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Walking, the body, and the pandemic: the public value of walking art in China

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ABSTRACT

In December 2022, the dynamic zero-COVID control policy came to an end, marking the conclusion of a three-year pandemic that affected 1.4 billion Chinese people. The pandemic and related policies created a unique, temporary, and historic social ecosystem where walking became more crucial than ever before. The pandemic not only severely restricted people's movement in public spaces but also exposed the longstanding contradictions between human bodies, modern mobility, and urban space. Over the three years of the pandemic, walking became an aesthetic survival attempt by Chinese people to cope with their limited freedoms under the pandemic. As the pandemic stagnated and worsened over time, walking-dominant activities gradually became a widespread social phenomenon that encouraged urban residents to participate in rebuilding society across various fields such as politics, art, nature, etc. The development of walking as an artistic form during this period represents a new aesthetic strategy and political awakening while reflecting humans' need to reconnect with land, social space, and their own bodies. This paper reviews how walking art has evolved historically through three periods – before, during, and after the pandemic – aiming to highlight both the public value of walking art and challenges within China's social ecosystem.

KEYWORDS

Walking art; body; pandemic era; spatial practice; cross-domain

Introduction

As modern humans coped with the shocks of the pandemic, their physical interactions mirrored the chaotic scene depicted in William Hogarth's *Gin Lane* (see [Figure 1](#)): bodies intertwined in an alcohol-addled state, unconscious of an infant about to fall from the arms of an inebriated mother. However, the pandemic went beyond the apathy and coldness shown in *Gin Lane*, as COVID-19 made people view themselves and others as biological enemies. Contemporary humans were separated physically, prompting a reevaluation of our relationships with the world and a need to readjust our perceptions and senses (Norton 2021). We were asked to fight the virus as human beings together while living in isolation as individuals. Walking was one of the coping strategies developed for this dilemma.



Figure 1. William Hogarth, *Gin Lane*, 1751. Retrieved from: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/399847>.

China's dynamic zero-COVID policy effectively curbed the pandemic and minimized casualties through biopolitical measures (Ristić and Marinković 2022). Experiencing death reshaped my perspective on this policy. My anger and confusion about the policy eased after losing loved ones to the disease and realizing the zero-COVID policy had protected them for more than two years. A significant number of elderly individuals lost their lives especially after the policy was rescinded, as a study revealed that COVID-19 infections caused around 1.4 million deaths in China from

December 2022 to February 2023 (Du et al. 2023). The zero-COVID policy temporarily postponed these tragedies. Nevertheless, given China's vast population and complex social dynamics, the adverse consequences were still substantial, including a notable increase in anxiety and depression (Brunier 2022). However, reality that cannot be substantiated by empirical evidence, such as the quantification of displaced individuals, experiences of social prejudice, and exacerbation of preexisting social disparities, solely subsists within the collective memory attributed to a particular generation, a heterotopia where time, space, and history converged in compressed form (Foucault 1984).

In February 2020, China implemented the National Health Code strategy in response to the pandemic. The health code, shown in Figure 2, was a mandatory application that served as a personal ID both for nucleic acid testing and accessing public venues, with different colors indicating different health statuses. Despite its convenience, this system created an atmosphere of surveillance and control, reminiscent of George Orwell's dystopian world and panopticism's cylindrical structures of certainty, which transformed "visibility into a trap" that assures the "automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1995, 448). The health code system evolved into a symbol of political technology, standing for "an omnipresent and omniscient power" (Foucault 1995, 440), reshaped Chinese people's perceptions of health, mobility, and spatiality, and became profoundly ingrained in people's daily lives.

On Nov. 14, 2022, Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province, partially lifted its lockdown. However, streets remained devoid of pedestrians and shops remained closed due to public confusion about this sudden "bold" action. Not long before, having a red code had signified enforced isolation and social stigma (Ristić and Marinković 2022), which resulted in unemployment and restricted access to public spaces or transportation. For instance, during Shanghai's three-month lockdown, an article circulating on WeChat reported that numerous urban migrants had to live in train stations due to their red codes. Despite being able to change their code to green by providing evidence of recovery from the virus, the red code still functioned as a "social record" that contributed to discrimination. The documentary *Memory Project – The Shanghai Lockdown* (Bhandari and Cohen 2022) presents an intimate portrayal of the lockdown, featuring firsthand accounts from numerous Shanghai residents. Employing artistic imagery to sidestep overt discussions of political sensitive topics, the documentary shows that walking became a gesture closely tied to politics during China's pandemic. Similarly, by exploring this topic under the theme of "Walking Art," I highlight the greater tolerance for political expression under the guise of artistic expression in contemporary China.

