitness influencers or other enthusiasts on social media platforms, like the Little Red Book and Douyin (Tiktok),³⁴ using them as sources for information, inspiration, fitness learning, and consumption decision. Meanwhile, some fitness women actively share their own fitness experiences and views on these platforms, becoming content creators.

At the present age, the contents and information shared by individuals on online platforms, like social media, have a significant impact on the popular culture surrounding women's fitness in China. This information further dictates women's consumption patterns related to body image and fitness. Within this virtual cyberspace, numerous women actively engage in the production and circulation of fitness-related content, including personal experiences, commentary, and discussions on various fitness topics. This dynamic and participatory exchange, which also includes contributions from male influencers who address women's fitness interests, contributes to a diverse and multifaceted information environment. Such user-generated content expands the informational resources available to women, potentially enhancing their agency in

³⁴ Both Little Red Book and Douyin are popular social media platforms in China. Douyin is the Chinese version of Tiktok.

navigating fitness-related consumption choices. However, this apparent democratization of knowledge presents complexities in commercial contexts. Park (2017: 22) claims that this user data and online platform are often used by businesses to tailor their sales strategies, leading to ‘the exploitation of online user labor’, which would extend ‘into consumer exploitation’ during purchase processes. Businesses and advertisers learn about women’s fitness preferences through the internet, which in turn further shapes those preferences through the internet to stimulate greater consumer desire. For instance, online fitness communities formed through user interactions and exchanges provide female fitness participants with convenient access to diverse information. However, these communities are often co-opted by suppliers as channels for brand promotion. In this scenario, users, through activities such as sharing, liking, and reviewing, perform ‘emotional labor’, contributing to marketing efforts (such as enhancing the visibility to a gym).

As a result, this cyberspace becomes a just lively, prosperous and distorted space for showing women’s fitness life. Interviewee number 12 stated that some popular fitness posts contained content that was not scientific or was quite exaggerated. She explained that:

Regarding posts and videos about fitness that are popular among women... topics such as losing weight in one or two weeks are very popular, but it is impossible. For example, titles including ‘two weeks of slimming thighs’ and ‘two weeks of slimming waist’ are very attractive, but in reality, that effect is impossible to achieve. I have practiced in this way myself, so I know that it is impossible but these titles are very attractive to click on... What’s more, you will notice that the commentary subtitles in such videos are full of content about ‘collection, review, or check-in’ (打卡), which means that there are many people watching videos. However, few people do exercise. And, following this practice is likely to lead to injury... (No. 12)

Interviewee number 10 with rich fitness experiences agreed that online posts or articles about fitness methods for rapid and significant weight loss are unreliable, but many girls tend to add posts and videos to their browsing list when they see such a type of title. She indicated that popular posts about fitness and slimming often avoid letting people

understand the negative consequences and side effects. Furthermore, the posts and information that she found useful did not receive much attention on the internet, so she explained that:

Those really valuable fitness posts and content are a bit boring because they try to teach you theoretical knowledge of fitness and explain why doing it this way would be better. Because introductions in these posts are not short enough and fast enough, there are not many people reading them. Do you know? This kind of post is not stimulating enough. The bloggers slowly explain fitness knowledge in detail to you. Actually, their explanations are very good, but you will notice that not many people watch them. The situation may be like this: according to the few comments, you find that the blogger is a fitness guru. If you take a closer look, you will find that the person who comments is also a fitness guru. (No. 10)

In other words, the fitness expressions or opinions recognized by experienced fitness women may not be the main focus of online fitness discussions. This situation uncovers that it appears that the prevailing fitness information lacks scientific rigor and substantive value for women. These mainstream viewpoints may not help women ameliorate their unreasonable mindset towards fitness, but instead cater to women's anxieties or pressing desires, especially among those with limited fitness experience. This guides women to engage in massive and even unreasonable consumption for fitness or weight loss, and may even have negative effects on women's bodies and health. Nevertheless, it is understandable that 'knowledgeable' women may not actively disseminate and defend scientific fitness-related knowledge. The allocation of much personal time and energy away from behaviors that pursue other-regarding goals such as truth and reciprocal altruism, yielding limited individual benefits (commercial returns or social approval), can be viewed as manifestations of individual behavioral rationality. However, this approach may inadvertently or indirectly hinder the development of a broader ecosystem for women's sport, facilitate the expansion of capital influence, and ultimately compromise the long-term interests of female sports participation. This issue transcends mere individual short-sightedness regarding long-term gains. Rather, it reflects a systemic conflict constituted by capital, a deviation of individual local optimization from

altruistic or collective long-term goals, thereby impeding the holistic advancement of women's sport.

In addition to the scientific and valuable information about fitness, on the Internet, the presentation of real female fitness experience may be less than imagined. Online, fitness women can be both information seekers and opinion expressers or content creators. However, the interview finds that some women in the fitness community are hesitant to or seldom share their fitness experiences or perspectives in public virtual spaces. In the further questionnaire, data presents respondents' level of participation in activities of 'browse online videos and information about fitness', 'share their fitness experience with friends and colleagues', and 'share their fitness experience on social media (such as the Little Red Book and Tiktok) toward the public' (see Figure 5.5). The data range is from 1 (never) to 5 (always, almost every day), and higher marks represent more frequent participation.

Figure 5.5 Participation levels of activities about collection and dissemination of fitness information

Activity	browse online information	share experiences with acquaintances	share experiences with the public
Frequency	2.64	2.66	2.05

The data shows that there exists an asymmetry between fitness-oriented women as audiences and content creators, with the audience role predominating on social media. The difference of sharing behaviors between 'with acquaintances' (2.66) and 'with the public' (2.05) reveals that the key factor contributing to low sharing frequency on social media is not a low inclination to share.

One interviewee explained that:

I won't do it... (sharing my fitness opinions, videos, or photos) on social media, where I need to face the masses, including unfamiliar audiences, such as the Little Red Book. I just browse. I won't express myself, because... you will be scolded if

you want to speak up to the public. I'm a bit fragile, I feel like... I can't be scolded, and there's no need for me to do this. I'm not a blogger (working on running an online account), and that sharing is generally posted by bloggers to make a living. Well, in the Friend Circles, I often post photos.³⁵ (No. 10)

Interviewee number 10 further claimed that she just had good exercise habits, but did not have the type of appearance that is beautiful and popular on social media, which will not attract too much public attention.

One interviewee indicated that:

(Regarding sharing my fitness opinions, videos, or photos)... I wouldn't do this on Little Red Book or the Friend Circles on WeChat (in social media)... because this is still a relatively private matter for me. I think exercise is a necessity for my own body, and I don't need to tell anyone else. Generally, bloggers who post these messages have this demand: they need network attention... In fact, popular bloggers usually want to transfer their network attention to interests. (No. 12)

One interviewee indicated that:

Sharing my fitness feelings or photos on social media such as the Friend Circles, Little Red Book, and Tiktok, or discussing fitness topics online... I will not do it. People in the Little Red Book like to share these messages, because they need network attention and need to make money. Their sharing must be purposeful. (No. 9)

Non-conformance of an ideal female mold, challenging to achieve commercial returns, negative reviews, and concerns about privacy are significant factors that contribute to women's refusal to share their fitness experiences online. Social media platforms operate within a stratified attention economy. At the top level, key opinion leaders (KOLs) or influencers, including most established fitness bloggers, frequently possess considerable financial backing, invest significant resources into curating their online presence, and

³⁵ The Friend Circles refer to a function on the Chinese social media, WeChat. It is a platform that brings together the statuses, various articles, and information of classmates, family members, colleagues, and other acquaintances, providing a space for communication and interaction.

operate with the explicit goal of generating commercial profit. Their visibility is amplified by algorithmic logics that favor already popular, professionally managed accounts, thereby marginalizing the voices of less-resourced users. Individual women within online fitness communities often lack the motivation, technical expertise, and financial resources to enhance their visibility through commercial means, such as purchasing exposure or investing in promotional tools. Thus, their behaviors are often practically constrained to the role of passive audience members or consumers of content, rather than recognized creators or influencers. This asymmetry in visibility and participation within digital fitness communities reinforces existing power structure. In this structure, commercial actors dominate discourse, and highly curated, flawless, commodified images of fitness-related women dominate the public gaze. This intensifies the risk of negative appraisal when ‘ordinary’ women share their own fitness narratives. In response to this heightened risk of public scrutiny and criticism, many of them choose to self-censor, curtailing authentic expressions of their physical practice and emotional journey. As a result, platform capitalism enforces a relatively homogenized female fitness discourse that systematically marginalizes grassroots voices and diminishes the visibility of nuanced, everyday experiences. Rather than centering genuine fitness practices or promoting specialized knowledge, the predominant narratives revolve around body commodification and the fetishization of idealized female forms. Such information presentation, as well as the co-optation of social exemplars for learning by capital, undermines the capacity of female fitness consumers to make informed, rational choices.

