

Sporting Gender

Women Athletes and Celebrity-Making
during China's National Crisis, 1931-45

Yunxiang Gao 高云翔



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Introduction

The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics helped the Chinese people eliminate the nation's historical image as the "sick man of Asia." China's bravura performance in the games – its male and female athletes won more gold medals than any other nation and placed second only to the United States in total medals won – epitomized the nation's recent dramatic rise to global power.¹

This soaring trajectory began during the 1930s, the era of national crisis (*guonan*) stemming from the Japanese invasions and the internecine conflict between the Nationalist and Communist Parties.² For those living under Nationalist rule, athletic competition in this period culminated in the participation of Chinese male and female athletes in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Their participation grew out of calls for greater civil equality for women following the 1911 Revolution. Aligning their aspirations with Chinese nationalism, women called for gender equality in work, family, sexuality, education, and suffrage. Female sports competitions resulted from ambitions for women's education and the nation's hopes for a healthier citizenry. As the influential Chinese writer Lin Yutang observed in 1935, team sports had the potential to create a civic consciousness that he found so lacking in Chinese society.³

The Chinese delegation to the Berlin Olympics arrived in the German capital on 23 July 1936. The seventy-nine athletes, thirty-three observers, and twenty-four staff members were exhausted after a twenty-five-day sea voyage replete with rigorous training exercises, meetings, lectures, German-language lessons, and occasional stops en route to give exhibition performances to Chinese expatriates. Cheng Tianfang, the Chinese ambassador to Germany, Dr. Ritter V. Hart, the German International Olympic Committee member, and Shen Siliang, the Chinese delegation leader, made welcoming speeches. Three hundred local Chinese chanting "Long live the Republic of China!" saluted the athletes as they marched smartly out of the Berlin train station decorated with the ubiquitous Nazi regalia. The Chinese wore the same apparel they had donned for their official photograph with Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) and his wife before leaving Shanghai. The team's uniforms

were a synthesis of Western fashion and Chinese nationalism. The men wore light-coloured Western suits emblazoned with the character for China on the front. The women wore white *qipao*, a formal dress style in Republican China produced under the “national goods” campaign (*guohuo yundong*) (see Figure 1). The women’s attire reflected a self-conscious modern departure from the weak and bound-foot stereotype of the past. The *qipao* signified women’s burden of maintaining a national essence; at the same time, the colour white, normally donned for mourning in China, took on a modern significance, indicating professionalism and metropolitan fashion: in short, the female Olympians were the pride of China. Indeed, displaying an independent spirit and the best of China at the games was deemed more important than expectations about winning. The Nationalist government had received ample military and other industrial aid from Germany in recent years, but the Chinese disliked the Nazis’ insistence on racial supremacy. If Chinese athletes fared well in Berlin, their achievements would refute German racial propaganda. Learning from others was another important goal of the trip. After the Olympics, the observer delegation went on a fact-finding tour of European countries, visiting Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, and Denmark before returning to Italy to begin their passage home. Zhang Huilan (Hwei Lan Chang), a prominent female professor, administrator in physical education, and key government consultant on sports, recalled that, except for the Nazi propaganda, German training methods impressed the delegation. China’s National Amateur Athletic Federation (CNAAF) showed the 1936 Olympics documentary bequeathed by German Agfa company at universities in Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou in 1937.⁴

The sizable delegation was a major upgrade from the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, when sprinter Liu Changchun was the sole athlete representing the 400 million people of China, a fact that made observers gasp. An important

1 “China’s representatives at the coming Olympic Games leave for Berlin.” ▶

Top right: “The athletes posing with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek after listening to his send-off speech.” “The Generalissimo speaking.” “Visiting Dr. Sun’s Mausoleum.”

Top left: “The delegates go on board the Conti Verdi ... crowds that sent them off with ‘good luck’ on their lips.”

Bottom from left to right: “The girl track star Li Sen and her well wishers at the wharf.” “Men and women Chinese boxing stars who will give exhibition matches in Berlin” (the third from right is Lu Lihua). “Mayor Wu (Tiecheng) of Greater Shanghai and Yang Hu, commander of the Wusong garrisons among the send-off party” (Li Sen is in the centre, with the mayor and the general on her right side).

