

To cite this paper:

Zhang, Q. & Min, G. (2019). Square dancing: A multimodal analysis of the discourse in the People's Daily. *Chinese Language and Discourse*, 10(1), p.61-83. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/cld.18011.zha>

Square dancing: A multimodal analysis of the discourse in the *People's Daily*

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Square dancing, *guangchangwu* in Chinese, is a kind of physical activity practiced in flat public spaces for fitness and entertainment. Despite its popularity all over China, there have been news reports on conflicts caused by it, such as noise pollution or use of a public square. This study collects 150 news articles published between May 2016 and May 2018 containing the keyword *guangchangwu* from the *People's Daily*, one of the most influential official newspapers owned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. The purpose of the study is to investigate the government's attitudes towards square dancing through an analysis of the official media discourse, using word frequency of occurrence and multimodal discourse analysis. Both the word count and the co-deployment of visual and linguistic resources indicate that square dancing is perceived as an integral part of promoting the national fitness agenda. While the discourse demonstrates awareness of square dancing in the context of an aging society and a shortage of public space, general approval for it is still quite evident in the frequent positive descriptions in the text and presentations in the images. The use of the word *dama* 'big mama' in the official media discourse reveals gender inequality in contemporary China.

Keywords: square dancing, national fitness, aging population, public space, media discourse

1. Introduction

The literal meaning of *guangchangwu* is public square dancing. As the name suggests, it refers to dancing taking place in an open and public space in China, usually on a flat patch such as a public square (Chao, 2017). The participants are mostly middle-aged or older Chinese women who engage in the activity daily, typically every morning and evening (C. Huang, 2016). It was first introduced to major Chinese cities around 2004 (L. Zhou, 2014) and has been rapidly gaining popularity in both urban and rural regions across China (Chao, 2017; A. Huang, 2017). In contrast to professional sport, which is selective in choosing members and emphasizes performance in competitions, square dancing as a type of self-organized grassroots sport is open to the public and encourages everyday participation in fitness activities as a form of leisure (Fan & Lu, 2012; Fan, Wu, & Xiong, 2005).

The form of square dancing is similar to congregational dancing, with elements of line dancing and mass broadcast gymnastics (Q. Wang, 2015; L. Zhou, 2014). This collective exercise allows the participants to dance in sync to recorded music played loudly in outdoor spaces. Built upon Q. Wang's (2015) categorizations, square dancing generally consists of one or more of the following components: (1) Chinese-style dancing, mainly Yang-ge, (2) disco-like movements such as cross steps, (3) social-dance movements such as three steps and jitterbug, (4) folk dancing adapted from ethnic minority groups such as the Tibetan, Uyghur, and Dai, (5) movements incorporating Western dances including cha-cha, tango, and ballet, (6) any other popular elements in a particular period, such as the Korean 'Gangnam Style' dance. Of these, Yang-ge best incorporates the origin and historical traces of square dancing, which will be discussed below. Due to the diverse elements embedded in square dancing, the music also shows an integration of folk songs and China and Western pop music, as well as revolutionary songs popularized during the Mao era.

Square dancing has become such a popular fitness and social activity across China that the number of estimated participants could be as high as 100 million (Q. Wang, 2015). Its rapid expansion and the nature of the participants also make this collective exercise newsworthy, in both positive and negative ways. According to Y. Wang (2015), the change in attitudes towards square dancing can be observed in the media discourse in the second half of 2013. Square dancing is usually portrayed as a representation of quality of life improvement due to the state's economic growth. However, noise pollution and negative connotations associated with square dancing began to manifest in late 2013 (C. Huang, 2016; Y. Wang, 2015). The social conflict

caused by the volume of the music that participants dance to indirectly correlates with the design and use of public space. For example, if a space used for square dancing is not in close proximity to a residential area, or if the square dancing takes place at a time that minimizes disturbance for neighborhood residents, these factors mitigate conflicts and disputes. In fact, a few local authorities have put forward specific regulations on the time, space, or volume of sound related to square dancing (Song, 2015). News relating to the issues and conflicts caused by square dancing can now be easily found in newspapers (Xinhua News Agency, 2017), as well as in domestic and international media (BBC, 2015). The surge of pieces related to square dancing in the news raises a question regarding the future of this activity. Therefore, this study scrutinizes the media discourse used in official media, in the aim of providing insight into government perceptions of square dancing, including the main participants and the use of public space.

This paper first outlines the historical roots of square dancing, with a focus on its recent development in the context of urbanization and the active promotion of grassroots sport in the context of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. It then describes the data collected from news articles published in the *People's Daily*. Using word frequency counts and multimodal discourse analysis, the paper examines these articles from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The analyses contribute to an in-depth understanding of the current situation of and attitudes towards square dancing in the discourse of official media. The research shares insights into the possible future development for this type of grassroots sport during the process of Chinese urbanization.

