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# “Competing personas”: aesthetic labor in the Chinese fitness industry

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## Abstract

Given the proliferation of lifestyle consumption, industries such as the fields of fitness, fashion, and beauty and makeup have experienced rapid growth in terms of employment numbers, leading to fundamental challenges to working patterns. Based on ethnographic data concerning two fitness clubs in Shanghai collected over 13 months and 35 in-depth interviews with managers, fitness trainers, and customers, this article draws on the concept of aesthetic labor to examine how a “persona,” a combination of an ideal physique and a desirable personality in line with the aesthetic tastes of socio-economically diverse clientele, is developed through the labor process of the fitness trainer. The author introduces the term “competing personas” to characterize shopfloor politics in the fitness industry. By understanding the process of packaging and selling their bodily, gendered, and affective resources as a “game,” fitness trainers draw symbolic boundaries to distinguish themselves from each other, thereby justifying their aesthetic competencies and self-identities. This article distinguishes three types of personas: advisor, friend, and idol, and these types are characterized by different corporeal and affective strategies. The article reveals how the exercise of agency by both male and female workers in the process of persona-building fuels the symbolic reproduction of class and gender inequalities by naturalizing the domination of an ostensibly legitimate taste.

**Keywords:** Fitness industry, Aesthetic labor, Labor process, Competing persona

## Introduction

“This industry kicks out unstylish bodies.”

—fitness trainer in Shanghai.

When studying the ever-growing obsession with maintaining health and appearance among the contemporary populace, fitness is undoubtedly relevant. The omnipresence of perfectly proportionate figures on social media alongside the marketing of a hygiene and sophisticated lifestyle has turned fitness into a social construct that displays far more complicated meanings than in previous decades (Bordo 1993; Maguire and Mansfield 1998; Tang and Xie 2021). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the desire of the Chinese people to engage in bodily training was understood in terms of a national revolt against the image of a weak, closed, and undeveloped country implied by the “Sick Man of East Asia” (dong ya bing fu) (Yang [2006] 2013; Zhong

2009). Before reform and opening-up, a healthy body was further extolled by the state as a prerequisite for one's devotion to socialist ideals (Yang 2017).

In 1983, the first National Bodybuilding Competition was successfully organized in Shanghai by the National Sports Commission (Zhao 2015). In addition to the sensual pleasure and the sense of self-empowerment that can be attained through bodily training, this success also revealed an untapped Chinese fitness market that afforded tremendous opportunities to global capital. Over the next 40 years, the fitness industry developed into one of the most lucrative businesses in China. The rapid development of the fitness industry is also closely related to the support of national policies and the rise of lifestyle consumption in China as a response to social stratification (Maguire 2001). The continuous policy support provided by the state not only contributes to the "savage growth" of the fitness industry but also confers on physical exercise an individualistic meaning.

The "Outline of Sports Reform and Development (2001–2010)" promulgated by the General Administration of Sport of China in 2000, for example, identified exercising as an individual responsibility to increase the country's overall standard of living. While writing this article, the "National Fitness Program (2021–2025)" was issued by the State Council of China on July 18, 2021. One of the general goals stated in the program is that by 2025, the overall scale of the Chinese sports industry should reach 5 trillion yuan. Innovations and reforms of the business model employed by the fitness industry are highlighted as a crucial part of achieving this goal.

Paradoxically, the growth of an industry that promotes physical health, knowledge, and confidence in our bodies has caused anxiety and even antagonism for those bodies. The marketization of fitness has driven people of all ages to engage in never-ending combat against bodily decay. The moral imperative that people attach to body modification is considered to be both a victory of consumer capitalism (Baudrillard [1970] 1998) and a metaphor for biopower (Foucault 1978). In recent years, China's growing concern with "keeping fit" has been discussed widely in the academic world (Zhong 2009; Xiong and Zhang 2011; Tang and Xie 2021; Xiong et al. 2021).

As an essential part of the fitness industry, fitness trainers have hitherto received limited attention from Chinese scholars. Most studies have chosen to examine how fitness consumption has been framed as a manifestation of social privilege through the lens of consumption (Zhong 2009; Tang and Xie 2021; Xiong 2021). However, the emergence and expansion of the occupation of fitness trainers have played an essential role with respect to raising the status of physical exercise as a mode of bodily care (Maguire 2002). By 2018, more than 170,000 Chinese people had applied for the national fitness training qualification examination, and the number of fitness trainers with national certificates reached 79,073.

The objective of the research is to examine the labor process of fitness trainers. The research starts with the tension that fitness trainers encounter on the selling floor. On the one hand, as individuals who live by "producing" and "selling" delicately trained and maintained bodies, fitness trainers are instinctively expected to be professional, indefatigable, confident, and eye-catching. Therefore, they must work on and with their bodies to "be" the type of person who can live such a life with confidence and

ease as a means of impressing target consumers. On the other hand, people who apply for the job are primarily new generations of migrants<sup>1</sup> from all corners of the country.

Given this situation, how do fitness trainers construct and negotiate the desired aesthetic styles and dispositions with customers when they are unfamiliar with them? How do such negotiations (re)shape the subjectivity of workers? What are the unintended social consequences of these ongoing dynamics in the workplace? Drawing on the concept of aesthetic labor, the article presents a nuanced picture of fitness trainers' labor process in the context of the fitness industry in terms of what I call "competing personas." I discuss fitness trainers' active participation in the process of establishing "personas," the attempt to maximize and marketize their bodily resources to create distinguishable selves that satisfy the aesthetic tastes of specific customers in the context of an ongoing symbolic competition among trainers.