These online dynamics not only reflect the changes of women’s access to fitness-related information, but also reveal how capitalism, propelled by advances in digital technology, has diversified, or even alienated the manifestations and underlying motivations of women’s fitness practices. As Debord observed, in societies saturated by a substantial volume of media content, life itself manifests as an immense accumulation of spectacles (Nunn, 2019: 79). All that was directly lived has receded into a representation. Social media functions as the most central and active apparatus for producing and distributing spectacles in contemporary society (Nunn, 2019: 81), while women’s bodies and their

fitness experiences have become highly valuable ‘raw materials’ and ‘exhibits’ within this system. Debord highlighted that the spectacle lies the concept of ‘separation’. Authentic and holistic human experiences, including bodily engagement, community connections, and self-fulfillment, are stripped away and replaced by spectacles constructed through media, designed for passive viewing and consumption (Debord and Nicholson-Smith, 2006). The spectacle is not merely a collection of images, but a social relationship mediated by images, serving as an invisible instrument for the perpetuation of capitalist domination. The spectacle achieves dominance by capturing human attention, constituting a novel form of social control. Within this framework, passive spectating supplants women’s active participation in fitness. They become onlookers and consumers of the spectacle, relying on the consumption of images to affirm their own existence. The implicit order crafted by social media, defining essential components of a desirable and watchable fitness lifestyle, operates as a form of silent, one-way communication. It imposes directives from above, demanding acknowledgment and compliance within the visibility asymmetry framework mentioned above.

The advancement of digital technology has significantly facilitated the transformation of intrinsically private fitness experiences into a process geared toward producing visual evidence for public display. Consequently, the fitness bodies and performances of women can be redeemed as symbols in exchange for spectacle value, such as attention, likes, and recognition, on social media platforms. Success in fitness is increasingly defined by ‘photogenic appeal’ and ‘online engagement metrics’. In contemporary media environments, users increasingly occupy hybrid roles as both audiences or consumers and content producers, possibly unintentionally, as micro-entrepreneurs within platform economies. The logic of algorithm-driven visibility and monetized attention transforms user engagement into a form of digital labor, where content creation, even by average users, can become subject to commodification. Even when users attempt to opt out of explicit monetization (e.g., disabling reward or donation features), their digital media presence may still serve as a form of personal branding or indirect capital accumulation. This entanglement reflects the broader nature of platform capitalism, where user identities are embedded with commercial potential by default. As a result, spectacle

value can thus be directly converted into economic gains. This model not only enables users to profit directly but also indirectly shapes consumers (as previously mentioned), substantially expanding the market demand for fitness-related goods, such as athletic apparel, supplements, nutritionally tailored meals, and fitness courses.

Driven by commercial motives, women's fitness practices have expanded from private endeavors to spectacular performances. Such orchestrated public displays contribute to the theatricalization of women's fitness spaces. Comfort and functionality are no longer the sole criteria for fitness environments; they must also feature bright lighting and visually striking decorations to create 'post-worthy scenes'. In the fitness centers I have observed, there were several venues with really sophisticated interior designs. I felt that these environments induced a sense of being the center of attention, thereby undermining one's sense of self-focus. Accordingly, holistic training routines centered on internal bodily awareness are deconstructed into a series of fragmented 'highlight moments', which are then reassembled into spectacular narratives glorifying 'self-discipline', 'strength', or 'beauty'. This explores underlying motivation for women's photography behavior mentioned above. Interviewee number 13 observed that some women wore heavy makeup and fashionable attire to the gym. The trend of spectacle society makes these behaviors increasingly common. Within this spectacle, the connotation of female body as an object of visual consumption has been strengthened, conforming to standardized ideals of display. For female fitness enthusiasts, exercise is no longer solely about physical training; every element captured within the lens requires her diligent handling.

'Spectacles' not only alter the external forms and immediate objectives of women's fitness activities, but on a deeper level, they colonize women's time, desires, and even subjectivity by thoroughly commodifying the body and self-identity. These landscapes invisibly create a highly homogenized 'cage' through representation standards and subtly dissolve the collective political potential for genuine liberation in the fitness process. The spectacle, in conjunction with the pre-existing patriarchal order, imposes a more covert, profound, and systematic control over women. Patriarchy has long objectified women as objects to be gazed at. The spectacle further democratizes, refines, and

perpetuates this gaze. Spectacle value guides women to ‘voluntarily choose’ to become spectacle works, thus internalizing the external gaze as self-surveillance, which in turn alienates women from their own intrinsic experience in the fitness. Furthermore, through the spectacle, women’s social value becomes deeply intertwined with their physical appearance. By embedding specific social contexts into female fitness scenarios, such as ‘postpartum women striving to restore their figures through fitness, the spectacle efficiently showcases a systemic process from the introduction of female social value and the definition of high value standards to the means to achieve standards. Moreover, the spectacle functions as an overt mediator that makes the male gaze increasingly covert. The reproduction of gender inequality through the spectacle gives rise to body anxiety, shame, or fear of aging among women. The depth and pervasiveness experienced by women far exceed those experienced by men, constituting a form of structural psychological pressure among women.

Some women who engage in fitness practices choose to turn off their cameras and reject the evaluation of their self-worth by social media and algorithms, reflecting capital’s strategy of the removal of substandard ‘impurities’ to refine ‘spectacles’ toward higher purity benchmarks. This also demonstrates women’s autonomous value selection of intrinsic well-being. To a certain extent, these individuals employ their actions to critique and resist the spectacle society. This reveals the potential for individual women’s agency to drive transformative change within the increasingly commercialized fitness domain. In this framework, which constitutes the rational choice for women: the pursuit of commercial returns from performance-oriented fitness or the pursuit of intrinsic well-being in fitness practice? This issue becomes a controversial and thought-provoking debate.

5.5 Challenges from market structure

These challenges mainly refer to the negative consequences brought about by supplier interaction and competition, including the instability of market structure, and are less related to the impacts resulting from marketing strategies targeted at consumers.

The interview shows that the closure of a gym is one of the most negative occurrences in women's fitness journeys. Interviewee number 1 described her experience: After working, she developed an interest in practicing yoga. While searching for information about various yoga studios, she chose one located near her home. After practicing for some time, she felt quite good and healthier and made some progress in yoga practice... Later, the yoga studio closed down. She felt very regretful and somewhat at a loss... Finally, she found a new yoga studio for exercise. She stated that the search process was quite challenging. Interviewee number 4 indicated that she once practiced at a yoga studio. However, after six months of practice, the owner closed the studio due to poor management... She felt fortunate that at least the owner was very nice and offered refunds to members in the studio. He didn't run away with consumers' money like some other gym owners... Subsequently, due to not finding a suitable fitness venue and facing income constraints, she chose not to go to a fitness venue for consumption. She sometimes exercises on her own, but she finds that she is more likely to give up during the practice process and lacks a clear fitness plan.

It is important to acknowledge that market competition can also lead to some 'losings' or negative outcomes. In terms of such 'losings' in the fitness industry, due to price competition caused by market saturation, many gyms were forced to close, and they might even refuse to refund membership fees (Zhang, 2019). This market instability not only harms the interests of businesses but also directly or indirectly undermines the well-being of female fitness consumers. As fitness training is a relatively long-term commitment, maintaining persistence is crucial for those engaging in fitness. Commercial fitness services are a way to help women stick to their fitness routines. As Interviewee number 10 mentioned, at home, she often lacks strong motivation for fitness. However, in the gym, seeing someone with a good figure may trigger feelings of comparison in her. Under this atmosphere, her exercise becomes more sustainable and effective. Interviewee number 12 indicated that she was indeed encouraged to persist in exercising due to support provided by commercial services, such as a coach's supervision or fitness atmosphere in gyms.

The interview also reflects that it seems that this negative impact on maintaining

consistent and regular fitness engagement is particularly significant for female consumers. Interviewee number 5 with rich fitness experience held the view that men may have a more spontaneous and proactive mindset of fitness... However, women's fitness may mostly be guided. Interviewee number 5 thought that men more actively do fitness following their willing, while women are more passively driven by the media or their friends. An investigation about Chinese college students showed that the number of girls who persisted in regular exercise was less than that of boys; meanwhile, girls exhibited more dependence during physical exercise than boys (Zhou et al., 2005). This result demonstrates the relative lack of subjective initiative and a lower level of self-motivation among women when it comes to fitness. They often rely on external factors to effectively drive them to persist in their training.

In the realm of sports, where there is a conflict of female identity and athlete roles (Xiong, 2014a), the full development of women's physical and mental potential is systematically constrained by socio-cultural norms and structural barriers. Unlike their male counterparts, they do not have their subjective initiative for fitness reinforced by societal expectations and identity. Women, positioned as objects of the 'gaze' and relegated to domestic spheres under patriarchal norms, need to divert considerable energy and motives toward managing aesthetic anxieties, safety concerns, and family responsibilities, rather than focusing purely on physical and mental growth in athletic pursuits. Within this framework, women's fitness goals are often shaped by external societal pressures rather than intrinsic achievement motivation. Furthermore, the expression of women's initiative is confined within a narrow construct that discourages excessive masculinization, limiting their ability to pursue strength or physique breakthroughs as freely as men. Consequently, in sport, women face a dilemma of 'to strive for excellence while avoiding the overexertion'. These paradoxical demands undermine the formation of consistent, robust positive reinforcement, curtail the space for exploring internal meanings, and ultimately weaken women's self-motivation for sustained, active engagement in sport. In this context, a fitness institution with stable and long-term operation can undoubtedly help solidify fitness habits for women. Therefore, this market structure-related negative effects (the gyms' bankruptcy) that female fitness

consumers may suffer should not be underestimated or dismissed lightly.

