Playful Chilling: Mapping Queer Sociality and Spaces of Play in Chengdu, China

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Table of Contents

English Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand how spaces of leisure and narratives of playfulness have embodied potent possibilities for queer sociality in China over the past two decades. In exploring the formation of queer scenes in Chengdu, I seek to demonstrate that the proliferation of queer worlds, at the ephemeral moment of their becoming and inhabiting, suggests a force and attitude as it saturates and complements the rather slow social imaginaries and rhythms of Chengdu as a city. By interrogating what constitutes the motion of the city and queer worlding, urban knowledge and altercation, public textualities, and mediums, I posit that rather than focusing on the notion of normal that hinges upon reproductive futurity, moments and encounters in queer worlding are indicative of a freeze on time that moves and whirls the world around. Observing these moments in which queer sociality and the ephemeral cues of affection took place, it is imperative to rethink the generative force *play* brings and what we can learn from being playful in relation to a creation of the world in which we live or would want to live. My analytic framework is anchored by an affective register, which merges John Paul Ricco's theorization of a temporal genre called neutral affect with what Kathleen Stewart calls "public feeling in constant motion" in everyday life. This thesis concretizes these concepts with Wei Wei's scholarship on *The Production and Transformation of Queer Spaces in Contemporary Chengdu, China*, and my (auto)ethnographic work and intervention on urban microhistory in Chengdu. I examine these sites as my objects of study to contextualize how the intensity of affective capacities relates to the production of counterpublics, intra-urban networks, and geographical movement in the city.

French Abstract

Cette thèse cherche à comprendre comment les espaces de loisirs et les récits à caractère ludique ont incarné de puissantes possibilités de socialité queer en Chine au cours des deux dernières décennies. En explorant la formation des scènes queer à Chengdu, je cherche à démontrer que la prolifération des mondes queer, au moment éphémère où ils deviennent et habitent, suggère une force et une attitude qui saturent et complètent les imaginaires et les rythmes sociaux plutôt tranquilles de Chengdu en tant que ville. En interrogeant ce qui constitue le mouvement de la ville et le développement du monde queer, la connaissance urbaine et l'altercation, les textualités publiques et les médiums, je postule que plutôt que de se concentrer sur la notion de normalité qui s'articule autour de la futurité reproductive, les moments et les rencontres dans le développement du monde queer sont indicatifs d'un gel du temps qui déplace et fait tourbillonner le monde. En observant ces moments où la socialité queer et les signes éphémères d'affection ont pris place, il est impératif de repenser la force générative qu'apporte le jeu et ce que nous pouvons apprendre en étant ludiques dans le cadre d'une création du monde dans lequel nous vivons ou voudrions vivre. Mon champ d'analyse est ancré dans un registre affectif, qui fusionne la théorisation par John Paul Ricco d'un genre temporel appelé affect neutre avec ce que Kathleen Stewart appelle le "sentiment public en mouvement constant" dans la vie quotidienne. Cette thèse concrétise ces concepts avec l'étude de Wei Wei sur *la production et la transformation des espaces queer dans le Chengdu contemporain, en Chine*, et mon étude (auto)ethnographique et mon intervention sur la microhistoire urbaine à Chengdu. J'examine ces sites en tant qu'objets d'étude afin de contextualiser la manière dont l'intensité des capacités affectives est liée à la production de contre-publics, de réseaux intra-urbains et de mouvements géographiques dans la ville.

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This thesis was completed at McGill University, situated on lands that have historically served as sites of gathering and interaction for Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations.

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This project owes its early genesis to the last undergraduate class, COMMRC 1112, I took in Communication and Rhetoric at the University of Pittsburgh, called "Theories of Rhetoric" by the luminous instructor David Molina. It was there that I haphazardly wrote about the rise of the underground club scene in Chengdu as an object of inquiry. It is through curiosity and unresolved questions that kept me pondering to further situate my study at McGill University, where I underwent my MA graduate training. My supervisors, Will Straw and Bobby Benedicto, were magnificent in their rigor and training, and I cannot thank them enough for everything they have done for me, both as a mentor, a scholar, and as a human being. Will, the most humble, sharp and witty human being I'm grateful to ask for of my academic encounters. Thank you for creating such a creative, intellectual and energetic environment for thinking, questioning, and writing my way through this study. Your generative impact on me will be felt

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List of Figures and Tables

Let me return to my home town entombed

in grass as in a warm and high sea.

Lasciatemi tornare nella mia città natale, Sepolta

nell’erba come in un mare caldo e alto.

— Giorgio Bassani, *Epitaph*

Introduction

> Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or profound disorientation. They can be funny, perturbing, or traumatic.
>
> – Kathleen Stewart, *"Ordinary Affects"*

How do you chase, freeze, or stretch time to affect and be affected in a way that deviates from a developmental trajectory? How does one's memory of a place lie in a straight line of time? Playful Chilling is an ethnographic writing project on everyday matters that disrupt the story of a "good life," a speculative experiment inspired by Kathleen Stewart's work *Ordinary Affects*. What I'm interested in capturing are the messy, awkward, and glitchy moments and occurrences that risk flopping and failing, and yet whose encounters and inhabitation may involve a synchronicity of partnership between joy and hope. This is a proposition aimed at questioning the plot and story of a "good life" by understanding the crystallization of a moment, or any moment, in its becoming. In Kathleen Stewart's words, ordinary affects are "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They're the things that *happen*." (2, emphasis mine) The intensity of the capacity to move people, places, and objects in a moment corresponds to the action of the three verbs about which my opening question inquires. What the three verbs encapsulate is a certain level of speed that accelerates or attenuates the ephemeral traces of the three chapters in my thesis: a frantic chase and craze of being on time; a pulse of the present in "neutral affect," (Ricco 24) and a syncretic and simultaneous stretch of time that evokes layers of sediments of event and passage. Trace, in Jacques Derrida's conception, "is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers to itself, it properly has

no site – erasure belongs to its structure" (Derrida 26). That is to say, the stories I included are associated with a grip on the force of *play*, which is key to the narratives behind the picture of a good life – narratives in which people are aware of the moments and occurrences they are in, and the animated praxis of the presence pulled out by *play*.

This thesis is set in contemporary China – a strange time and place where the terms authoritarian governance, surveillance, freedom of expression, neoliberalism, globalization, and post-socialism serve as index cards with which to approach a present caught in constant flux. However, none of these indexes nor their nominal characteristics begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in. The notion of taxonomy or of a "totalized system" (Stewart 2) does not help us to understand the present. This is not a rejection or a disavowal of the functional utility of the index card analogy. Instead, I am trying to shed light on a corpus of moments and encounters as "a scene of immanent force" (2) with which to map out queer sociality and spaces of leisure in a city I call home.

Chengdu, A City You'll Never Leave Once You Come is a five-minute city promotional video made by the acclaimed fifth-generation auteur Yimou Zhang in 2003. The intonation of the voiceover in the video repeats the title and served for me as a deciphering enterprise when I once watched the video on TV. The core message of the video – as the title suggests – manifests an ambition the city government has had since the turn of the century, that of branding Chengdu as a tourist destination in China. The plot unfolds as a young man travels to his grandmother's hometown Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province[1] in the southwestern part of China. The narration follows a vortex of mnemonic footprints his grandmother used to tell him about –

[1] Sichuan is a southwestern Chinese province that contains a stretch of Asia's longest river, the Yangtze.

buzzling commercial Chunxi Road in the city center and its effervescent nightlife, tea tasting at People's Park, and Dujiangyan, an ancient irrigation system that has nurtured the region for over 2000 years.

Interconnected waterways, lakes, rivers are central tropes in the region's literary and historical traditions (Ng, Wang). Zhang brings that tradition into the character's experience, and their integration allows us to witnesses a livable historical archive of the city and brings about something of a rapprochement between new and old sites, articulating what the grandmother said, and what the title of the video suggests – this is "a city you'll never leave once you come." This shapes an ontological exposition of being through sensing, wandering, and paddling the sonic and visual world of Chengdu, encompassing the character, texture, and fuel of a city landscape and a multiplicity of presence through the sharing and circulation of the tonal rhythm the city provides.

The affection I have for the city I grew up with is a work in progress for the simple reason that I live through departure and return. It is through an evocation of a fond encounter in the early 2000s with a giant billboard banner sitting right before the intersection, a node which separates the departure and arrival terminals at the airport. On the billboard, the plain calligraphy, written by the video's director, that says, once again, "*Chengdu, A City You'll Never Leave Once You Come"* reminds me over and over again of the urban constellations and changes of a city I call hometown, as well as of the spaces of resonance in which nostalgia and affection become possible. That is to say, the visual footage and signs in the video, and that giant billboard, become a reminder of inhabitation and of the mood of a familiar yet other-worldly affective function that leaves a certain ephemeral trace on me. What frames the narratives I have included in my thesis are incohesive, non-linear stories of departure and return, of perceiving the

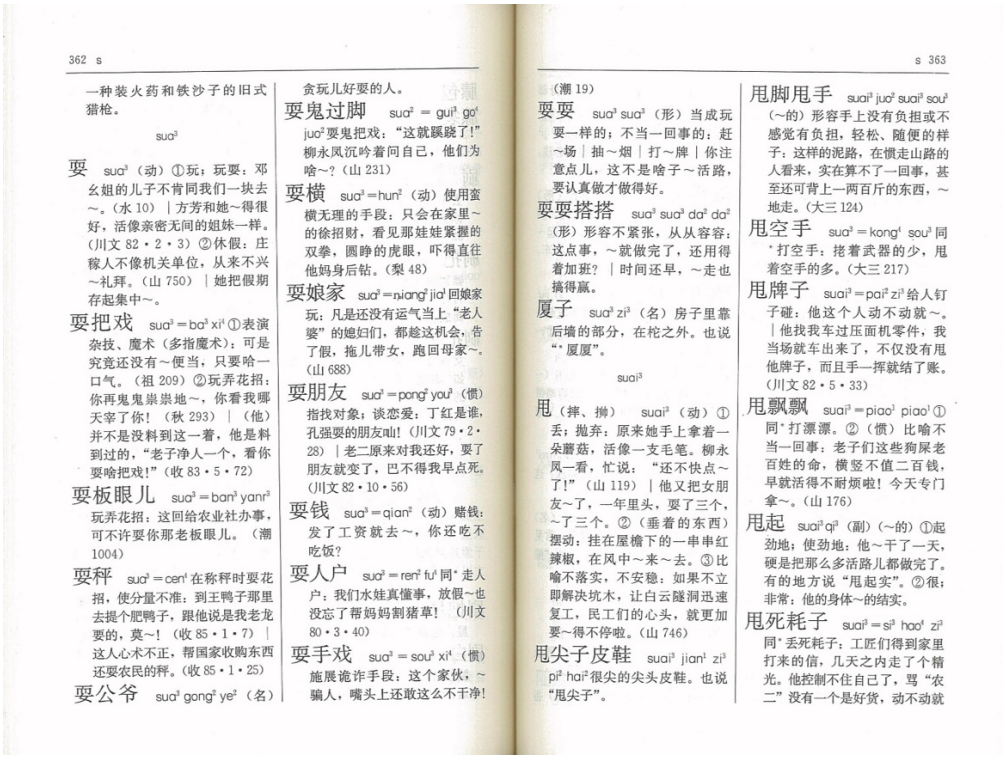
urban realm in a poetic manner, and of the cadence of the repetition of the lingering ethos *A City You'll Never Leave Once You Come* captures.

This thesis examines three primary objects of inquiry: a park, gay bars, and a commercial building inadvertently turned into multiple nightclubs. First, I use People's Park as a primary locus for entering the city in an effort to illustrate the slow social imaginaries and rhythms of Chengdu as a city, illuminating the social and cultural utility of this temporal orientation through a concrete observation of the park. I then engage with Wei Wei's sociological study on gay men in Chengdu, *Going Public: The Production and Transformation of Queer Spaces in Contemporary Chengdu, China*, which offers a nuanced narrative of neutral affect – a temporal genre proposed by queer theorist John Paul Ricco – which demonstrates how intra-networks of exchange among *Piaopiao*, a local term used to describe gay men, shape the temporal order in Chengdu and its subjects within a pulsing of time created by neutral affect. I discern a neutral tone throughout Wei's work, one which results from the process of recontextualization of the interviews he conducted under the assimilatory trope of the gay liberation movement. Finally, this thesis examines Poly Center, once a nightclub heaven from 2013 to 2017, and its fall and afterlife, in order to situate the underground club scenes within a long history of chilling and non-teleological modes of being. I suggest that the ruins and losses of the building evoke atmospheric attunement (Gandy), eliciting a compositional reading and/or listening with which to feel the possibilities such places offer.

Orienting and Disorienting Time Through Shua

The evocations of a playful mode of being permeate throughout the city and rely on the concept of Shua. This concept operates on momentary measures of time, in which people hang out, take a break, and fool around. In the *Sichuan Dialect dictionary* (Sichuan fangyan cidian), *shua* means

"to play and to take a break from work." The dictionary provides an example: "庄稼人不像机关单位，从来不兴耍礼拜," or "grain farmers, in contrast to office workers, never take any vacations." The standalone character, X, can be interspersed with other characters and suggests a loose and casual undertone, but also adds an ambivalence when renaming a phrase. When Shua is paired with the term scale (chen 秤), it denotes fraudulent behavior, and the example of the usage refers to a person who lacks moral integrity – by manipulating the weighing scales in procuring goods from farmers, in an example the dictionary provides. Note that *shua* in this particular usage becomes a way of manipulating and exerting power. When Shua is paired with the term friend (pengyou 朋友), it means to seek a romantic partner or engage in a romantic relationship. In this case, Shua denotes seeking and engaging in an orientation.



