

Book Review

Sporting Gender: Women Athletes and Celebrity-Making During China's National Crisis, 1931~45

Yungxiang Gao. Vancouver · Toronto: UBCPress, 2013. 348 pages

Gary Wang
University of Toronto, Canada

In *Sporting Gender*, Gao Yunxiang convincingly shows how athleticism, nationalism, popular culture and the aspirations of individual “sports-women” intersected to produce ideologically fraught but meaningful spaces in which prescribed roles for women were simultaneously reproduced and negotiated. Building on recent studies that examine sports, urban culture, the popular press, and the Modern Girl/New Woman archetypes, the book offers new perspectives on the unprecedented elevation of *tǐyù* “physical culture” in early twentieth-century China. It focuses on the 1930s to mid-1940s, when Japanese military advancements intensified. War and imperialist occupation reinforced the conviction among Chinese intellectuals and petty urbanites that their nation needed strengthening to cast off its global image as the “sick man of Asia.” While physical exertion had formerly been associated with menial labour, the novel (and sexy) physicality of Euro-American athleticism gained esteem (and notoriety) as it was swiftly adopted in the name of nation-building.

Gao highlights the contributions of women who demonstrated the benefits of health and fitness to Chinese audiences, and who represented China at global sporting events. In Chapter 2, the only one that does not focus on the story of an individual, emphasis is placed on the multifarious meanings and uses of nationalism as evidenced in the women’s magazine *Linglong* (1931-1937). Gao elucidates how the rhetoric of nation-building was employed by women to challenge received notions of femininity, and she underscores the links and tensions between nationalist and feminist discourses, a running theme throughout the book. For example, while the baring of limbs in swimsuits and team uniforms publicized the new fashion for *jianmei* “robust beauty” that demanded

strong bodies for a strong nation (in contrast to an earlier elite ideal of dainty *bingtaimei* “sickly beauty”), scantily clad and highly visible athletes were also susceptible to charges of being little different from prostitutes, who by the 1930s were increasingly seen as epitomizing national shame.

Much recent scholarship has examined ways in which the female body has been portrayed to symbolize the Chinese nation in writings and images, either to convey China’s backwardness or its promise. In contrast, Gao reconstructs what she can of the biographies of actual women to illustrate the complexities of their lived experiences as sports intersected with politics. Five chapters chronicle the fleeting fame and largely forgotten stories of these individuals. These chapters contain fascinating details about the contradictions embodied by the women spotlighted, and they lay solid groundwork upon which further studies and critical theorizations about gender constructs can be built.

Chapter 1 charts the life and career of the academic administrator Zhang Huilan (1898-1996). Recounting the significant role that Zhang played in adapting American and German theories of health and fitness to what she envisioned for China, the chapter’s most intriguing details bring out the disjunctions between Zhang’s public pronouncements about women’s social roles and what little is known of her own enigmatic private life. Deeply involved in forging female networks among her colleagues and students, many of whom vowed never to marry, Zhang herself remained unwed and lived with a female life-partner, a former student named Wang Rumin (1912-2008). Yet as Gao suggests, perhaps to avoid accusations of social if not sexual perversion, Zhang publicly upheld traditional gender roles to maintain a semblance of mainstream respectability for herself and her associates. She argued in her writings for the benefits of coeducation on heteronormative marriage practices, and advised women to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. Similar ambiguities are revealed in succeeding chapters.

Chapter 3 focuses on Lu Lihua (1900-97) and the women’s basketball team that she led at the Liangjiang Girls School based in Shanghai. Chapter 4 traces media reports on three “queens” of track and field: Sun Guiyun (dates unknown), Qian Xingsu (1915-68), and Li Sen (ca. 1914/1917-1948). Chapters 5 and 6 respectively examine the most glamorous of the women featured in the book, the swimmer Yang Xiuqiong (1918-82), and the athletic movie star Li Lili (1915-2005). These chapters

expand on Gao's central argument, laid out in the Introduction and Chapter 2: that the politics of sports converged with fashion, entertainment and media culture, and threw gendered social norms into confusion in the process. We read in Chapter 3 that Lu Lihua was a "shrewd business woman" who understood the entertainment value of competitive sports, and who skillfully maintained amicable relations with the most powerful members of the press through gift-exchanges to garner attention and support for the basketball team she managed. While Lu worked behind the scenes, all the sportswomen in these chapters had at one time or another graced the covers of the most popular pictorial magazines of their time. All were photographed by the most eminent studios such as Lianhua and Wang Kai, best known for shooting publicity images of Shanghai's top movie stars. One striking full-colour image of Yang Xiuqiong is printed in repetition on the beautifully designed cover of the book, which hints at the allure of these sportswomen as they appeared in multiple mass-media representations to contemporary audiences. In this regard, more in-depth consideration of fan cultures might round out the biographies constructed in this book as an extension of Gao's interest in celebrity and star-making.

For instance, one wonders how fans responded to the controversies surrounding the masculinization of women, a topic touched on mostly in Chapters 3 and 4. Gao writes that while the rugged prowess of women on sporting fields was championed as outstanding and heroic by some commentators, others condemned masculine women as a threat to manhood and the proper feminine roles of wife and mother. Magazines like *Linglong* solicited and printed many letters and images by readers, and close scrutiny of these contents might provide a basis for thinking about the interplay between celebrities and fans. How, for example, do these mostly unknown individuals dress and pose in their pictures, in comparison to the celebrities whom Gao concentrates on? As for visual analysis, while Gao acknowledges the importance of images in generating meanings, the numerous figures included throughout the book play a largely supplementary role. Further research in this area might read them as closely as Gao does texts. One image reproduced on page 229 is mistakenly referred to as a film still of Li Lili and the actor Jin Yan (1910-1983), but it is in fact a satirical photomontage in which the heads of these two movie stars of China have been superimposed onto the

bodies of Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan, stars of the Hollywood *Tarzan* films. Such errors, however, do not detract from the book as a whole, and Gao's arguments are for the most part persuasive. *Sporting Gender* is an immensely rich and stimulating study that paves the way for new avenues of inquiry that will undoubtedly benefit from this magnificent work.

Biographical Note: **Gary Wang** is a Ph.D. student in Art History at the University of Toronto. His work focuses on textual and visual representations of men and women in the early 20th-century popular press in China. He received his MA in Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. E-mail: emailgary.wang@mail.utoronto.ca