With the imposition of restrictions on public spaces and transportation, walking initially emerged as a means of survival or expression for marginalized individuals in the urban environment, which is characterized by "compartmentalization and alienation" (Sansi 2020). Residence in the modern city no longer refers solely to a physical dwelling or home, which symbolized civic presence in ancient times (Arendt 1998, 62). The lockdown in Shanghai highlighted the vulnerability of modern homes, while a subsequent apartment fire in Urumqi exemplified the violation of privacy related to domestic spheres. During the pandemic, when external forces infiltrated households and the once completely private domain could no longer ensure safety or uphold rights, how did individuals safeguard themselves? Furthermore, as modern public spaces became "empty spaces"



Figure 2. Health QR code. Source: screenshot of author’s phone on November 27 2022.

(Milun 2007) incapable of accommodating a social spirit, 21st-century nomads emerged on streets eroded by homogenization and mobility.

In 2021, I witnessed the effects of China’s strict containment measures as I returned from an exchange program in Norway. For example, I watched Chinese people stranded at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol due to COVID-19 infection pushing their luggage carts like homeless ghosts because they were unable to enter China. At the Chinese border, I myself

anxiously awaited the results of my nucleic acid test lest I be unable to enter. This experience drove me to investigate the challenges that individuals encountered in such a crisis, wherein the mobile individual potentially violated national policy. This article adopts a perspective centered around people's walking-oriented actions when their physical freedom is threatened by viruses or political maneuvers; furthermore, it envisions potential futures that embracing walking more broadly as a way of overcoming post-pandemic problems.

The emergence of walking art

Walking as an art form was underdeveloped in China until the pandemic, compared to countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and certain European nations that embraced the "right to roam" and established walking as a mature artistic category. The history of walking, originating from philosophical contemplation and aesthetic objects into spatial practices, artistic themes, and even the conduct of everyday life, provides a perspective for understanding the emergence of walking in China during the pandemic and sheds light on the social issues it reflects.

Walking in urban and public space

Contemporary walking art is inherently intertwined with the conceptualization of public space in modern society. One of the founders of Situationist International, Guy Debord, introduced psychogeography in 1955 as a methodological exploration of the city's multi-dimensional truths. One of the psychogeographical approaches is *dérive* or urban drifting: "a technique for swiftly traversing diverse ambiances" (Debord 2006) that challenges society's established order through improvisation and play (Daniilidis 2016). In *The Naked City* (1957), Debord attempted to deconstruct traditional map representations by linking 19 fragments of a map of Paris with red arrows, illustrating a fragmented and discontinuous spatial experience. By utilizing mapping, an approach that subverts power structures and cultural orders expressed in traditional maps, *The Naked City* dilutes the colonization of land, space, and resources. Situationists' *dérive* has inspired numerous contemporary artists who view walking as a revolutionary action when confronted with spectacles where freedom in the city can become "servitude" (Sansi 2020).

Walking has historically been utilized as a political act, symbolizing power and resistance. Gandhi's Salt March of 1930—during which he led a group of people on a 300-km journey to challenge and successfully abolish the British colonial government's Salt Monopoly Law – is a prime example of this. During the pandemic in China, people also resorted to alternative methods of political action such as "White Paper Protests," confirming Hannah Arendt's claim that the degradation of speaking indicates a decline of the public sphere. In her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, Arendt extensively explores the historical development of the public and private spheres and expands on Aristotle's concept of man as a political being from a linguistic perspective, emphasizing the crucial role of speech in political life (1998, 28). She also notes that a shared realm must transcend time and be constituted by individuals with limited lifetimes (1998, 56). Walking corresponds to Arendt's three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action, which embody the biological realm, the artificial world formed by millions of pedestrians, and

the intricate network of humans within the political sphere. Situationists, spatial theorists, and walking artists have all praised walking for its ability to become a means of subjective agency for engaging with public spaces and restoring faith in human affairs.