362 s

一种装火药和铁沙子的旧式猎枪。

sua³

耍 sua³（动）①玩；玩耍：邓幺姐的儿子不肯同我们一块去～。（水 10）｜方芳和她～得很好，活像亲密无间的姐妹一样。（川文 82・2・3）②休假：庄稼人不像机关单位，从来不兴～礼拜。（山 750）｜她把假期存起集中～。

耍把戏 sua³＝ba³ xi⁴ ①表演杂技、魔术（多指魔术）：可是究竟还没有～便当，只要哈一口气。（祖 209）②玩弄花招：你再鬼鬼祟祟地～，你看我哪天宰了你！（秋 293）｜（他）并不是没料到这一着，他是料到过的，"老子净人一个，看你耍啥把戏！"（收 83・5・72）

耍板眼儿 sua³＝ban³ yanr³ 玩弄花招：这回给农业社办事，可不许耍你那老板眼儿。（潮 1004）

耍秤 sua³＝cen⁴ 在称秤时耍花招，使分量不准：到王鸭子那里去提个肥鸭子，跟他说是我老龙要的，莫～！（收 85・1・7）｜这人心术不正，帮国家收购东西还耍农民的秤。（收 85・1・25）

耍公爷 sua³ gong¹ ye²（名）贪玩儿好耍的人。

耍鬼过脚 sua² = gui³ go⁴ juo²耍鬼把戏："这就瞩跷了！"柳永凤沉吟着问自己，他们为啥～？（山 231）

耍横 sua³＝hun²（动）使用蛮横无理的手段：只会在家里～的徐招财，看见那娃娃紧握的双拳，圆睁的虎眼，吓得直往他妈身后钻。（梨 48）

耍娘家 sua³＝niang² jia¹ 回娘家玩；凡是还没有运气当上"老人婆"的媳妇们，都趁这机会，告了假，拖儿带女，跑回母家～。（山 688）

耍朋友 sua³＝peng² you³（惯）指找对象；谈恋爱：丁红是谁，孔强耍的朋友咄！（川文 79・2・28）｜老二原来对我还好，耍了朋友就变了，巴不得我早点死。（川文 82・10・56）

耍钱 sua³＝qian²（动）赌钱：发了工资就去～，你还吃不吃饭？

耍人户 sua³＝ren² fu⁴ 同"走人户：我们水娃真懂事，放假～也没忘了帮妈妈割猪草！（川文 80・3・40）

耍手戏 sua³ = sou³ xi⁴（惯）施展诡诈手段：这个家伙，～骗人，嘴头上还敢这么不干净！

s 363

（潮 19）

耍耍 sua³ sua³（形）当成玩耍一样的；不当一回事的：赶～场｜抽～烟｜打～牌｜你注意点儿，这不是啥子～活路，要认真做才做得好。

耍耍搭搭 sua³ sua³ da² da²（形）形容不紧张，从从容容：这点事，～就做完了，还用得着加班？｜时间还早，～走也搞得赢。

厦子 sua³ zi³（名）房子里靠后墙的部分，在柁之外。也说"＊厦厦"。

suai³

甩（拌、掸） suai³（动）①丢；抛弃：原来她手上拿着一朵蘑菇，活像一支毛笔。柳永凤一看，忙说："还不快点～了！"（山 119）｜他又把女朋友～了，一年里头，耍了三个，～了三个。②（垂着的东西）摆动：挂在屋檐下的一串串红辣椒，在风中～来～去。③比喻不落实，不安稳：如果不立即解决坑木，让白云隧洞迅速复工，民工们的心头，就更加要～得不停啦。（山 746）

甩尖子皮鞋 suai³ jian¹ zi³ pi² hai²很尖的尖头皮鞋。也说"甩尖子"。

甩脚甩手 suai³ juo² suai³ sou³（～的）形容手上没有负担或不感觉有负担，轻松、随便的样子：这样的泥路，在惯走山路的人看来，实在算不了一回事，甚至还可背上一两百斤的东西，～地走。（大三 124）

甩空手 suai³＝kong¹ sou³ 同＊打空手：挎着武器的少，甩着空手的多。（大三 217）

甩牌子 suai³＝pai² zi³ 给人钉子碰：他这个人动不动就～。｜他找我车过压面机零件，我当场就车出来了，不仅没有甩他牌子，而且手一挥就结了账。（川文 82・5・33）

甩飘飘 suai³＝piao¹ piao¹ ①同＊打漂漂。②（惯）比喻不当一回事：老子们这些狗屎老百姓的命，横竖不值二百钱，早就活得不耐烦啦！今天专门拿～。（山 176）

甩起 suai³ qi³（副）（～的）①起劲地；使劲地：他～干了一天，硬是把那么多活路儿都做完了。有的地方说"甩起实"。②很；非常；他的身体～的结实。

甩死耗子 suai³＝si³ hao⁴ zi³ 同＊丢死耗子：工匠们得到家里打来的信，几天之内走了个精光。他控制不住自己了，骂"农二"没有一个是好货，动不动就

Figure 0.1: Explanation of Shua in *Sichuan Dialect Dictionary*

Shua is a loose concept that profoundly shifted the vernacular experience deeply embedded within agricultural inhabitation, rhetoric, and way of living – particularly surrounding perceived foreigners and "Others" of different provinces. In the modern world, the experience of shua has shifted from its agricultural trace to a mode of socialization that highlights urbanity and embraces flaneuring around. In his article "Struggling for Livelihood: Social Conflict Through the Teahouse in Republican Chengdu," historian Di Wang notes a historical continuity in the Chinese teahouse, as not only a congregating hub of daily life but "a microcosm of the larger society" (Wang 247). He explains the roles teahouses played in the dynamic of urban modernization during the first half of the 20th century. Centering on conflicts that took place in teahouses, Wang focuses on the mediative strategy of appeasing such conflict at teahouses where people crowded together without physical separation in activities such as " 'drinking settlement tea' " (249). The conflict at a place of leisure thus employs vernacular knowledge and the valences of shua with a rumination to calculate the cost and affordances such conflict brings. As club owner Eileen Zhang explained at a panel discussion in 2020 about the rise of Chengdu club culture, the concept of "Shua means having good soil." She later clarifies that "the word can be used in cases to demonstrate a fertile environment [for making music]." Thus, shua indicates a mundane, not-too-full degree, bringing together the different informal senses of play. I propose that the urban knowledge and usage of the term shua employs nonchalant aesthetics as a creative, playful response to a draconian censorship measures of the government.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One discusses the politics and affective kernel of spatial configuration and signification of People's Park – the first public park opened in 1911 – illustrating a circulatory system of

leisure where the park becomes a repository and co-presence of old, intermediate, and new sites of memory and affect. This chapter opens with a sound that emerges from the park – an indication of time and circulation – as a point of departure from which to examine a relationship between everyday life and rhythms, or "the concrete modalities of social time" (Lefebvre and Régulier 5). Borrowing from French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's concept "rhythmanalysis," I view the park as a symphonic site for producing a slow time, derailing from the notion of "homogenous and decanonized time" (5), that is to say, a precise adaptation of a calculation of labor-time driven by capitalist force. On the contrary, the modality in the park affirms idling as an essential part of everyday life that echoes the ethos of Shua, of being leisurely playful. In my close analysis of the documentary *People's Park* (2012), I argue that the speed and angle of the shot encapsulate a sentiment of slow time, by gesturing in a manner on par with an act of walking through its hand-held uncut visual footage that attends to the habitual nature of locals.

The second half of the chapter switches to a personal encounter in the park to complicate the circadian rhythm and testify to the embodied feeling of slow time. By registering a slow sentiment of the park, both the documentary and the park prompted an autoethnographic inquiry in which I immersed myself – *doing* rhythmanalysis in praxis and attempting to grasp the rhythm of the park. An encounter with the matchmaking corner – a site where unmarried single men and women's information is exchanged in public – interrupts the slowness, unsettling the linear conception of slow time in the park and introducing a mode of a *craze* of being on time. Leta Hong Fincher articulates the prevalence of matchmaking corners in China, pinpointing ***shengnü*** (leftover women) discourse in her book *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, where she delves into an ongoing stigmatization of unmarried women over thirty, implying their undesirable status in the Chinese marriage market. Alongside Fincher's analysis

of women's forced subjugation and imposition, I demonstrate that the public performance of intimacy on the marriage poster revolves around a conflictual unity between standardized social rhythms – getting married and starting a family – and a repetitive process associated with heterogenous time, as illustrated in the first half of the chapter. By tactfully misreading the grammar of the matchmaking corner/poster, I flip, play with the term *shengnü,* and valorize its stigmatization to gain access to and reterritorialize the space. My engagement serves as a temporal disorientation and a firm rejection of this craze of being on time; that is to say, a biological timeline commanding individuals to *chase* time. A ludic practice of such can shift the angle of chasing time and thinking beyond a heteronormative progression of time-passing and recognize a different time-space as produced in a minoritarian, self-assembled practice.

Chapter Two engages with gay bars as a mediation on the temporality of neutral affect and infrastructures of intra-networks among Piaopiao – a common term used to describe gay men in Chengdu – as they shape a Chinese social imaginary that is not here yet. I interpret gay bars following Wei Wei's tracing of the development of cruising spots in Chengdu since the 1980s, demonstrating how the short-lived snippets of conversations and time spent at various cruising spots/public sex (hauntology) shaped an accretive foresight of neutral affect veering from public to private. The chapter begins with my encounter with an episode of a feminist podcast *Bierenxing* in 2021 one discussing the significance of the inception of the first gender-neutral bar Muchroom, which opened during the height of the pandemic in Chengdu. The listening experience hence becomes a starting point of the urge for – and anticipation of – mapping out spaces of leisure and public sex acts in Chengdu. The narration is interspersed with my readings and Wei Wei's scholarship, which makes up a patchwork of the content in this chapter, as well as

sounds and stories of memory associated with queer sociality as a child, and my retrospective reorganization of a cauldron of memories and histories as an adult now.

I address the affective consequences of this mode of sociality by reading an undercurrent of neutral affect in Wei's interview and a journalistic expose, one which, I suggest, also manifests itself through the dominant order of craze in normal times and the neoliberal economy that structures everyday life. I draw extensively from John Paul Ricco's work on neutral affect as a temporal genre in which an affective register in a given moment becomes a force to pulse the moment. In other words, the mere affective occurrence of an event that is not formative becomes a vehicle for the process of "*emptying out* (including a temporal continuity)" (22 emphasis mine). I demonstrate how gay bars attend to the connections between neutral affect and a minoritarian performance of closeness in which Piaopiao mobilized. The concept of an intra-network of *Piaopiao* derives from Joshua Neves' idea of underglobalization, with "under" as in "undermine or underperform" (Neves 22). Neves' conceptualization of underglobalization involves a recognitioin that the "peculiar ontology" of infrastructure, relates to the fact that "they are things and also to the relation between things" (Neves, 195). By examining the ways in which these relations manifest themselves in the network of Piaopiao, I suggest that the transition from public to private gay bars indicates how they strategically fit the needs of the dominant capital world of social productivity and reproductive futurity. The formation of such 'soft infrastructure' (Straw, Berlant) is consequently what Roland Barthes described as a "hole-filled temporality" (Barthes 2005). I read the atemporal nature of such occurrences inhabited by Piaopiao as aligned with the non-teleological progression and the inevitable neutral affect that emerges from these relations.

Chapter Three begins with the inception of the first techno club born in 2013 atop a high-rise commercial building called Poly Center, indicating the city's prominent position as a thriving music hub for the music scene in China. More importantly, this chapter attempts to situate the significance of the club's site-specificity within a larger context of the development of underground clubs in Poly Center as well as in its relationship to Shua. I discuss the ways in which the nuances of the escape that underground clubs proffer a stretch of time in the mode of being. This elongated temporal glitch serves to fit the needs of shaping identification, subjecthood, and narratives of the "good life." Drawing from José Esteban Muñoz's *Introductory Notes to "Queer Acts*,*"* I explain how ephemera refers not necessarily to transient objects, but are steeped in public/private evidence that supports a time-passing history/mechanism. By contextualizing the birth of the club within these modes of relations, this chapter illustrates how the choosing of a commercial building and its unexpected flourishing and downfall are the results of a larger autonomous assemblage/collective attunement/atmosphere for creating a zone of affect in which is made possible a stretch of the present.

This chapter positions my own participation and witnessing of the rise and fall of the building as an ongoing interlocutory and atmospheric attunement with which to understand spaces of play. An itinerary of a night out – the less-than-twelve-hour's span – becomes ephemeral evidence of a stretch of time of the past before the fall of the scene – as if time enables a somatic response of being stretched out. I refer extensively to Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's collaborative work *The Hundreds* as a writing model for explicating the utility of affect theory by providing coordinates with which to capture undulating moments of encounter in public life set in the United States, and, in doing so, coming to reckon a possible way of perceiving and composing the world, "a way of feeling one's way into the world"

(Berlant and Stewart, 2). In so doing, I slide with the concept of Shua as a writing praxis, affect orientation and process to collect, listen, and attune my subjective feeling as a navigation point/compass for orienting beyond the dancefloor.

Chapter One: Rest and Pleasure: The Emotional Life of People's Park

> The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to the language or to the statements uttered [...] Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it "speaks".
>
> — Michel de Certeau

Figure 1.1: Bamboo chairs piling up on the table during non-business hours

The sharp, high-pitched rustling sound rang out through the documentary *People's Park* (2012) at Heming Teahouse in Chengdu, China. The resonating echo pinged and reverberated along the banks of the lake and lotus pond in the park, wringing out and attenuating images of body movement on the screen. A slender metallic instrument with a bifurcated apex resembled a tuning fork in both appearance and auditory resonance. This chirping sound comes from the dexterous hands of an adept ear cleaner, a typical hawker wandering around the teahouse to attract and exchange business (Wang, Ng). I remember growing up in Chengdu in the early 2000s, sitting on a squeaky bamboo chair while sipping a bowl of Jasmine tea at Heming on a weekend, my dad waving at the ear cleaner, a sign of a commercial transaction on the go. The ear

cleaner deftly employs a myriad of peculiar cleaning tools, tapping, excavating, and rotating within the auditory canal of his customer. Slightly lurching back on the chair, my dad closes his eyes, with the porcelain cup still clasped in one hand. The leisure of ear cleansing, unlike more subtle entertaining programs we see in the park, is derived from a long-established street tradition (Wang). With the trigeminal nerves converging at the front of my dad's skull, the tool punches the back of the head. His eyes crinkle shut before opening wide at the same time as the now empty cup he is holding. Toward the end of the session, the ear cleaner wraps up by clinging to the fork ensemble, receives his change, and saunters out from our table, with disappearing sharp sounds, towards other directions in the park. For American ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, who conjoins "acoustics" and "epistemology" to theorize sound as a way of knowing (Feld 2015, 12), "coustemology, in essence, "favors inquiry that centralizes situated listening in engagements with place and space-time," (Feld, 2015) with the relationality of knowledge production and investigates listening "as knowing-in-action: a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible" (Feld 2015, 12). The chirping sound from ear-cleansing practice hence becomes an immersive, relational ethnographic object to be known in Chengdu's public park. [2]

In the early 1910s, a new character appeared in the city-planning playbook, charged with developing a plan to alleviate the escalating tensions between the Manchu and Han ethnic groups. Yukun, the last general in power in Chengdu before the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, was a Manchu surveyor and public servant. Although inexperienced in matters of urban planning, Yukun filled in the organic patchwork of rice fields, vegetable plots, and horse stables, that lay beyond the built-up city's customs wall with a perpendicular cross-hatching of streets for

[2] For more information on the art of ear cleaning, British cookbook author Fuchsia Dunlop writes about her experience with an ear cleaner during her studies in Chengdu in the mid-1990s in her work titled "The Dying Art of Ear-Cleaning."

the Manchu residents of Chengdu. Yukun expanded the park's boundaries to include a corner of the lotus pond east of the office (south of the current Citang Street), extending east to the present-day Banbianqiao and south to the current Xiaonan Street. The rigid geometric street pattern Yukun contrived for Chengdu resembles a grid of city blocks full of possibilities during the beginning of the Chinese Revolution of 1911.

The gaping plots of land sketched out by Yukun's new street plan gave birth to the establishment of the first urban park in Chengdu. Renmin Gongyuan (People's Park 人民公园), is a congregating spot for the Manchu vendors to start businesses and make a living while charging admission fees for visitors. Located in the center of Chengdu, the park spans an area of approximately 112,639 square meters. People's Park is a massive complex of pavilions, gardens, a lotus pond, a teahouse, lakes, and a public monument in commemoration of the martyrs who died during the Road Protection Movement on the eve of the 1911 Revolution. Over the course of the past century – from the late Qing dynasty to the inception of the Republic of China - the "afterlife" of the park as a repository and co-presence of old, intermediate, and new sites of memory and affect has reverberated with the echoes of the past.

This chapter focuses on the politics and affective kernel of spatial configuration and signification as it shapes the rather slow social imaginaries and rhythms of Chengdu as a city, interrogating what constitutes urban knowledge and altercation, and how public textualities and mediums, and embodied movements contribute to a sauntering temporality in its iterative and conditional nature in the present-day People's Park.