2. The development of square dancing: Urbanization and grassroots sport

The emergence of square dancing is in accordance with the urbanization process of China, during which large-scale city squares were built (Q. Wang, 2015, p. 8). As mentioned earlier, square dancing originated in these city squares and is now expanding to other available public space.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, a number of massive urban squares were built to celebrate the establishment of the New China and commemorate the lives sacrificed in the wars (Li, 2015). A very limited number of squares were also built during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to worship Chairman Mao. This period also witnessed the Zhongzihu,

the Loyalty Dance that square dancing can be related to. The Loyalty Dance was performed to show dedication to Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution (Q. Wang, 2015, p. 40). Like square dancing, the Loyalty Dance is also a kind of public dancing that can be traced back to Yang-ge (Song, 2015), traditional ‘rice-sprout’ dancing rooted in rural northern China that peasants performed to entertain themselves and relieve fatigue during the harvest (Tong, 2013, p. 10). Interestingly, most square dancing participants nowadays are likely to have been exposed to the Loyalty Dance and to have experienced the Cultural Revolution, a period during which there was an attempt to eliminate individual aspirations and differences in order to achieve almost absolute equality in society. The Loyalty Dance itself carries negative connotations of a backward past and ruthless class struggle during the Cultural Revolution (Q. Wang, 2015, p. 40), and was phased out of Chinese society after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

After the adoption of the opening-up policy in 1978, China began going through a series of economic reforms, including of state-owned enterprises. Western styles of dancing, such as ballroom dancing, started to spread as an embodiment of Chinese modernity (Song, 2015). In the movement towards a market economy, approximately 72 million workers were laid off from formerly state-owned enterprises between the late 1990s and early 2000s (C. Huang, 2016). This is also the generation that grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Due to the social disorder at that time, children did not receive a proper education (C. Chen, 2011). As a result, workers, especially female workers, in low-skill, low-pay jobs were the most affected by the state-owned enterprise reforms (C. Huang, 2016). They were no longer guaranteed an ‘iron rice bowl’ job in a collective work unit which offered life-long employment and benefits including pension, housing, and healthcare (Zhang, 2013a). Those who grew up in the collective era and working environment are likely to find in square dancing, a collective physical activity, a reminder of their previous way of life, while they are more or less “excluded from China’s race toward modernity” (C. Huang, 2016, p. 230).

Against the social backdrop of fast-paced urbanization in China, Xiong (2007) outlines the impact of urbanization on grassroots participation in sport: (a) the declining health of Chinese urban residents, (b) an increase in leisure time, (c) an expansion of consumer culture leading to growth in expenditure on sports and fitness activities. However, despite the increasing need for grassroots sport, the fast expansion of urban land has not led to an increase in public green

space.¹ A significant feature of China's urbanization is that it is land-centered or depends on land finance (Ye & Wu, 2014). In the pursuit of land-lease revenue, built-up urban areas have been rapidly expanding, driven by real estate development (ibid.). Importantly, land-based urbanization can have a negative impact on the provision of urban public green space (W. Y. Chen & Hu, 2015). Square dancing, a way of staying physically healthy using public space (Chao, 2017; Q. Wang, 2014), is affected by the reduced amount of urban green space. In fact, recent news (Xinhua News Agency, 2017) shows conflicts between square dancing practitioners and other groups of sports participants over the use of the space, vividly reflecting the problems resulting from a lack of urban green space.

In addition to this bottom-up impact on square dancing, there was also top-down promotion of grassroots sport, including square dancing. Alongside the economic reforms at the time, the Chinese sports system was also encouraged to become market-oriented, with a focus on the improvement of quality of life (Xiong, 2007). After the 1990s, due to the increasing demand for grassroots sport participation, the government started to advance both the Olympic Strategy and the National Fitness Program initiated in 1995 (Fan et al., 2005). In order to promote and receive support for the Beijing Olympic Games, a national fitness program was formed, which encouraged people to participate in different sports (Dong & Mangan, 2013). The 'National Fitness and Move with the Olympics' campaign was launched in 2006, attracting 100 million people to join different sport programs (BOCOG, 2010). According to BOCOG (2010), some Olympic facilities were adapted for public use, and more funding was allocated to upgrade sporting facilities in less developed regions and rural areas. In 2009 the government also declared August 8 National Fitness Day, to mark the anniversary of the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games and encourage more people to participate in sport and have a healthy lifestyle (CPPCC News, 2010).