Source: *Liangyou huabao* 118 (July 1936): 16.



國神之民事敢持請新，航製在滿政軍上北發與康乘月讓全奉，高香，陽揚君。依條數俄軍府集徵校。在德發廿手們也專向長推閣上！行依紛從噴樂並，茲碼是爾地郵五於世。為精昂價常勝脫突惜莫。奏險特市者頭日出船船日六運

The delegates go on board the Conti Verdi. Above photos show the crowds that sent them off with "good luck" on their lips.

大軍啓行

·發出征西兒健運世國我·

CHINA'S REPRESENTATIVES AT THE COMING OLYMPIC GAMES LEAVE FOR BERLIN



之觀赴訓赴形部委。後調訓務赴於會世我攝理院前京。時員右之為話委京出選界國影陵園全後下之此為分總，員行發手至參。後調館務為情調務影河土長總前，動加

The athletes posing with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek after listening to his send-off speech. Right: The Generalissimo Speaking. Below: visiting Dr. Sun's Mausoleum.



The girl track star, Lee Yen and her two winners at the world.



Men and women Chinese boxing stars who will give exhibition matches in Berlin.

Mayor Wu of Greater Shanghai and Yang Fu, Commander of the Wuang garrisons among the send-off party.

可與吳物敵令楊市中廷等度長之人



表代女五國我之林柏在

2 The five female Chinese Olympic athletes arrive at Berlin train station. *From left: Zhai Lianyuan, Yang Xiuqiong, Li Sen, Liu Yuhua, and Fu Shuyun.* Source: Yang Xiuqiong, *Yang Xiuqiong zizhuan* (Hong Kong: Xinhua chubanshe, 1938), 30.

feature of the 1936 delegation was the inclusion of women. Swimmer Yang Xiuqiong and sprinter Li Sen competed for Olympic glory, and Zhai Lianyuan, Fu Shuyun, and Liu Yuhua participated in a “national skills” (martial arts) performance (see Figure 2).⁵ The nine female observers, including Zhang Huilan, represented the emergence of women administrators and intellectuals in physical education and sports; they also had the task of keeping tabs on their youthful female athletes during the tour.⁶ None of the Olympians of 1936 would have imagined that hot and cold wars would keep any large-scale delegation from mainland China out of the Summer Olympics until 1984.⁷

Unfortunately, the Chinese female athletes, like their male compatriots, fared badly in Berlin and failed to win a single medal. Back home, journalists lamented that the athletes had “wasted 200,000 yuan of state money on a goose egg” that lost face for China internationally. Criticism centred on Li Sen and Yang Xiuqiong.⁸ Critics derided Yang, arguing that her best swimming results, which had thrilled the Chinese people in the run-up to the

Olympics, compared poorly with other world athletes, and that she should have recognized this and not ventured to Berlin.⁹ A dissenting voice in *Linglong*, a major women's magazine, defended the female athletes, stating that "it is a fact that the men did not make progress, but the relative progress made by the women cannot be denied." After all, it had been only twenty years since women had unbound their feet and begun participating in sports. Women's presence at the Olympics meant the liberation of women and strengthening of the Chinese nation.¹⁰

Competing internationally just six years after the first women's competitions in China's National Games, the female Olympians may be viewed, as Fan Hong has argued, as symbols of women's emancipation in China. Fan usefully identifies female athletes as "sportswomen," a term I will use in this book. In contrast to Fan's argument about emancipation, Andrew D. Morris has contended that their saga was part of a complicated and contradictory narrative that was often overwhelmed by nationalist demands. Morris concludes that Chinese women found scant liberation in the male-dominated Chinese media and the nation's Western-influenced *tiyu* (which can be roughly translated to encompass physical education, sports, and physical culture) world. I agree with Morris that women's experiences in *tiyu* were often complicated, but find much more evidence of emancipation than he acknowledges. Yu Chien-ming's recent book tilts against the idea of the nation as a guiding force in women's physical education; rather, she argues, such new forces as popular culture, film and print media, and competitive sports shaped physical culture.¹¹