Michel de Certeau writes extensively about the tactics available to the common man to discover and claim the operations of specific, concrete implementations of structure in *The Practice of Everyday Life,* where he captures the relations of the pedestrian's mode of movement

and its formal structuring in a linguistic analogy: The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to the language or to the statements uttered [...] Walking affirms, suspects, *tries out*, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it "speaks"(emphasis mine) The act of movement itself attempts to enunciate People's Park as an always-in-the-process mediation that organizes life, or in Lauren Berlant's words, as "the lifeworld of structure" (Berlant, 2016). How does the co-presence of old, intermediate, and new forms of sites such as a matchmaking corner express the social relations of the space? How do certain sensory inputs (sound, smells) signal change and possibility while others stabilize a history (and a relationship to my own past.) To address the question, I use two types of materials – one from the documentary *People's Park* (2012) and one from personal memory and a recent trip where I collected discursive and symbolic nodal points of understanding of the site.

People's Park *(2012) and Slow Time*

The collaborative work of Libbie Dina Cohn and J. P. Sniadecki's *People's Park* (2012) is a realist documentary that offers a candid exploration of everyday life in contemporary China. Following the low-angle camera perched upon a wheelchair, this 75-minute film gleaned every minuscule aspect it could, from observing tea drinking, square dancing, and singing, to other various forms of strolls, evoking a slow-paced rhythm of Chengdu natives on a Saturday. Before the lens unveils a space of gathering in the heart of the park, the early parts of the documentary resonate with a rhythmic beat—thud, thud, thud – and the images emerge almost uniformly as an exhilarating single shot, guiding viewers on a walking tour through the park as a way to enter the city.

The raw and uncut gem of *People's Park* presents a winding passage within the park's branching paths. We hear the sound of a plastic water bottle being squished, and the larger

presence of the sound of cicadas when we enter the more intimate and enclosed, darker parts of the park. As an ethnographic work, the documentary attempts to depart from mere storytelling while acknowledging the neglected potential residing in the very essence of the images themselves in the tension between “culture” and “spectacle”; by reflecting on the spectacularization of the everyday and attempting to intervene in the marketplace of images. In Sniadecki’s own words:

> [We] decided to jettison conventional editing and embrace the long take—one seventy-five-minute take—because any way of making an intervention into that unbroken journey through the park in Chengdu seemed to undermine the experience of being swept up into something greater than oneself. At times, that collapses your sense of a fixed ego, diffusing it into this collective space, and that’s what we were trying to move toward by not cutting. Conversely, we were also interested in not only the possible exhilaration and ecstasy of a long take through waves of humanity, but also the *exhaustion and the unease* of gazing and being gazed back upon, the interplay between immersion, reflection, and self-consciousness. (Sniadecki and Pereda 50, emphasis mine)

The camera lens embodies a figure that can be understood as a rhythmanalyst [3] that transcribes to us how it *feels like* walking nonstop and experiencing multiple temporalities at once. For example, we see a young man sitting on a bamboo chair while making a phone call at a teahouse. On the table sits a large lobed teapot brimming with hot water (21:18). The man comes into the frame from afar and gets closer as the camera keeps on moving steadily. The phone call he is making is probably a consultation with a doctor, as he mentions symptoms like "feeling cold and sweaty, having a runny nose, and coughing." Simultaneously aware of the camera's presence, he maintains a composed posture and continues to articulate his symptoms, establishing eye contact with the lens. As the camera shifts away, rendering him invisible, his voice gradually diminishes until it fades while other sounds emerge. As the camera continues to *walk* around the park, it arrives at a corridor teeming with a constant stream of pedestrians; two

[3] I will return to the concept of rhythmanalyst later in the following section.

young women sit on a chair on the side (42:58). One of them assumes a reclined position upon the lap of her friend, suggesting signs of either inebriation or slumber. Meanwhile, the other woman is on a phone call, wherein the precise content remains indistinct and obscured by the environment. A fragmentary capture of a sentence manages to pierce through the auditory haze of the camera: “Call me upon your arrival tomorrow.” Ebbing her voice to a whisper, she attentively directs her gaze toward the camera, hinting at an intention to communicate undisclosed thoughts. In both cases, the presence of the lens as a sauntering stroller experiences movement throughout space in urban life.

Since the mid-19th century, circulation and walking narratives have been used as tools for orientation, repositories of cultural knowledge, and catalysts for shaping human emotions and behavior (Benjamin, Munt, etc). The use of the term 'circulation' derives from scientific disciplines, symbolizing the flow of substances such as saps in plants and matter in chemical reactions (Teich, 1982). Armand Mattelart posits that western ideas about communications and the network society were born with the influential work of the 17th century English scientist William Harvey on the circulation of blood (cited in Mons 2002, 185). “ ‘Circulation’ becomes a dominant metaphor after the French Revolution: ideas, newspapers, gossip and ‘ after 1880 ‘ traffic, air, and power ‘circulate.’ From about 1750, wealth and money begin to ‘circulate’ and are spoken of as though they were liquids, flowing incessantly to nourish a process of accumulation and growth” ( ). In the East, the balance of yin and yang also extends to a circulation within the body. Traditional medicine posits that the meridians (jingluo 经络; used in acupuncture and traditional medicine) in the human body, akin to blood vessels, form a continuous cycle. With twelve meridians in total, the body forms interconnected circuits. This perpetual and balanced state within the human body is termed 'meridian circulation.' Circulation

thus would serve as an informative metaphor in the description of a balanced mediation between the human body and built environment, signaling a correlation between interior energy pathways in the body and the exterior information flow and exchange

Circulation – as an analytic concept – evokes both space and time (Boutros and Straw, 11). The walking figure – the darling of the literary character of the flâneur in Charles Baudelaire's The Painter of Modern Life, the aimlessly wandering urban stroller, artist, and thinker of the cityscape reminds us of the intricate interplay between built environment and individual emotions and behaviors. The adaptation of such a figure in Walter Benjamin's writing further theorized the subject as references to the speed and intensity of movement within urban space.

While Walter Benjamin's articulation of flaneur runs parallel to Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of rhythmanalysis, the strolling individual implies on subjective experience and personal observation, whereas the rhythmanalyst, a practioner of a "science" of rhythms within cities, focuses on interpreting the convergence of the temporal and spatial terrain of a place. The rhythmanaylst experiences the encountering by familiarizing and understanding the pattern of the rhythm in which the environment affects and (re)produces. Lefebvre's 1992 book Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life, posits that rhythm refers to temporal patterns and cycles that structure everyday life. The rhythm of daily routines, social practices, and cultural activities, as well as their interplay with spatial dynamics inform us that social relations are constantly mediated through space and time. He further elaborates on two types of rhythm – cyclical and linear – defining the former in terms of simple intervals of repetition, such as the rhythms of nature (day and night, seasons) that "originates in the cosmic" (2004, 8), and social rituals (weekly routines, annual festivals) while suggesting that linear rhythm implies a flow of

events or activities that occur in a continuous and progressive manner. The two rhythms complement each other as a metric for gauging the intensity and speed of everyday life in which social and economic structures emergent from urban infrastructuresto mutually inform one another. The rhythm of People's Park thus revolves around the cyclical rhythm of repetitive temporal patterns such as the park's opening hours and business operation hours. Within this temporal framework, activities like ear cleansing, tea drinking, chatting, and gossiping are structured as the linear rhythm of People's Park.

The circulation of People's Park in the lens of Cohn and Sniadecki becomes an accumulation of things, objects and individuals passing by, having interactions or not over the course of the film, capturing the essence of slowing down and leisure. Viewing, or observing the rhythms of movements in the frame between corridor pathway and teahouse creates a continuity of linear rhythm whose slow tempo permeates across the frame. One becomes a rhythmanalyst who "not only observes human activities, but he [hears](in the double sense by which the word names both noticing and understanding), the temporalities in which these activities take place" (Quayson, 229) and charts the ways in which various rhythms in the park operate together in circulatory iteration. Throughout the act of filming, the two individuals—Sniadcki, pushing the wheelchair, and Zhang Mo, controlling the portable DV camera— and their figures and movements, become part of the narrative attempting to create a method of thinking through images that, as per Lefebvre, may not be able to show these rhythms, but can create rhythms out of a particular frame of impulses and encounters. Images in the film, after all, are encounters with reality, while thinking about image-as-encounter is also to claim that anthropology has had a longer relation to image. Some of the encounters in the film deliberately capture frustration,

unease, and exhaustion in an attempt to interrogate or complicate a trope of ethnographic encountering.

We observe and hear the daily life of the locals on hot summer afternoons – resting individuals, tea brewers, ordinary adults and children, vibrant elderly dancers, and other figures intertwine. In its own way, *People's Park* produces the theme of leisure as the subsuming of life by its constitution as a form of moving and slowing down. To emphasize the importance of attending to such banalities as an avenue to understanding the status of spatial practice and its temporality in the context of Chengdu park and the city as a whole, the wheelchair, restricted in its mobility, transcends borders to arrive in Chengdu as a seemingly autonomous public space, becoming an invisible means of transportation.

The fleshing-out-of-life scenes in *People's Park* endow it in part with what Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier (2004), called 'the concrete modalities of social time'. According to Lefebvre and Régulier, city life consists of various interconnected patterns involving movement, sounds, activities, and routines. Rhythm hence becomes a relevant articulation of the method for gauging speed and intensity as it moves between mobility and circulation.

Public Performance of Intimacy: Matchmaking Corner

I stopped at a corner in the park with a friend visiting from Beijing. It was August, and we went for a stroll before breakfast at the tea house in the park. We made a beeline to the destination from the north gate after hopping out of the taxi, scurrying towards the destination about which I had told him many times over our phone exchange. Facing aluminum-plastered columns with oversaturated blue posters hanging around, our morning reading was packed with dense information. Having already visited the matching corner six months ago for my fieldwork with

no intention of writing about it at all, at first I thought that the corner captured a dominant sociocultural attitude about this craze of being "on time." Being on time places individuals in a linear trajectory to predictability and stability. Being on time secures individuals in social and legal standings. Being on time consolidates familial and reproductive infrastructures and identities. In discussing time and its relationship with uncertainty, feminist technology studies scholar Sarah Sharma argues that "uncertainty propels one into neoliberal action. One becomes an entrepreneur of time control, obsessed with work-life balance, and a sense of productivity which is all tethered to keeping that normative reproductive order normative." (Sharma 44)

Standing next to me, my friend muttered the descriptions in the boxes: "65 kilograms, college degree, travel industry, owns a house in Chengdu, a two-bedroom apartment with a living room, good-tempered and patient, non-smoker, loves animals." He pursed his lip, wrinkled his chin, and continued to look for something – sentences or words, categories, or any nouns that could make more sense to him. Then he moved two rows downward. The box read "32 years old, 170cm in height, owns a house in Chengdu. Seeking a girl with modest requirements for a settled life."[4] Both personal posters orient readers and potential partners to a reproductive futurity in line with a life that eradicates accidents, arrhythmia, but offers a security blanket. The text, all in simplified Chinese characters, was perused and chewed in many attempts – I read it aloud, my friend read it aloud, and we read silently – all too familiar but elusive. There was no sketch of the person outside of transactional, hetero-patriarchal descriptors. Lauren Berlant writes of the making of this particular genre and aesthetics in their book *Cruel Optimism*, describing the formation of the vision of the fantasy of a good life, as a social and economic project, contingent on the materiality and fantasy of ___ for people to grip upon. They explain:

[4] In its original sentence on the poster, it particularly focuses on emphasizing the search for someone in bad financial situation (条件差).

“ In other words, we need to see the mass consumption of exchange and talk value as emerging not only out of the narrow corner of this matchmaking corner but of a wider cultural politics of, literally, the meaning, ‘life,’ how life should be lived, and what constitutes ‘the good life.’

Refraining from meta-analysis, we arrived at the verge of combusting to a point where we both chided the absurdity of the requirements listed on the posters. There was a thin, tall elderly man standing beside me, facing towards the information-laden board. His gaze zig-zagged down the posters, reading through the personal advertisements. He then lowered his head over the text and jotted down information on his hand-sized notepad. In the midst of this quiet observation, a middle-aged man prowled around a sea of blue posters and approached him.

“Looking for a partner for your granddaughter?” Although the ascending intonation at the end indicated a question, this man’s deliberate and assertive manner of inquiry posed a rhetorical emphasis, revealing a shrewd and calculating shark looking for his target. The elderly nodded and responded affirmatively. “You must come from the North, so not a local? How tall is your granddaughter?” The man noticed the accent and sifted through geographic categories on his internal data list.

“Yes, we’re from the Northern part, though my family has been living in Chengdu for decades. We moved here for work.” A little hesitant to reveal the height of his granddaughter, the elderly responded with, “Oh, she’s alright, just a little bit over 5 feet 7,” as an indication of mild euphemism (that the height doesn’t matter too much). He maintained a careful look of interest, anticipating what would happen in this conversation.

"That's quite tall for guys in the South; you know, they're generally shorter than Northern guys. Does your granddaughter mind about the height?"

“I suppose no…” I continued eavesdropping on the conversation, as it was becoming more and more interesting, realizing that the ordinary throws itself together out of pulse.

The middle-aged inquirer picked up the conversation and went deeper. "What is her Zodiac sign?"

“She’s a Rabbit, born in 1999.”

His eyes sparkled with rumination as he began calculating compatibility. “Let me think… Rabbits match well with Dog, Pig, and Goat. So guys born in 1994, 1995, or 1991 would be the best fit. I’m sure I can find one for you.” He spoke with unwavering confidence, seamlessly transitioning to a more pragmatic and personal inquiry. “What does your granddaughter do?”

“She works at a medical company” The elderly man stuttered, responding concisely.

“But what kind of role? Research? Pharmaceuticals?”

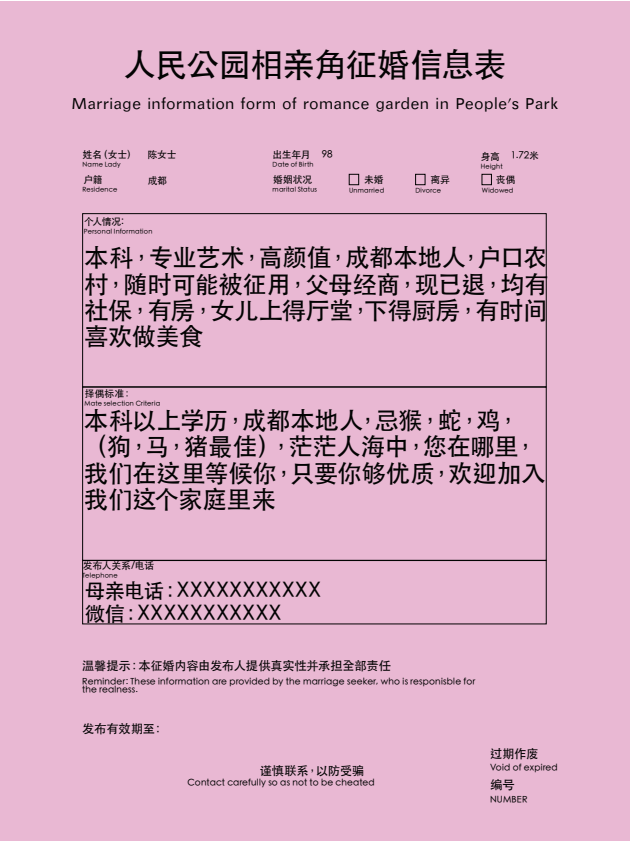
“She’s in sales at a big medical company.”