### **From emotional labor to aesthetic labor: reframing the body in the service world**

What makes the labor in the service sector different from its counterpart in the manufacturing industry? Hochschild's (1983) ingenious elaboration of flight attendants' "emotional labor" provides the most widely acknowledged and convincing answer to this question—unlike individuals who work with their hands, workers in the service sector live by commercializing their "feelings." Although this notion sheds a great deal of light on the essential attributes of the process of working in the service sector, the explanatory power of emotional labor has been decreased by the fact that it downplays the role of the body with respect to labor in the service industry (Warhurst and Nickson 2001; Witz et al. 2003).

The paradigm of emotional labor is problematic in two respects. First, despite being defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild 1983: 7), the exact type of "body" that engages in those smiles and gestures is "analytically abandoned" (Witz et al. 2003: 36) by examinations of the managed production of feeling. This research gap then leads to the second problem. The "surface-deep acting" frame establishes a dichotomy between body and soul or between performativity and authenticity. The bodily presentation of workers is then presumably recognized as performative, superficial, and ephemeral, in contrast to the deep and authentic nature of the mind.

Many scholars focusing on the sociology of labor have tried to address this issue. Lan (2003) uses the notion of "bodily labor" to examine the ways in which the bodies and identities of saleswomen in the cosmetic industry are constructed during the labor process. She proposes "the tripartite components" of bodily labor as a means of going beyond this dichotomic framework, a notion that includes the disciplined body, the mirroring body, and the communicating body. Yang (2017) introduces the concept of "holistic labor" to account for the multiple job requirements of female beauticians. In addition to beauty care, female beauticians are expected to give their clients "emotional,

<sup>1</sup> The term "new generations" was introduced by Wang (2003) in his study of the social identity of migrants of China. He defines migrants who traveled to the cities in the 1980s as the first generation and those who did so in the 1990s as the "second" or "new" generation. New generations differ from the first generation in terms of age, educational background, and social experiences.

psychological, and moral support” (Yang 2017: 118). Additionally, female workers extend beauty care to emotional nourishment through bodily exfoliation and transduction. The notion of affective labor (Hardt 1999; Hardt and Negri 2004) is also borrowed by Ip (2017) to study how workers in the beauty parlor industry use their bodies to create affection and intimacy during the labor process.

These studies (1) epistemologically and pragmatically reveal the constitutive relationship between the commercialization of the body and the formation of workers’ identities, (2) incorporate the perspective of feminism into class analysis, examining the role of gender inequality with respect to the body, and (3) situate the body within various cultural and political contexts, thereby facilitating a spatiotemporal analysis of the body and labor. However, existing investigations of the body in service labor are incomplete. One fundamental problem is that these analytical frameworks have not yet transcended the binary body-mind framework. For example, an emphasis on a body that is “exfoliative” or “transductive” (Gil 1998) indicates the dichotomy between an “outer body” and “inner self.”

As a result, what is now called the Strathclyde school introduces the concept of “aesthetic labor” to emphasize the synergy of the body and the mind in service work. Aesthetic labor is the employment of workers with desired bodily dispositions (Warhurst and Nickson 2007a: 107), and it is not “performed by” but rather “embodied in” an individual as “the durable ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu [1972]1977: 69–70). In this context, aesthetics denotes the sensory components of production (Fine 1992: 1269). More specifically, aesthetics is composed of “the knowledge originating from our senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch and the meanings of this knowledge” (Karlsson 2011: 51). In this sense, the labor conducted by fitness trainers can be understood as aesthetic labor since what they are “selling” is not only their professional fitness knowledge but also their ability to meet the aesthetic demands of a particular lifestyle that is established as desirable by the company and its target consumers.

Finally, I use *competing personas* to characterize fitness trainers’ aesthetic labor process. The notion of analyzing shopfloor culture originates from Burawoy’s theory of the labor process (1979; 1985), in which he creatively relates the story of how workers’ mutual competition for exceeding their work quotas through a game known as “making out” led to the justification of an organizational setting featuring a strict quota system. Thereafter, many scholars have attempted to study the labor process that produces consent in various work sites.

For example, Sallaz (2002) focuses on the American gambling industry and proposes the notion of “making tips” in order to characterize the competition among servers in gambling establishments to earn extra “tips” during the gambling service process. Zheng et al. (2015) discuss “the game of boss” to illustrate why informally employed garment workers continue to work diligently under unprotected working conditions in China. Shi (2016) coins the term “making VIP” to explain Chinese female beauticians’ emotional labor process.

According to my observation of fitness trainers’ labor process, the game played by fitness trainers on the selling floor can be conceptualized as that of “competing personas.” A “persona” is composed of a physically appealing appearance and a symbolically

**Table 1** Work condition of the dual track

Basic information Employment track Case selected	Club B		Club W	
	Senior trainer	Rotating trainer	Senior trainer	Rotating trainer
Minimum Wage/month(yuan) <sup>a</sup>	2000–3000	below 1500	2000–5000	1000–2000
Insurance Coverage <sup>b</sup>	Partial	N/A	Partial	Partial
Daily working hour	6–8	8+	6–10	8+
Locality <sup>c</sup>	Fixed	Contingent	Fixed	Fixed/contingent
Daily customer Traffic(individual) <sup>d</sup>	267.9		414.3	
Approximate staff ratio <sup>e</sup>	1:4		1:3	

The data represent only the branches that I observed, provided by the personnel sector of both companies (Club B and Club W)

<sup>a</sup> The total amount of wage is not fixed for trainers in both clubs. In general, senior trainers earn 10,000 to 15,000 yuan per month, while rotating trainer 3000 to 8000 yuan per month