Morris, Fan, and Yu provide valuable insights. Fan and Yu argue that Chinese women used sports to shape their bodies, adopted sportswear and other modern clothing, and permed their hair. They travelled freely, attended school, and at times became famous, all signifiers of modernity and a perceived emancipation. Morris argues, however, that there were complicating factors. Sportswomen had to negotiate their freedoms with men, some of whom were duplicitous and predatory. Women faced limits on their sporting careers and found employment only in teaching. Many of their gains, as Yu contends, lay within the cultural realm rather than in politics and economics. In this book, I connect and expand on these arguments by showing that sportswomen could emancipate themselves in a complicated national society and improve nation building through their athletic accomplishments and personal styles. Above all, Chinese sportswomen faced challenges and created new, personal solutions as they pushed into new gendered arenas. These challenges and their responses occurred within the pressure cooker of a national crisis caused by internal conflicts and external attack by Japan.

Using the valuable findings of Morris, Yu, and Fan, I contend that certain aspects of this rise are beyond debate. The rise of women's sports was essential to nation building, at the centre of which lay the definition of its citizenry, involving gender, education, religion, ethnicity, and other qualifiers. Education, including women's education in *tiyu*, often with religious underpinnings, was critical to this effort. Gender has been particularly significant in the construction of the Chinese citizenry. Women's liberation and physical improvement were seen as keys to regaining Chinese self-respect and status among the world's nations. Prasenjit Duara argues that when various Chinese nationalists identified immutable, timeless essences as sources of the nation's identity, they pointed to women as the embodiment of the eternal Chinese virtues of self-sacrifice and loyalty, thereby treating women as national exemplars. When a woman's body and spirit became sites on which to rest the unchanging essence and moral purity of the Chinese nation, female gender ideology became particularly critical in nation building.¹² As scholars and officials in China, as elsewhere in the world, cast women in modern China as the embodiment of "the essential truths of a nation or civilization," reform efforts focused on uplifting and cultivating strong and healthy female bodies to signal modernity, progress, and the "civilized" status of a strong Chinese nation. Sports became the vehicle for achieving these seemingly clashing perceptions and goals, which were particularly acute during the uncertainty and turmoil of national crisis.¹³

Communists and Nationalists promoted female athleticism to counteract the image of China as a weak nation and to bolster its ability to resist the Japanese. Presenting China to the world as a progressive nation with civilized culture through their publications in English, liberal intellectuals such as Lin Yutang and journalist Tang Liangli highlighted women's "emancipation" and "the feminist movement in China," as exemplified by "the manner in which girls have taken to athletics."¹⁴ Women's sports were key parts of a sporting culture in which Chinese athletes and their government sponsors embraced Western sports and created elite competitions that always supported the goals of the state.¹⁵ At the same time, the meaning of those goals was contested. Evolving gender ideologies served as keys to defining a certain "version" of a nation, while Communists, Nationalists, liberal male intellectuals, and urban literate women with feminist mindsets each had their own vision of a strong, modern nation. All agreed that women's emancipation and national needs went hand in hand.

In this book, I strive to highlight the lives and times of individual athletes and sports administrators. This enables me to add colour and contour to their stories and to demonstrate the complexity of their interactions with state and

society. Using biography is, according to Susan Mann, a natural and historically significant method for writing Chinese history. Since the late Qing period and the May Fourth Movement, Chinese women who made central contributions to the nation and its culture replaced traditional, virtuous women as models and icons. Looking at women's lives and accentuating their achievements can contribute to our understanding of modern China, as Wang Zheng and Danke Li have demonstrated. My methodology benefits from Wang's fine recovery of women's lives during the Chinese enlightenment. Whereas Wang depends largely on oral histories, I concentrate on primary sources from the era, including archival materials, newspaper and magazine accounts, and contemporary biographies and autobiographies. This enables me to reconstruct the histories of women and their sports from the perspective of their time. Furthermore, I have the benefit of writings by the sportswomen themselves, in the form of memoirs and academic studies or through interviews. By drawing their emotions and voices closer to the surface, the writings penned by those leading sportswomen allow us to discover their agency in the complex dynamic of sports, gender, and nation building in the context of national crisis.¹⁶

Instead of using biography as a historical recovery that maximizes knowledge of the quotidian lives of these sportswomen, this book uses their life stories as windows into aspects of social and political negotiations over the meaning of sports, gender, and nation during China's national crisis. I have chosen athletes from basketball, track and field, and swimming because these sports exemplified the connections between individual aspirations and the goals of the nation. The athletic events I discuss are stages on which the sportswomen and others reveal themselves and their times. Female athletes, writers, and actresses were the first group of modern Chinese women who entered public discourses through their fame and celebrity. While there is abundant scholarship focusing on individual writers and actresses, female athletes have been somewhat neglected. Morris, Fan, and Yu have collectively identified many sportswomen but without exploring their lives.