In addition to businesses exiting the market, market instability also involves product quality issues caused by weak regulation and low-cost strategies. It is one of the negative effects of competitive markets. For making the input choices, sellers or suppliers always expect to use a cost-minimizing combination of inputs for a certain business scale (Mankiw, 2012). Therefore, in reality, under the pressure of price competition, fitness service providers frequently subordinate the quality of the exercise environment and the provision of attentive support to cost-containment imperatives (Baijiahao, 2023). In prioritizing the lowest cost of corresponding operational scale, these fitness service suppliers configure their service offerings around profit-maximization rather than the holistic well-being of female clientele. Although suppliers may rhetorically acknowledge the specific needs of women, this recognition is circumscribed by the pursuit of financial returns. As a result, economizing strategies, such as curtailed facility maintenance, can erode the consumer rights and experiential quality of women's fitness engagement. In fitness service provision, suppliers recast consumer well-being as a conditional variable, subject to the competitive pricing and operational costs. Consequently, the ostensible responsiveness to female fitness consumers becomes instrumental. This transactional model always privileges organizational profitability over sustained consumer empowerment and satisfaction. As a result, this ostensible responsiveness leads to those deceptive marketing and sales strategies.

Market instability may also trigger changes in the broader market structure. For example, in the stage of explosive growth in the number of gyms in China, many gyms have been phased out. Intense competition would accelerate the integration and merger of the industry, which may result in a certain degree of monopoly (Mankiw, 2012). In strongly monopolistic markets, such as an oligopoly market or a monopoly market, consumers often face disadvantages and significant challenges in influencing prices. The current fitness market landscape is characterized by a diversity of suppliers and competitive pricing, although it may be temporary. In the long term, a scenario that the entry and consolidation of large-scale capital lead to a more monopolistic market structure is likely to emerge. This situation potentially diminishes consumer rights for fitness-oriented

women and increases the financial burden associated with their fitness participation, like the increase in the product prices. Monopoly is a potential outcome of unconstrained free competition. Consequently, temperate government intervention to curb monopolistic practices should be adopted.

5.6 Conclusion

Since the reform and opening-up, China's fitness environment has shifted to a commercialized and diversified consumer model. Accordingly, fitness services and products offered by the market have become key avenues supporting women's individual fitness engagement. In the market context, female consumers' behavioral patterns, consumption motivations, and the strategies of suppliers continuously influence each other. Since both consumers and suppliers possess agency, their relationship involves both alignment and conflict, making the dynamics of interaction inherently complex.

In the market context, women's agency is activated based on consumer power and sovereignty. Hence, in response to women's needs for self-fulfillment and self-development, a wide range of fitness options for women, female-friendly public fitness spaces, and sports narratives have been generated. The gender hierarchy and the norms and behaviors associated with women's social roles impose varying degrees of constraints on women's sports participation, and fitness services offered in the market could address these challenges and barriers to some extent.

In addition to catering to women's needs, suppliers constantly shape or influence their preferences to attract more women to rely more on commercial products to meet their fitness needs. They may construct associations between various aspirational identities or lifestyle and their products through advertisements and employ deceptive pricing strategies, the amplification of women's social anxieties, or manipulative branding practices to recalibrate consumer expectations. These strategies modify female fitness consumers' sense of product value. In this process, the market acts like a magnifying glass. It distorts and amplifies women's fitness needs through an uneven lens, while the images or echoes formed within the market further shape and influence women's perceptions of their fitness needs. This system leads to noticeable patterns of over-

consumption or irrational spending choices among fitness-related women. These processed demands should be criticized as ‘false demands’, thereby leading to the emergence of ‘consumption alienation’ (Bowring, 2012).

In capitalist production, people have lost consciousness and can only discover themselves through consumption (Rickert, 1986). In this way, meaning-laden products and marketing concepts have acted as proxies for women to practice, express, and advocate in the sports field. In essence, this process forms an invisible encroachment of women’s power, weakening women’s autonomy in sports development and diminishing the impact of their agency on gender structural transformation in this domain. Seemingly autonomous consumption practices have actually simplified women’s development and gender emancipation to privatized consumer choices, thereby enshrouding structural inequalities that create barriers to women’s fitness. Ultimately, such dynamics serve the reproduction, regulation, and exploitation of gendered bodies under capitalist logics.

The research findings reflect that, in the women’s fitness market in China, suppliers’ commercial strategies exhibit a model of segregation or differentiation. It is commonly believed that customer value of a certain product incorporates a comparison with alternative offerings, and a greater comparative gap implies higher attractiveness (Zauner et al., 2015: 12). To create the differentiation of value, businesses strive to enhance female consumers’ evaluations of their fitness products while devaluing alternative options. Their products may compensate for the lack of gender-sensitive design in public fitness facilities but shape some ‘fortresses’ that generally segregate women’s fitness practices into commercial domains. This reinforces the gender segregation and gendered inequality in the material and spatial distribution within the sports environment.

Further, these ‘fortresses’ are solidified through the construction of customized narratives. As a result, various female-centered sports narratives echo in various segmented female market contexts. In the fragmented landscape of digital communication, these narratives can be developed within distinct ‘information cocoons’, each producing its own logic. These cocoons, closed systems of algorithmically curated content, facilitate the proliferation of divergent, and at times contradictory, ideas.

However, these isolated environments reinforce echo chambers where concepts expand unilaterally but struggle to spread widely. Although diverse and potentially valuable narratives about women's sport proliferate, their compartmentalization and the lack of dialogic engagement or critical debates lead to an absence of meaningful consensus. The result is a dilution of discursive significance or a paradoxical implosion of meaning among these seemingly valuable women's sport discourses. The advocacy of integration and inclusivity is an overarching sports goal. However, in the fitness market, women as individuals tend to focus on self-fulfillment, while suppliers aim to enhance consumer experience and perception through a customized model with an isolating essence, thereby shaping product value. Because stakeholders in the market (both consumers and suppliers) lack the altruism motivation, under the self-regulating framework, the macro-level outcome of these market interactions can not facilitate the realization of the general sports goal of inclusivity. This customized or differentiation model also exhibits the feature of class stratification, perpetuating uneven distributions of fitness resources among women across different social strata.

This abundance of products and marketing significantly promotes women's fitness consumption, leading, in some cases, to excessive and misdirected consumption. In other words, this phenomenon of over-consumption is undoubtedly driven, at least in part, by the commercial strategies employed by suppliers. However, it is equally important to understand why, within a seemingly free market environment, these female consumers, as the final decision-makers, are 'willing' to purchase some impractical yet expensive fitness products and services. Faced with an increasingly stimulated consumer desire, some fitness women begin to reflect critically on the alignment between the effects of fitness products and their actual needs, prompting a shift toward more rational consumption. However, due to the fundamental information asymmetry between consumers and commercial actors, women's fitness consumption decisions tend to deviate from optimal or fully rational choices.

During this digital era, new technologies, such as the development of social media, offer individuals easy access to vast amounts of information and a broad space for expression. Nonetheless, with the increasing capitalization of digital platforms and the monetization

of user-generated content, commercial actors have gained dominance over the dissemination of information. Specifically, the most visible and influential figures within digital fitness cultures are often those who successfully integrate their content into market-oriented logics, like influencers. For ordinary users, the risks associated with self-disclosure, including exposure to unsolicited judgment, online harassment, and potential breaches of privacy, may outweigh the perceived benefits of self-disclosure. The unequal distribution of visibility and voice in these digital arenas reflects that information on consumer guidance has been manipulated by commercial actors. Consequently, the expressive capacity of ordinary users of fitness women is restricted. At the same time, the information they receive is filtered by market-driven forces to some extent. Within the capitalist framework, the vigorous expansion of media has facilitated the commodification of women's fitness experiences, leading to the performative and fragmented forms of their fitness practices.

To sum up, the innovation of digital technology has not fundamentally altered the asymmetrical flow of information between consumers and commercial actors, and has not significantly enhanced consumer powers. Although women may appear to actively express their fitness interests, the popular culture surrounding fitness is, in essence, deeply shaped and orchestrated by commercial capital. As a result, despite the growth of individual experiential knowledge and a resurgence of rational decision-making, female fitness consumers often find it difficult to fully escape the over-consumption. As outdated fitness or marketing ideologies fade, they are swiftly replaced by a new round of innovation in fitness cultures, products, or symbolic consumption, aiming to generate fresh consumer demand. It is commonly believed that the market-oriented pattern can contribute to efficient resource allocation. However, within the information asymmetry context, fitness women's consumption practice faces a constant challenge of sub-optimal or irrational decision-making. The platform capitalism further reinforces the commercialization of women's bodies, which underscores the dual oppression of gender and capitalism among women's fitness consumption. Within the market sphere, consumption just offers a limited capacity for fitness women to authentically articulate feminist consciousness or to challenge gender inequalities in the realm of sport. The

expressive function embedded in consumer goods is, in reality, a design of commercial actors to strategically serve the logic of capital accumulation. Rather than enhancing sport's function of empowering women, marketization risks undermining the emancipatory potential of sport by dissimilating and depoliticizing its progressive dimensions.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Market-oriented Transformation, Capitalism, and Chinese Women's Fitness Consumption

Over the past few decades, a number of studies on Chinese women's sport have emerged. Among existing research, one of the most attractive topics is the performance of female athletes in elite sport. Jingxia Dong's work (2007a) has analyzed the social, political, economic, and cultural elements that contributed to the great success of Chinese female athletes in elite sport. In the aspect of a larger-scale participation in sport, some researchers explored the political and social implications of women's sport. The works by Fan Hong (1997) and Susan Brownell (1995) have explained the important role of the female body in the analysis of cultural and social constructions of various issues. They discussed the relationship among women's exercise, their bodies, the nation, and Chinese women's liberation and assessed the influence of women's sport on women's social status in China. In addition, several studies discussed the relationship among women's sports participation, their personal empowerment, and individual lives. The work from Huan Xiong (2021) has focused on women's fitness experiences at the grassroots to explore the relationship between fitness and women's self-identity, personal life planning, as well as cultural aesthetics. My study focused on Chinese women's fitness consumption after the reform and opening-up. I discussed the role of market forces in shaping women's fitness and sports at the grassroots. Since this reform, the power of the state decreased in women's individual sports activities, and the marketization, as a structural transition of China's economy, has significantly influenced these activities. However, the majority of Chinese research on women's sport that mentioned economic transformation remained at the level of descriptive explanation of the market context. Few studies engaged in theoretical exploration of how market dynamics systematically influence women's participation, choices, and experiences in the realm of sport and fitness. My study filled this research gap.