A new National Fitness Program (2016-2020) was released in 2016 (General Office of the State Council, 2016). Square dancing is specifically mentioned in this document as one of the sports that should be "vigorously developed" (ibid.). Contrary to the promotion of square dancing, the appearance of square dancing in the news now often gives readers a negative impression and is usually associated with noise and the use of public space (Chao, 2017; C. Chen, 2011; L. Zhou, 2014). In this context, this study uses an official newspaper, the *People's Daily*,

¹ According to MOHURD (2011), public green space includes parks and squares.

to scrutinize the representation of square dancing in government media. This enables us to examine government attitudes to square dancing, especially after the conflicts in recent years.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data

The *People's Daily*, 'Renmin Ribao' in Chinese, is one of the most important official newspapers owned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (*People's Daily* website, n.d.). It has been the most widely circulated newspaper in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (*People's Daily* website, n.d.; Swanson, 1996). The paper reports key political events, national policies, and cultural events. It is therefore considered to represent the voice of the central government and is one of the most influential forms of official media in China (G. Wu, 1994; S. Wu, 2014). An examination of the news in the *People's Daily* may indicate government perspectives on square dancing.

This study collects news articles published in the *People's Daily* between May 2016 and May 2018 which included the keyword 'square dancing' (*guangchangwu*). The reason for focusing on this period is to assemble the most up-to-date news in relation to the topic. In the database of pictures and text provided by the *People's Daily* website, 150 articles report on square dancing (see Table 2). These articles contain 270,000 Chinese characters in total.

Table 2. An overview of pieces containing the keyword 'square dancing' between 2016 and 2018

	Pieces	Headlines	Photos*
May 2016	5	0	0
June 2016	10	1	0
July 2016	2	1	0
August 2016	7	0	0
September 2016	3	1	0
October 2016	9	1	0
November 2016	5	1	0
December 2016	7	1	1
January 2017	6	0	0
February 2017	3	0	0
March 2017	4	1	0
April 2017	5	0	0
May 2017	3	1	0

June 2017	9	0	1
July 2017	1	0	0
August 2017	9	0	0
September 2017	9	0	0
October 2017	4	0	0
November 2017	13	3	1
December 2017	6	0	0
January 2018	13	1	1
February 2018	7	0	0
March 2018	2	0	0
April 2018	2	1	0
May 2018	6	0	0
Total	150	13	4

Note: * Only photos relevant to square dancing were counted here.

Please note that, although square dancing might be included in an article, the full article does not always focus on the theme of square dancing. It could be that square dancing is merely mentioned in an article on a completely separate topic. For example, an article entitled ‘Celebrating National Day’ (Huandu Guoqing, published on 4 October 2016, page 1) is primarily about various events that took place on National Day, including square dancing. Therefore, the two pictures with the article are images of people posing in front of a tourist spot and in front of an event opening. This is an example of why, in the 150 articles, only four photos were found to be relevant to square dancing and therefore included in the MDA. Another example is an article published on 12 May 2018, page 12, about life in Wenchuan after the 2008 earthquake. Square dancing is mentioned as one indication that the town has regained its vitality and that local residents are enjoying life. There are no pictures, and the piece does not focus on square dancing, though the liveliness of Wenchuan is vividly portrayed through the description of square dancing. These 150 articles were therefore included in the word frequency analysis, since they also contextualize square dancing in society at present.

3.2 Multimodal approach to attitude analysis

A newspaper usually consists of both written language and images, in order to present a vivid *mise-en-scène* to readers. In this context, multimodal discourse analysis (hereafter MDA), which studies meaning-making based on a combination of multisemiotic phenomena (O’Halloran, 2011), is a useful analytical framework for examining the integration of linguistic and visual

resources. As this study focuses on government attitudes to square dancing through an investigation of articles published in a newspaper, MDA is employed to scrutinize the ways in which text and images are co-deployed for meaning-making. In other words, the analyses are extended from a purely linguistic system to other semiotic modes such as visual imagery. This study is situated in the appraisal theory within the interpersonal dimension of systematic functional linguistics (Martin & White, 2005). Appraisal comprises three domains – attitude, engagement and graduation – with attitude as this study’s primary focus.

Martin and White (2005) suggest that attitude encompasses three regions concerning our feelings: affect, judgment, and appreciation (see also Y. Chen, 2010). Affect refers to emotional reactions – positive and negative feelings such as happiness/sadness, confidence/anxiety, interest/indifference. Judgment provides resources to ethically evaluate behavior, construing attitudes to the dispositions that people possess and the ways they behave. It can be shown as admiration or criticism, praise or condemnation. Appreciation is concerned with “resources for construing the value of things” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 36), including aesthetic awareness of natural phenomena, abstract constructs, and man-made objects.

Table 1. Classifications of attitude in the appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005)

Affect:	Emotions	Positive or negative feelings including happiness/sadness, confidence/anxiety, interest/indifference
Judgment:	Ethics	Evaluations of people’s behavior broadly in the categories of admiration/criticism or praise/condemnation, according to different institutionalized norms
Appreciation:	Aesthetics	Evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena. It can be divided into our reactions to things (do they catch our attention; do they please us), their composition (balance and complexity), and their value (how innovative, authentic, timely, etc)

The above table presents the framework adopted from Martin and White (2005). Since it was originally proposed for the purpose of analyzing semantic discourse, it can be adapted from monomodal verbal communication such as written text to be used for an MDA, as shown in the study of Y. Chen (2010). Table 1 outlines the key information of the analytical framework employed to scrutinize how attitudes are construed through the integration of language with visual resources. An exhaustive list of traits in the categories of appreciation, affect, and judgment can be seen in Martin and White (2005, pp. 45–61). Since the categories of attitude

often overlap (Bohner & Wänke, 2002; Martin & White, 2005), the analyses also show the encompassing nature of attitude with multiple classifications of an example from the news.