Like their peers in writing and acting, individual female athletes rose to fame, enabled by modern mass media, both print and visual. Joan Judge notes how modern newspapers contributed to the creation of a "new citizenry" and ensured national survival during the late Qing period. Catherine Yeh has indicated the coincidental emergence of entertainment journalism.¹⁷ Print journalism had political purposes during the national crisis, as the Nationalist government managed to insert tiyu as an essential context for modern media to propagandize and mobilize the masses. When the Ministry of Education called for newspapers and news agencies to start and maintain tiyu news

columns, “the various parties responded warmly, and the newspapers carried tiyu news among their already crowded columns.”¹⁸

Major national newspapers such as *Shenbao* (*Shanghai Daily*), *Dagong bao* (*Impartial [Takung] Daily*, both the Tianjin and Shanghai versions), *Shibao* (*Eastern Times*), *Yishi bao* (*Social Welfare*), and *New China Daily* all followed the trend. The National Tiyu Academy persuaded the monthly journal *Teaching and Learning* (*Jiao yu xue*) to carry a special tiyu issue. Cinema studios were encouraged to make films on tiyu and national survival. Radio stations periodically broadcast tiyu common knowledge (*changshi*) and news. The Central Radio Station held a tiyu program on Saturdays. Chinese audiences of various radio stations fully enjoyed their lively reports of the 1936 Olympics.¹⁹

Leo Ou-Fan Lee describes how periodicals and cinema contributed to popular modernity beyond the scope of the nation-state. Morris notes how the emergence of tiyu in the press and mainstream periodicals provided “a means for modern sports fans to finally get to ‘know’ their dashing and distant athletic idols.”²⁰ Frequently their athletic achievements, anecdotes of their private lives, and images of various poses circulated in serious national newspapers, tiyu periodicals, and various popular magazines and journals. With the image of female athletes offering inspiration and commercial attractions to the readers, even the semi-official and academically oriented *Qinfen tiyu yuebao* (*Diligent Tiyu Monthly*), the flagship journal of the dominant tiyu publishing house Qinfen shuju (Diligent Publishing House), used female athletes as cover girls. The popularity of such pictorials as *Liangyou huabao* (*Young Companion Pictorial*) and *Beiyang huabao* (*Peiyang [North Ocean] Pictorial News*) along with the growth of literacy among women in the Republican era accompanied the rise of female athletic stars.²¹ When their images were printed next to those of famous actresses and their stories became intertwined in mass media, female athletes gained celebrity status and became household names. Their audiences included officials, other athletes, and male and female petty urbanites (*xiaoshimin*), who toiled in government offices, stores, and companies and studied at universities.²²

As noted, by focusing on the experiences of famous female tiyu figures, I strive in this book to show the effect of sports on officials, athletes, and performers as well as on their audiences. Using varying perspectives, I demonstrate the broad influence of tiyu on Chinese culture. The impact of sports went beyond the media and athletic competitions themselves. Using newspapers, magazines, and biographical sources, I reveal the charged emotions of the spectators, the excitement of the athletes, and the contradictory

impulses of government figures who applauded the female athletes while plotting to make them their concubines.