<sup>b</sup> According to the Labor Law, laborers shall enjoy social insurance benefits that include retirement; illness or injury; being disabled or suffering from occupational disease due to work-related injury; unemployment and reproduction. “Partial” refers to medical and work-related injury insurance. “N/A” refers to no insurance provided

<sup>c</sup> The stability of the work location is different for fitness trainers with varying conditions of employment. Compared with senior trainers who are allowed to work in the same during their stay, rotating trainers are required to work in different club branches

<sup>d</sup> Data provided denote the average daily access of customers monitored and calculated by automatic online recorder of the fitness club

<sup>e</sup> Staff ratio here represents the senior-rotating rate

distinctive disposition in this context. Therefore, the game of “competing personas” refers not only to the physical domain of appearance management but also to the competition among fitness trainers to generate a symbolically distinctive disposition that can allow them to outperform their fellow workers, i.e., in terms of voice, posture, demeanor, body language, and self-presentation (Elias et al. 2017: 35).

### Research methods: data collection and analysis

Data collection for this research was conducted at two intermittent stages. The initial research stage took place from January 2019 to June 2019 in one branch of a high-end chain fitness club (Club B) located in Y district, known as the “educational center” of Shanghai, since it contains more than 14 colleges and universities. From July 2019 to February 2020, I proceeded with the second round of data collection in another fitness club (Club W), which is located in a well-known business center in Shanghai and features a relatively larger scale of business (higher average business revenue and more customer traffic; see Table 1 for detailed information).

Data were collected through semi-participatory observations, in-depth interviews, and analysis of related publications (industrial reports, manuals) over the past ten years. With the assistance of my informant, who has worked at both clubs, I was given access to observe what happened on the selling floor in two different fitness clubs, which also included attending assemblies held during the morning and evening two to three times per month and observing the training sessions held by the clubs once or twice per week. I was also granted permission to observe the entire labor process of the fitness trainers. The interviewees were selected by snowballing and purposive sampling to maximize the variations in age, job position, registered residence, and educational level within the sample.

**Table 2** Summary of demographic profiles of the interviewees

Interviewee code	Demographic characteristics				
Manager	Title	Gender	Birth year	Registered residence	Years of education
MM01	Manager	Male	1987	Anhui	12
MM02	Assistant manager	Male	1989	Shanghai	16
MM03	Sales manager	Male	1991	Shandong	16
MM04	Sales manager	Male	1993	Jilin	16
MM05	Chief manager	Male	1994	Hubei	15
MF01	Assistant advisor	Female	1992	Shanghai	16
MF02	Assistant advisor	Female	1992	Fujian	16
<i>Trainer</i>					
WM01	Rotating trainer	Male	2002	Shandong	12
WM02	Rotating trainer	Male	1997	Hebei	15
WM03	Rotating trainer	Male	1996	Hebei	15
WM04	Rotating Trainer	Male	1993	Henan	15
WM05	Rotating trainer	Male	1994	Fujian	15
WM06	Senior trainer	Male	1991	Hubei	16
WM07	Rotating trainer	Male	2000	Henan	9
WM08	Senior trainer	Male	1994	Henan	12
WM09	Rotating trainer	Male	1993	Henan	12
WM10	Senior trainer	Male	1989	Hubei	16
WF01	Rotating trainer	Female	1999	Liaoning	9
WF02	Rotating trainer	Female	1993	Liaoning	12
WF03	Senior trainer	Female	2002	Shandong	9
<i>Consumer</i>					
CM01	Student	Male	2000	Hunan	16
CM02	Student	Male	1994	Shanghai	16
CM03	Bank manager	Male	1997	Jiangsu	16
CM04	Civil Servant	Female	1992	Shanghai	19
CF01	Student	Female	1995	Shanghai	19
CF02	Student	Female	2001	Jiangxi	14
CF03	Student	Female	1998	Hubei	16
CF04	Student	Female	2001	Hunan	16
CF05	Junior manager	Female	1994	Shandong	19
CF06	Junior manager	Female	1993	Jiangsu	16
CF07	Department leader	Female	1990	Anhui	16
CF08	Senior manager	Female	1991	Gansu	16
CF09	Researcher	Female	1988	Shandong	24
CF10	Senior manager	Female	1983	Shanghai	19
CF11	Retired	Female	1949	Hubei	16

As presented in Table 2, I interviewed 35 people, including seven managers, 13 fitness trainers, and 15 customers. The interviews took place in three modes: online, face-to-face, and focus groups. After serious discussions with my key informants and the interviewees who participated in the research, I decided to renumber interviewees by removing all English names (pseudonyms) that I used in my transcript. The reason for this choice was that one of my interviewees pointed out that the pseudonyms

I used could potentially be revealing since one might be able to speculate on their actual identities based on the information provided in the article.

### **Historical development of the Chinese fitness industry**

As Brownell (1995) notes, the way in which the body is trained and modified should always be situated in a specific “body culture,” which is demarcated by class, gender, and sovereign power. Therefore, before examining the content of the notion of “competing personas” further, it is necessary to trace the historical development of the Chinese fitness industry.