This study went through two steps to process the data collected from the *People's Daily*. First, all texts were analyzed using the Jieba (Sun, 2017) to conduct word segmentation and then using Python script to calculate the frequency of words according to the property of a word.² Secondly, multimodal discourse analysis was employed to examine both text and images from collected news articles. The qualitative nature and the selective, small-scale data tend to be criticized when MDA is used, and so the representativeness and generalization of the findings can also be questioned. A level of subjectivity is inevitable. For this reason, the first step of the study is to offer a quantitative aspect to the topic in question. Importantly, frequency of word occurrence can provide an overview of the discourse in articles collected from the *People's Daily*, contributing to an understanding of the context of the government's attitudes towards square dancing. In other words, while the next step – scrutiny of the attitudes embedded in the discourse using MDA – helps us understand how the government perceives square dancing, the quantitative analyses of word frequency offer insights into the backdrops for these perceptions.

4. Results

4.1 Frequency of noun occurrence

A word count on the nouns in the newspaper was carried out in order to gain an overview of the key items mentioned in relation to square dancing. Table 3 below shows the top ten nouns that most frequently occurred in the selected news. Interestingly, 'the elderly' appeared twice³ and can be ranked fourth if the counts are combined. Taking a close look at the concordances with 'the elderly', the vast majority (85.7%) can be categorized under the following three labels: (a) measure words, such as 'number', 'group', (b) locations where the elderly usually gather, such as 'park', 'organization', 'service center', (c) activities or purposes of activities that the elderly participate in, such as 'square dancing', 'health', 'fitness'. The discourse of the official newspaper seems to suggest a link between the elderly and square dancing. Previous literature

² The word property in this project only refers to part of speech, e.g. noun, adjective, or verb.

³ 老人 *laoren* is basically a shorter form of 老年人 *laonianren* 'the elderly'.

put the emphasis on the female participants rather than the age group, though those women are in or above middle age and usually considered old in China.

Table 3. Word counts for nouns

Rank	Word	Pinyin	English translation	Word count
1	文化	<i>wenhua</i>	culture	755
2	广场	<i>guangchang</i>	public square	435
3	群众	<i>qunzhong</i>	the mass, people	416
4	全民	<i>quanmin</i>	the entire population	342
5	社会	<i>shehui</i>	society	336
6	社区	<i>shequ</i>	community	276
7	老年人	<i>laonianren</i>	the elderly	234
8	农村	<i>nongcun</i>	countryside, rural areas	230
9	村民	<i>cunmin</i>	person from the country, villager	205
10	老人	<i>laoren</i>	the elderly	191

In fact, the word *dama* is used to refer to the women considered to be the main participants. Literally meaning ‘big mama’, *dama* generally connotes a stereotype that might be equivalent to ‘granny’. It captures a derogatory image of the middle-aged or older female, with personality traits lacking any sexual attractiveness, such as being loud, overweight, trivial, etc (Q. Wang, 2015, pp. 1–2). Interestingly, although the term has been so often cited in the media discourse that it has even been introduced to the Western media (Y. Wang, 2015), it is only ranked 48th according to the word count. In other words, the use of the term is much less frequent than ‘the elderly’ or ‘the young people’ (ranked 36th) in the *People’s Daily* when square dancing is mentioned. This could be a conscious choice to avoid discrimination against the square dancing practitioners. This result is also likely to be associated with the fact of China being an aging society, which will be discussed later.

While it was expected that the word ‘square’ would be often used, the use of the term ‘society’ can be interpreted together with the most frequently used words – ‘culture’ and ‘the entire population’. As mentioned earlier, the government has been providing top-down support to grassroots sport, including square dancing. 全民健身计划 *quanmin jianshen jihua*, which translates as National Fitness Program, contains the word *quanmin* ‘the entire population’. As pointed out by Hu and Fang (2016), the National Fitness Program can contribute to enriching the cultural recreational activities in people’s daily life. China is not the first or only country to

perceive a fitness program to be part of the culture industry. The US National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP, 2016) states that its aim is to “foster a national culture that supports physically active lifestyles” (p. 1).

The National Fitness Program (General Office of the State Council, 2016) aims to encourage the inter-related development of education, economics, and other societal industries. One of its purposes is to push the reform of social sporting organizations. The program ultimately contributes to “a well-structured ‘sports for all’ enterprise by a cooperation of the government, different sectors, and the whole society” (ibid., p. 1). An integral part of the Chinese national strategy for a healthy life for every Chinese person is to establish a tripartite network for fitness facilities based on the current administrative units for urban/rural areas (shown in Figure 1; General Office of the State Council, 2016). This is probably the reason for the frequent appearance of ‘community’ and ‘rural area’.