My approach to the political and institutional quality of women's tiyu in this era differs from that of Fan. While she sees women's emancipation as part of the struggle concluding in the 1949 Communist revolution, I concentrate, using the example of Zhang Huilan, on the creation of a women's sporting politics within the Nationalist government. Zhang's saga illustrates the rise of female sports administrators. Showing the connections between sports and politics does not mean that I eschew recent social histories of women in modern China. Rather, I strive to show how sports, politics, and social experiences intermingled.²³

My work combines recent scholarly examinations of the quotidian aspects of modernity with the arrival of the Modern Girl. As Madeleine Yue Dong and others have shown, everyday activities such as the search for food and water, or popular attitudes about women's roles, highlight the process of modernity.²⁴ Sports events and heroines quickly became part of the routine quality of life, even as athletes rapidly broke each other's event records and as their fame rose and fell (Chapter 4). Chinese audiences admired their female sports stars as popular magazines mediated their reputations, and these stars' performances had an uncanny impact on their audiences. Visions of beautiful young women scantily dressed in sports uniforms dazzled male spectators and impressed female fans. The latter's enthusiasm blended into the arrival of the Modern Girl.²⁵

The Modern Girl has fascinated scholars around the globe. Scholars of the Chinese version, called *modeng xiaojie/nülang*, have shown how ordinary women, influenced by cinematic images of film stars and advertising of personal products, embraced cosmetics, Western dress, and media interests. The editors of the recent anthology *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity and Globalization* have referred to the Modern Girl as a heuristic device that allows discovery of new arguments through fresh research. This book contributes to the ongoing discussion of the global flow of the dynamics between Modern Girl and New Woman. Perceptions of the Modern Girl in China were complicated by politics and social demands. Scholars have emphasized the radical culture of the Modern Girl, emergence of female-oriented literature and film, and the conservative retrenchment of the New Life Movement. In China the Modern Girl, which was powerfully attractive to the Chinese masses, especially young women, threatened, yet at the same time became integrated into, the aspirations of the nationalist movement. Leftist critics disparaged her. As I will show in this book, there

was significant blurring of the boundaries between the Modern Girl and the New Woman. In part this was because Nationalists needed to find examples of modern women whose personae would uphold their views without discouraging young Chinese females. Leftists sought to rescue modernity from the shallow, commercialized “girl” of the early 1930s. Such attitudes affected the presentation and reception of sportswomen, even as the latter breached the boundaries between the naughty Modern Girl and the virtuous New Woman through their desires and agencies.²⁶

Although it is recognized that physical education played an important role in the strengthening of female citizens and of the nation itself, none of the recent studies of the Modern Girl and the New Woman has highlighted the importance of sports to the emergence of the modern Chinese woman or to the creation of a healthy, vigorous body type to replace the sickly women of the “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School.” This book will demonstrate the critical importance of the healthy, vigorous (*jianmei*) female body to the development of the nation.²⁷

Numerous scholars have seized on the image of the Modern Girl as representing new, individual freedom to choose one’s appearance and to be in step with modernizing feminism around the world. As the editors of *The Modern Girl around the World* explain, the term “girl” denoted “young women with the wherewithal and desire to define themselves in excess of conventional female roles and as transgressive of national, imperial, and racial boundaries.” Scholars of China’s *modeng xiaojie/nülang* may find that description too broad, but there is no doubt that the Modern Girl was politically and socially significant during the national crisis.²⁸

Concomitant with my examination of the emergence of sports is an investigation of the meaning and effect of stardom and celebrity in China. There are no extant studies of fame among Chinese women in this era. Surely the athletes described in this book were products of what Leo Braudy called the “democratization of fame.” They benefited from the creation of a fan culture within the burgeoning print and cinema industry in 1930s China. Athletes and film stars were often worshipped in common. In this book, I discuss how young female athletes handled their sudden, fleeting national notoriety in the 1930s.²⁹

Talented, athletic women and female intellectuals were key figures in the emancipation of women in modern China. The Nationalist Party legalized such emancipation in the Civil Code of 1930, which gave women the right to choose their own husbands and equal rights of divorce. Women could be heads of households and, with certain restrictions, perform the same kinds of work and be paid the same wages as men. Overall, the law was a compromise

between tradition and modernity, but it did affect self-supporting, independent women and inspired countless others to seek greater freedom.³⁰

Under Chiang Kai-shek, however, the Nationalists were concerned that female freedoms ranged too far and constructed the New Woman as a key part of the New Life Movement. This gendered construct, as Sarah E. Stevens has argued, was meant to “symbolize the vision of a future strong nation [whose] character highlights the revolutionary qualities of the modern woman.” The New Woman was strongly nationalistic and educated, and pursued love on the basis of free choice and social improvement rather than personal fulfillment or sexuality. As Hsiao-Pei Yen has noted, Chinese women recognized the conservative nature of the New Life Movement and strove to play an active role in moderating government attempts to control them.³¹ In resisting government restriction of their freedom and pushing for freedom through athletics and personal style, sportswomen were feminists.