For demonstrating how women's sport transformed, especially the development of their fitness consumption during the economic reform period (the post Maoist time), first, this study examined the historical backgrounds of the interrelationship among social transformation, sport, and female circumstances in the pre-Maoist era from dynastic China to the Republic of China (pre-1949) and during the Maoist time (1949-1978).

During the time of dynastic China, Confucian culture, which emphasized a patriarchal family structure, dominated the society, contributing to women's subordinate roles. Under this context, women often encountered societal restrictions of behavioral norms, available spaces, and access, thereby lacking equal rights and access to sport participation. From dynastic China to the Republic of China, a more modern time, in line with significant changes in social ideology and political system, women were encouraged to engage in social production and the liberation of the body. Accordingly, women had greater opportunities to take part in physical activities.

In the Maoist era, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established, women were encouraged to exercise their bodies to develop strong bodies for social production and gender equality. Women's sports activities were primarily organized by work units. Admittedly, during this time, the development of women's sport experienced several setbacks due to the turbulent social and political environment, including the scarcity of social resources in the Great Leap Forward and the rigorous ideological regulation in the Cultural Revolution. During the Maoist era, the state maintained centralized control over resource distribution and sectoral development, encompassing both macroeconomic planning and the ideological and practical regulation of individual daily lives. Within this context, Chinese people lost the freedom to choose their preferred attitudes, notions, and lifestyles for fulfilling themselves, although the state achieved a significant socio-economic development. Consequently, the state actively promoted gender equality in access to sports participation, and Chinese women's sport created a representative symbol of women's liberation and brought the state political glory and meanings. However, this success also reflects that the advancement of women's sport was primarily aligned with national development goals and the ideology of collectivism. The women's sporting bodies were suppressed by enforcing masculinity, thereby leading to a

neutralized and unmarked gender concept. It was difficult for women to find opportunities for their sports participation to satisfy their own rights, desires and interests as independent individuals. This situation didn't shift for women's sport until the emerging development paradigm for economic reforms and society's opening-up.

Since the late 1970s, the market-oriented transformation has emerged in China's economy. This reform has undermined the flow barriers of capital (including foreign capital) and the means of production, greatly increasing the scale of the Chinese economy. Furthermore, individuals' consumption and income have witnessed a dramatic increase. This system has rationalized individuals' own benefits (for both sellers and buyers) and developed a relatively free environment for women to organize their personal lives. The opening-up policy has accelerated the evolution of Chinese society from the culturally homogeneous environment of the Maoist era to a multi-cultural environment, which promoted the shift of women's sport in the new period. This shift offers Chinese women new lifestyles and values, allowing them to select their preferred beliefs, religions, lifestyles, and ways of sports participation.

During this time, China's sports system has been encouraged to create more social, economic, and cultural values for individuals' lives instead of carrying out a strictly political function. Correspondingly, the values, models, and spaces of sports participation have shifted. Specifically, sports policy highlighted that the goals of contemporary mass sport are to improve the lives of the general public and promote individuals' development. The mode of sport has shifted from a work-unit organized pattern to a self-organized pattern. The government mainly takes steps to guide, assist, and support women's physical exercises. Women themselves have gradually regarded sport as a means to enrich and diversify their individual lives. Accordingly, female mass sport has proliferated and changed. Compared to women's sport during the pre-Maoist time, the great progress lies in the change that women have gained numerous opportunities to participate in sport. Compared to women's sport during the Maoist time, an era of accelerated development for women's sport, the great progress lies in the change that the government no longer formulates models of female sports participation without consideration for women's individual volition. However, the discourse of free

choice is often accompanied by increased pressure on individuals to assume personal responsibility.

During the collectivist era, women's engagement in sport was positioned within a state-defined framework that framed women as 'nation-builders', with the state assuming responsibility for managing and supporting women's health and physical fitness. In the post-reform era, with the retreat of the state from centralized resource allocation, women's fitness goals shifted toward freely individual development. Accordingly, in a market-driven environment, women need to find fitness opportunities on their own or pursue self-optimization to independently access more social resources. For example, they would do physical training to enhance appearance or to improve health for self-optimization. In contemporary China, where patriarchal logics remain deeply embedded, as key gender figures in the private sphere, women's development, especially their opportunities for fitness development, are often restricted to a relatively narrow social framework. Ultimately, these seemingly autonomous choices related to fitness and consumption are in fact shaped by intersecting forces of gendered social structures and an institutional market-oriented system.

Within patriarchal structures, women have long functioned as instruments serving broader social functions. Yang (1999) mentions that there was a view that both today's commercial community and the Cultural Revolution period encompass patriarchal structures of domination. The division is that in the Cultural Revolution, males wanted females to pursue masculinity; however, during this new era, males want females to pursue femininity (Yang, 1999). During these two times, males are telling females what to do, presenting equivalent male-dominated dynamics. As a result, the different tensions of gender relations and institutional structures across different historical periods have produced varying functions, images, and behaviors of women, thereby shaping distinct forms and purposes of female participation in physical activities.

Among the transformations of women's sport after the reform and opening-up, one of the most significant phenomena is the rise of women's fitness consumption. This rise offers tangible means for women to participate in the emerging, diverse lifestyles. The fitness products and services in the market have become key avenues supporting

women's individual sports and fitness engagement and constitute an important part of the self-organized form of women's sport. This market development reflects the expanded functions of sport and the changes in social settings for fitness women in line with the market-oriented economic development.

In the market, women's agency is activated based on consumer power and sovereignty. As a result, the market's response to women's individual fitness needs has led to the diversification of fitness options, product innovation, and service upgrades. In response to women's barriers to balancing their family, work, and fitness schedule, female-friendly services have been provided, and diversified ways of participating in fitness have been developed in the market, which enhances the convenience and flexibility of women's fitness practice. In response to women's fitness motivations like health and beauty, a variety of tailored fitness products and services have been offered, including fitness programs for cultivating a soft, feminine figure and supporting postpartum recovery. In response to the gendered stereotypes and gendered sense of insecurity among women under the patriarchal framework, female-friendly and women-only fitness environments have been developed in the market. In addition to the general needs of women, suppliers in the market also try to satisfy the non-conventional fitness needs of women. Moreover, the diversity of fitness products and services is reflected not only in their functional variety but also in the broad range of pricing options available, thereby accommodating women with different purchasing capacities. These actions support women's individual development, reduce social barriers, especially barriers imposed by gender hierarchy and the norms and behaviors associated with women's social roles, to women's sports participation, expand the sports participation scale among women, develop a female-centric sports narrative, and expand female-friendly public sports spaces in China. The rise of the fitness market also makes up for the deficiency of public fitness facilities and venues (like sports grounds and parks) and compensates for the lack of gender-sensitive design in these public facilities, which has brought convenience to fitness-related women.

In addition to improving the intrinsic quality of the offering, suppliers in the fitness market may seek to construct a heightened sense of value through symbolic appeals,

aesthetic presentation, or emotionally resonant narratives. These marketing and strategies have catered to women's social expectations and ideal social identity and fostered new desires around fitness among Chinese women. Consciousnesses of health, beauty, recreation, fashion, female empowerment, and consumption formulate new values in female fitness and encourage women to adopt sport and fitness as a way to enjoy life and express self. However, these strategies may also inflate reference prices or distort women's perception and needs of fitness, leading to excessive and misleading fitness consumption among women. This phenomenon suggests that fitness-related women often make consumption choices contrary to their best interests. Beneath the surface of self-fulfillment, fitness-related women face some subtle and structural challenges in the marketization and capitalization context.

Harvey and Marx (2010) emphasize that capital is not a mere object, but a social relation manifested as a movement in pursuit of self valorization. In a highly capitalized world, capital no longer confines itself to exploiting labor within factories (the immediate sphere of production) but continuously seeks new domains for value expansion. It must attempt to incorporate even human emotions, attention, life experiences, and future possibilities into its tracks of circulation and accumulation. In women's fitness consumption, women are not merely consumers, and their bodies and identities are transformed into means of production and objects of valorization. Simultaneously, technology is driven by the logic of capital, serving the purposes of capital accumulation, surveillance, and the enhancement of production efficiency, rather than human well-being. Innovations such as algorithmic recommendations, credit scoring systems, and personalized advertising subtly shape people's desires, choices, and possibilities, weaving individuals into the network of capital circulation. Within this dynamic, user-generated information and data are commodified, enabling more covert and extensive capital valorization.