Walking artists

In both the United States and Europe, walking remains a primary means for the masses to engage in nonviolent political resistance and for artists to intervene in politics. Francis Alÿs, for instance, utilizes walking to explore urban tension and geopolitics. In his work *Green Line* (2004), he traversed a route in Jerusalem that marked the border between Israel and Palestine while carrying a leaky canister filled with green paint, questioning the authenticity of ideologically defined boundaries. For some of his contemporaries, such as Richard Long or Hamish Fulton, walking is an artistic methodology.

Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* in 1967 officially inaugurated the thematic era of walking art. He meticulously traversed a straight path across a meadow in the English countryside and subsequently captured the trail through monochromatic photography. Afterward, he expanded his walks to wilderness areas around the globe. Long turns walking into a profound form of artistic expression, usually symbolizing the innate connection between humans and the vastness of nature. He portrays the deeply personal and heroic rhythms of humanity traversing Earth's terrain. The physical exertion and uncharted paths immersed in nature conceal a yearning for humanity's primordial origins.

Hamish Fulton develops walking as a ritualistic act within the natural landscape, akin to a pilgrimage, addressing environmental and ecological concerns by commonly presenting geographical poetry through imagery and text that depict his journey. Similar to Japanese haiku, concise phrases capture the immediate experience of walking and the perception of space. The common thread between Long and Fulton revolves around the theme of pilgrimage, not solely as a means of reaching a physical destination, but rather as an effort to pursue and explore a "belief system." In light of the pandemic-induced disintegration of tangible communities, each individual has assumed the role of a solitary pilgrim, embarking on their journey accompanied by an imagined community within their own psyche (O'Mara 2021).

Walking in literature

The "path of contemplation" among intellectuals appears to have originated from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* in 1796. However, philosophers in ancient Athens also engaged in contemplative walks. The term Peripatetics, associated with Aristotle and his followers, refers to walking and the designated space for it within Aristotle's Academy, known as "*peripatos*." Walking as a cultural practice emerged within aristocratic gardens, requiring three essential prerequisites: leisure time, safe surroundings, and good health. These fundamental freedoms continue to be sought by individuals today (Solnit 2001, 290). Walking's significance has transformed over time, and its historical evolution was mirrored during the pandemic, where walking turned dangerous as pedestrians risked hostility on the streets. Walking freely became a privilege especially in China's gated communities, where the economically advantaged could leisurely stroll in secluded garden settings, detached from the outside world (Chiu-Shee, Ryan, and Vale 2021). People adapted to isolation and developed a strong desire for nature walks, which they satisfied

through camping culture. As the pandemic neared its end, people began to stream from cities for road trips and backpacking. Domestic tourism bounced back, international travel surged, and city walks became all the rage once lockdowns were lifted.

Walking art reflects the contemporary notion that art is no longer about presence in order to create an existential impact that showcases the present (Groys 2010, 84). Diverging from traditional forms based on time, walking art instead records a “nonhistorical surplus time,” a repetitive, inadequate, or infinitely ongoing continuation of the present, while adopting a “weak practice and attitude.” In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1968), Michel de Certeau elucidates how ordinary individuals navigate strategy and tactics within their daily lives. He delves into the juxtaposition between pedestrians’ autonomous behaviors (walking in the city) and the predetermined order imposed by urban structures. De Certeau (1984, 97) argues that walking is akin to language itself and functions as a form of speech that generates space. He vividly describes the exhilaration of standing atop a Manhattan skyscraper, gazing down upon the city: “It’s hard to be down when you are up” (1984, 92). This sentiment resonates with the documentary *Pretend It’s a City*, celebrating anthropological approaches to everyday life: Rather than immersing ourselves solely in abstract thinking or creating aesthetically pleasing geometric patterns from a divine perspective, we should humbly descend to “groundness” (Hall and Smith 2011) and earnestly learn from reality’s “sensorial aura” (Daniilidis 2016).