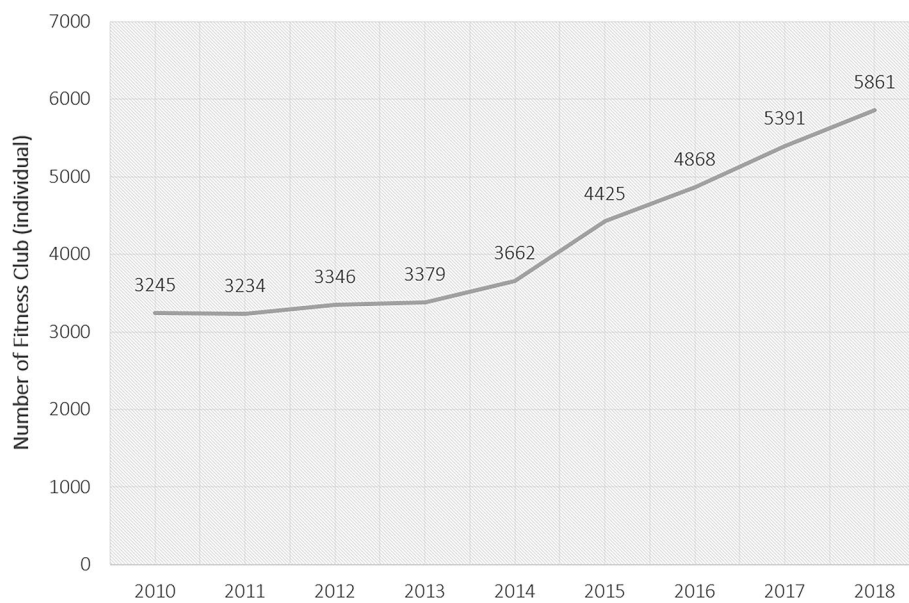
In contemporary China, the obsession with sculpting the shape of one’s muscles has the social function of expressing one’s individual aesthetic tastes and class identity; however, that function emerged only recently. Counterintuitively, when the notion of fitness was first introduced to China in the early twentieth century, it was regarded by that generation of Chinese intellectuals as a form of national mobilization closely linked with the rejuvenation of the country. Before reform and opening-up, the government vigorously promoted physical exercise by the people; however, in the meantime, activities focusing on “body-building” were identified as bourgeois and prohibited (Zhao 2015).

In 1987, the first commercial fitness club appeared in Guangzhou, which served as the prelude to the marketization of fitness. Years later, the establishment of the first chain fitness club—Will’s in Shanghai set the tone for the standardization of the fitness market. Due to investments by capital from Hong Kong, the Westernized business model was widely adopted by such clubs. In the twenty-first century, alongside the swift development of the Chinese economy, the fitness industry also expanded rapidly, especially after China’s successful bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games. From 2012 to 2017, an increasing number of global fitness industry giants opened branches on the Chinese mainland. The total output value of the fitness industry increased from 106.83 billion yuan to 154.53 billion yuan, with an annual compound growth rate of approximately 7.7% (The 2018 Industrial Report of the Chinese Fitness Industry). The industry grew in size and in terms of technical developments and level of standardization. (Figure 1 presents the total number of fitness clubs established in the China mainland between 2010 and 2018.)

This transition is intrinsically related to China’s stable economic growth and the birth of the middle class. The expanding scale of commodity production and the increasing middle-class purchasing power signify the advent of “the third consumer era.” What Miura (2012) calls “creative consumption” took the place of conspicuous consumption. People no longer adopt the consumer mentality of “the more expensive, the better.” Instead, they pursue “aesthetics,” that is, they focus on factors related to the “style” of the product (i.e., originality, customization) (Qiu 2020). During this period, consumers began to pay attention to the expressivity of goods with respect to their class, gender, and occupation. This change in consumer mentality can also be seen in fitness, a form of lifestyle consumption that serves as a battlefield concerning taste and self-identity (Bennett 1998).

In response, fitness clubs have attempted to develop new business models and marketing strategies, and “branding” plays a critical role (Pettinger 2004). As a manifestation of brand image, the body of the fitness trainer is treated as a piece of hardware that contributes directly to brand value (Warhurst and Nickson 2001). It has become a vital





**Fig. 1** Total number of fitness clubs established in the Chinese mainland, 2010–2018

niche marketing strategy for fitness clubs to construct a differentiated “aesthetic style” by recruiting trainers with different physical appearances, body shapes, genders, and sexual orientations.

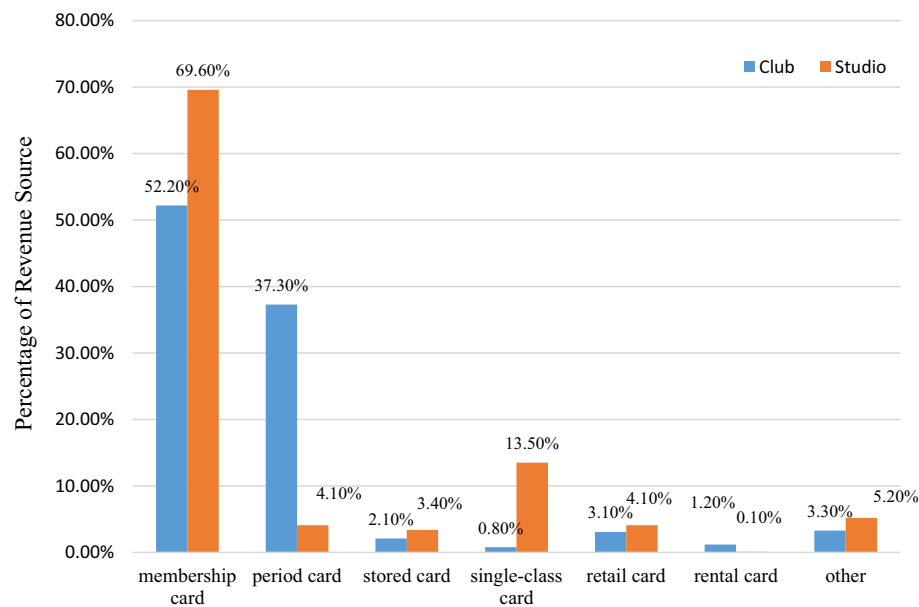
The difference here is that fitness trainers in China do not resemble their American counterparts, who typically have decent educational backgrounds or “middle-class” origins (Warhurst and Nickson 2007b). In contrast, Chinese fitness trainers are recruited in entry-level positions and are frequently young men and women from rural regions. As illustrated in the Industrial Report of the Fitness Industry for 2020, nearly 70% of fitness trainers working in Beijing and Shanghai are migrants who began their migration just after completing their middle or high school education. Meanwhile, few fitness trainers have related work experience. Fitness trainers have a variety of employment histories, ranging from front-line service workers to security guards and retired athletes.