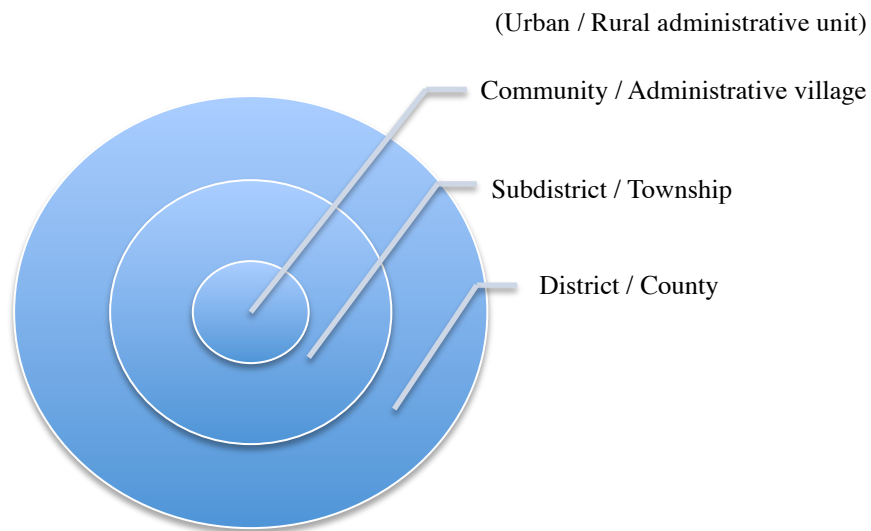


Figure 1. A tripartite network for fitness facilities in urban and rural areas (adapted from General Office of the State Council, 2016)

As square dancing is one of the named physical activities outlined in the National Fitness Program 2016-2022, it is unsurprising that the key terms mentioned in the official document are also frequently adopted in the *People's Daily*, an important channel of the central government's voice. Interestingly, further details are provided to implement the tripartite network, such as

ensuring an average of 1.8 square meters per person for sports activities. This has influenced the development of public space and consequently square dancing, which will be discussed later.

4.2 Frequency of adjective occurrence

A word count on the adjectives used in the news can be a good indicator of the attitudes associated with square dancing. As shown in Table 4 below, the most frequently used word is ‘healthy’, followed by a few positive adjectives including ‘big’, ‘new’, and ‘good’. The adjective ‘old’ is ranked highly, since the noun ‘the elderly’ is also frequently used.⁴ The extraction of terms that collocate with ‘healthy’, for example, shows that a substantial proportion of the time (37.5%) the collocation is with ‘China’. A close analysis of expanded concordances reveals that this collocation is used in the context of perceiving square dancing as part of the National Fitness Program that aims to encourage a healthy way of life. Interestingly, while for both ‘new’ and ‘big’ the collocations can be broadly divided into two types – describing something abstract (‘new concept’, ‘big/grand picture’), or something concrete (‘new rural areas’, ‘big/large statistics’) – both types still refer to promotion and development of the National Fitness Program, including square dancing. In other words, the official discourse usually portrays square dancing in the context of the National Fitness Program. The overall official attitude towards square dancing seems to be quite positive, based on the choice of adjectives used in the discourse. The discussion later therefore goes on to examine square dancing and its future development with reference to the National Fitness Program.

Table 4. Word counts for adjectives

Ranking	Adjective	Pinyin	English translation	Word count
1	健康	<i>jiankang</i>	healthy	367
2	大	<i>da</i>	big, large, major	244
3	新	<i>xin</i>	new	233
4	好	<i>hao</i>	good, nice, well	204
5/6	高	<i>gao</i>	high, tall	111
5/6	重要	<i>zhongyao</i>	important	111
7	老	<i>lao</i>	old	110
8	丰富	<i>fengfu</i>	abundant	66

⁴ The word 老人 *laoren* ‘the elderly’ is a compound noun comprising two morphemes – the adjective *lao* ‘old’ and the noun *ren* ‘human’.

9	近	<i>jin</i>	close, nearby	61
10	难	<i>nan</i>	hard, difficult	54

While the frequent use of ‘important’ indicates the value attached to square dancing in the discourse, the articles also show an awareness of the difficulties (‘difficult’ ranks 10th) and problems associated with it. Interestingly, ‘problem’ is ranked 11th and two main problems indicated previously – ‘noise’ and ‘space’ (Chao, 2017; Song, 2015; L. Zhou, 2014) – are ranked 43rd and 45th respectively. That is to say, the government has noted the social disturbances between square dancers and neighbors, in particular conflicts related to noise and the use of public space.