In *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett delves into the portrayal of the body in cinema, asserting that movies paradoxically immerse audiences in a high-speed world while rendering their bodies static. As Debord argues, the entire world becomes a theater, and walking’s slowness serves as a means of questioning both rapidity and passive embodiment. He examines the interplay between contemporary cities and the human body, engaging in a critical conversation with the cases presented in the text. For instance, he mentions that domestic roads were where kings asserted their rule by patrolling their lands. Later on, as cities prospered, buildings symbolized royal power within a geographical context. “The street bore the imprint of aggressive assertion, then it was the space left over after people asserted their rights and powers(2003, 268).” From this perspective emerges the extended significance of urban walks in resisting colonialism, as well as in geopolitics and urban governance.

The pandemic raised a series of inquiries into the disparities between private and public spheres, human and contemporary surroundings, thereby prompting individuals to utilize walking as a means to reconnect their internal and external environments. Walking can function as Arendt’s optimal political action, actively engaging with public space; Debord’s rebellion against the society of spectacle; Sennett’s embodied act of penetrating urban stone; De Certeau’s spatial speech narrating space; and Jane Jacobs’s potentiality for integrating functions, embracing heterogeneity, and dismantling exclusivity within public space and art.

The predicament of walking in the pandemic era

This chapter delves into the pandemic’s effects on walking and urban mobility, including policy-induced displacement, concerns about physical contact, the criminalization of walking, the promotion of pedestrian-friendly cities during the pandemic, and the societal implications of post-pandemic city walking.

Untold stories of walking

In 2013, National Geographic explorer Paul Salopek initiated the *Out of Eden* project, embarking on a 30,000-km odyssey around the world to retrace the migratory path of our human ancestors. Along this journey, he meticulously documents the tales of human migration, technological advancements, and climate change. In 2021, Salopek's footsteps led him to China amidst the pandemic. Throughout this arduous expedition, he diligently captured the essence of landscapes and individuals' narratives every hundred kilometers. However, Milestone 83 bears a rather disheartening title: "No Human in Sight." The journal entry was made on June 2, 2022, during the peak of China's zero-COVID policy. As he eloquently noted, "The land was as bereft of humans as if our species had never been born" (Salopek 2023). In Chapter 3, when he was traversing a war zone, he pondered the question, "What happens when you become a war refugee? You walk" (Salopek 2021). This inquiry and response resonate with certain circumstances witnessed during the pandemic. Although lacking the gruesome brutality of an actual war, the three-year pandemic also caused numerous individuals to be displaced.

In mid-2022, a fleeting Internet story surfaced, recounting the struggles of a group of COVID refugees, predominantly migrant workers living in the city. They were compelled to isolate and assigned a red code due to COVID-19 infection. Confronted with social stigma and unemployment in the city, they walked hundreds of kilometers to get home due to their inability to access public transportation, which was available only to those with green codes. These stories persist in the collective memory, yet remain unrecorded. Despite the rich content of the Shanghai New York University exhibit, *Walking China: Stories Yet To Be Told* in June 2023, which was part of the *Out of Eden* project, untold narratives still deserve attention. Due to the "terror of touch," the criminalization of walking during the pandemic extended beyond China's borders. Alison Young exposed Australia's strict measures to control the pandemic by combining public health protocols with the criminalization of everyday activities during lockdown. From a criminological perspective, she examined various walking activities in Melbourne's lockdown environment, such as the *Teddy Bear Walk* and *Neighborhood Watch*, and proposed that individuals should integrate their sensory actions to foster "geographies of kindness and compassion" (Young 2021).

The body in urban mobility

The pandemic heightened the "no-contact order" and dematerialization. While the world was combating the virus, the human body as a carrier of infection was also marginalized and devalued (Ristić and Marinković 2022). Amid the pandemic, physical contact turned perilous, forcing society to prioritize distance and establish a new social order. Throughout this period, independent artist Inês Norton created a series of works centered on tactility: Her video work *Contactless* portrays a nude body wrapped in plastic film, starkly highlighting how, under the pandemic's influence, human tactile experiences were artificially manufactured by technology. In *Aseptic Synesthesia*, she metaphorically represents all beings' detachment and connection within an immaculate and sterile environment.