Therefore, fitness trainers must develop aesthetic skills that can allow them to “look good and sound right.” Here, the notion of “aesthetic skills” refers to two capabilities: that of maintaining an aesthetically pleasing physical appearance and body shape and that of making aesthetic judgments concerning how to match these bodily resources with their temperamental characteristics in order to satisfy the preferences of the target consumers. In the following section, I first introduce the dual labor regime of the two fitness clubs in question and the process of aesthetic labor that occurs in this context.

### **“Competing personas”: the aesthetic labor process of fitness trainers**

Due to the situation described above, the two fitness clubs that I observed feature an expanding external labor market full of potential young and inexperienced employees. They must also face a tight internal market with high demand for professional trainers with relevant educational backgrounds and technical skills. Hence, these clubs exhibit a dual employment track often seen in the construction and delivery service





**Fig. 2** Percentage of general source of sales revenue in the Chinese fitness industry Source: <2018 Industrial Report of Chinese Fitness Industry: A White Book of Survival Guidance>, released in 2018 by SanTiYun Data Research Center, see [https://www.styd.cn/default/data\\_report](https://www.styd.cn/default/data_report).

industries (Shen 2007; Zhang 2014; Lei 2020). This track establishes two categories of employees, namely senior trainers and rotating trainers.

As shown in Table 1, the working conditions of employees vary across these two different working tracks. In both clubs, social insurance is not fully covered. In Club W, both types of trainers are provided with medical and work-related insurance, while in Club B, rotating trainers are not included in the insurance system. Furthermore, unlike senior trainers, who have a written labor contract, rotating trainers are hired with a stipulation of a paid probation period (ranging from 1 to 3 months) and do not have formal labor contracts. In Club B, rotating trainers are recruited as “apprentices” from variegated occupational origins, ranging from food couriers to security guards.

Additionally, as the business model of the fitness industry has transformed from a membership-based model to one that focuses on providing custom-designed fitness training services (see Fig. 2 for detailed descriptions of the revenue composition of the fitness industry), fitness trainers must therefore act simultaneously as personalized trainers and as salespeople. Before checking and cleaning fitness equipment and attending the daily morning assembly, a typical day for fitness trainers both begins and ends with working out and identifying daily sales records.

It is conceivable that a “fit” body shape is a way in which fitness trainers are assessed at first sight. In addition to the visible exercise they receive while coaching clients, fitness trainers have to strengthen their bodies by engaging in training programs such as aerobics and strength-building exercises. In Club W, fitness trainers are required to report their workout and sales progress during the daily night assembly, while in Club B, this information is gathered through a joint training program led by experienced trainers.

Moreover, as salespeople, fitness trainers are aware that “being fit” has very material consequences, which can be seen through sales records. The hiring ratio of senior to rotating trainers is 1:4 in Club B and 1:3 in Club W, which means that the number of rotating trainers in fitness clubs is at least three times larger than senior trainers. As the manager of Club W explained, the club’s adoption of what is called the “best or none” policy aligns with a highly competitive environment:

*“We want them to know that we are holding a very high standard here, that one should feel proud being in part of the club. And we also want individuals who regard it [i.e., the club] as their own business because, essentially, it is they themselves who are paving their path to success. You can choose to work harder, and you would be paid accordingly” (MM03, male, sales manager of Club W).*

In this respect, fitness trainers, especially rotating trainers, make every effort to win customers’ hearts. Experienced trainers can then engage in flexible negotiations given their personal experiences and relationships with customers. To mitigate their “distance” to customers quickly, fitness trainers first identify customers’ desires, known as fitness trainers’ ability to “sense the taste.”

*“I think the most important thing is to have that kind of ‘sense’; you have to know who you are capable of talking with, who has the most probability of buying your courses – it’s all about your ability to ‘sense.’ Anyway, when I first came here, I was so ‘out’ that it was almost impossible for me to talk with clients. No one wants to buy a class from someone they cannot trust” (WM06, male, senior trainer at Club B).*

The ability to “sense” refers to fitness trainers’ ability to make the aforementioned “aesthetic judgments” and requires them to combine the “instrumental action of economic production” with “the communicative action of human relations” (Hardt 1999: 95). Unlike young female restaurant workers or careworkers, who try to affect their customers by constructing a “subservient” body, fitness trainers employ a different strategy: They embody “personas” that satisfy customers’ tastes based on their evaluation of their own personal strengths. The formation of a “persona” is thus the outcome of dyadic and relational negotiations between fitness trainers and customers. Here, I divide the notion of “persona” into three types, advisor, friend, and idol, each portrayed by different bodily and affective strategies.