First, from a capitalist perspective, a healthy body represents high-quality labor characterized by greater efficiency, fewer sick leaves, and enhanced capacity for high-intensity work. The expenses incurred by women on fitness-related goods, such as class fees and equipment costs, can be regarded as prepayments for part of the reproduction

costs of labor. Meanwhile, the female body is constructed as an asset requiring continuous investment to maintain and enhance its market value, particularly within the matrimonial context and labor market. Consequently, these fitness commodities also function as 'means of production' that reshape the female body, constituting necessary investments in body optimization projects. Thus, the female body assumes multiple roles simultaneously: the 'laborer', the 'object of labor', and the 'instrument of production'. This research reveals that, within the capitalist framework, women's dedication of time and energy to fitness training is embedded with connotations of unpaid, self-imposed labor. Their investment in physical well-being has expanded the consumer market, their healthy bodies are exploited in the labor market, and their female bodies are consumed by the patriarchal society.

Second, this study uncovers that within the consumption system, women's fitness methods, choices, subsequent reactions, and critical awareness are systematically managed and regulated by capital. Further, capital continuously introduces new concepts to raise the cost for women to reflect on these designed fitness pathways, thereby curbing the re-emergence of rationality in consumption. Such innovation reflects the inherently low value of the products, which does not involve long-term market competitiveness. Much high-concept marketing serves as a means to conceal the low value of products and as a strategy to manage women's post-purchase responses, illustrating the pervasive encroachment of capital into the daily lives of fitness-oriented women.

Specifically, Hong (1997) highlights the crucial role of sport in women's bodily autonomy and liberation, as well as the challenge of the existing patriarchal order. Within the domain of fitness consumption in contemporary China, this dynamic is re-encoded by the fusion of aesthetic norms with discourses of health, empowerment, and self-improvement. The fitness products and services market not only the promise of fit body shaping but also the attainment of a commodified ideal where sculpted bodies function as indices of personal agency and feminist self-care. Yet this conflation of self-improvement, individual health, and beauty obscures the ways in which embodied practices are co-opted by market imperatives, compelling women to invest in an ever-expanding array of consumable commodities. Guan (2013) expounds Horkheimer

and Adorno's perspective on rationality that, in advanced capitalist systems, the enlightenment rationality has degenerated into instrumental rationality, a mode of thinking that serves capitalist domination by prioritizing efficiency and control. Instrumental rationality regards the world, including human bodies and minds, merely as objects to be calculated, managed, and manipulated (Guan, 2013). All values, such as beauty, health, and freedom, are quantified into achievable and measurable objectives, for which the efficient technical means are found. This process strips the intrinsic, qualitative richness of things. Instrumental rationality exemplifies the degradation of rationality from an emancipatory force into an instrument for dominating nature or humanity. In the context of women's fitness consumption, ideologies of female resistance and progress are co-opted by capital logic, transforming them into new market segments and value-added opportunities. Fitness commodities are positioned as effective technical instruments that could realize such progressive ideals. Critical consciousness becomes dissipated and ultimately integrated into a consumerist narrative centered on 'the freedom to choose any bodily management method', thereby reinforcing the premise of 'the body must be continuously managed and consumed'. This reflects capital's appropriation and pacification of social critical energies. These practices reflect a broader trend in the commodification of female empowerment, where the market does not so much respond to women's needs as it capitalizes on them, instrumentalizing feminist discourses and subjective desires for commercial gain.

Women's engagement with fitness is driven not only by autonomous fitness goals but also by the imperative to realize and signal a culturally sanctioned ideal, reinforcing women's bodies as a site of continuous commercial exploitation and symbolic production under the patriarchal structure. This process reveals the ambivalence of commercial intervention: while it may expand access to feminist progressive narratives, it, in essence, repackages ideals of female bodily aesthetics within narrow, consumer-oriented frameworks under a compromise of the existing patriarchal structure. This compromise reproduces or reinforces the discourse of stereotypical femininity. Consequently, rather than empowering feminist practices, what is more frequently observed is a state of ambiguity, confusion, and contradiction in the process of female

engagement in fitness consumption.

Leveraging the commercial potential embedded in widely shared female aspirations, the fitness market aligns gendered fitness aspirations, fitness-related aesthetic values, and consumer identity with popular progressive narratives among women. However, in contemporary consumer culture, women's bodies have been transformed into potent symbols of cultural capital, leveraged by pervasive advertising and marketing campaigns. This symbolic regime recasts the body from a natural, biological substrate into a mediated signifier of worth: through particular disciplined self-care and aesthetic maintenance, women are encouraged to amplify their attractiveness and command attention within social fields. This process reflects the operational logic of instrumental rationality, quantifying and decomposing objectives. Ultimately, in the body consumption associated with different aesthetics, the various concepts promoted based on different aesthetics, including the concept of power and independence in women's fitness consumption, ultimately aim to reinforce women's demand for enhancing their appearance. Within this paradigm, women's consumer choices are subtly steered by curated illusions of value, raising ethical concerns about exploitation, misrepresentation, anxiety amplification, and the hollowing out of authentic consumer autonomy. According to Gordon, Hammer, and Pensky (2020), Adorno contends that the 'cultural industry' represents the comprehensive application of instrumental rationality in the sphere of intellectual production, systematically eradicating genuine individuality and critical capacity. It signifies the industrialization and standardization of cultural creation, whereby cultural commodities are mass-produced in a manner akin to factory assembly lines. Its primary objective lies not in artistic expression or the pursuit of truth, but rather in economic profit and social integration (Gordon, Hammer, and Pensky, 2020). Within the female fitness consumption, the 'cultural industry' incessantly generates and replicates these different templates of the ideal images through channels such as social media and advertising.

Critically, such overwhelming abundance of so-called individualized choices provided by marketing constitutes a 'tyranny of choice' and fosters 'pseudo-individuality' (Gordon, Hammer, and Pensky, 2020; Guan, 2013). Essentially, these fitness choices are

confined to the instrumental level of ‘how to meet the standard’, while the more fundamental question of ‘whether one must pursue such a standard’ is systematically precluded by the ‘cultural industry’. Consequently, expressions of individuality, uniqueness, and progressiveness are reduced to limited, predetermined options. This study reveals that within the capitalist framework, the notion of self-fulfillment is not merely gentle encouragement but carries an implicit coercive demand. This requirement posits that women should exhibit considerable desires and compels women to satisfy their desires. Women’s individualized fitness choices must align with standards of self-fulfillment, which function as a metric for evaluating the ‘progressive’ or ‘backward’ nature of modern individual behavior, especially among women. Consequently, women become structurally trapped in an endless cycle of desire, unable to reach the understanding of genuine fitness achievement and meaning – the original objects of their desire.

The fact of cultural commodities reveals that these meanings laden in fitness products and marketing serve the valorization of capital. As a result, seemingly autonomous consumption practices have actually simplified women’s development and gender emancipation to privatized consumer choices. Meanwhile, complex and structural body politics, such as patriarchal aesthetic discipline and capitalist consumer traps, are reframed as personalized issues of freedom of choice or lifestyle. The female sporting body has shifted from a productive subject to a consumable object, adapting to the gendered order under the capitalist context due to stripping away the context of class struggle in the socialist context. The market also redirects bodily regulation into a matter of personal fitness pursuits, thereby obscuring the deeper impact of gender structures on access to resources and social expectations. This undermines the potential for women to form critical social solidarity based on shared struggles, atomizing them into isolated, anxious consumers fixated on their own ‘imperfect’ bodies.

Additionally, the satisfaction in consumption may even lead some women to overlook the true significance of fitness practices in reality. The ‘cultural industry’ perpetuates the cycle of consumption through the systematic production of readily accessible, formulaic, and predictable forms of pleasure (Gordon, Hammer, and Pensky, 2020). As a

consequence, these pre-packaged pleasures or some symbolic values supersede the authentic experiential engagement in physical activities. The diverse dimensions of genuine experiences (including enjoyment, frustration, and monotony), which may provoke profound reflections on the meaning of life, are suppressed. These dynamics reflect the profoundly alienating effects of capital accumulation logic on female individuals and societal relations.

While the influence of fitness consumption continues to expand in both scope and level, propelled by a capital-driven consumerist fitness culture that has become increasingly pervasive, actual participation in such consumption remains attainable only for a segment of women in China. Specifically, rural women do not often spend money on fitness activities. One contributing factor is income limitation; another is the underdevelopment of the fitness industry in rural regions. In urban areas where the fitness industry has significantly developed, women from the middle-class are willing to invest in high-quality fitness facilities and services; and some working-class women also get the opportunities of enjoying commercial fitness services, but these are often low-cost or discounted offerings. Accessing such services frequently comes with implicit requirements that these women perform free emotional labor. Within the market context, fitness services tailored for individuals or for women are categorized as higher-end or elite offerings. Such services and participation scope possess limited capacity to address broader gender inequalities and exclusions in sports, and instead contribute to the stratification of access to fitness and health-related resources.

The rise of online fitness consultations, classes, and fitness apps has, to some extent, addressed the spatial and class-based limitations of the traditional fitness industry. These online platforms have enhanced the flexibility of women's fitness and seemingly created more inclusive environments for lower-income women, allowing them access to broader fitness advice and knowledge. However, this online system has also become the key site where women are expected to provide emotional labor, such as sharing promotional content or endorsing services on social media, often without compensation. Lower-income women are particularly vulnerable to this form of exploitation. More critically, the capitalization of digital platforms sustains structural information asymmetry between

consumers and commercial actors, promotes consumerism, reinforces the exploitation of women's bodies, and contributes to the expansion and even alienation of women's fitness needs.