Sennett stated that Harvey's discovery of blood circulation in 1628 profoundly influenced the conceptualization of the human body, along with economic and urban spatial planning. Urban citizens resembled blood flowing through the city, with its streets serving as veins. This resulted in a proliferation of neutral spaces that prioritized circulation, such as tunnels, sidewalks, plazas, and commuting routes that conformed to spatial laws. While religious activities like pilgrimages still retain a metaphorical sense of physical asceticism in modern times (Peng 2013), most forms of movement have been alienated by advancements in transportation technology and reduced to mere tools within neutral spaces. Under the dominance of modern mobility, our descriptive perception of the body has transformed into one characterized by passivity. Kathryn Milun (2007) examines urban anxiety stemming from an emptiness inherent in contemporary space from a pathological perspective. The abstraction and cleanliness prevalent in these homogeneous places such as malls, plazas and monuments give rise to symptoms of agoraphobia, evoking fear of ineffable, indescribable, and unconceptualized unknowns. The vacant city during the pandemic foreshadowed an impending disaster while humans pushed forward amidst their fears.

The pandemic temporarily disrupted this detrimental cycle of contemporary mobility and gave rise to a tributary. Baudelaire's *flâneur*, Benjamin's arcades project, and Debord's urban drifting all emerged in China, coinciding with the end of the pandemic. Online discussions on walking grew in popularity, with three main focal points: escaping the city, camping outdoors, and city walking. The demand for more freedom of movement is reflected in these tendencies. During the pandemic, "urban escape" had been conspicuous, evident in activities such as camping, hiking, and traveling that were often associated with anti-urbanism or pastoralism. Simultaneously, related consumer goods flooded supermarket shelves, signaling the market's readiness for this moment: Space could be commodified and sold to customers seeking a distinctive walking experience. For businesses operating within this market, an innate desire for walking served as a driving force (Yang 2023) that fueled economic growth and promoted productivity.

Pedestrian-centric cities

Adapting to being lost is a crucial skill for navigating modern cities. As De Certeau (1984, 102) aptly observed, "New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future." New York thrives as a pedestrian-centric city where the collective narratives of millions of pedestrians contribute to its vibrant energy. Since 2013, New York's Times Square has undertaken an annual event during summer solstice, strategically situating yoga venues amidst bustling traffic. This initiative aims to highlight the dematerialization resulting from the collapse and transformation of urban spaces. During the pandemic, two anthropologically oriented documentaries dug into New York City's streetscape: *How To With John Wilson* and *Pretend It's a City*. The creators adeptly captured the latent social issues veiled in the streets of New York by immersing themselves within the crowds.

In Norway, Den Norske Turistforening (DNT), which has evolved within the framework of the "right to roam" and Scandinavian culture, played a pivotal role in revitalizing urban

connectivity during the pandemic. Through its extensive network of walking trails, DNT provided Norwegians “a sense of living in a communal and national landscape” (Westskog, Aase, and Leikanger 2021). Established in 1868, DNT upholds a prosocial tradition by maintaining an intricate 20,000-km web of trails that intertwine with national infrastructure and identity. Trail markers (such as stacked stones, red symbols, ribbons) distinguish themselves from conventional urban markers since they are predominantly maintained by hiker volunteers and exude a distinct local spirit. Countless trails remain unpaved but merely flattened by human feet, while some even serve as shared pathways for both forest creatures and humans.

Norwegian walking spaces are thoughtfully designed to harmonize with nature, embodying a profound ecological philosophy and symbiotic approach. In contrast, China’s approach to pedestrian environments is characterized by top-down interventions, resulting in luxurious urban walking infrastructure and natural scenic spots. For instance, China’s mountain climbing culture has given rise to a niche profession – mountain porters – who serve as “human machines” on scenic trails, using their physical strength to transport goods to grand mountaintop hotels and even offering human-powered sedan chairs for those unwilling to climb themselves. However, these overly standardized trails detract from the essence of walking and transform nature into a monotonous landscape. Norway, by contrast, has opted to preserve its original trails during modernization, offering a constant opportunity for people to experience the curiosity and awe that come from treading on pristine land. Amidst the pandemic, Chinese society developed an aesthetic appreciation for giving in to the wilderness, especially when scenic spots became off-limits for gatherings. Individuals turned their attention to the previously overlooked rural outskirts of cities.