### **Advisor**

Fitness trainers who employ this persona are usually retired athletes or those who have received education at sports colleges, and they tend to target “freshmen,” i.e., those who have limited purchasing power and knowledge of body shaping and the idea of “working out.” Additionally, this persona is adopted by fitness trainers who consider themselves not to be good-looking or physically attractive at first sight, and they consider themselves to be equipped with “cultural prestige” or “kudos” (Entwistle 2002). In most cases, the clothing of fitness trainers reveals their level of professionalism. “Professional” trainers tend to wear the company’s uniform, removing any ornaments that could reveal their personal characteristics. In other words, they understand this depersonalized clothing

style as a symbolic representation of their expertise and respect for organizational aesthetics (i.e., they abide by the dress code).

Fitness trainers of this variety also erect another kind of corporeal boundary by developing large and firm muscles that cause them to appear robust or even intimidating. They have to spend more time breaking a sweat than other trainers to maintain their body shape and training techniques, which is an identifying characteristic. One female customer explained her choice to purchase a course from a fitness trainer as follows:

*"I remember that day I just passed by the gym, and I took a look at their poster. Then, Chack saw me, and he walked out to chat with me; he's really got a robust figure. I remembered that he was wearing a tight sports suit that day. He was patient, and he told me that I had a problem with scoliosis and a hunchback. I was kind of shocked and then decided to take some training courses to cure these problems" (CF10, female, group leader).*

In addition to these attributes, fitness trainers also stress their persona in their distinctive behaviors and dispositions. The "advisor" persona is used by male trainers to justify their lack of communication skills. One of the rotating trainers at Club W recalled his experiences with and reasons for becoming a star trainer, given that he was shy.

*"I'm not like those who are talented at communication. I'm often told by my clients that I am too 'straight' to communicate with. However, I believe that actions always speak louder. As you saw just now, I was training my back on this advanced equipment; trainers seldom know how to operate it correctly. I'm like always the first to try new types of equipment to break the limitations of my body" (WM03, male, rotating trainer at Club W).*

In this example, the trainer noted a symbolic binary—"talented at communication" versus "poor at communication"—to highlight his professionalism. This binary was evident when the fitness trainer joked about other trainers' winning star-trainer bonuses by being good at "dashan" (hooking up with clients). Moreover, male trainers also mentioned another benefit of being less sentimental: a higher probability of attracting male "freshmen." When asked about their standards for choosing fitness trainers, students with zero experience in fitness training prioritized "professionalism" without hesitation.

During the interview, one male client explained why he chose fitness trainers who spoke less. His core demand for fitness training was "to find someone to provide him with virtual instructions on professional training techniques." He had previously been recommended a digital fitness training application called "Keep" by his classmates, but an accidental injury made him realize the importance of offline guidance for beginners. According to him, a trainer's body shape indicates his or her professionalism.

*"I prefer fitness trainers who can cut all the crap and focus on training. I'd love to choose those who look strong, which means they are very strict with themselves. My fitness trainer has a Dwayne Johnson<sup>2</sup> type of body shape. And since he has a wonderful musculature, he must know how to train different parts of the body effec-*

<sup>2</sup> Dwayne Douglas Johnson, also known by "The Rock," is an American and Canadian actor, producer, and professional wrestler.

tively" (CM02, male, student).

Meanwhile, the reaction of female trainers to such demands indicates the hegemonic gender aesthetics of this persona. When a female trainer tries to showcase her professionalism, she must consciously embrace her departure from "typical" feminine body ideals.

*"As a former weightlifter, my body shape is different from many female trainers. I look stronger than other girls, I know that, especially my back muscles. Many male trainers say I am much better trained than them! They'd call me "buddy" sometimes, haha. I kind of like that, though"* (WF01, female, rotating trainer at Club B).

The narrative related by WF01 serves as a perfect contrast to WM03's description of himself as being "straight" and insufficient with respect to human interaction. According to WF01, her problem does not pertain to communication but to a lack of hetero-feminine attractiveness as a female trainer, which is the (at least partial) result of her appearance. These bodily strategies indicate the domination of heterosexual masculinity in the context of this "advisor" persona, which features the admiration of strength and rationality as opposed to appeals to sensitivity and tenderness.

### Friend

Fitness trainers who try to be "friends" with customers typically consider themselves to be sophisticated, emotionally intelligent, and good at understanding other people's thoughts. They oppose the idea that professional ability is the only criterion that defines a "good" fitness service—from their perspective, communicating and making a customer "like you" matters most. They believe that the competition required for sales performance is ultimately the competition of "guanxi." Fitness trainers tend to employ this persona with clients they consider "experts." "Experts" refer to young and ambitious boys and girls who work for world-class companies, come from wealthy families, and graduate from top universities. To customers of this type, their body shape functions identically to the brands that they wear. One rotating trainer described one of his female clients in the following way:

*"She always meticulously shapes her bodily figure, and she's also very self-disciplined, although I think she's already perfect enough. All eyes are on her when she walks into our fitness club. You know, that reminds me to work harder; I have to be good enough to coach her"* (WM07, male, rotating trainer at Club W).

In this case, fitness trainers attempt to act as their clients' friends because they know that these customers are looking for something other than "professional advice." As a result, they are better able to adapt themselves to the needs of their customers. For example, one client who worked as a group manager for a foreign-funded cosmetic enterprise noted that she wanted a trainer who embraced a similar aesthetic taste with respect to the notion of "fitness." Such criteria require fitness trainers to be dedicated to their clients in both bodily and affective ways. The former sense is realized by fitness trainers through consumption. The literature on aesthetic labor has particularly discussed the role played by consumption in constructing workers' brand identification and class habitus (Pettinger 2004; Cutcher and Ahtel 2017; Boyle and Keere 2019).