“Nice that it’s a big company. You get all the benefits covered. Better than a government job.” He acknowledged, showing a hint of concession, before probing further, “Can you make decisions for her?”

"I can," the elderly person replied, his gentle demeanor belying a sense of authority as he accepted the proffered business card of the marriage broker.

A matchmaking corner is a place of public performance of intimacy**,** of wandering, and an extension of social relations in the making. This corner of the park, dotted with thousands of posters, is diffused with two contrasting colors: blue for unmarried men and pink for unmarried women. The posters are loosely strung up on a repurposed public newspaper reading stand. The removal of the glass window allows for denser patterning of the posters, inviting viewers to examine all the listed prerequisites, and specific criteria such as minimum height, income, and

education. These posters are either written by a matchmaker, a parent, or the unmarried individuals themselves. Flocks of parents can be overheard with repetitive queries, such as, “Do you have a daughter or a son?”, “Where do they work?”, “How tall are they?”



人民公园相亲角征婚信息表

Marriage information form of romance garden in People's Park

姓名(女士) 陈女士 Name Lady

出生年月 98 Date of Birth

身高 1.72米 Height

户籍 成都 Residence

婚姻状况 marital Status ☐ 未婚 Unmarried ☐ 离异 Divorce ☐ 丧偶 Widowed

个人情况: Personal Information

本科，专业艺术，高颜值，成都本地人，户口农村，随时可能被征用，父母经商，现已退，均有社保，有房，女儿上得厅堂，下得厨房，有时间喜欢做美食

择偶标准: Mate selection Criteria

本科以上学历，成都本地人，忌猴，蛇，鸡，（狗，马，猪最佳），茫茫人海中，您在哪里，我们在这里等候你，只要你够优质，欢迎加入我们这个家庭里来

发布人关系/电话 Telephone

母亲电话：XXXXXXXXXXX
微信：XXXXXXXXXXX

温馨提示：本征婚内容由发布人提供真实性并承担全部责任

Reminder: These information are provided by the marriage seeker, who is responsible for the realness.

发布有效期至：

谨慎联系，以防受骗
Contact carefully so as not to be cheated

过期作废 Void of expired

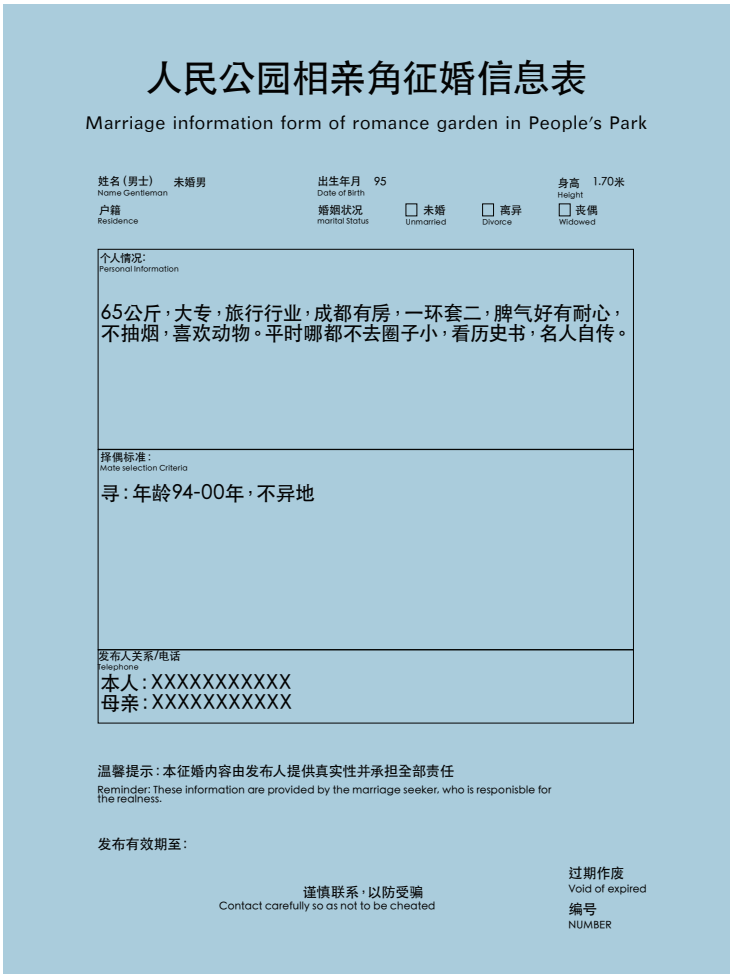
编号 NUMBER

Figure 1.2: A female marriage information form in People’s Park

Ms. Chen
Undergraduate degree, majoring in art, attractive appearance, Chengdu native of Chengdu, registered as a rural resident, may be conscripted at any time. Parents work in business but have retired, both have social security and own a house. The daughter is skilled in social settings and in the kitchen, and enjoys cooking in her free time.

Looking for: An individual with at least an undergraduate degree, a native of Chengdu, not born in the Year of the Monkey, Snake, or Rooster (Year of the Dog, Horse, or Pig preferred). In the vast sea of people, where are you? We are here

waiting for you. As long as you meet our standards of quality, you are welcome to join our family.



人民公园相亲角征婚信息表

Marriage information form of romance garden in People's Park

姓名(男士) 未婚男
Name Gentleman

出生年月 95
Date of Birth

身高 1.70米
Height

户籍
Residence

婚姻状况
marital Status

☐ 未婚 Unmarried ☐ 离异 Divorce ☐ 丧偶 Widowed

个人情况:
Personal Information

65公斤，大专，旅行行业，成都有房，一环套二，脾气好有耐心，不抽烟，喜欢动物。平时哪都不去圈子小，看历史书，名人自传。

择偶标准:
Mate selection Criteria

寻：年龄94-00年，不异地

发布人关系/电话
Telephone

本人：XXXXXXXXXX
母亲：XXXXXXXXXX

温馨提示：本征婚内容由发布人提供真实性并承担全部责任
Reminder: These information are provided by the marriage seeker, who is responisble for the realness.

发布有效期至:

谨慎联系，以防受骗
Contact carefully so as not to be cheated

过期作废
Void of expired

编号
NUMBER

Figure 1.3: A male marriage information form in People's Park

65 kilograms, college degree, travel industry, owns a house in Chengdu, a two-bedroom apartment with a living room, good-tempered and patient, non-smoker, loves animals. Usually, I don't go to crowded places and enjoy reading history books and autobiographies of famous people.

Looking for: Born between 1994 and 2000, preferably not in a long-distance relationship.
Myself: XXXXXXXXXX
Mother: XXXXXXXXXX

The history of the matchmaking corner in People's Park dates back to 2005, as some elderly parents would gather and engage in casual conversations, discussing various mundane matters such as family affairs and daily necessities. They revealed similar parental concerns, anxieties, and frustrations about the marriage market in a changing urban environment. During the initial stage of the matchmaking corner, from 2005 to 2021, visitors were greeted by a voluntary display of printed marriage advertisements arranged on A4-sized paper. These notices were strategically yet sporadically positioned on both sides of the pathways, suspended from tree branches along the roadside, or placed upon benches and stone seats. In this ad hoc environment, clusters of people engage in lively conversations, while others embrace intimate tête-à-têtes. Amidst the bustling scene, there were also individuals who conscientiously examined each matrimonial advertisement, noting down pertinent contact information. These sentimental attachments demonstrate the ways in which heterosexual marriage and reproduction are not so much cultural and social artifacts because of their materiality, but rather because of their accelerating standardization of a proper social time and formations of *shengnü* (剩女), a stigmatized category of surplus women (Zhang and Sun, 2014). The term 'leftover women' was first popularized by Leta Hong Fincher's 2014 book *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. According to Fincher, the stigma around 'leftover women' has existed in Sinophone communities for more than a decade. The term originally applied to women over thirty, though the age limit involved has gradually decreased to 25. In the book, the relief of attuning and gripping a hold to the social time Li Fang is completed.

> "Li Fang is relieved that she found a husband just in the nick of time. The parents of the university graduate and former human resources manager in Beijing feared that their only daughter was getting old and might never be able to marry. Li worried that she would pass the 'best child-bearing age' and might no longer be able to give birth. She is 26."

In a panel discussion on "Leftover" Women in East Asia: Sexism, Ageism and Feminism, Jeremy Tai expounded that the current orientation of the Chinese state involves exerting influence on women of specific socioeconomic and educational strata to marry for the sake of social stability. The prevailing gender imbalance in China stems from the heightened prevalence of sex-selective abortions subsequent to the initiation of the one-child policy in 1979. Currently, there exists a discernible demographic disproportion, with twenty million more men than women below the age of thirty, positing that this demographic asymmetry underscores the significance of marriage as a matter of state concern in China.

In a similar vein, Zhang and Sun write of the making of this particular social engagement in their article "When Are You Going to Get Married?," which describes the formation of the vision of the "good familial life" as a social and economic project, contingent upon heterosexual marriage and its promising reproductive futurity. As Zhang and Sun explain, the surplus women discourse derives from

> parental anxieties… often framed through the real or imagined gaze of others: how others might view their presence in the matchmaking corner and what these others might say about their daughters. Parents' experiences of such a public gaze derive from earlier participation in group dating and from histories of close monitoring of their intimate lives by work units and supervisors (Sun and Zhang, 139).

Sun and Zhang demonstrate the prevalence of parental matchmaking practices in Shanghai attached to the rise of middle-class educated women in urban China, reiterating the poisonous rhetoric of surplus women as an image that reifies the narrative of the appropriate social clock to do "what you need to do at a certain age," whether by compromising or lowering the standard that goes against one's wish as a promise of "good familial life" and prosperity. This Chinese

way of timing embodies both the sheer potentiality and inhibition of the women to break with or remain within in the acceleration of social time.

The elderly man's fascination with the matchmaking corner and his authoritative take on making a proper decision for his twenty-four years old granddaughter represents one of the millions of dutiful yet worrisome parents' enchantment with a craze of being on time are both enabled by tokens of standard social time, the fear of passing the 'best child-bearing age,' cultures that indicate how the strenuous battleground of being on time is woven into the fabric of the Chinese imaginary. I started to question what this road to being "on time" or not "being on time" is composed of (not the what but the how) – how do people attach to each other? This matchmaking corner hence becomes the detour and space of traversal as it presents itself with a range of contacts and encounters, from the ephemeral to the enduring, made possible by conversation and networked means: pink and blue posters, marriage agency brokers, informational chats, hand-sized name cards, scrutinization of potential individuals walking around the corner, dating sites. This very corner becomes a scene and inhabitation in which it gathers and "holds" local resources to fortify it and become nodes in larger networks (Straw).

While many encounters I experienced often begin with middle-aged aunties and uncles approaching and initiating the conversation, I entered the corner and consented to present myself as a five-foot-six female figure, slightly above the average height for Chinese women. After screening my appearance in precision, much like a money counter machine, the auntie unfurled the conversation: "Where are you from," "How old are you?" or "What's your Zodiac sign?" I mentally and physically blanked before giving them the boilerplate – I was born and raised in Chengdu, Year of the Pig. Instead, I shook my head and declined: "I'm not looking for…" I stuttered the incomplete sentence for confirmation, but I chose not to finish the sentence. I

gleaned at the auntie's face – perplexed and wary – "Don't waste your prime time and hurry up then. Here, take my card." She gave me a hand-sized card and continued to vouch for her massive database of guys that would *fit* me.

"You better hurry up before it's too late," this auntie, apparently a marriage agency broker, exerted the sentence, but the weight of the punctuality she refers to remained.

"Oh? What do you have for me?" I wrote a note in my phone that said: put my info up on the poster and let's do interviews. fun! People enter this space and they are swarmed by a whole swath of information. How do they come up for air? I was having trouble with that at the moment, coming up for air.

The matchmaking corner demonstrates this affective sentiment attached to the rise of the craze of being on time in the Chinese consciousness, reiterating marriage as an image that reifies the family nuclear unit as a promise of interconnectedness and modernity through a progressive trajectory. This Chinese way embodies the sheer potentiality of expanding a hereto-patriarchal society that makes up a "Chinese" identity, including reproduction, harmony, kinships, inheritance by penis interjection, toward a future and sense of "good life" that only reproductive futurity can offer. Matchmaking on display in public thus shapes and creates the material conditions for a social imagination from which this Chinese way of life emerged.

Chapter Two: Wandering Men in a Neutral Time

What do you call an affective occurrence that is less than an event, functions neither as a cause nor an effect, and yet remains formative as a force, although not in a developmental way?

– John Paul Ricco

I remember listening to an episode of the Chinese feminist podcast Bierenxing (Be a Do Do) in my room, a small room all pale shades of ivory white with an unnecessarily long hallway in downtown Montreal around the end of 2021. What I heard is a conversation with June on the opening of the gender-inclusive bar Muchroom in Chengdu, an eponymous homage to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. As purveyors of women's spaces and communities, co-founder of the bar Marnie, and the organizer of a female stand-up comedy community "Quite Feminine" (xiangdang nvzi 相当女子), June talked about the significance of women's spaces, challenges inherent in managing such spaces, the elusive definition of gender-friendly spaces, and the pivotal factors that render a space truly conducive to gender inclusivity in urban China.

As I went back to Chengdu to conduct fieldwork in February 2023, I vaguely remembered the place Muchroom that I had pinned on my mental map and I decided to go, but I only managed to walk past Fanghua Street – less than a 5-minute walk from where this bar is – in the south of the city after dinner with a friend nearby. I later came to realize that my elementary school, the bus stop where I hopped on and off the bus as I headed from home to school, and a row of now-demolished clothing stores with a glut of bogus and real foreign trade brands on the main street of Fangcao were all fragments of memory and a reminder of my return to the city I call home. While the stores were gone, having been rebuilt, renamed, or wiped away altogether in the process of urban development, the pinky neon light "Muchroom" that was hanging on a slim white wall also reminded me of something familiar. Seeing the triple

enunciation of "muchroom muchroom muchroom," I remembered the logo from my WeChat subscription and the episode I listened to a long time ago. The logo of the bar – after its traversal – from my phone screen to real life – was once again present under the interlingual gleam of this neon light. "Oh, that's the place," I uttered in a delayed lapse and suggested to my friend that we have a drink here to kill the penetrating boredom of a Monday night.

Inside Muchroom, there are no acute angles. It is spacious and lofty, all shades of violet neon light permeating through the space, whether strategically or playfully resembling the massage shop and the illegal sex work service, and marble surfaces and lichen-colored couches and seats are spread across the space. Windows stretch across the storefront's whole breadth, annexing and seeping into the sideway. All is orderly, settled, and purposeful. A big framed poster clinging to the middle of the bar reads "A Room of Our Own." Having noticed the possessive difference between "*one*" and "*our*," I wonder about the possibilities and mobilities Muchroom envisions for itself in terms of forging a community-based room by and for women that funnel beyond the polarizing and more limited realm for women one sees in Chinese mainstream media, as the #MeToo Movement, surveillance, and freedom of expression were all under scrutiny.