4.3 Attitudes in the co-deployment of images and text

As shown in Table 2, four photos were found that directly relate to square dancing. In all four, only women were photographed (see Table 3). Two of them (Photos 1 & 2) obviously portray women middle-aged or older, while it is hard to identify the age of the female characters in the other two (Photos 3 & 4) due to the low resolution or the angle. These photos indeed represent women as the main participants in square dancing. The analytical framework set in Table 1 is used to examine the attitudes co-deployed in the photos and text. A general description of each photo is in Table 3 below. Further details are provided when analyzing each of them.

Table 3. Descriptions of four photos

	<i>People’s Daily</i>	Description
Photo 1	page 15, 29 December 2016 (Liu, 2016)	A group of nine ‘dancing grannies’ posing for the camera while performing on a TV show. These women wear simple t-shirts, bright yellow trousers, and hats with the brim turned sideways.
Photo 2	page 19, 28 June 2017 (Ge, 2017)	A group of women performing in an open space surrounded by residential blocks. They wear traditional red countryside dresses, have plaits, and hold traditional Chinese straw hats.
Photo 3	page 20, 8 November	A group of women performing in a square dancing

	2017 (B. Wang & Zhou, 2017)	competition on a stage. They wear green Western-style dresses. The photo was shot from a distance and so the images are quite small, though the slogan at the back of the stage can be identified from the photo: “The smile of Changzhou: The original square dancing second season final”.
Photo 4	page 16, 19 January 2018 (Jiang, 2018)	A group of women learning square dancing in order to become cultural instructors. They wear regular clothing, and each holds a colorful fan. The photo was taken from behind them.

Photo 1 shows a group of nine ‘dancing grannies’ posing for the camera while performing on a TV show. All women demonstrate facial expressions of obvious joyfulness with enthusiastic gestures, which expresses positive emotion. Different from the traditional dress in Photo 2, the Western-style dress in Photo 3, or the regular clothing in Photo 4, the clothing in Photo 1 is also closer to the style of young people – a simple t-shirt and a hat with the brim turned sideways. Most importantly, the dance they practice is hip-hop, a style popular among the younger generation. Despite the use of *dama* in the title, the headline indicates admiration and respect:

Headline:

《跳起健身舞，活出老来俏》

Tiao qi jianshenwu, huochu lao lai qiao

Dance up fitness dancing, live out old and beautiful

Practicing the fitness dance, live a beautiful life at a senior age

Sub-head:

《辽宁省朝阳市有支“九大妈”街舞队》

Liaoningsheng Chaoyangshi you zhi jiudama jiewudui

In Liaoning Province, Chaoyang City, there is a nine-*dama* hip-hop dance team

A hip-hop dance team consisting of nine dama in Chaoyang, Liaoning

(excerpted from Liu, 2016)

However, the use of *dama* here does not mean the official media has made an effort to eliminate the disparaging connotation of this term associated with square dancing. On the contrary, the term has been adopted in order to contrast it with the hip-hop usually practiced by young people, assuming the admiration will resonate with the reader. Moreover, the main text accompanying the photo also shows admiration for their dancing activities. For example:

这支被当地百姓亲切地称为“九大妈”的健身街舞队，成立 16 年间，参加过上千场的公益活动，用充满活力的舞姿，带动无数群众参与健身活动。

This hip-hop dance group, consisting of nine *dama* and established for 16 years, has taken part in over a thousand charitable and non-profit social activities. Their dance is so full of energy that it encourages countless people to participate in different fitness activities.

(excerpted from Liu, 2016)

The article also shows aesthetic appreciation for the dancing, as shown in positive evaluations like “dynamic rhythms” and “cheerful and light-hearted dance steps”, as well as positive feelings shown in descriptions such as “resplendent smile” and “the entire stage filled with happiness and energy”.

Both Photo 2 and Photo 3 contain photos of dancing in costume. These two photos demonstrate facial expressions indicative of delight, which can be observed from the smiles. Positive emotion is therefore embedded in the visual display. Although the background of Photo 2 shows several residential blocks, which suggests the dancing is taking place in an open space in a local community, the article does not mention the noise pollution that square dancing may produce, as previous studies suggest (e.g., Y. Wang, 2015). Rather, an overall positive feeling (i.e. “happy”) and judgment (i.e. “to be fit”) towards square dancing can be observed from the headline below the photo:

《秧歌扭起来，健身又快乐》

Yang-ge niu qilai, jianshen you kuaile

Rice-sprout dancing starts, fitness and happiness

Yang-ge dancing, to be fit and happy

(excerpted from Ge, 2017)

The article is short, consisting of only three sentences. While the first two describe the event, the third one is:

乡亲们踏着节奏、舞动身姿，共同展示新秧歌和现代广场舞的美丽画卷。

Villagers were moving their bodies and dancing to the melody, like posing for a beautiful painting with the new Yang-ge and modern square dancing.

(excerpted from Ge, 2017)

This line exhibits appreciation of the value attached to square dancing. Square dancing seems to be a way to modernity for both an old style of dancing – Yang-ge – and for urban life.