In the fashion retail industry, the consumption of branded clothes is beneficial or even essential as a way for workers to identify themselves with brand aesthetics. This process is usually facilitated by companies offering staff discounts to potential applicants. Such an offer is highly appealing to workers in luxury retail companies, although such discounts are relatively limited compared with their wages (Maitra and Matria 2018). Moreover, mastery of stylish dressing is closely related to work competence in this industry. Williams and Connel (2010) note that, compared with workers from the working class, high fashion brands tend to hire people of middle-class origins because they tend to share similar consumption practices with target customers.

This ability to consume goods entails a better understanding of customers' demands and the possession of better communicative techniques. On the other hand, consumption is seen as an effective way for workers to refashion themselves for workers from socioeconomically underprivileged backgrounds. They accomplish this task by devoting more time and energy to polishing their personal image as self-disciplined and attractive. When discussing his most unforgettable training experience, one rotating trainer suddenly became extremely talkative, albeit slightly anxious. He confessed that he took cultivating his attractiveness and "middle-classness" seriously by wearing branded clothes.

*"I would never have gone to a luxury store before. I would not even think about it! Then, my colleagues reminded me that I could pay by installment. Let me show you my 'huabei' (an online consumer credit service). Now, I have almost spent all the amount I saved before. It's unbelievable to think that I owe more than 60,000 yuan on 'huabei'!" (WM04, male, rotating trainer at Club W)*

As it happened, he did get the chance to approach these upscale clients. After becoming familiar with him, he invited me to dinner with his client, who had become a friend. We met at a Western restaurant in the Jing'an district, and by the time his client walked in, I understood why fitness trainers had to spend time "polishing" themselves to "match" their clients' styles. The client wore a suit and tie and told us that he had recently been too busy to go to the club. After some small talk, I expressed my interest in knowing how the two got along. The client gently made the following observations:

*"I've been working out for years, so I wasn't looking for some intro or basic guidance. I just want someone who can help me with the equipment I'm not familiar with and help me with my training. He did not talk much when we met, but I could tell from his appearance and look that he's experienced and trustworthy. And one thing I appreciate is that he often sets up a late-night class for me after he finishes his work. That's really helpful since I can sometimes be so occupied with my work" (CM03, male, bank manager).*

As explained by the fitness trainer, a "late-night" class is a training class in which trainers coach after their regular working hours. Such classes usually occur when clients are occupied during the day or require intensive training from their personal trainers. In this case, the fitness trainer (WM04) would wait for his client (CM03) to come to "work out together" or simply record a video demonstrating how to use the equipment. This unpaid training session is "paid off" by clients' support for the monthly sales performance evaluation by the fitness clubs:

*“Whenever I’m desperate to meet the KPI of the month or something, he (CM03) is the first one that I’ll find. He will buy the rest of my training courses without hesitation; he’s such a bro! And I always give him the biggest discount in return.”*

The picture of these two individuals having dinner together illustrates or at least suggests the decreasing social distance between service providers and consumers. However, behind the scenes is fitness trainers’ unseen efforts to meet the expectations of these “loyal” clients, who nevertheless take this work for granted.

### Idol

In contrast to friends who attempt to develop reciprocal relationships with their clients, the idol persona is typically deployed to attract what fitness trainers refer to as the “big names,” exceptionally wealthy clients. Successfully capturing a “big name” usually guarantees that the trainer will continue to be employed. In this case, fitness trainers strategically form highly exclusive and unique relationships through obedience and desirability. When I asked WM09 to account for his success, he attributed it to his “hard work” and endless patience with clients. The secret to his success, according to him, was remaining confident and alert in the face of “impossible chances,” in general, by “always being prepared.”

*“Just keep trying. You will find that nothing is impossible. Once, a client of mine forgot to take her sports suit to class, so I tried to borrow some for her. When I found that she was upset, I directly bought one for her at the shopping mall. Can you imagine that? I’ve also biked a long way down to my client’s workplace to cheer her up when she was troubled by her work and family issues” (WM09, rotating trainer at Club B).*

In *Class Acts*, Sherman (2007) illustrates the similar behavior performed by waiters at luxury hotels, which she called the normalization of customers’ “unlimited entitlement.” Service workers must personalize, anticipate, legitimate, and resolve even the most unreasonable needs of clients through unlimited physical labor and a deferential and sincere demeanor (Sherman 2007: 25). This sense of “self-accomplishment” was expressed in other terms by a female trainer who claimed to be good at “detecting what guys want.”

One female fitness trainer with a palm-like face, big eyes, and a perfect figure narrated how she wisely navigated relationships from reciprocity to intimacy. As she noted, she understood very well “what straight guys want from her.” For her, “maturity” and “the sense of accomplishment” were better reflected by mastering “upper-class” standards of living that were sponsored by her affluent clients, who adored her. On occasion, she secretly received gifts from her clients, ranging from cosmetics to luxury handbags or VIP cards for shopping malls. In return, she managed to (according to her description) “appropriately flirt with clients.” Regarding what was counted as “appropriate flirting,” she explained this term as follows:

*“It was very natural, like, once a guy approached me and told me I’ve got a sexy booty and said something like ‘it’s a shame that you are not my girlfriend!’, I smiled back and went, ‘You bet! Come on and get trained; I like hot guys with a great body shape.’ He laughed out loud, and then the next day, he signed up for my class... Also,*



*I like wearing skinny shorts and leggings and makeup, not heavy, but those ‘right on’ types of makeup that make your lips juicier and your skin lighter. You’ve got to dress yourself up since the coat they offer is so ugly” (WF03, female, senior trainer at Club W).*

According to WF02, this approach of “dressing up” and “flirting” was considered to be unprofessional and vain. As WF02 told me, trainers have a strict dress code in Club W. They are provided with club uniforms when they are recruited. She herself wears this uniform whenever she is on the selling floor. To her, wearing this clothing is a way of showing her professionalism. For WF03, however, the reverse is true. In her words, what she did was completely natural. As she explained, “I’m not crossing the line; anyway, I earned it, and it is a pity that they lack this emotional intelligence to please people. Everybody wants to be pleased; that is human nature, isn’t it?” She also did not seem bothered by the gossip circulating on the selling floor. As she commented, “girls get jealous when they think you’re good-looking, haha. And I don’t know why those girls never dress themselves up.”