After making sense of the general atmosphere of the bar, I was soon greeted by a woman, slim and blonde with lightly trimmed wolf-cut hair. My friend and I decided to sit on the patio on the sidewalk, with two foldable camping chairs and a wobbly standing stool in between. She brings out the wine menu, along with two complimentary snacks. Each of the menu's ten hand-crafted cocktails has a name that conceals a story or tale steeped in significance. For example, A Glimpse of Pastoral Serenity (youdian tianyuan 有点田园), a gin-based cocktail, was also a feminist podcast forcibly banned and censored in 2019. XXX and Her Friends, another cocktail,

is the Weibo name of the #MeToo icon Xianzi Chinese government attempts to silence.[5] Portrait of a Lady on Fire, an exquisite love story about desire and heartbreak between two women set in 18th century France. The names of the drinks on the menu are like enigmatic ciphers, and bestow with discernment their significance to those who could unlock the profound depths of meaning concealed within. Though only ten drinks are available, the profoundly ephemeral process of deciphering the cocktail's meanings matches the tone of the social texture and conversational counterpoint of contemporary feminist and gender discourse in China more generally, and its form can be gleaned through snippets of cocktail components. When she introduces us to the drinks, I recognize her sound from the podcast and ask if she is one of the owners - Marnie - and she nodded. There I spent the rest of the night on the sidewalk catching up with a friend and Marnie wanders in and out at the bar, snacking on Danhonggao (Sichuan stuffed pancake) and sipping foams on a refined version of a whisky sour. Muchroom on the street testifies to the productive force of women, although lacking in visible outlets it simply trickled away in more ambiguous ways, seeping into the words and posters around the bar, leaving precious chilling and lasting conversations at the moment, in this place. For me, it is a place that represents a dream of a liberating public sphere free from entanglements.

In writing about "the female homoerotic imaginary" in mainstream Chinese media and literary cultures, Fran Martin questions "the most common narrative, generic and ideological patterns in representations of love between women" (6). What she finds is a recurring motif- that most of the stories are marked by a memorial structure: a mature, married narrator or protagonist

[5] *Xianzi and her friends* refer to the Weibo name of Xianzi, the face of China's #MeToo movement when she took Zhu Jun, a prominent host at state broadcaster CCTV, to court, accusing him of groping and forcibly kissing her in a dressing room during her internship in 2014.

wistfully recalls a bygone love story. Within this framework, Martin asserts that these narratives are significant, in that "the markedly mournful cast of these stories' remembrance of same-sex love as a kind of paradise lost implies a critique of the social imposition of hetero-marital relations upon young women as a condition of feminine adulthood" (2010, 7). In other words, these narratives serve as a subversive force by making explicit the personal toll upon which heteronormativity relies. However, it is crucial to note that this does not entail a wish to supplant heterosexual bonds with their homosexual counterparts. Instead, the existence of these narratives within the Chinese mainstream attests to their simultaneous existence alongside the prevailing sexual systems. Thus, enforced and enforcing heterosexuality finds itself both reaffirmed and contested, 'The idealization of women's youthful same-sex love and desire, framed as a universal female experience, is remarkably common, and the pain caused by the renouncement of this love is frankly avowed, not simply papered over to enable an air of triumph in the stories' heterosexual conclusions' (Martin 2010, 8). Although Muchroom employs a memorial mode, what it memorializes is the female bond, resistance, and their productive force – a vessel for a broader margin in social life. The temporal logic at Muchroom is of a past being remembered not 'as it really was' but as remembrance, factual and imagined. At Muchroom, the temporal politics of Chengdu are most visible. The lesbian bar is inextricably embedded in the pulse of the present. And this rhythm – multilayered, complicated, and messy – seems quite purposefully apart from the memorial mode Fran Martin theorizes with an emphasis on the temporal logic of neutral affect.

As feminist, queer re-memories inhabit, the imagined and physical spaces of the present, by bringing memorable past events and struggles from the past, I argue that Muchroom is a place that attests to the workings of the "feeling queer/queer feeling [that] is outside the temporal

orders of continuity, directionality, or teleology" (Ricco, 24). In this chapter, I argue that the short-lived snippets of conversation and time spent at *Piaochang*, wandering spots where gay men socialize are de facto a victory of queer feeling and connection that examine "the stasis of the momentary" (Ricco, 23). The neutral affect people experience in the bar not only contests a haunting, compulsory gender role assigned and played in the public sphere – the normalcy of being an etiquette 'man,' 'woman', 'father,' 'mother' who must fulfill familial roles and social expectations - but also challenges the commercial, privatized nature of the bar itself to an extent that solidarity is possible. To provide the intended analysis, I will first discuss the main observations on neutral affect as a temporal genre in John Paul Ricco's article *Morning, Melancholia, Moonlight*. Then, I will illustrate and historicize the conceptualization of neutral affect via an analysis of queer temporality in Chengdu. By looking closely at important models of space, from public to private, I will connect the notions of social chilling and neutral affect, respectively, to what has been conceptualized as the realization of feeling queer and the sensibility of Chengdu's queer temporality.

Concept of Neutral Affect

In his article "Mourning, Melancholia, Moonlight", John Paul Ricco explores the affective relations that circulate around loss and blackness in Barry Jenkins's film *Moonlight*. Ricco theorizes the momentariness of intimacy as opening up a space of affective relations that is distinct from prevailing conceptualizations of mourning and melancholia or the sense of "cruising utopia" (Love 2007; Muñoz 2009). He raises the question about an affective occurrence or experience that is less than an event and non-developmental in its endurance, which pertains to queer feeling and affect. Ricco argues that we are dealing with a historicity of

sense or feeling that in its a-temporality defies the laws and categories of genre, requiring us to move from the singular to the anonymous, rather than from genre to the general. He describes this as a question about what evades the tyranny of the plot, melodrama, or a story about the good life.

The plot of the film *Moonlight* follows the life of Chiron, a Black gay man, at three different points in his life. The story is as much about performed masculinity as it is about growing up gay. Looking closely at a scene in Story 2 of the film *Moonlight*, Ricco contextualizes the question and invites the movement and momentariness of Chiron to slip through his speculation on a linear hetero-chrononormative timeline. The scene takes place when Chiron and his high school classmate Kevin encounter each other on the beach in the moonlight. Confounded by his own identity and surroundings – a drug addict mother, an unwelcoming school where he constantly faced bullying due to his effeminate look and timid temper -- and the meaning of the word 'faggot,' Chiron experiences a moment of sincerity with Kevin, a light-skinned popular kid at school who showed amiable gesture towards him and taught Chiron how to protect himself from getting bullied by others. The moment of confusion Chiron experienced – about internalized self-hatred, self-suspicion, and the affection of naming, after confirming that the nickname Black Kevin called him was not a put-down but rather for the straightforward reason that Chiron is black - is unprecedented onscreen as an exemplar for showing "what freedom and pain can look like, all in one frame" (Ricco, 23). It is worth noting that the scene when the boys kiss is the only moment of physical intimacy in the film - the shot of the constant holding and letting go of sand on one's hand mirrors the movement of an hourglass, which the impending unease of running out of sand as a metaphor for time on one side and flipping to the opposite side. This scene is a contention that "feeling queer/queer feeling is outside the temporal orders of

continuity, directionality, or teleology" (Ricco, 24) yet a powerful statement in which intimacy felt both strange, exotic, and invigorating to Chiron – the kind of feeling that was never felt or could never be felt before. Intimacy with oneself and the loved one is made possible through a convergence of **"the stasis of the momentary"** (23), a glittering open memory which for Chiron will always be zipped and preserved as an affective moment.

The nonlinear, non-developmental narrative Jenkin portrayed examines an amorphousness of Chiron's being and becoming that lies beyond self-repudiation, or a seeking of "a lost object" that renders melancholia and mourning and "the self-maximizing affirmation towards an ultimate happy path of normalcy" (Ricco, 31). The enduring indeterminacy in the time of the affects, in Ricco's theorization, is a queering construct that paves the very way to the future and a pulse of the present. In the context of Chiron's story, a call for hope can seem sentimental, odd, and even profane; however, it is precisely in this odd construction, this bent framework, this aslant eye view that access to neutral affect can be generative. Ricco writes of the usefulness of neutral affect as a hermeneutic, it is " this meditative *posture*, this nonvolitional and nonintentional yet affective moment, momentum, and active sense. It is something like daydreaming, or sitting on the beach at night facing out toward the ocean and in the moonlight that illuminates its dark surface and your two black bodies." (25) The posture, affective moment, momentum, and active sense that complement neutral affect allow us to conceive intimacy, momentariness, event as an attitude, as acts of consciousness in relation to the world. It is an active action of extracting and emptying out a temporal continuity, rather than, for example, a progressive, conventional trajectory or linearity that hinges on reproductive futurity and prosperity.

Although my primary aim is not to offer a comprehensive exegesis of queer feeling per se; Ricco's view of neutral affect and related concepts for constructing an understanding of the force and attitude against black male closeness, as a reminder to embrace such reserved gesture of resistance, and in a larger spectrum, provides a better description of the cinematic sensibility at hand. To this end, I offer a recontextualization of the everyday life of Piaopiao, a term people use in Chengdu when referring to gay men. What I intend by foregrounding the complicity of the term in conjunction with neutral affect is to propose an understanding of a pulse of the present as the resumption of queer feeling's embrace and acceptance of inner desire.

Piaopiao in the City

四个 8，四个 9，	Quadruple eight, quadruple nine,
特价机票送到手	Discount air tickets at your door

The recording of this advertising jingle is what I often heard in public transit growing up in Chengdu. I would then see the big red font indicating the promotion of a round trip from Chengdu to Bangkok, one of the most popular destinations in local travel agencies. As I write, I remember the snippets of conversation I heard on the plane to Bangkok from a couple behind me in the early 2000s. While I can't recall the exact sentence, I remember that it was a play on the jingle: "quadruple eight, quadruple nine." They had a copy of *Lonely Planet: Thailand* and practiced how to say "crystal boy" in Thai. I have been thinking about this "figure of sound" as a constitutive nod and echo to the city where unconsummated desire is kept alive by private forays into the spaces of memory.

A friend of my parents, Auntie Sha, who had previously worked at a local television station in Chengdu spouted me gossip and tales of a building adjacent to the Kempinski Hotel in

the 1990s. The anonymous building was a renowned cruising spot, one which beckoned with nothing extraordinary, and was only known through word of mouth. She recounted witnessing individuals from Beijing and Shanghai flock to Chengdu, the gay capital of China, arriving and anticipating a dirty weekend's escapism. Every Friday and Saturday night were saturated with a sticky convergence of kindred spirits seeking Chengdu's queer temporality. Through conversing, socializing, and spending time together as if it was a utopia in its purest form: a self-organized public was liable to ignore material realities by preferring this framework over reality itself.

The faded building I visited in 2023 was nearly empty and smelled of stale cleaning solvents. I saw the dull neon signs advertising Sichuan hot pot near the building and wondered if piaopiao in the 90s ever darted across streets, stood smoking, or got some greasy oily sliced potatoes before absorbing Long Island iced tea mixed with bogus imported gin. I imagined individuals arriving at this genuinely kitsch place with no sign proclaiming it a men's gay bar. They probably would have registered the fact, knowing that this has to be the real deal only by glancing at others, checking the vibes, and taking concrete steps up to the destination by stairs. The confusion was, really, more more the anticipation of what was about to happen. While the predecessor of the gay scene in the 1980s hinged heavily on the repurposing of teahouses and parks as primary cruising spots – where 'the emphasis would be on the mix of boozing, socializing, and cruising, as an antidote to the pre-Internet invisible nowhere and no one in particular' – this transition from public to private demonstrates an esprit de corps to *do more things* through queering up the space, an indication of "unpredictable mobilities of bodies, desires, and practices" (Sedgwick) coming together in a visible place.

One poignant recollection etched in Auntie Sha's memory remains: an enigmatic gay man in a feathered skirt, resounding with fervor as he graced the dance floor, his voice invoking

“White-Haired Girl,” a classical Chinese revolutionary ballad. This man, like many others in this space void of regulation, was known as “piaopiao,” wandering man. In Chengdu, male homosexuals embrace the self-identifying term "piaopiao," contrary to the usage of *tongzhi,* a political idiom in Chinese revolutions that means “comrade” – a term which Sinophone sexual countercultures have appropriated to refer to same-sex love (Liu, 41). The verb “piao” denotes a state of drifting, an orientation without a direction. While the origin of the reduplication of the verb piao remains unclear, *Piaopiao* invokes multiple colloquial senses of the verb piao: piao as in a state of moving (“The balloon drifts away from her hand”); or piao as in being complacent or overbearing (You are quite piao lately). The grammatical significance of reduplicated verbs in the overlapping style incorporates a conceptual notion of quantity. The use of reduplication in the Chinese cultural context signifies both livelihood and a short period of time. Piaopiao, in its essence, encapsulates an envisioned state of being and distinctive behavioral traits specific to gay men. Transcending its verbal nature, "piaopiao" assumes the guise of a noun, embodying an emblematic identity. To "piao" someone signifies an earnest desire to forge a connection and establish profound relationships. "Piao" finds expression as an adjective, employed to depict flamboyant demeanor and mannerisms often attributed to gay individuals, perpetuating well-worn stereotypes.

In Wei Wei’s study, *The Production and Transformation of Queer Spaces in Contemporary Chengdu, China*, he argues that “the piaopiao identity serves as a critical linkage between the traditional imagination of male homosexuality and modern gay identities, while the tongzhi identity facilitates the shift of Chinese homosexuality from behavior to identity, and contributes to the development of gay communities in present-day China.” In other words, piaopiao surfs the crest of the wave, as a reparative canon, all the joyfulness that can come from

anticipation in the potentiality of every moment to become, without assurance of certainty, a neutral affect in action. Through the lens of collective imagination, queer spaces are aptly coined "piaochang" or "piaoshi," wandering spots or wandering markets.

In Wei's account, the construction and performance of piaopiao identity are closely associated with the visible presence of piaochang, or in other words, queer spaces in the making. It is doing concrete things with other gay men and congregating in public spaces that form social bonds and networks, in which teahouses and parks become open-air cruising places. Unlike queer geographer Natalie Oswin's theorization of queer urban theory, in which "the queer… is everywhere within mainstream urban thought and praxis – as prop, as foil, as a problem in need of correction, as object of place" (28), piaochang formed quite organically by word of mouth, a fleeting undercommons where piaopiao strategically levied and utilized the city's soft infrastructure. Lin Tao, Hong Sheng, and Mu Mu discussed the presence of socialization in public spaces as marking the beginning of visible gay scenes in Chengdu:

> If I didn't go out, I would feel so restless at home. I had to go to these places. It was really like opening the Pandora's Box. The Internet has changed everything now. But back then there was no Internet. We didn't even have pagers or cell phones. So you could only go to these places. You didn't really have to find anything for most of time. It mattered just for going there and finding people of your kind. You would feel relieved from anxiety. You actually looked for something to identify with. You walked around. If nothing came up, you just went home alone. (Personal interview with Lin Tao)

> I came out pretty early, when I was 20. I knew a lot of people in Chengdu. We had *piao shi*. One was in Houzimen. The other was the tea house in the Cultural Palace. Houzimen was a street park. At that time, people hung out at Houzimen during the night and drank tea at the Cultural Palace in the daytime. (Personal interview with Hong Sheng)

Piaopiao never try to hide anything in these teahouses. They can speak aloud about the *tongzhi* stuff, or flirt in *piao yu* like calling each other stupid bitch (*gua po niang*) [laughing]. It is pretty different from the city where I was from. Nobody has the guts to come out in public over there. (Personal interview with Mu Mu)

The organic assemblage and social network *piaochang* provided in the 1980s, as illustrated by the three interviewees Wei interviewed, is motivated by both the material and immaterial appropriation and repurposing of the teahouse and park, indicating the presence of foresight into the budding gay scenes' anticipated recognition and move towards a more carnivalesque domain. Michael Warner, in his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, discusses the concept of public which in Piaopiao's case serves as an invitation to queer futurity through collectivity and potentiality. Warner defines a public as "a kind of practical fiction, present in the modern world in a way that is very different from other or earlier societies" (8). In other words, publics in Piaopiao's purview consists of their collective imagination. In a public where piaochang stood, "You don't just mechanically repeat signature catchphrases. You perform them through your social placement" (Warner, 73). The reflexive posture towards circulation on the other hand constitutes a public statement targeting a social entity itself. Here, *Piao yu* is worth mentioning as a direct translation of the expressive language Piaopiao used, as seen in the discussion with Mu Mu. Calling others stupid bitch (*gua po niang*) is a ludic formula understood as a flirtatious manner Piaopiao utilized when referring to other gay men. This attention to derogatory negation illustrates how Piaopiao appropriates the target of the term, a woman, and usurps it by presenting the word for their use as a trace of a robust defense in a process of queer meaning-making. "A relation to the circulation of the phrase came to be part of the meaning of the phrase" (Warner, 71).