In contrast, the link between Photo 3 and square dancing is not clear without reading the main slogan at the back of the stage: “The smile of Changzhou: The original square dancing second season final”. The headline in Photo 3 demonstrates the praise for such events by using the Chinese idiom 翩翩起舞 (*pianpian qiwu*).

《“常州风”让一座城市翩翩起舞》

Changzhou feng rang yizuo chengshi pianpian qiwu

Changzhou wind makes a city dance lightly and gracefully

The event of ‘Changzhou Wind’ makes the city dance with elegance

(excerpted from B. Wang & Zhou, 2017)

The idiom means ‘dancing lightly and gracefully’, which suggests a happy mood. Positive aesthetic and ethical evaluations are interwoven in the headline: the aesthetics of square dancing are praised, since they allow the entire city to be immersed in the beauty of the dance. Similar comments can be found in the main text:

[广场舞大赛]充分展示了常州人独特的精神之美、创造之美和文化之美。

[The square dancing competition] fully demonstrates the aesthetics of Changzhou in spirit, in creativity, and in culture.

Photo 4 is interesting. Neither the headlines nor the caption for each photo indicate the link between the image and square dancing. Only after reading the entire text on the right of the page does the reader find out that this is a demonstration that the IoT (Internet of Things) Platform for the Public Cultural Service in Chongqing⁵ offers training to a number of cultural instructors for square dancing. Since the news is mainly about the IoT platform, attitudinal information found in the visual or linguistic resources relates to the platform. However, it is interesting to note that while other examples of “Public Cultural Service” are mentioned in the text, such as “exhibitions” and “dragon dancing”, the accompanying picture shows square dancing. As one of the most influential official newspapers in China, the choice of image is planned rather than random. This choice may indicate the government indeed paying particular attention to square dancing over other activities, highlighting its importance from a government perspective.

Another interesting commonality among the four photos is that square dancing is portrayed as a type of sport for fitness, which is consistent with the promotion of the National Fitness Program 2016-2020. The pictures in Photo 2 and 3 were taken during a competition organized by the local government specifically for different kinds of square dancing groups, while Photo 4 shows the efforts of local government (i.e. the launch of the IoT platform) to assist in the development of square dancing. Photo 1 explains that this team of *dama* has developed and designed “a square dancing style of physical exercises suitable for the middle-aged or elderly” (Liu, 2016).

5. Discussion

Both analysis of word frequency and MDA show that the central government tends to situate square dancing in its National Fitness Program policy. Square dancing is portrayed positively as a helpful grassroots sport that can encourage people to take regular exercise as an important part of wellbeing.

⁵ This IoT platform, according to the article, allows different administrative units within Chongqing to place orders for any public cultural service needs. For example, a county that wishes to have a square dancing instructor can submit a request on this platform.

In relation to the policy and the investment, a debate can be traced back to the 1980s about whether the focus should be on the pursuit of Olympic medals or the improvement of the nation's exercise and health at grassroots level (Fan & Lu, 2012). The debate continues thirty years later. While the official media discourse tends to support grassroots sport, as shown in the example of square dancing, the budget for national and provincial sport is still smaller than the budget for professional sport (Tan & Houlihan, 2013). Square dancing in particular, performed in a congregational form and tending to be relatively large-scale is still predominantly practiced and perceived as a form of fitness activity in the context of promoting the National Fitness Program. Despite the positive attitudes towards this activity, a more profound question may be raised regarding to what extent it will be accepted if it starts to express any political appeal (C. Huang, 2016). It is also possible that the positive portrayal of square dancing as merely a healthy way of life could be an intentional choice made by the official media, or even seen as a way to maintain social harmony, as indicated by Huang (2016), though this is beyond the scope of the current study.

The second main finding of this study is the association of the elderly and square dancing. Both word frequency and MDA show the elderly as the main practitioners of square dancing. The first main reason for this phenomenon is the aging Chinese population. Due to the one-child policy between early 1979 and 2016 (Flaherty et al., 2007; *People's Daily* website, 2015; Shea, 2018), there has been an inevitable decline in fertility. Meanwhile, other factors such as economic development, rising maternal education, and women's employment have also contributed to reduced fertility. While 5.6% (63.68 million people) of the entire population were aged 65 or over in 1990, less than three decades later, by 2016, this proportion had reached 10.8% (150.03 million people) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017).⁶ Improvements in living standards and healthcare have contributed to an increase in longevity in China, which poses challenges to the healthcare system in an aging society (Fang et al., 2015). It is thus unsurprising to see the state actively promote a national fitness movement as a supplementary method to improve health while providing entertainment (A. Huang, 2017).

⁶ The problem of the aging population may be much more severe than reported here. According to Fang (2015), 8.2% of the population was aged 65+ in 2010, whereas the population aged 60 or older had increased to 16.1% by 2016 (Shea, 2018).