These quotations show how trainers defend and justify their personas by erecting symbolic boundaries with respect to gender and work ethos. For quite a long time, the intimacy that trainers and clients develop in the fitness industry has been controversial and even stigmatized. This situation was evident when I asked my consumer interviewees their impressions of the fitness industry: “I would think some of those male trainers are hot and seductive. So, what you mentioned makes sense” (CF07, female, department leader).

Additionally, if you search the fitness industry on “Zhihu”<sup>3</sup> for the string “what do you think of the fitness industry of China?”, the top-rated answer discusses how fitness trainers manage to “fool around” with their clients. By reference to the story of Cinderella, saleswomen in Lan’s (2003) case were able to answer this “charge of vanity” by overtly expressing their desires for extravagant lives and wealthy men. The narratives of these saleswomen, similar to my observations, showcase how they adopt an idolized persona that is self-empowered and entrepreneurial.

In *Dealing in Desire*, Hoang (2015) brilliantly interprets workers’ agency by describing them as “shrewd entrepreneurs” who make conscious efforts to realize upward mobility through maneuvering their desires. On the other hand, there have also been cases in which such a relationship has led to negative results. During my last interview with a fitness club manager, he had just fired a rotating trainer for having “affairs” with two of the trainer’s female clients.

*“There are opportunities and temptations around here. You cannot control human nature. Because all the ‘big names’ we deal with in this industry are quite rich, those children cannot keep themselves from these temptations. However, no matter how excellent you are, this is the bottom line” (MM05, male, chief advisor of Club W).*

<sup>3</sup> An influential online, user-generated content platform in China, for which most content is generated in a Q&A style. According to the “Decade Report of Zhihu (from 2010 to 2020),” the platform has over 20 million active users monthly nationwide.

Although the opportunity to approach these clients can help fitness trainers satisfy their KPI, it can also lead to the sudden ruin of their careers. If this deviant behavior eventually occurs within a relationship, the boundary between the customer and the trainer is broken.

## Conclusions

The commercialization of fitness renders bodily training simultaneously a component of welfare guaranteed by the state and a moral obligation for the individual, both a blessing of modern medicine and a curse of consumer capitalism. This article describes these tensions in the fitness industry by presenting a micro-level picture of the practice of selling fitness services in contemporary China. This analysis, which focuses on fitness trainers' creation and negotiation concerning the discursive meanings of body and gender, contributes to the service labor and sociology of inequality literature in two ways.

Theoretically, I analyze the fitness labor process from the perspective of aesthetic labor. I maintain that the body should not be understood as less important than feeling and emotions in service work dynamics, as shown in the emotional labor literature. In contrast, the body pertains to every aspect of a human being, from sensual pleasures and desires to unspoken lived histories and forms of self-expression, through how we dress, walk, speak, and move. The way in which fitness trainers present themselves through postures, gestures, and kinesthetic characteristics plays a non-negligible role in determining their idiosyncrasies and their ability to shape their service interactions.

Empirically, I describe the aesthetic labor process in the fitness industry as a game of "competing personas," as part of which fitness trainers progressively habituate symbolically distinctive dispositions in order to outperform their fellow workers. The article distinguishes three types of personas: advisor, friend, and idol. The "advisor" persona is deployed by fitness trainers who consider themselves knowledgeable about fitness training but not as good-looking and communicative as their colleagues. The robust physique that is characteristic of this type of persona is taken as an indication of professionalism and the authority to coach people with little workout experience.

Fitness trainers who portray themselves as "friends" of their clients consider themselves sophisticated, emotionally intelligent, and good at understanding other people. Physicality is not a protocol that distinguishes "professionals" from "amateurs" but a medium for nourishing mutual human bonds. The final type of persona, that of the "idol," is mostly used by fitness trainers who understand the body as a vehicle for eliciting sensual gratification and expressing attractiveness. According to trainers of this type, the secret to making a deal lies in their ability to elicit adoration or worship from target clients.

These findings can also be applied to many other service sectors in which nicely presented bodily dispositions and a carefully cultivated sense of "middle-classness" among workers are key aspects of employment (Pettinger 2004; Entwistle and Wissinger 2006).

I am aware of the way in which the harmonious embrace of "appearance supremacy" by the culture alongside the "middle-class" dispositions of fitness trainers may contribute to the perpetuation of existing class and gender hierarchies by rewarding fitness

trainers with recognition and admiration rather than leading to grievances with respect to “the symbolic dominance” of the privileged class.

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#### Author contributions

The author conducted the field research, including the in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation, and the collection of secondary material (i.e., industrial reports, relative statistics, and historical files from physical and digital archives). The author also transcribed and coded the interview material, designed the research framework, and wrote the manuscript. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### Declarations

##### Competing interests

The author declares that no conflicts of financial and non-financial interests, or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the findings presented in this paper.

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