Much of the controversy surrounding the Modern Girl and the New Woman concerned fashion. I show in this book how tiyu entered the fields of fashion and mass media. These interstices are most apparent in China’s burgeoning popular culture of magazines and films. Such periodicals and motion pictures encouraged viewers to follow the examples of female athletes by embracing tiyu to strengthen their bodies in preparation for war and national survival, while simultaneously promoting modern glamour. When women’s tiyu was subtly transformed from a nationalist project to fashion, women were able to articulate their hopes through writing, clothing, and athletic achievement. Feminist attitudes often appeared in the women’s weekly *Linglong*, which declared itself “the mouthpiece of women’s circles, and the only weapon to launch attacks on men,” and which steadily covered fashions, cinema, and sports for women. Such attitudes were not uncontested. Even *Linglong*, as will be seen in Chapter 2, had to compromise and redefine its purposes.

Understanding how tiyu and fashion mixed adds to the current debate over the Modern Girl and the New Woman. Most accounts rely on literary/cinematic characters or on spotlighting single moments of otherwise anonymous women.³² The characters I examine in this book were briefly famous as athletes, competing in a world that evokes ardent but fleeting enthusiasm. Athletes rarely address their personal lives in autobiographies, preferring to dwell on their achievements. Still, as historical sources autobiographies can be witnesses to an era. Materials on sportswomen abound in the sports, cultural, and news journalism of the crisis era. Sports journalism is a genre that records athletic feats but rarely provides insights into the performers. Newspaper accounts tend to highlight individual feats and scores while paying little attention to the individual’s personality. I use photographs to illustrate

athletic garb and non-sports clothing. Such images add to the dynamic emotions people feel about athletic achievement and, with words from government sources and journalism, can create national sensibilities about these female athletes.

Since fashion and glamour were linked to modern concepts of sexuality, the athletes' sexualities and family aspirations were often played out in the public media. Competing discourses of sexuality are keys to a narrative that created unexpected traps for young women. In imperial China, courtesans gained significant notoriety as "public women." A substantial literature developed around their lives and loves.³³ With such a legacy, it is not surprising that the sexuality of famous actresses and female writers and athletes who attained the status of national celebrities in Republican China underwent strict scrutiny and at times drew unwanted attention. Athletic careers require expansive, highly public displays of the human form, in addition to ubiquitous images in popular media. This phenomenon has received insufficient attention. Fan Hong has commented on how media popularity transformed sportswomen into "sports queens," into icons of desirable sexuality.³⁴ I go beyond Fan's valuable insights to broaden our understanding of such complex sexual dynamics as homosexuality, cross-dressing, forced concubinage, and state-sponsored moral purity, which characterized the new femininity as educated, healthy, prosperous women, by examining closely the apposite experiences of athletic administrators and the female athletes, whose hard, gleaming bodies so affected their audiences.

Some discussion of the origins and meaning of the term *tiyu* is necessary. As elsewhere, the rise of spectator and participant sports was associated with state formation and modernity. Earlier studies of Chinese sports have emphasized the massive impact of Western sports on Chinese society. Leaving aside the fact that such Western sports as basketball, baseball, and track had only recently emerged from earlier pre-industrial pastimes, I argue that sports in China (*tiyu*) has a strong Chinese component as well – and that at most, sports are a form of mediation between the Chinese people and the West. Scholars have interpreted *tiyu* in a variety of ways. Brownell and Morris puzzle over its meaning and an accurate English translation, since its meaning is too broad to be translated into "sports," "athletics," "physical education," or "physical fitness." After deliberation, Brownell uses "body culture" and Morris applies the term "physical culture" (a literal translation of the German term *Körperkultur*).³⁵ I find much value in the term "physical culture" and want to extend its use into fashion, film, government, and sexuality. I differ, however, with Brownell and Morris's understandings of *tiyu* as part of the Western-dominant linear narrative. Brownell suggests that "in Mandarin, the word

tiyu came into use as a label for the new methods of physical education that Japan and the West brought to China in the late nineteenth century.” Although she suggests that there was a genealogy by which the modern word “*tiyu*” came into existence, Brownell attributes it exclusively to Western- and Japanese-introduced events.³⁶