Thirdly, amid the collusion between capitalism and social media, female fitness culture in China has undergone profound spectacularization. The fitness has evolved from a potentially emancipatory and empowering bodily practice into a performative and self-disciplinary form of labor governed by capitalist logic. Within this framework, women's time and energy are alienated, transformed from dimensions of lived experience into productive resources invested in 'personal branding'. Women's time that could be devoted to broader life experiences is systematically appropriated by capital and converted into productive or consumptive time that serves capital accumulation. Women are caught in an endless cycle of self-optimization anxiety, while their authentic selves are colonized and governed by a spectacularized 'ideal self'. Spectacle is not merely an assemblage of images but a set of social relations among people mediated through imagery. In this dynamic, authentic peer and communal support rooted in shared physical activity are reduced to abstracted, point-to-point interactions of likes on social media, one-directional follows, and the comparative gaze. While the form of connection is virtual, its content remains heavily objectified, centered on the body. The spectacle supplants genuine community, social relations become abstract, and women are superficially united through the shared consumption of standardized bodily images. Debord and Nicholson-Smith (2006) underscore that this dynamic would lead to a crisis of the loss of the real. The sweat of a workout would be shed only for the camera, bodily sensations would yield to photo feedback, and the joy of fitness would depend on the number of likes on social media. As a result, women become disconnected from the most immediate and authentic bodily experiences, such as the growth of strength, the release of endorphins, and the sheer pleasure of sport. What remains is a virtual bodily image, perpetually subjected to comparison, evaluation, and modification within the spectacle.

This study discovers that the framework of self-expression shaped by capital does not emphasize self-affirmation, but rather seeks to dominate the external evaluation criteria for self-presentation in public. When the self becomes an object of external appraisal

through such expression, it becomes exposed to the exploitative mechanisms of capital. Consequently, fitness-oriented women's intention to express their inherent individuality is suppressed, while they are prompted to 'rent' a desired or idealized fitness image through consumption. Capital shows remarkable 'leniency' toward an inconsistent self, as it drives women to actively pursue the fitness personas marketed by capital. This dynamic undermines arduous, genuine progress in women's fitness practices. Capital takes over the self-expression governance, resulting in spectacular yet intrinsically hollow fitness performances among women. The higher spectacle value placed on female bodies in patriarchal societies exacerbates this circumstance for women.

Fourth, these dynamics illustrate how the passion, self-expression, and creativity that women invest in fitness, which are regarded as vital aspects of life, are subtly appropriated by capital as free raw materials, used to fuel its valorization processes. Lazzarato (2016) indicates that in the post-industrial economy, the dominant form of labor is no longer physical labor aimed at producing material goods, but rather 'immaterial labor', which primarily involves informational and cultural content. Labor related to cultural content encompasses activities that define cultural standards, fashion trends, aesthetic tastes, consumer norms, and public opinions (Lazzarato, 2016). The outcomes of such labor often influence or shape social relations. The forwarding of fitness advertisements by women (as mentioned above) epitomizes this type of labor. Private social relationships are thereby transformed into brand communication channels. Individuals leverage their personal credibility to endorse brands, an act of cultural content production, and then stimulate desires in others through interaction, an act of affective labor. Throughout this process, capital capitalizes on community trust to lower marketing costs, fulfilling functions of market education and promotion. However, this process may lead to the expense of eroding that very trust. Furthermore, the spectacular display of women's fitness bodies on social platforms constitutes a form of cultural-symbolic production labor. Such content functions as free advertising material, fostering emulation and consumption. Through these forms of labor, capital reaps benefits such as market demand expansion, brand value appreciation, and the accumulation of data assets. Much of this labor does not require compensation from capital, as many individuals are

already guided by the value system constructed by capital to perform unpaid work. This phenomenon blurs the boundary between labor and everyday life (Lazzarato, 2016). This research demonstrates that women's leisure time becomes colonized by productive activities. Fitness is no longer merely a means of post-work recuperation. Capital no longer exploits merely physical strength in factories, but increasingly harnesses the very foundations of social existence: human sociability, creativity, and emotional capacities. The display of female sporting bodies on social media reinforces both the self-objectification and the collective body anxiety among women, which exemplifies this exploitation of the foundation of social life.

Additionally, from the perspective of market structure, the market does not inherently ensure a diversity of goods and services with affordable prices. The current structure of China's fitness market remains relatively competitive and free, which places female consumers in a relatively advantageous position and allows them access to cost-effective fitness offerings. However, if the fitness market moves toward monopolization, women may face a more challenging fitness environment, characterized by limited choices, reduced service quality, and potentially higher costs.

To sum up, women's fitness consumption, thus, emerges as a critical site where women's self-expression, market economic system, and social regulation are intricately entangled, carrying significant economic and sociocultural meaning. This study explores how the position and boundaries of women's agency in fitness practices are shaped by intersecting forces of gendered social structures, cultural norms, and market dynamics through the lens of women's fitness consumption. It explains the fitness market for women in contemporary China and analyzes the interactions between individual female consumers and fitness suppliers in terms of value construction, behavioral orientation, and identity formation. Women's fitness consumption is not merely a pursuit of health, but also a negotiation of social identity, aesthetic ideals, and symbolic capital. These practices reflect the complexities of women's individual fitness practices and the tensions and restructurings between women's personal agency and structural constraints within a transformation of sport marketization. This research also reflects a broader trend in women's bodily practice, where the female bodies have been liberating from the

national, political discourses, but gender and capital work together to build a cultural apparatus that regulates women's bodies, actions, and desires in line with the market-oriented economic development.

Research on women's consumption, particularly female body consumption, often focuses on how external social structures shape women's consumption, emphasizing the influence of marketing concepts and consumer culture in patriarchal societal frameworks. This study explores an aspect often overlooked in previous research: the impact of intrinsic subjective initiative anchored in consumer sovereignty on women's consumption. The findings point toward a feasible improvement strategy for individual female consumers: first, focusing on the interaction between self and their body and their own perceptions of physical practice can optimize individual experiences, particularly in fitness consumption; second, obtaining more relevant knowledge and information can improve their rationality, which must optimize their consumption decision; third, they need to focus on the authenticity of the motives behind their actions. For example, they need to consciously consider 'whether they need to consume' and 'whether they need to pursue a certain fitness standard'.

This study also reveals the imitations in micro-level decision-making of 'independent' fitness-oriented women and the vulnerability of their agency in driving macro-level sports reform practices within a commercial context. Hargreaves (1996) argues that the progress of women's sport is challenging to automatically achieve; this process requires institutional assistance to ameliorate the power dynamics of gender in society, especially in the sports domain. The evolution of modern society is believed to be driven by two contradictory forces: one force is the movement of market expansion, whereby market principles continuously transform factors such as labor, land, and currency into commodities; another force is the movement of social protection, which represents a counter-movement through which society resists the encroachment of the market on human life and the natural environment, seeking to curb excessive market expansion through institutional interventions (Aulenbacher, Bärnthaler, and Novy, 2019: 106-107). In the context of China's socialist system, where the government has strong macro-intervention capabilities, the macro-level fitness environment for women can be

optimized in the following ways:

The Chinese government helps to improve the public fitness environment for women in a variety of ways. For example, the construction of public fitness facilities should incorporate female-friendly designs. In local and central official sports organizations, women's leadership should be promoted at different levels, which must improve the government's emphasis on women's fitness. The All-China Women's Federation, an official women's organization, should pay special attention to women's fitness, such as improving women's interests, participation options, and rights in the sports and fitness field, when executing the mission to elevate the societal status of women. These actions may expand the fitness opportunities for women and also reduce the bargaining power of commercial actors, thereby driving them to upgrade their fitness services.

In terms of the commercial fitness environment, the government should focus on preventing monopolistic developments in the fitness industry. At the same time, efforts should be made to strengthen regulatory mechanisms to promote accountability while preserving market dynamism. Specifically, the government should strengthen the supervision of operations in the fitness market, such as monitoring and reviewing the qualifications of fitness coaches and promoting standardization in the industry. Moreover, the government should strengthen supervision and regulation of commercial advertising in the fitness market, particularly in relation to exaggerated or false information in advertising. It is noteworthy that the state government functions both as a driver of market expansion and an executor of social protection, particularly in China. Generally, the state must achieve a balance between the benefits of economic liberalization and the costs of social safeguards (Aulenbacher, Bärnthaler, and Novy, 2019). Therefore, while strengthening regulatory oversight of the fitness market, the government must also ensure the market's vitality is maintained.

The commercialization of fitness continues to deliver strong messages that stimulate women's interests in fitness as well as recreation, and produces more options for women to obtain access to fitness engagement. However, those women with lower discretionary incomes or salaries might suffer challenges in fitness practice. In order to provide all women with equal chances, the characteristics of low-income female groups

need to be given special consideration when the governmental or voluntary sports sectors and organizations support women's fitness participation. In addition, there is an underdevelopment of team-oriented programs for women within the current fitness market. The growing trend toward customized services tends to foster a less inclusive fitness environment. The government should prioritize addressing these issues. The governmental sectors need to encourage the development of female team sports and fitness activities on the basis of the orientation of enjoyment, performance, and competition, and provide programs that constitute a collaborative environment for men and women to participate in sports and fitness activities and share their views and experiences. This effort enables the development of a more open and inclusive fitness environment for women.

Additionally, the government could support the organization of public and non-commercial lectures or campaigns focused on women's fitness and health expertise. Providing scientific information helps women shape their understanding of fitness, which may make them more rational and wise when making decisions about fitness consumption. Moreover, internet regulation needs to improve, such as enhancing information security and platform transparency. These actions can counteract capital's use and manipulation of online user information and alleviate the information asymmetry between individual women and commercial actors, which may optimize their fitness expression space and access to valuable fitness information.