To put it in José Esteban Muñoz's words, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. (p. 1).” The three comments, all of which delineate a neutral sociality, are driven by the desire for a sense of being together. The flirtation, wandering in the Cultural Palace and Houzimen, and actively finding people, are vivid footprints of the idea of what will come next: a matter of framing and adjusting what mode of affection and pleasure is felt presently, and how to recuperate and maintain it as an object of pleasure. Knowing where to go and an uninhibited expression of self point to hope and aspiration, toward what is already anticipatory in the present, and in which, frankly speaking, the future is already here. All of the comments weave into Muñoz’s hopeful manifesto, as calling for the creation of a joyful futurity that is affectively animated through its contemporary material passing.

Futurity, Public, Underglobalization

In referencing different scales of gender transgression beyond the recognizable Western notion of transgender, Howard Chiang utilizes the geopolitics of Chineseness (3) as an analytical prism to orient us to a continuum of transgender studies. Chiang suggests the feasibility of a new type of historical thinking, in which transtopia, an antidote to transphobia, creates an ontological and epistemological intervention in which *transness* tells us different ways of knowing and specific ways of being in the world – less as a fixed identity-based entity (4) and more of a generative tool to imagine more promising futurities and possibilities. Author Dung Kai-cheung uses *transtopia* to designate “a place with transit itself as the destination.” The transit in action, this

ongoingness in Paradise bar, and the cross-temporal encounters it produces, destabilize the very notion of completeness in which the diversity of queer experience fills up this corporeal immersion of bodies in transit.

On May 22nd, 2003, a sensational expo*sé* titled “Undercover Investigation: Life Inside Gay Bar - Shocking Scenes of Chengdu's Same-Sex Erotic Content” was published online. This report marked one of the initial instances of homosexuality under public scrutiny in Chinese media. Readers were taken on a journalistic journey, following the reporter as he provided a firsthand account of navigating various cruising spots across Chengdu. Although the journalist, a cis-gender Chinese man, discreetly omitted the name of the gay bar, the narrative strongly hints at Paradise Bar, a famous establishment that emerged in the late 1990s. The bar occupies the fourth floor of a building, marked by a somewhat weathered poster on its left side promoting a past event – a competition focusing on LGBTQ+ Life and health knowledge, with a specific emphasis on AIDS prevention. Upon entering the domain, the reporter learned to give into the experience of what a gay bar is: effervescent, impishly tacky, and inviting. He went undercover with a “coquettishly feminine white backpack” to get inside the place. The time frame he scribbled in his notes, spanning from 9:00 pm to 11:30 pm, encapsulated in vivid detail the ambiance and conversations within, providing a snapshot of the social activities taking place in Paradise Bar.

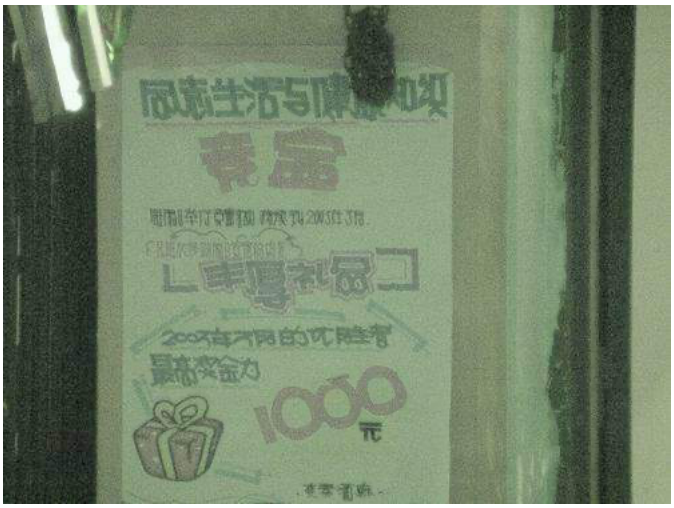


Figure 2.1: A poster promoting AIDS prevention at a gay bar in 2003

9 pm: Upon entering the bar, the reporter settled into an inconspicuous corner. A male waiter, approximately 20 years old with heavy makeup approached, offering the reporter a menu. Surveying the spacious hall revealed around 30 individuals, predominantly males aged between 20 and 30, each pair engrossed in conversation. Noteworthy were the decorative posters on the walls, advocating for the well-being of the LGBTQ+ community.

9:40 pm: The waiter came to sit and introduced himself to the reporter. His name is Xiaolin. Curious about the reporter's status, Xiaolin inquired if he was a student. With hesitation, the reporter hastily mentioned that he was indeed a student from a local university. This revelation prompted Xiaolin to burst into laughter, remarking, "Another one from that university?" With a hint of camaraderie, Xiaolin proceeded to share the names of several individuals, all famous piaopiao, and questioned if the reporter was acquainted with them. Swiftly, the reporter claimed unfamiliarity with those names. Xiaolin added, "They're all quite well-known; you should get to know them." When asked if he enjoyed working there, Xiaolin remarked that as long as one finds someone who genuinely loves them, they can lead a happy and ordinary life. From Xiaolin's eyes, the reporter discerned sincerity and kindness. As the clock ticked towards 9:50, Xiaolin rose and informed the reporter that the performance was about to start, expressing the need to retreat backstage for a quick touch-up. In parting, Xiaolin casually brushed his hand against the reporter's neck.

10:00 pm: The drag show began. All the performers on stage wore long wigs in women’s clothing, including Xiaolin. Their voices were soft and feminine. A biased predisposition made the reporter think the promiscuity of the show, but its entirety appeared highly professional. The performances were marked by

> meticulously rehearsed dances, and the attire exuded tastefulness. Throughout the performance, there was no explicit exposure of the body.
>
> 11:30 pm: The performances at the bar concluded. The host, dressed in women's clothing, extended wishes of happiness to all "comrades." The "couples" within the bar gradually dispersed, disappearing into the night.
>
> Notes: Einstein remarked that the world requires a nuanced, dualistic approach. Regarding individuals who identify as homosexual, this distinct social group should also be approached with an objective and impartial perspective. Like any other aspect of life, there are both positive and negative aspects to the behaviors of homosexuals. Specifically addressing the LGBTQ community in Chengdu, it is undeniable that some individuals within this group engage in behaviors that go against societal morals, tarnishing the social atmosphere. However, there is still a portion of this community that abides by laws, advocates for a civilized and healthy lifestyle, and tirelessly pursues their own happiness. Therefore, understanding their pursuit of romantic fulfillment and embracing their way of life should be a collective responsibility of society as a whole.

What I intend by highlighting the petty details and punctual time the reporter offered is not to rehash the news by keeping its original phrasing – " " in describing gay couples, biased predisposition, and presumption he imposed upon gay men – but, importantly, to propose a temporal framework of my own – inspired by John Paul Ricco's theorization of neutral affect in the time of the affects – that is built upon the very cruelty of the reporter's text as he tactfully camouflaged his identity while gripping his pen and notes to examine "this distinct social group." Cruel, or nonchalant, in his taxonomy between good gays and bad gays, and a searing critique of derailing on heterosexual social norms bad gays disrupted, which reproductive futurism as the imperative to generation and procreation. Non-productive queer into the materialization of danger and disorder, the reproduction of social order. To be moved towards the queer feeling of revamping what a faded AIDS prevention poster tells, of what Xiaolin's vision of a good life looks like, and the drag performance the reporter repeated three times in

negative attitude of the fact they wore women's clothing requires a different kind of reading about time.

What the news reveals, after two decades in retrospect, becomes a messy litter of archives within the presence and proliferation of neutral affect. The affective dimension of the gay bar is animated by the very cruelty of the text that informs us about queer time in relation to neutral affect. The concept of queer time arises from the AIDS crisis, as it reexamines the heteronormative notions of longevity and future possibilities, forming a community in tandem with risk, illness, and mortality (Bersani 1996; Edelman 1998). Quite the opposite, the prevalence of queer time at Paradise Bar relies on AIDS prevention as a study tool that aims to erase shame orthe bad feelings and horrors of AIDS history. From here, we can start to uncover a mode of living the good life of piaopiao shared in this 2-hour and 30-minute frame. For me, sifting through the text is not as truth-seeking but a joy-seeking practice in which neutral affect is presented within this period at night mobilizes as the shifting motion.

In this context, the present lies in this very proliferation of life, in a belief that life itself is good, as told by the poster promoting health and safe sex and Xiaolin's vision of what comes next, a good worth pursuing and hopeful enactment through the present, not as a point of beginning or end but as a process. It is through the reporter's singular narrative that I find it profitable to stay within the questioning of what "the very materiality of "that once existed" " (Barthes, 53) can look and feel like, in which all of these modes of relation in his text becomes a "hallucinatory relish of "reality" " (Barthes, 53) to the subject of queerness and time. At its core, it is about piaopiao's desire for the pulse of the present that "the stasis or inertia of a moment can be its own form of movement, if not toward pure being, encounter, sense, or experience, then toward…neutral affect – it's a-temporality or ex-temporality. The contention is that feeling

queer/queer feeling is outside the temporal order of continuity, directionality, or teleology" (Ricco, 24).

From the pulse of the present, we also see the infrastructures of intra-network among Piaopiao through an archive that includes architectural ruins, a poster, dance performance, among other material transformations not manifestein linguistic forms. Joshua Neves writes about the affective dimensions of haptic infrastructures in Underglobalization, considering people's hand-to-hand delivery of DVDs as a form of pirate infrastructure. The concept of ''underglobalization'' in the title takes a cue from Ackbar Abbas's term ''faking globalization,'' which describes the historically specific rise of counterfeit practices as China became integrated into the global economy. Instead of treating ''fakes'' as a stage in a linear trajectory that progressively leads toward a legitimate design culture, as Abbas has done, Neves shifts critical attention to what lies between hegemonic norms and their illegitimate ''others'' in order to destabilize the sanctity of the former through the prism of the latter. Neves engages his analysis on China's media urbanism by focusing focuses on illegitimate media practices (piracy), and infrastructures – an emphasis on the latter in which the "peculiar ontology" of infrastructure, Brain Larkin observes, relates to the fact that "they are things and also the relation between things" (Neves, 195). His media ethnography examines the unexpected locals and gestures toward a subaltern sociality.[6]

In particular, the comparison Neves draw between pornography and fakes endows a sense of timeliness – in celebration of the here and now – that cuts through the temporal logic of the modernizing telos, which valorizes the promise of a future to come over the immediacy of

[6] My usage of the term "subaltern sociality" is informed and inspired by Fred Moten's work *A Poetics of the Undercommons.* First ed., Sputnik & Fizzle, 2016 and Michael Warner's book *Publics and Counterpublics*. Zone Books, 2010.

pleasure that fakes often provide. He attends to how infrastructures of urban practices – from movie theaters, ambient television, digital videos, and pirated DVDs --, capture the transformations of Beijing's cityscape as a sensorial physical reality and representative of what is happening in contemporary China.

In an infrastructural trajectory, the shift of the infrastructures of intra-networks from public park to private gay bars and the emergence of the first gender neutral bar, Muchroom, not only generate the affective environment of everyday life, suggesting that this ambience exceeds the technical utility of infrastructure, but also acknowledges a dimension that impacts the here-and-now present and its consequences on the expansion of life. Neves attends to how infrastructures generate the affective environment of everyday life, suggesting that this ambience exceeds the technical utility of infrastructure, urging us to recognize its symbolic and aesthetic implications. Echoing these propositions, that highlight the functionality of transit, precarity and emphasis on the present, Piaopiao calls attention to how infrastructure not only shapes materiality but also sutures and structures the social and cultural relations that make queer lives legible and familiar.

The intricate and subtle portrayal of queer feelings holds great significance within the context of my examination of piaopiao's identity and belonging at Paradise Bar and other various queer sites in Chengdu. What I aim to explicate is that there is a mode of force and attitude that becomes a tool with which to destabilize and unfix the supremacy of the heterosexual gazes in the urban spatial dictionary. Transtopia, utopia, or a public – whatever the index one wishes to call upon –become fleeting sites where all temporal and spatial barriers are excised. Through close recontextualization of Wei Wei's scholarship and (re)visitation of old and new queer sites in Chengdu, this chapter examines a mode of neutral sociality piaopiao inhabits in everyday life

amongst public and private, reproductive futurity. What can be found in these arguments is that neutral affect provides a tonal lens through which these conversations, glances, and indeterminacy can be illuminating. While the past and near-present stories lean into a particular proliferation of stasis and inertia, I argue that it is through the stories and interviews that we see the potentiality of dismantling the trope of the story of the good life. Neutral affect, in its silent way, unveils the slippery nature of a past, and gestures toward what is left wanting in the world as it is given.

Chapter Three: Channeling "Shua:" Locating Spaces of Play in Underground Clubs in Chengdu

> Worlds are already so compositionally full that the question is not how to choose what to stay with but how to feel your way in
> – Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, The Hundreds

At a real estate developer's event in Chengdu, where dreams and fantasies of a good life are sold at transparent prices and interest rates, flocks of prospective homebuyers, with their young children by their side, roam around the housing models. Sales representatives scurry toward the families and hand them model brochures from a stack of pamphlets clutched under their elbows. It is 2012. Tobias Patrick, a resident German DJ at Haze Club in Beijing, was invited to perform a gig with a Berlin Calling theme at the showroom in the style of Paul Kalkbrenner's techno work[7]. He describes this unconventional performance venue and clientele in a panel discussion in 2020, hosted by the Consulate General of Germany in Chengdu, about the rise of Chengdu club culture.[8] The odd juxtaposition of rising Chinese middle-class homebuyers and four-four-beat Berlin techno speaks to a scene that has yet to emerge. Also presenting at the panel was Ellen Zhang, a Chengdu native and one of the founders of the first techno club in Chengdu open to all genders, who opened TAG (an acronym for To Another Galaxy) in 2013 on the twenty-first floor

[7] Paul Kalkbrenner is a German electronic music producer and DJ. He is known for his contributions to the techno and electronic dance music (EDM) scenes and gained widespread recognition for his work in the mid-2000s with the release of his album "Berlin Calling" in 2008. "Berlin Calling" featured tracks like "Sky and Sand," which became an international hit and established Paul Kalkbrenner as a prominent figure in the electronic music world. The film of the same name, also released in 2008, was co-written and starred Kalkbrenner, and it served as a visual companion to the album. Paul Kalkbrenner remains an influential figure in the electronic music scene, particularly within the context of Berlin's rich electronic music culture.