Yearning to wander

Since July 2023, more than 570,000 posts about city walking have appeared on China’s social media platform Xiaohongshu (Hu 2023). It represents the third wave of walking-related activities after urban escape and camping. The driving force behind these trending phenomena is people’s yearning for freedom, which aligns more closely with Lévi-Strauss’s description in *Tristes Tropiques*, where he states that freedom is “the outcome of an objective relationship between the individual and the space he occupies, between the consumer and the resources at his disposal” (2012, 327). Lockdown cities fueled the emergence of city walking, aiming to revitalize urban circulation and transform conventional walking and certain spaces exclusively enjoyed by privileged individuals.

The pandemic exposed the dichotomy between human beings as terrestrial creatures and modern cities. As lockdown measures closed non-places devoid of a sense of belonging and historical significance (Augé 1995), previously overlooked areas brimming with local character became indispensable. Prolonged isolation left us yearning to connect with the land, yet standardized and homogenized urban spaces failed to offer solace. The city transformed into a “dead language” beyond our comprehension (Solnit 2001, 467). Throughout the pandemic, an increasing number of game developers created “walking simulators,” immersive first-person games devoid of levels or character interactions but offering vast surreal worlds where players could wander. People’s longing for

virtual realms reflected their disillusionment with reality. In today's highly mobile world facilitated by the Internet, this "catastrophic freedom" rendered our physical bodies uninhabitable while spectacles entered our homes through screens, making them equally "unlivable," thus resulting in externalization, temporariness, and fragmentation of both our own image and external space (Kailuweit 2008).

During the pandemic, the UK Museum of Walking adapted its exploration to encompass urban forests and cyberspace, establishing an effective coping mechanism. The museum collaborated with psychogeographers and historians to discover lost rivers and forgotten communities in London. They additionally launched the Urban Tree Festival, engaging modern poets to explore urban forests. The museum connected with app developers, composers, and performance artists to develop online activities and a Soundwalk platform. The integration of aesthetics into walking practices and urban walking systems offered a grassroots "adaptive and valuable ecosystem for socially resilient systems that withstand pressure from adversity while maintaining their functionality" (Zhao 2021, 52).

In conclusion, action is profoundly significant to human political existence, as Arendt noted. When the pandemic and control policies confined us within restrictive boundaries, hindering our ability to perceive one another, walking became essential action for connecting us on a fundamental bodily and kinetic level. According to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, walking contributes to the internal construction of human beings. The pandemic disintegrated physical space and eroded individuals' internal spheres, resulting in "the loss of their body's capacity to self-plan their world and carve out possibilities from their real environment" (Ma 2019), thereby depriving them of their most precious freedom. The prevalence of social phenomena has proven that walking is an approach to "penetrate dense existence" (Ma 2019) and acts as a public mechanism for reconnecting individuals with their internal and external spaces.

The revival of walking art in the pandemic era

During the pandemic, vacant urban landscapes provided a rare opportunity to observe the city itself while creating a limited sensory environment that encouraged individuals to envision alternative ways of living. Lockdown measures sparked innovative forms of nomadic exploration and physical engagement, fostering new social dynamics (Young 2021).

Walking in civic matters

The pandemic exacerbated social inequalities, and the measures implemented by different countries regarding walking reflected their distinct social values. On April 27, 2020, the New York City government announced plans to close approximately 161 km of city roads to repurpose them for safe outdoor activities. The road closures in New York exemplified civic considerations and societal concerns since "lockdowns reinforce existing social inequalities" (Hills 2020). New York is a culturally diverse immigrant city, implying the existence of numerous social conflicts. The road closure policy involved transforming motorized thoroughfares into pedestrian paths surrounding large parks and expanding

walking areas within city parks. Furthermore, the measure allowed people to submit online questionnaires to advocate for more spatial resources through the New York City Department of Transportation's website. This strategy reflected concerns about marginalized citizens, since walking and pedestrian space are commonly accessible to privileged individuals who have more leisure time and resources.

Meanwhile, China's pandemic-related regulations on public mobility were relatively centralized. Due to specific national circumstances, China maintained its dynamic zero-COVID strategy by mandating the possession of a valid health code for entry and exit from public premises until Dec. 7, 2022. Under this strategy, the frequency of nucleic acid testing ranged from once a day to once every two or three days, depending on the specific conditions. Periodic lockdowns of public spaces and even individual residences were enforced. Since gated communities are the predominant residential mode in most Chinese cities, thus leading to the fragmented social space and increased inequality, such communities made it possible for disproportionate power to be exerted under the guise of health and safety during the pandemic. The formerly garden-like gated communities effectively turned everyone into either jailers or prisoners within panoramic structures. In this setting, an individual's right to walk inside or outside the wall could be either granted or denied.