Importantly, the gender differences in the aging population outlined by Shea (2018)⁷ may have led older women to become the main participants of square dancing. In Chinese society, gender differences are unsurprisingly rarely taken into consideration when dealing with issues relating to the elderly. As Shea (2018) maintains, Chinese national aging policies all take a gender-blind approach. Even though senior women take up a disproportionate share of eldercare compared to senior men, this is not acknowledged (ibid.). In this case, a unity word, ‘the elderly’, is much more frequently used than *dama*, and the absence of ‘women’ or ‘female’ in the top word counts may also be a representative of the gender-free characteristics of China’s national aging policies. In other words, while the official discourse indicates a good awareness of the aging population in China and may encourage square dancing as a healthy way of life for the elderly, gender realities seem to be neglected.

As discussed previously, despite the use of *dama* and its association with square dancing practitioners in other media (Y. Wang, 2015), its limited use could be an intentional choice to avoid this derogatory term against senior women. Nevertheless, it is used in Figure 2 to provide a dramatic contrast between the linguistic resource (*dama*) and the visual resource (hip-hop performers full of energy and youthfulness). While the article constructs a positive attitude towards square dancing as a mass activity, it makes no effort to avoid the use of the word *dama* the negative connotation of which suggests both sexism and ageism. This is not the first time that a derogatory word has been used in official media, although the case could be made that a government newspaper should be more careful in its use of language and avoid discriminatory terms. 剩女 *shengnü* ‘leftover women’ is another word discriminating against women to have been found in the state-run news agency. The word typically refers to well-educated professional women who are unmarried at the age of 27 or above (Fincher, 2014). One commonality of *dama* and *shengnü* is their lack of contribution to reproductivity and population growth. While *shengnü* have probably chosen not to or have not had an opportunity to get married, and consequently have not given birth, *dama* are most likely to have passed the age of fertility (Q. Wang, 2015). Following from this, the invocation of the stereotypical image of female square dancers in the discourse of Figure 2 may not necessarily contradict the positive attitude of the government

⁷The gender differences include the gendered realities of spousal age asymmetry, longer average female life expectancy, and younger female retirement age (Shea, 2018: 14).

towards square dancing. It may be seen as reflecting a general bias in Chinese society against women who choose not to or are unable to carry out their reproductive duty. Further research is necessary to allow for a conclusive interpretation of the word choice.

The third research finding is that the official discourse is not concerned with the conflicts caused by square dancing, though previous studies have pointed out these issues. Public space is clearly an essential facility for square dancing, which is consistent with the function of urban green space to “protect the public health of urban populations” (Wolch, Byrne, & Newell, 2014). Although the word counts show the Chinese government is aware of the issues relating to the use of space, this has not been taken further, at least based on the media discourse analyzed in this study. For example, none of the four articles analyzed in depth above, including the one showing an image of square dancing near residential blocks, mention possible noise pollution or a shortage of public space. The lack of dancing space is not completely separate from the issue of an aging population, since the elderly are the dominant users of small and medium-sized public squares in China (Nguyen, 2017). While the official discourse acknowledges the elderly as the participants of square dancing, the main problem – the shortage of dancing space – that this group faces seems to be neglected. Instead, the official representation of square dancing is that it is an important element of strengthening ‘sport for all’ and supports national physical activities.

Interestingly, the National Fitness Program 2016-2022 provides details for enhancing ‘sport for all’, in particular in urban regions. In addition to the tripartite network shown in Figure 1, a 15-minute fitness circle should be established for urban communities (General Office of the State Council, 2016).⁸ More details are specified in the National Fitness Program 2016-2022, including the average space per person for fitness purposes. The improvement of fitness facilities and expansion of fitness space would put urban China in a better position to accommodate square dancing.

6. Conclusion

⁸ This means that fitness facilities should be accessible to urban dwellers within 15 minutes’ walk.

Previous research on discourse and language use in the *People's Daily* indicates that semiotic representations are strategic choices made in the service of larger policy agendas (e.g. Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2017; Liang & Lu, 2013; Liu & Yang, 2015). This study is consistent with previous findings. The results show that square dancing is represented positively as a grassroots sport integral to promoting national fitness. The general approval for square dancing and the elderly being the main participants are evident in the frequent use of positive adjectives in the texts and upbeat graphic representations in the images. This positive attitude in the portrayal of square dancing as a healthy way of life is in keeping with the government's promotion of the National Fitness Program, which serves the larger policy goal of sparking positive energy and maintaining stability in society. This policy-driven positive representation is especially noteworthy in light of the widely held negative public opinion on this activity due to its role in noise pollution and occupation of public space. Finally, this study raises an interesting question as to whether the use of sexist and ageist labels such as *dama* should be understood as part of the larger discursive objective of the official media. While it is a possibility especially in view of the urgency for the government to find solutions to challenges posed by the sharp decline of birth rate and a rapidly aging society, the answer to the question remains inconclusive until more evidence is available.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their insightful suggestions on an earlier draft of the paper.

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