[8] The event took place on September 4th , 2020 at Yitong Coffee + Records in Chengdu.

of the Poly Center, an unregulated commercial office building in South of Chengdu. She did so attempting to find a footing in this wide industry of clubbing, whose patrons at the time were exclusively male and whose primary trend focused on prodigious nightlife consumption and the privileged VIP lounge space[9] with songs from Billboard magazine's top pop charts (Farrer, 2008). Soon, rampant groups of youths and promotors inexperienced in club operation were beginning to move into the empty buildings in Poly Center, experimenting with new forms of collective partying. An anthem of one of the squatters was Mosaic Band's '魔方大厦' "Rubic Cube," a song about the party scene in the building, which became associated with the untethering, freeing dance moves and the resulting romantic encounters. In response to the question of why Chengdu has become the capital of counter-culture in China, Zhang addressed the relaxed sentiment natives carry. One word – 耍 "Shua," playful in the Sichuan dialect—epitomizes Chengdu's ethos and is used as a catch-all excuse for the laid-back character, or to describe navigating a difficult issue with a witty attitude. The onset of TAG and its neighboring club Here We Go characterizes the beginning of underground club culture in Chengdu.

As I'm watching the video of the panel discussion, I think to myself, as I try to come to grips with Chengdu in the 2010s, that it feels both distant but close to my own upbringing, culture, chronology, and place. But comprehension only comes through close attention, and even though most of the clubs in Poly Center were shut down forcefully in 2017, TAG remained, and the shadows of this time are still here, soaked into the city as much as those of previous eras. I engage with the site of the Poly Center as a serpentine of joy, requiring people to hop on and off

[9] 1. See Farrer, especially chapters 3 and 4, for a comprehensive insight of the typology and development of Chinese nightlife clubbing spaces where he chronicled the development and trend of the clubbing industry from a social dance hall model in the 1980s, to a lounge bar model of the 1990s, and ultimately to the extravagant "king in his castle" model today.

different floors, be transported by the only operating wooden paneled wobbly elevator, and engage with the pre-arrival and post-arrival embellishments. Diane Chisholm's reading of the gay bathhouse points to how the labyrinthine logic of cruising for sex mimics the architecture of the city in the way that it "interiorizes the passages and meeting places of the external city" (Chishom, 45). Similarly, the interior and exterior of Poly Center make contact among club-goers, cruising potentials and desirous contours: a kind of expanding, even testing of the Shua of the city. In return, Poly Center becomes an anthropological place in which I attempt to find queer joy through the stretch of time spent within and fulfilled by this building. Reaching into the past and sifting through anecdotal narration preserve an affective spot in which we may find "a tangle of potential connections, an assemblage that comes together when links are anxiously traced, felt, and made between spaces, forms, bodies, objects, dreams, trajectories, images, signs, styles, and other forceful and affecting elements" (Benedicto).

This chapter will explore the nuances of the simultaneously dreamlike and quotidian escape that underground clubs signify and the ways in which this affect is made manifest not only in the physical spaces of the Poly Center and CUE Club but also in writing, listening, dancing, and recollecting individual experience as a way of feeling one's way into the world. Methodologically, this chapter is inspired by the collaborative text *The Hundreds* by Kathleen Stewart and Lauren Berlant. *The Hundreds* is an experimental text that explicates affect theory, in short sections of 100 words, or multiples of hundreds that "sift types and relations, seek out the gist of things" (Preludic) of everyday public life in the United States. Berlant and Stewart slide with concepts. "You have to start somewhere, you light on something, you lean into a realism of slippages and swells" (58). They demonstrate a playful and loose way of roaming around and of a possible way of perceiving the world, of composing the world, of worldbuilding,

of being and living together among others and things. The objects, index, and references they use capture weird encounters at the liquor store, the crazy neighborhood driver, nail salons in the enterprise zone close to Midway airport in Chicago, yoga and capitalism, and smoothies. If we don't jump straight to the meaning but merely pay attention to the awkward, messy encounters in the book, what questions do we ask and what do we get from asking those questions? To borrow writer Hua Hsu's words, "Where did the seeming surplus of emotionality that we see on the Internet come from, and what might it become? What new political feelings were being produced by the rudderless drift of life in the gig economy? What if millennials were unintelligible to their parents simply because they have resigned themselves to precariousness as life's defining feature"? Does it matter what we get/ getting it right or not getting it at all?

In iterations of Berlant and Stewart's performative text where verbs of choice suggest a tilt that hinges on proactiveness – observation, patterning, sequencing, and an urgency and need to latch on to concreteness as the very concreteness of an object "set off a line of thinking" (103) – I too experiment with the bounds of sociality and effervescence of a *soft* scene as contoured by the ethos of *Shua*. Through playful, ludic interactions with people, songs, places, or in transit, spaces of play such as Poly Center, TAG, and CUE remind us that their indeterminacy and their transient duration buttress a sense of proactiveness where a site of play becomes an active ground with charged forces. What could be narrated as hindrances to queer sociality and creativity are instead the ground upon which the ruins and relics of the two places are built. In the introductory notes to "Queer Acts," José Esteban Muñoz offers a glimpse into the potential of ephemera as an archive in itself, raising the question of which value-based framework would transform the ephemeral into credible evidence (6). By describing and transcribing stories that took place in Poly Center and CUE, and that I gleaned from myself and others, I suggest a

compositional reading/listening approach to feeling the possibilities such places offer as I probe for words, sounds, and worlds that provoke and haunt, heeding to the way characters and sounds jab, rustle up and pull us apart, and the way things and objects hint to us from between the lines, the way we witness concepts immersing, expressing, and sedimenting, fragmenting into divergence and alterations, always pulling objects into performance.

The Emergence of Southern City Development and the Rise of Poly Center

Above the desk in my home hangs "Tourist Map of Chengdu Urban Districts," collected from a second-hand bookstore in the city. It was first published in 1980 by the Chengdu Institute of Geography and sold for 0.18 Yuan (0.025 US dollars). One side of the map covers a crayon-like sketch of the Cultural Palace and People's Stadium as the city center, and the other side contains pictures such as one of Sichuan opera Qiujiang, a well-known local dish mapo tofu with minced pork and chili pepper powder sprayed on top, and People's Park.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many heavy and military industries were moved to rural areas near Chengdu for strategic and defense reasons, and I see the Sichuan Chemical Factory, the Third Mechanism Brick and Tile Factory, and the Aircraft Manufacturing Factory on the map. Subsequently, the 1970s witnessed a substantial transference of industrial activities to Chengdu's peri-urban periphery (Webster, 2002). As the specter of strategic threats waned, the transformation of the military-industrial complex into civilian production, and the burgeoning of the new service economy, Chengdu has emerged as one of the most important industrial, service, knowledge, and distribution centers in Western China. Among the vanguard of Western cities granted 'open' status, the city found itself endowed with the nation's inaugural high-tech zone in 1991 (Schneider et al, 2015). The bleak, scattered spot with lots of greenery on this map – the Southern part of the city – will soon account for the continuing salience of the dreams that

enliven the modern city with massive real estate development and commercial edifices. To underscore spaces such as these, I use this map to guide myself, my body, and my thoughts in my very own reflections and relationships and to remake the inner and outer worlds based on the map.

How does one find Poly Center or arrive at the clandestine entrance of TAG? To be sure, to find a nondescript skyscraper situated in the south of the city presents no trifling challenge. To arrive at TAG, the address on Google map leaves one on Lingshiguan Road, a main road whose name means consulate with specific reference to the US Consulate hundreds of meters away from Poly Center. There, one needs to first pass through the back of a 7-Eleven on the same road, traverse a thoroughfare, and thereby gain entrance to Poly Center – an expansive real estate development in the Jingjiang District of the city that amalgamates small business corporations, craft workshops, art studios, bistros, and apartment housing – bedecked with marble, distinguished by the spectacle of a crystalline chandelier. The portal itself, expansive to the extent of at least 20 feet in breadth, is graced with the presence of a circular reception desk. In the recesses of the lobby, beyond a confined corridor scarcely broader than a typical doorway, measuring an approximate length of 200 feet, our visitor would lean leftward, past a series of scratched metallic mailboxes, ultimately culminating in the presence of an elevator with wooden panels, attaching sticky advertisements to the boards. Upon reaching the 21st floor and stepping forth from the elevator, the visitor would discover himself ensconced within a corridor imbued with a rather disquieting atmosphere in this spatial interlude; amid the subdued undulations of subsonic vibrations, then would negotiate a path through a pair of curtains, evocative of the vestibule of an industrial cold storage facility. These contemplative peregrinations would ultimately culminate in the arrival at the most remarkable techno club TAG.

Established in 2013 by a group of enterprising Chinese and Dutch DJs and astute entrepreneurs, TAG occupies a unique niche adjacent to the 21st-floor elevator within the sprawling expanse of Chengdu's Poly Center. Famously known as rubik's cube by avid party-goers, this is an inner-city commercial building sitting right next to the United States Consulate (officially closed in 2020) and Sichuan University. The once scattered spot on the obsolete map I hung above my desk in Montreal underwent a drastic change. This latest establishment, with a capacity to accommodate 200 patrons, extended its domain across two floors. The ground floor features a double-height main room while the smaller-sized hidden bar resides aloft, accessible through a mezzanine traverse, where mellower, more house-infused musical interludes resonate alongside profound drunken conversational exchanges. The club's name stands for "To Another Galaxy," signalling both the hedonistic escapism it offers and its ski-high location.

As a Chengdu native, I took my first pilgrimage down to Poly Center in the summer of 2015. It was the first time I would see an attempt to give underground club music a proper contemporary home and a self-imagined utopia. Besides the metallic furniture, clean walls, proper bar, and sparse club space designed to better accommodate visuals, what struck me the most was the effervescent affinity it provides through a shared recognition of heaps of remixes of folk songs, Tibetan folk epics, nostalgic 2000s Mandarin pop songs and oral samples extracted from vendors at the Yulin vegetable market in amiable Sichuan dialect. The everyday feature of what was happening underground was not only a response to the wider world but perhaps offered an alternative means of navigating through it in a localizing translation of what it means to be joyful.

At its prime time, Poly Center features a different club on almost every floor, filled with a vast cross-pollination between a particular style of electronic music and visual communication.

There, a new sonic world seemed to have opened up that pushed a fast-paced, wayward, crowded sonic palette, metallic and industrial, varied in borrowings and influences. Producers such as Luna Li, Laughing Ears, Postunk and Osheyack are representative of this sound, connected as it is, to a wider global decentralized brand of electronic music that defines itself as being simultaneously from everywhere and nowhere. As the oldest and most prominent dance club, TAG undoubtedly earned distinction as the definitive locale for Chengdu's revelry enthusiasts, in the ten years since its opening, TAG has experienced a tumultuous trajectory, marked not only by its moments of success but also by a series of formidable descents in the guise of abrupt and protracted government-mandated shutdowns. These unforeseen hiatuses have inflicted financial constraints and introduced an additional layer of ambiguity to an already precarious milieu within the Chinese clubbing domain. The global pandemic stands as but one instance in a succession of such protracted closures.

From 7-Eleven to Pancake Stand: A Night Out in Poly Center

The concept of "missing out" revolves around the immense possibilities in an event, as described by philosopher Brian Massumi as the "just-beginning-to-stir." According to Massumi, the just-beginning-to-stir is a concept that elucidates how space harbors anticipatory energy *before* an event, an energy poised to reshape our experiences and propel us into a novel emotional state (Moore,49). The anticipatory energy waiting to be expensed coincides with the time being stretched and rolled upon in a night out in Poly Center. It was the winter holidays and a group of friends had taken me to various weekend parties across the South of the city. One night, I found myself moving from NASA to TAG, a hip-hop club only two floors away in the same building. Waiting for the right time to head to the clubs, we headed down to grab some small bites at 7-Eleven. I stood in that convenience store, shivering in the crisp night air next to a row of sitting

chairs facing the street, dousing the roasted sausage with a generous sprinkling of Sichuan chili flakes.

"You know," my companion quipped, his words infused with an air of casual intrigue, "this 7-Eleven is where Higher Brothers used to get their food from." A friend casually tossed a morsel of local lore my way.

> 7-11, I've gotta go every day, it gives me the energy to stay up all night
> Heat up my bento and add a drink, within five minutes I'll be back at the crib
> Eating, sleeping, writing songs and making beats, everything else is excess
> The store clerk covers his mouth as he laughs, it turns out he's a fan

Such a revelation carried with it an air of time passing. It evoked? a time before the world had succumbed to the infectious cadence of Higher Brother's music, a time when they were known solely to the Chengdu natives rhyming in dialect. The hip-hop quartet whose name rose to global acclaim in 2017 was catalyzed by the viral sensation that was their "Made In China" music video on YouTube. In this kaleidoscope of urban existence, a narrative unraveled – one that underscored the enigmatic interplay between global notoriety and the forgotten footnotes of a local journey at a convenience store. The city's streets bore witness to the Higher Brothers' humble beginnings, and in that unassuming 7-Eleven, their name echoed like a whispered secret, a testament to the myriad tales concealed within the movements of city life.

We walked around Kehua North Street where Poly Center sits, and we got lost among cliques of adults all dressed up heading into Poly Center and groups of young high school kids with uniforms on smoking outside cafes. We were moving from 7-Eleven back to TAG, grabbing a giant bottle of water with a plastic handle.

“Dumbbell back row it is!” exclaimed a friend who saw dancing and moving at TAG as a full aerobic workout. Charged up with energy after small bites, we took a sharp left turn, passed the metallic mailboxes, and arrived at the elevator. With a brief stint under a brim light, I started to beat time on my feet. It was almost 11 pm. Afraid of missing out on good jams while upholding? a sacred 7-hour sleep regimen that required getting up early the next day, I needed to compress time and superimposed a tight time budget by pressing the button, imbued with impatience. Here, nested within the confines of the elevator, we stand poised to see a flux of passengers each having distinct destinations on various floors. Among these inhabitants, one might meet a senior lady selling canisters of Nitrous Oxide, adolescents spreading nude playing cards featuring hotline numbers for customized service, or a collective of party-goers in the latest trends of street fashion.

The party we were heading to was called Same Bitches, in reference to a Berlin-based LGBTQ party series. Approaching the party, we saw two young gay men standing in the hallway next to the stairs. The hallway bulb above their heads gave off a sputtering, weak light and there were busted garbage bags of delivery food on the side. We were told by a friend who had spent years studying and living in Berlin, that it was going to be a fun party, that it reminded him of the smell of Kreuzberg. The raw and diverse sound of the parties is comprised of three hours of acid-spiked house, pop, and techno psychedelia. Water was consumed at the same rate as alcohol. As the event gradually drew to a close, attendees meandered out of the building towards their Uber drivers, as many people would set C complex or the 7-11 as the pickup location. There, drunken conversations and the auditory remnants of the DJ's performance still reverberated a range of beats from The Veronicas, t.A.T.u, and other pop artists. Sometimes, we would head across the street from the entrance of the Poly Center. There is a hotel with a corroded bronze sign that

reads “Friendship Hotel.” Right next to the hotel sits a pancake stand. A lot of times I see a line queuing up at the stand at 4 in the morning, curbing the intermittent yawning to postpone bedtime as a continuum of emanating Shua, or as a proper way to fuel up the body from the dance floor to the pancake booth.