On Nov. 26, 2022, voices dissenting against pandemic control policies surfaced on WeChat. The catalyst was a tragic fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, on Nov. 24, resulting in the loss of ten lives, including a three-year-old child. Initial postings on social media suggested that emergency escape routes in the community had been sealed shut, hindering the firefighting response. Subsequent official investigations revealed a different cause for the tragedy, but it still triggered widespread grievances and distrust about the government's handling of the pandemic. WeChat, one of China's most popular social media platforms, became the primary channel for discussions about pandemic control measures. However, due to its limited political functionality, any sensitive messages were subject to censorship by higher authorities (O'Neill 2020). Meanwhile, expressing genuine opinions in public spaces remained an enduring challenge. An impromptu action known as the "White Paper (or A4) Protest" took place on Urumqi Road in Shanghai to commemorate the fire (Che and Chien 2022). People gathered under the Urumqi road sign in Shanghai, holding pieces of blank white paper to symbolize restricted freedom of speech. However, these posts were swiftly removed. Following that, two tacit "protests" against censorship arose on WeChat, circumventing cybersecurity controls in euphemistic ways: An influx of netizens shared posts devoid of any content or disseminated Pink Floyd's music video "Another Brick in the Wall," featuring scenes of people marching in prison-like formation. (Due to Internet censorship, accessing relevant information about the fire and protest requires going over the Great Firewall.)

Walking as an artistic, sensuous, and educational method

The pandemic also exposed the inadequacies of contemporary art, particularly art dominated by ocularcentrism, which long lost its genius loci due to the collapse of public spaces. Vacant cities during lockdown allowed for urban spaces to be reimagined and transformed into artistic canvases. In 2020, artist Iman Tajik initiated a public project entitled *Under One Sky*, gathering sky images observed by 320 walkers from around the

world during their walks and consolidating them under one unified sky. Together they covered a distance of 41,725.46 km – the equivalent of 104.12% of Earth's circumference. Tajik digitally collaborated with numerous walkers to explore ideological interactions and conflicts between borders and viruses. The art work juxtaposed the landscapes traversed while freely walking with the plight of those deprived of freedom either by the virus or sociopolitical factors.

On the other hand, Louisa Allen's pandemic smellwalks offered a localized view of the lockdown's olfactory surroundings, proving valuable since the virus rendered air a scarce resource and breathing determined human fate. Allen created smellscape maps by capturing both episodic and habitual smells in specific locations to examine social transformations. Drawing from autoethnographic narratives, Allen connected individuals with culture through an insider-outsider dual identity akin to Paul Salopek's *Out of Eden*. Smellwalks, a sensuous methodology, provides a novel embodied and tangible experience to understand lockdown through sensory synesthesia (Allen 2023).

Walking aesthetics also caused ripples in the Chinese art world. In 2022, Wu Zhen Culture and the China Academy of Art jointly organized *The Walking Environment* exhibition, featuring public educational activities centered on the theme of "strolling." This exhibition unveiled the artist's persona as a stroller, showcasing the artist's empathetic connection with urban and natural surroundings. It fostered an inclusive atmosphere that invited audiences to embrace a poetic spirit and actively participate in artistic production. The subsequent series of exhibitions adhered to the Situationists' *dérive*, challenging the established urban order by creating walking scenarios that showcased alternative lifestyles (Sansi 2020), however, within a harmless, dreamlike, and poetic quality, skillfully sidestepping political controversies.

To some extent, the pandemic drove the global advancement of walking education. For instance, in rural Kashmir, an open-air classroom provided a safe and accessible environment for children when schools were closed during the pandemic (Bhat 2020). The local government recommended online courses for schools, but it was not feasible in areas without Internet access, with economic disparities, or in nomadic communities. However, a small town in Kashmir found a solution. Every morning, students from Doodpathri in District Budgam walked across streams and over bridges in the mountains to their new classrooms in a picturesque setting with snow-capped mountains as a backdrop. Most of these children were from nomadic communities and had been out of school before the pandemic; now they had the opportunity to study in this open-air classroom.