This research on Chinese women's fitness consumption makes a contribution to Chinese market research, sports research, and research on women. As sports marketization emerges as a remarkable trend in the present age of China, the study on the influence of the consumer market on the development of women's sport at the grassroots level is needed. The main limitation of this study was the focus on urban women in Chengdu. Future research could broaden the sample to include women from across the country, particularly from rural areas. As respondents in this study come from working-class and higher-class backgrounds, future research could be expanded to include an analysis of women from lower socioeconomic classes in China. These studies will compose a comprehensive roadmap for understanding Chinese women's fitness consumption by

examining both similarities and differences across various socioeconomic classes and regions.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Consent form

Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Sixi Liu's research study titled *The Conditions, Strategic Preferences and Obstacles of Contemporary Chinese Women's Practical Participation in the Fitness Market (temporary)*.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my interview with Sixi Liu to be audio-recorded. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to anonymisation. ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet. ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview. ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects. ☐

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitalsSIXI...LIU.....

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix 2 Interview questions

(Chinese Version)

基本情况:

- 1 年龄:
- 2 职业:
- 3 年收入状况:
- 4 是否为独生子女:
- 5 婚姻状况:
- 6 子女状况:
- 7 受教育状况:

健身相关经历:

- 8 您的整个健身经历是怎样的, 比如学生时期?
- 9 您一般的健身计划是怎样的? 运动期间和运动后你感觉如何?
- 10 您去健身锻炼或消费的目的是什么?为什么?
- 11 您有最喜欢参加的健身项目吗? 是什么?为什么?
- 12 您是否参加或考虑参加相关于生育健康的健身运动项目?
- 13 您对健身服是否有偏好? 宽松的(中性的)还是体现曲线(女性特质)的? 如果你在公共场所(如商场)穿紧身的健身服, 您会感到自在吗?
- 14 您认为社会对女性的身材或外貌(与男性相比)有更高的要求吗?
- 15 您对外形塑造是否有偏好?强壮的, 性感的, 健康的, 还是柔弱的和苗条的?为什么?
- 16 健身锻炼是否给您的生活带来了改变? 有哪些呢?
- 17 在您参加健身锻炼或消费的经历中, 您是否遇到过障碍? 是什么? 它们如何影响呢?

消费相关经历:

- 18 您的健身消费是多少呢?一个月、一年大约花多少钱? 您消费了哪些健身产品呢?
- 19 您为什么愿意花钱在健身上?
- 20 您是否有过不满意(以及满意的)的健身消费体验? 是怎样呢?
- 21 您认为商家(比如健身房)是否注重女性客户的体验呢? 具体的行动是什么呢?
- 22 您有注意过健身广告中的女性形象吗? 是怎样的?
- 23 您有注意过女性健身相关广告的内容吗? 它们会让您联想到什么样的生活或概念?
- 24 您会看网上的健身视频、健身帖子吗? 内容是怎样的?
- 25 您喜欢分享自己锻炼相关的感想、照片或视频吗? 通过哪些平台或途径? 为什么? 什么样的信息?

(English Version)

Basic information:

- 1 Age:

- 2 Occupation:
- 3 Income status:
- 4 Are you the only child?
- 5 Marital status:
- 6 Status of children:
- 7 Education status:

Fitness-related experiences:

- 8 What has your entire fitness experience been like, such as during your student days?
- 9 What's your general fitness plan like? How do you feel during and after exercise?
- 10 What are your purposes for investing in fitness?
- 11 Do you have favorite fitness programs? What are they? Why?
- 12 Do you participate in or consider participating in fitness programs related to reproductive health?
- 13 Do you have a preference for fitness wear? Loose (neutral) or tight-fitting (feminine)? Would you feel at ease when wearing tight-fitting fitness wear in a public place (like a shopping mall)?
- 14 Do you think society has higher requirements for women's figures or appearances, compared to men?
- 15 Do you have a preference for body shaping? Strong, sexy, healthy, elegant, or slim? Why?
- 16 Does fitness exercise make a difference in your life? What are these changes?
- 17 Have you ever encountered challenges in your fitness practices or spending? What are they? How do these factors affect?

Consumption-related experiences:

- 18 How much do you spend on fitness, about a month or a year? What kinds of fitness products and services do you consume?
- 19 Why are you willing to spend money on fitness instead of taking part in free exercise?
- 20 Have you ever had unsatisfactory (and satisfactory) fitness consumption experiences? How were these experiences?
- 21 Do you think businesses (such as gyms) consider the experience of female customers? What are their specific actions?
- 22 Have you ever noticed female figures in fitness advertisements? What is it like?
- 23 Have you noticed any advertisements about women's fitness? What kind of life or concept do they bring to your mind?
- 24 Do you watch online fitness videos or fitness posts? What's the content like?
- 25 Do you enjoy sharing your thoughts, photos, or videos about fitness? Through which platforms or channels? Why? What kind of information?

Appendix 3 Questionnaire questions

(Chinese Version)

基本情况

1 年龄：——（数字）

2 职业：——

3 请问您是否有个人收入（您不属于没有收入的群体，比如全职太太或学生）？

A. 有收入 B. 没有收入

A— 请填写您的年收入状况：——（元）

B— 请填写您的年生活费用：——（元）

4 一年的健身消费额度（包括健身房会员、教练费用、健身器材购买，等等）：——（元）

5 受教育情况（毕业及在读）：

A. 大专以下学历 B. 大专 C. 本科 D. 硕士 E. 博士

6 您是否为独生子女：

A. 是 B. 否

7 您的婚姻状况：

A. 未婚 B. 已婚 C. 离异 D. 丧偶

8 您的子女状况：

A. 未生育 B. 独生子女 C. 多子女

9 您在健身时穿什么类型的健身服？

A. 贴身的 B. 宽松的 C. 随意 D 其他：_____【请注明】

10 您喜欢参与什么运动【多选】：

A. 拳击、柔道、摔跤类对抗性运动 B. 健美操、体育舞蹈、瑜伽类伸展型运动 C 举重类力量器械类型锻炼 D. 有氧自行车类有氧器械类型锻炼 E. 其他：_____

【请注明】

11 是否参加或考虑参加孕产相关健身运动项目：

A. 是 B. 否

健身锻炼和消费的情况

一、健身锻炼的目的

本版块借鉴 Likert 5 级评分法进行评判，1 非目的, 2 不重要的目的, 3 一般目的, 4 重要目的, 5 非常重要的目的。请选择最符合您的经历或看法的描述：

12 瘦身塑形是您参与健身锻炼的目的：

（非目的）1 2 3 4 5（非常重要的目的）

13 健康是您参与健身锻炼的目的：

（非目的）1 2 3 4 5（非常重要的目的）

14 休闲娱乐是您参与健身锻炼的目的：

（非目的）1 2 3 4 5（非常重要的目的）

15 提升自身魅力是您参与健身锻炼的目的：

（非目的）1 2 3 4 5（非常重要的目的）

16 提升抵御男性侵害的能力是您参与健身锻炼的目的：

（非目的）1 2 3 4 5（非常重要的目的）

17 提升工作或学习效率是您参与健身锻炼的目的：

(非目的) 1 2 3 4 5 (非常重要的目的)

18 社会交际是您参与健身锻炼的目的:

(非目的) 1 2 3 4 5 (非常重要的目的)

19 【可选】其他目的: _____ 【请注明】

二、阻碍健身锻炼的因素

本版块借鉴 Likert 5 级评分法进行评判, 1 完全没有影响, 2 有微小的影响, 3 有一些影响, 4 有较大的影响, 5 有极大的影响。请选择最符合您的经历或看法的描述:

20 工作或学习阻碍您参与健身锻炼:

(完全没有影响) 1 2 3 4 5 (有极大的影响)

21 家务劳动阻碍您参与健身锻炼:

(完全没有影响) 1 2 3 4 5 (有极大的影响)

22 子女养育阻碍您参与健身锻炼:

(完全没有影响) 1 2 3 4 5 (有极大的影响)

23 生育阻碍您参与健身锻炼:

(完全没有影响) 1 2 3 4 5 (有极大的影响)

24 个人财务能力阻碍您参与健身锻炼:

(完全没有影响) 1 2 3 4 5 (有极大的影响)

25 不符合‘女人味’阻碍您参与器械、拳击等健身项目:

(完全没有影响) 1 2 3 4 5 (有极大的影响)

26 【可选】其他障碍: _____ 【请注明】

三、对于美丽和健身的观点

本版块借鉴 Likert 5 级评分法进行评判, 1 完全不同意, 2 不同意, 3 中立, 4 同意, 5 非常同意。请选择最符合您的经历或看法的描述:

27 您如何看待‘白瘦幼’这种女性审美?

(完全不同意) 1 2 3 4 5 (非常同意)

28 您如何看待‘健身是自我取悦’这种看法?

(完全不同意) 1 2 3 4 5 (非常同意)

29 您如何看待‘自信的女孩最美丽’这种看法?

(完全不同意) 1 2 3 4 5 (非常同意)

30 您如何看待‘健身减肥比其他减肥方式(比如: 减肥药)更好’这种看法?

(完全不同意) 1 2 3 4 5 (非常同意)

四、健身消费相关的经历

31 您愿意在公共场合(比如地铁、商场)穿着紧身健身服吗?

1 完全不愿意 2 不太愿意 3 无所谓 4 愿意 5 十分愿意

32 您愿意跟随男性健身教练学习吗?

1 完全不愿意 2 不太愿意 3 无所谓 4 愿意 5 十分愿意

33 您介意健身场所的男性(比如: 男性凝视)吗?