Nights like this epitomized the fundamental essence that underpinned the entire scene, portraying it as a movement that is always in motion. In a mode of auto-theory, this account delves into urban intimacies and sociality and thus constellates charged, porous scenes of everyday playing and chilling in the city of Chengdu. In *Writing as Method: Attunement, Resonance, and Rhythm,* Anna Gibbs writes, “Writing is a process, implicitly dialogical, in conversation with the world, with other writing, and, reflexively, with itself” (224, Gibbs). I spent much of my time as a teenager counting the days until I could leave the city. It is through this mode of writing that such fractured experiences of the urban are telling of my personal relationship with the city, where the proximity of home-making continually fluctuates between familiarity and strangeness, negotiating both longing and belonging. I, like many others, would only start to plan the itinerary at this nondescript building on my way in the backseat of the taxi, scurrying through subscriptions on Wechat for the programs of TAG, NASA, Funkytown, and many other clubs of what is happening. I would, sometimes, write down the memo of my tentative program for the night on my phone. I could tell what the night had in store by the number of takeaway plastic bags out front in the hallway. Instead of writing a mode of difference, writing affect becomes a mode of inquiry (Gibbs, 2015), and a mode of proximity. A work of progress and an affective attunement coterminous with alterations in my access to the city were first set into motion in 2015, the year I started clubbing in Chengdu as a returning site in this work that coagulate in conversing and realizing of be/longing and scenes of public

intimacy. The waiting zone in the hallway, the elevator, and 7-Eleven are sites that allow us to consider multiple temporalities at once. Places in this building were perceived not as mere endpoints, but as viable destinations bearing a temporal depth; the multiplicity of Poly Center lives on, pushing and pulling, (dis)orienting, and unfolding our sense of time ever so tenuously.

Remembrance of the Past Through Present

In the summer of 2017, the local authorities mandated the shutdown of the Poly Center, with no specified duration and reason. Some suggest that this was the city government's response to the visit to Chengdu by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the state'. During the visit, the central government directed the Central Environmental Protection Committee to investigate water, air, and noise levels throughout the country, in response to the extremely high levels of pollution in China four years after his inauguration in 2013. Xi's visit, in a sense, pressures the local government to *present* what it wished to see: a sanitized clean city as outlined in the visiting agenda. Apart from raising issues such as drug raids, rising rent, and noise complaints, the partying in Poly Center saunters in and out of the city, evoking memories of the old days so densely entwined with the traffic of memories, good times, odd times, and the uncertainties of being young adults. On the music forum Zaomengshe and the address of Poly Center on Google, I seek the accumulated weight of these pasts, just as such reminiscence constellates multiple stories. Others' writings have informed me and made me the need to depart and re-engage with the city to find out where to party.

On the Google review,

> The elevator in Block C is difficult to wait, and the efficiency of Poly Property is too low

Disappeared NASA, youth, memory.

Cool group of clubs on the 21st floor of Building A.

On Zaomengshe[10]

It was early 2014 the first time I went to Poly Center. Transported on the coattails of party legend DJ Cvalda, we arrived at HWG just in time for the typical 4am madness. The crowd was: stoners, hipsters, drunk English teachers, sleazy guys, and people in the know.

The abominable toilet line forced me out on what in reflection was my first visit to TAG, still under construction, I did an adventurous pee amongst the rubble.

At the time this place felt like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for those who didn't want the party to end. And as TAG opened followed by 1602, NASA, and all the others, it became the rainbow, the pot, the balloon, the party, the after party, and just generally the place to be.

For an oddity at the top of an office building, the rubble that I peed in had been transformed into the answer to the question 'What are you doing this weekend?'. And then after this weekend, it transformed back into rubble. Leaving the question, post this weekend hanging in the wind. So quickly, from the unimaginable, the Poly Center became our local. The strange so quickly became the normal, it's hard to imagine what's next. The underground scene, in pure irony of its label, rose up 21 stories into the sky. Where to next?

The disconcerting nature in which *Shua* is imagined in these stories and places points toward an alternate stretch of time and, consequently, of modes of being. The lived experience of the circulatory night itinerary slides, across tensions between continuity and turbulence, to an end. Fragmentary stories I collected online express a sense of attachment to the bygone Poly Center scene. The rubble, the rainbow, and the balloons bring a *thick* description to bear on the material and affective geography of Chengdu. Writing the scene that took place in Poly Center is, I hope to conjure up the resonances of multiple clubs, of an elevator in transit, and the waiting zone. Through writing and expressing attachment to the loss of such scene, descriptions become

ephemera, as Muñoz writes, “a modality of anti-rigor and anti-evidence that reformulates and expands our understanding of materiality” (Muñoz,10).

In contrast to the empirical which values only self-identical facts, the ephemeral embraces the expansive dissemination and emanation of meaning across space and time. The ephemeral values the unexpected ways in which unfamiliarity questions us and our social relations. In *Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories*, Muñoz examines the visual work of the photograph that artist Tony Just’ completed in 1994. In Tony Just’s project, the artist selects run-down public men’s rooms that were shut down because of the AIDS/HIV public health crisis in New York City. He then scrubs and sanitizes sections of them. Gazing at Just’s photograph of a pristine toilet bowl – cropped so closely that it could be misconstrued as a piece of ceramic, a nipple, or perhaps a donut, we see Just’s attention to negation in this project: - the ways in which he erases the evidence of queerness, cleans the traces of cruising, and presents the abstract, close-up image as a trace of a violent erasure which brings these remnants and specks of things back into life. By *presenting* what is obscured, nuanced, or erased, Just is enacting what Muñoz identifies as “ephemera.” Muñoz explains that ephemera “acts as a mode of proofing and producing arguments often worked by minoritarian culture and criticism makers.” (10)

In the second recount of the online comment, “At the time this place felt like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for those who didn't want the party to end.” The act of remembering is also an act of preserving a youth memory forcefully flooded away by external forces. The glimmering pot of gold as described signifies a peak interval of such stretch of time where what that *something else* to do becomes merely secondary but a feeling of elongation of that joy is one ephemera, one of many narratives of play woven into the fabric of collective

memory in Poly Center from 2013 to 2017 within the social milieu in Chengdu. Online commentaries on the accounts of past events and performances evoke this minoritarian strategy in fleshing out the details and sometimes dirty little secrets to cohere to a stretch of time, of adding and multiplying stacks of stories against the telos of adulthood and responsibility in remembering the past. While people reminisced about the loss of Poly Center, the legacy of clubbing in unexpected places around the city remains. What is at play in this work is tied to questions of location. Yet it is not a thing that solely stems from a place, in the previous case of Poly Center, or even the city as a whole, but one that inter-affectively generates a sense of place through playing and chilling.

Figure 3.1: Friend sitting in a hammock outside CUE club

It was 2019, two years after the crackdown at the Poly Center. My flight from Pittsburgh arrived at Chengdu Shuangliu Airport at dusk. I had been away for almost a year for school, and already anticipated a couple of nights spent at new spots in town that recently opened while I

was gone and that I had missed. It was my first encounter with Zhuoling Wu, a local music producer, and her song, *Summertime in Wet Market*, at a soft opening of a techno club on a weekday night – saturated with boredom yet with an immense burst of energy waiting to be expensed. It was a short trip back home from the United States for family reasons before the outbreak of the pandemic. I was led by friends to this clandestine spot on the second floor of an old residential building, one floor above a neighborhood fruit shop and a bank, right after a first night round in which we indulged in hot pot and charcoal grilled BBQ to fuel up our body and stomach. The theme of that night was *drifting* – an expected exposition of a drowsy 120 bpm drumbeat that churns and kicks through predictable reverberations. Wu's track, however, opens with a series of dense sounds of a bamboo clapper (known as Paiban), a traditional Chinese percussion instrument that is commonly used as a form of oral storytelling performance, accompanied by the sound of cicadas, car horns, and predominantly muddling vendor sounds. I can't decipher clearly what the speech was about, but the continuation of various lingering sounds excited me as some of the emotions were oddly indefinable.

[…]	[…]
中江的挂面	Noodles made from Zhongjiang
硬是不怕煮	Can endure a good boiling
[…]	[…]
温江酱油	Soy sauce from Wenjiang
保宁醋	Vinegar made by Baoning
(refrain)	(refrain)
[…]	[…]
郫县豆瓣	Fermented bean paste from Pixian
甘孜酥油 营养足	Tibetan butter nutrient rich
我们要好好建设	We will strive to build a better society,
多幸福	How joyful

My friend took a deep puff of his vape and asked: “where the heck is this sound from?” My friends and I were hovering on the brink of the concrete dance floor, unable to enter or retreat. The sound forced upon us an intense atmosphere of intimacy which I could hardly escape as I soon recognized the regional-specific condiments vendors were rhyming about: the music performs a mode of recognizability, while I perform a mode of recognition, imagining transposed to the spaces of markets, ready to bargain in Sichuanese dialect I haven’t spoken for a long time.

The sound is about time, how we mingle through it together, how it disperses, stretches around, and diminishes us. We were listening and dancing to a quotidian sound extracted from a marketplace without knowing the name of the song, responding to itas nothing more than a morse code of a derivative of the temporal-spatial specificity, as if were understanding a form of local knowledge. At that moment, the song became a proper entrance for landing in the city and for sensing and marking homeliness through sound.

Within the dizzy feeling after a long temporal lag, I was obscured by a plethora of fog machines and lasers emanating from all corners of the club, chipping at this new club, dissecting its anthropological truth, and making assumptions for modes of inquiry into Shua and its spectrum - modes that not only rest upon the experiences of the been-there of the ethnographer but also engage in thinking that is not solely in service of formalist coherence and certainty.

Cortisol, I Like It, Attunement

The last time I returned to Chengdu was in August 2023; at that point, Chengdu was saturated with underground clubs, a post-COVID *modus operandi* for businesses and individuals reclaiming revenue and time lost respectively during the draconian lockdown protocols in China

for nearly three years. I end up outside a club located below a Sichuan Opera House in a grimly kitschy building, where an intimate public space annexes the main room and a smaller sound gallery. In this post-pandemic time, seven out of ten attendees in this club are small business owners known as Zhuliren, representing the rise of the yuppie creative class. I see myriad social and business interactions being exchanged in this small space outside the newest club, AXIS. As I share beers and cigarettes with friends, I feel the weight of the city surging behind me.

Under dozens of umbrellas reinforced by square rocks at the bottom, only a few inches away from me stands a man with bleached-gold hair. He is watching a short video on his phone that explains what cortisol is and why it matters. I can hear a woman's voiceover sharing scientific evidence of its relationship to *x, y*… Just ditch x or focus on y makes the body *better* in pursuit of happiness and of a pleasure beyond. I find I could be happy for the irrelevance of things as such. It is fun in a way that culturally under scripted moments often are. Didn't he deserve the beneficiary of cortisol? Don't we all?

What I later learned is that cortisol is a steroid hormone produced by the adrenal glands, and it plays a crucial role in various bodily functions, including regulating metabolism, reducing inflammation, and controlling the sleep-wake cycle. The term *cortisol* was an extremely popular search word that month on Xiaohongshu, millennials' favorite social media platform in China. It is the time to talk about high cortisol levels and its association with chronic stress, with symptoms including weight gain, impaired immune function, blood sugar imbalances, and the list goes on.

Back at AXIS in August, however, I note that the man watching the video stands alone, slightly leaning towards a big umbrella to avoid the rain. He is standing among a pile of cigarette bums scattered across the floor, damp with the rain. He was unlike everyone else in the space,

who were so busy with networking. Maybe, I thought, the regulation of cortisol also indicates a stretch of time that crawls into the human body and lies there, panting for balance. My eavesdropping presents itself as an ontological exposition of being through listening, feeling, and viewing his screen when there is nothing more exciting to do in the dark.

Upon our return to the main room, I watch the cortisol guy unlock his phone and browse the line-up, unable to match the time and set among DJs. The night is crystallized by the intrusion of catchy melodies in the chorus of American R&B group DeBarge's classic "I Like It," one of the band's most iconic danceable and feel-good songs. I am surprised by the drop of the song as I start to zigzag in a silly line dance. I proceed to move toward the booth, wanting to see the face of the DJ and identify him in the lineup of four. He has shoulder-length hair, a slim frame, and glasses fogged by the aggressive air-conditioning. Next to the booth, I notice a jar of Sichuan pickled vegetables. "What an act," I murmur implicitly, interpreting it as a show-off act to mismatch and misplace items.

"Hao shua bu?" A phrase that could be both understood as a question—is it fun?—or a rhetorical one—isn't it fun—vying for a positive confirmation. A young woman approaches me and asks me it. It seemed as if she had stepped out of a wall of shoulders as the catchy chorus in the song began, "I like the way you move, like the way you groove, babe. Oh, I like it." Not entirely sure of her meaning in this context but reluctant to impede the energy the song brought, I smile and nod. Her smile broadens and we start to laugh together, as if that question needs no response. She then caresses my curly hair along my jawline and continues pushing her way through the crowd. The sonic atmosphere – a groovy bassline, rhythmic guitar strums, and a silky keyboard riff – enlivens multiple sensory aspects of the dancefloor, too: layers of sound

hang in the air as people in the back of the room near the bar yell their drink orders while the bassline kicks electrify my flesh like the crush of bodies on the dancefloor.

In that moment, the phrase “Hao shua bu?” serves as an initiative to draw strangers closer, creating the setting for a tactile gesture that would have felt bluntly out of place in the routine of everyday urban life. What unfolds is a moment of brief intimacy improvised based on the extent of play, or the scale of S 虎啊， corporeal copresence, and a shared sensorium. In other words, we are there in the flesh, sharing space, atmosphere, and sensuous enjoyment. This improvised intimacy manages to forge a transient connection, defying the anonymity of the crowd—or, as I argue, perhaps it succeeds precisely because of it.

Attunement to the layers of movement on the dancefloor … the the joy and excitement of falling in love in the song “I Like It” inscribe an amplified bodily experience of affection—the process of moving and being moved that’s always “tuned in to some little something somewhere” (Stewart, 2007, 12), “animating forms of attachment and detachment and becoming the background of living-in and living-through things” (Stewart 2011, 445). The regimes which intense feeling emanating from smooth melodies register, for Stewart, involve “an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds” (Stewart 2011, 445). The acousmatic experience I experienced and the brief exchange with the anonymous girl become an “activity of sensual world-making” (Stewart 2011, 446), which calls for a sort of theoretical treatment and writing paying attention to atmosphere as a capacity, and, in this case, the three minute time span of the song and unexpected encounter as a force, able to stretch and to be stretched, that pushes the 180 seconds of the song into “a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event” (Stewart 2011,452).

The strangeness of time is, how it repeats and returns with our feet moving on the dance floor; the tactile exchange, and the cortisol video acknowledge the situatedness of play and time. Playing this song, or any catchy pop funk beats in the club, signifies a purposeful endeavor to disrupt time—an intentional desire for sound to reanimate and come alive in the realm of imagination. Shua as force provides and enables a form of transitive dwelling in that particular span of time, inhabiting a situated attunement within the song. For me, this account preserves and seals an affective memory I had with the city, a form of translating Shua and imagining a stretch of time for orientation on and beyond the dancefloor. Becoming attuned to scientific findings about cortisol or the sound of DeBarge's silky vocal singing *I Like It*, the movements and encounters on the dancefloor, in their distance and spacing, enact and transmit the sense of stretch of present time into an effervescent conglomeration – a coming-togetherness. As the song ends, I see the DJ opening up the jar, picking up a pickled turnip by hand while eating and watching the crowd.

Shua, in other words, is an open-ended process.

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