In recent years, the proliferation of national parks in China has contributed to a notable increase in nature education, which has been integrated into the curriculum of public schools (Guo 2022). Nature education and the rising popularity of walking culture highlight the aesthetic importance of physical activity and its therapeutic potential for pandemic-induced psychological ailments (Huang et al. 2022). Recreational walking in nature has been confirmed to enhance cognitive abilities by facilitating restoration and enhancement mechanisms tied to conscious attention (Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan 2008). Social walking promotes experiential exchange and fosters tactile autobiographical memory development (O'Mara 2021). These results collectively indicate a positive association between walking and psychological well-being and demonstrate a favorable inclination toward utilizing walking as an educational methodology.

Pretend it's a walk

The resurgence of walking signifies a political awakening and a comprehensive understanding of one's own physical, social, political, and even philosophical existence, along with the external spatial dimension. Similar to Allen's olfactory exploration, delving into soundscapes provides a sensuous avenue for understanding the pandemic environment. China's pandemic soundscape showcased how sound intertwines with modern media and governmentality, evident through air raid sirens and a moment of silence on the National Day of Mourning. Moreover, residents received alerts through loudspeakers in their regional dialects during the pandemic. This highlights that the "sonic act of governmentality is not only nationalizing, but also simultaneously localizing" (Zhang and Chow 2021). Sound was used as a form of artistic governance, giving rise to an era of "clips" on Douyin (Chinese Tiktok) where individuals were fully immersed in the voyeuristic experience of others' travels. Although media platforms became a liminal space for public discourse and participation in civic matters, they also exploited wanderlust, transmuting walking into consumerism to create fabricated fantasies.

This article has discussed cases from Western and European countries to demonstrate that a complex social system promotes public accessibility and progress in walking in various domains. National support for social welfare initiatives is necessary to ensure the right to walk and the equitable allocation of pedestrian space (Hall and Smith 2011). Norway's DNT trail network and road closure policies in New York depend on national commitment to social welfare efforts because socially oriented spatial divisions driven by public welfare necessitate specific locations being forsaken or abandoned under economic pressures (Habermehl and McFarlane 2023). Exploring the correlation between walking and public welfare in these countries involves reshaping spaces for social justice, fostering political consciousness, and inspiring artistic pathways – endeavors that hold significant value, particularly for the development of walking art in China. Although walking-oriented activities benefit the general public, especially economically disadvantaged groups, efforts to promote social welfare through walking face challenges amidst China's economic development and may risk becoming commodified.

Conclusion

Contemporary walking art reflects the historical evolution of social space and addresses the contradictions of urban space, mobility, and the body in modern times. Walking, whatever its form, is an act of pure art, an urban rebellion, and a spatial practice that contributes to restoring social spaces affected by the pandemic and addressing the symbiotic relationship between people, cities, and nature. In pandemic-era China, where every step was a challenge, the life-affirming principles of walking had an even greater positive impact on the public. The pandemic may be officially over, but its lasting effects on individuals will not fade quickly. Our urban landscapes may still lack spiritual significance and the capacity to accommodate vulnerability, pain, and heterogeneity; however, walking presents a viable alternative. The emergence of walking activities post-pandemic indicates that walking can enrich individuals' self-narratives within their living spaces and foster public awareness regarding political consciousness in shared environments. This article, written over three years during China's pandemic battle, serves as an

autoethnographic account documenting societal memories eroded by mainstream narratives. China's urban resilience in the wake of the pandemic will drive the development of a politically innovative system centered on walking, which will greatly enhance human survival in modern cities.

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Notes on contributor

Huiqing Wang obtained an M.A. from the School of Sculpture and Public Art at the China Academy of Art in 2022. The original theme of this manuscript "Walking, the Body, the Pandemic: The Public Value of Walking Art in China" was conceived when she attended the Oslo National Academy of Art in Norway as part of an academic exchange program in 2021. She previously earned an B.A. from the Department of Interdisciplinary Visual Arts at the University of Washington in 2017. During her study experience in different countries over the past decade, her focus on art has changed according to the environment. This article is mainly based on her personal perception of human conditions while walking in different societies during the pandemic.

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