1 完全不介意 2 有些介意 3 一般介意 4 相当介意 5 十分介意

34 相比于普通健身房，您会更偏向于女性专属健身房吗？

1 十分不喜欢 2 不太喜欢 3 无偏好 4 有偏好 5 有极大偏好

35 他人对您身材的负面评价会影响您的自信心吗？

1 完全没有 2 有微小的影响 3 有一些影响 4 有较大的影响 5 有极大的影响

36 您希望练成哪一类身材或练出多少肌肉：

A 纤细、无肌肉 B 练出紧致、适当的肌肉线条 C 练出大块、强壮的肌肉

37 您浏览关于健身的网络视频和网络话题吗？

1 从未 2 偶尔 3 有时 4 经常 5 随时，几乎每天

38 您会自愿参与线下的健身相关的比赛、互动、或者表演活动吗？

1 从未 2 偶尔 3 有时 4 经常 5 随时，几乎每天

39 健身属于完全私人的问题，且我没有兴趣与家人以外的人谈论。

A 同意 B 不同意

40 您会与身边的朋友和同事分享您的健身经历吗？

1 从未 2 偶尔 3 有时 4 经常 5 随时，几乎每天

41 您会在社交媒体上（例如小红书、抖音）向公众分享您的健身经历吗？

1 从未 2 偶尔 3 有时 4 经常 5 随时，几乎每天

(English Version)

Basic information

1 Age: _____

2 Occupation: _____

3 Do you have personal income?

A. have income B. no income

If A - Please fill in your annual income status (unit: RMB): _____

If B - Please fill in your annual living expenses (unit: RMB): _____

4 Annual consumption of fitness (unit: RMB): _____

5 Education status (graduation and current enrollment):

A. education below junior college degree B. junior college degree

C. undergraduate degree D. master's degree E. doctoral degree

6 Are you an only child:

A. Yes B. No

7 Your marital status:

A. unmarried B. married C. divorced D. bereft of one's spouse

8 Your filial condition:

A. no child B. one child C. multiple children

9 What type of fitness clothes do you wear when exercising?

A. Close-fitting B. Loose C. Random D. Other: _____ [Please specify]

10 What sports do you like to participate in [multiple choice]:

A.combat sports (eg, boxing, judo, and wrestling)

B.stretching sports (eg, sports dance and yoga)

C. strength equipment exercise (eg, weightlifting)

D. aerobic equipment exercise (eg, aerobic bicycle)

E Others:_____

11 Whether to participate in or consider participating in fitness activities related to pregnancy and childbirth:

B. Yes B. No

Questions about fitness and fitness-related consumption

(1) The purpose of fitness

This section consults the 5-point Likert scale method for evaluation, with 1 non purpose, 2 unimportant purpose, 3 general purpose, 4 important purpose, 5 very important purpose. Please choose the option that best fits your experience or view:

12 Slimming or body shaping is the purpose of your fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

13 Health is the purpose of your fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

14 Leisure or enjoyment is the purpose of your fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

15 Enhancing your attractiveness in society is the purpose of your fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

16 Improving the ability to resist male aggression is the purpose of your fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

17 Improving work or learning efficiency is the purpose of your fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

18 Social interaction is the purpose of your fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

19 Or, you have another purpose for your fitness:_____ [please write down]

(2) Factors that hinder fitness

This section consults the 5-point Likert scale method for evaluation, with 1 no impact, 2 slight impacts, 3 some impacts, 4 relatively remarkable impacts, 5 great impacts. Please choose the option that best fits your experience or view:

20 Work or study is the obstacle to your participation in fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

21 Housework is the obstacle to your participation in fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

22 Parenting is the obstacle to your participation in fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

23 Reproduction is the obstacle to your participation in fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

24 Personal financial capacity is the obstacle to your participation in fitness:

1 2 3 4 5

25 The non-compliance with 'femininity' is the obstacle to your participation in certain exercises such as strength equipment and boxing:

1 2 3 4 5

26 Or, you suffer another obstacle in your participation in fitness: _____ [please write down]

(3) Views on beauty and fitness

This section consults the 5-point Likert scale method for evaluation, with 1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree. Please choose the option that best fits your experience or view:

27 Do you agree with the female aesthetic of 'fair-complexioned, fragile, and young'?

1 2 3 4 5

28 Do you agree with the view that 'fitness is self-pleasing'?

1 2 3 4 5

29 Do you agree with the view that 'confident girls are the most beautiful'?

1 2 3 4 5

30 Do you agree with the view that 'fitness for weight loss is better than other weight loss methods (such as weight-loss pills)'?

1 2 3 4 5

(4) Fitness-consumption-related experiences

31 Are you willing to wear tight fitness clothes in public places (such as subways or shopping malls)?

1 completely unwilling, 2 not very willing, 3 it doesn't matter, 4 willing, 5 very willing

32 Are you willing to learn with a male fitness coach?

1 completely unwilling, 2 not very willing, 3 it doesn't matter, 4 willing, 5 very willing

33 Do you mind the presence of males in fitness venues (such as male gaze)?

1 not at all, 2 feel a bit uneasy, 3 feel uneasy, 4 feel quite uneasy, 5 feel greatly uneasy

34 Compared to mixed gender gyms, do you prefer women's exclusive gyms?

1 strongly don't like it, 2 don't like it, 3 don't have any preferences, 4 have preferences, 5 have great preferences

35 Will negative evaluations of your figure by others affect your confidence?

1 no impact, 2 slight impacts, 3 some impacts, 4 relatively remarkable impacts, 5 great impacts

36 What type of body shape or how many muscles do you want to develop?

A. slim, no muscle B. develop tight and moderate muscle lines C. develop large, strong

muscles

37 Do you browse online videos and topics about fitness?

1 never, 2 occasionally, 3 sometimes, 4 frequently, 5 always, almost every day

38 Do you voluntarily participate in offline fitness-related competitions, interactions, or performance activities?

1 never, 2 occasionally, 3 sometimes, 4 frequently, 5 always, almost every day

39 Fitness is a completely private issue, and I am not interested in discussing it with people outside of my family.

A. agree B. disagree

40 Do you share your fitness experience with friends and colleagues around you?

1 never, 2 occasionally, 3 sometimes, 4 frequently, 5 always, almost every day

41 Do you share your fitness experience on social media (such as Little Red Book and Tiktok) with the public?

1 never, 2 occasionally, 3 sometimes, 4 frequently, 5 always, almost every day

Appendix 4

Table: Per capita annual disposable income and expenditure for food of urban households between 1978 and 1999 in China (RMB)

Year	Per Capita Annual Disposable Income	Food
1978	343.4	178.9
1985	739.1	351.4
1986	899.6	418.9
1987	1,002.2	472.9
1988	1,181.4	567.0
1989	1,375.7	660.0
1990	1,510.2	693.8
1991	1,700.6	782.5
1992	2,026.6	884.8
1993	2,577.4	1,058.2
1994	3,496.2	1,422.5
1995	4,283.0	1,766.0
1996	4,838.9	1,904.7
1997	5,160.3	1,942.6
1998	5,425.1	1,926.9
1999	5,854.0	1,932.1

Source: Department of Comprehensive Statistics of National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 1999.

Appendix 5

Figure: Curriculum of a yoga studio (named Youran Yoga Studio) in Chengdu, China



Appendix 6

Figure: Information about a gym on an E-commerce platform

PS.PHOENIX&SPIRIT健身 (西宸天街店)

★★★★★ 4.4 课时均价 ¥133 私教工作室 >

茶店子健身中心销量榜第2名 >

营业中 周一至周日 09:00-22:00

收录3年 面积500㎡ | 可容纳60人

茶店子路龙湖西宸天街铂金岛4期301-304
(舞东风超市旁4号观光电梯三楼右侧直行...
距地铁7号线茶店子站C口步行360m

立即预约 49人订过 >

次卡 专属客服 过期退 随时退

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私教包月·不限次数·2499...	筋膜刀拉伸·缓解疼痛·1对...
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3小时前有人购买

询价
在线询问课程价格, 省时省心

商家动态(28)

雨天练背 训练的时候还可以伸着别人家...

冬季肩训练 训练不分早晚

写评价, 赢¥10抵现积分 去评价

用户评价(477)

教练很棒 155 环境很好 150 一人行 148
体验很棒 110 设施很棒 109 性价比高 100

12天前 大众点评
★★★★★
很不赖的健身工作室! 有小铁馆的感觉, 都很认真的感jio! 基本上都有针对的固定器械, 设施也是比较齐全的, 五脏俱全, 力量区域有氧区域拉伸区域都有分开, 有储物有淋浴。教练也都很负责, 不会过度推销, 社恐人福音, 比较松弛。

1天前 大众点评
★★★★★ ¥3600/人
如果你想在一个舒适的环境中进行高效健身, 这个健身房是不二的选择。新手建议包月课程, 便宜划算。

Source: Meituan: <http://i.meituan.com/index/changecity>

Appendix 7

Figure: A promotional photo of a gym for women (named SUPERMODELFIT)



Source: <https://weibo.com/p/1006062470448712/photos?type=video>

Appendix 8

Figure: The information about annual gym cards across various locations on an E-commerce platform



Source: Meituan: <http://i.meituan.com/index/change-city>

Abbreviations

ACWF	All-China Women's Federation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGAS	China General Administration of Sport
CPIC	China Population Information Centre
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLF	Great Leap Forward
GNI	Gross National Income
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NFP	National Fitness Programme
NPC	National People's Congress
PRC	People's Republic of China