Prasenjit Duara has informed my understanding of *tiyu*. According to Duara, when the linear representation of time and history underlying Western civilization (which replaces God with the nation as a united actor moving forward in time and “conquering uncharted territories”) becomes hegemonic, “conceptions of time become tied to structures of power.” Alternatively, Chinese civilization created its own representation of time by resorting to traditional history, which referred to “an earlier presumed existent ideal, or to a transcendent time of God” as “known certainty” in a cyclical structure. In so doing, Chinese nationalists and intellectuals created a timeless essence – in this case, womanhood – that became crucial in the construction of national identity and China’s sovereignty over its own history.³⁷

Tiyu involves not only Western sports and physical education but also ancient and folk forms of Chinese physical activities (such as martial arts, strategic chess, *qigong*, mountain climbing, boating), and military activities.³⁸ *Tiyu* gained a fixed meaning during the national crisis and became a firm pillar of nationalist goals. Events and movements affected concepts of *tiyu*. Since the late nineteenth century, the Chinese term for sport kept shifting – from *ticao*, to *yundong*, to *duanlian*, and so on, and eventually to *tiyu*. Japanese aggression added key dimensions; until then, the urban literate Chinese public had no definite opinion of *tiyu*. A key force of Western society, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), introduced the unifying concept of “muscular Christianity,” which linked the spiritual well-being of the individual with the national good. The Nationalist government’s leaders and Nationalist intellectuals eventually indigenized the missionary-introduced “sports” curriculum into an official state agent for building discipline and stimulating the latent potential of the bodies of Chinese citizens as workers and soldiers during the crisis of war. Before the national crisis, although the curriculum of women’s *tiyu* was relatively complete, emphasis was exclusively on health-oriented exercise and performance rather than on competitive games.³⁹ This intense moment in China’s history promoted the growth of competitive sports for women, an arena from which athletic stars emerged.

Why does the national crisis serve as a proper context? From the Mukden Incident in 1931 until the close of the Second World War, the term “national crisis” and the sense of impending war penetrated official documents, intellectual speech and writings, newspapers, and magazines. As Hung Chang-tai

notes, “war is not just about force and deconstruction; it is also about commitment, expectation, and construction.”⁴⁰ An atmosphere of wartime tension dominated the development of *tiyu* as a means of acquiring national strength and reshaping gender order. The crisis required reinforcement and mobilization of human resources for war preparation domestically. The crisis of war intensified the efforts of Nationalists, Communists, and liberal intellectuals to strengthen the citizenry’s bodies through *tiyu* and to build a strong, militant nation. As liberating and modernizing women had been central tenets of the Chinese national state since the revolution against the Qing Dynasty in 1911, creating a healthy, vigorous female citizenry augmented national goals and built confidence for the wartime efforts against the Japanese. Both the Nationalists and the Communists firmly desired a fit Chinese womanhood.⁴¹

The context of war is useful in decoding the dynamics involved in women’s *tiyu* in the 1930s. I will concentrate on the period between 1931 and 1937, when elite athletic competitions were at their peak in China. The Mukden Incident is a reasonable starting point for the study of wartime culture and policies in Republican China, although to recover women’s lives and careers, I make frequent references to slightly earlier times. At the other end, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 7 July 1937, in which the Japanese army attacked Wanping, a town near Beiping (the name for Beijing from 1927 to 1949), led to full-scale war between China and Japan. The subsequent loss of Shanghai, other big cities, and the major railroads plunged the entire nation into extreme distress. Along with so much else, women’s *tiyu* came to a halt. Transportation restrictions caused the breakup of existing associations, and the periodic National Games were suspended. After 1937, a few games were organized among locals and students who migrated to Chongqing, Kunming, and Guizhou.⁴² This book therefore highlights the 1930s, the “golden time” of women’s sports in Republican China. The Second World War interrupted international sports competitions and affected Chinese women’s *tiyu*, but again the need to examine life cycles will push my use of evidence beyond that point.

I want to be precise about what I mean by China during this period. During the national crisis, Republican China was both in formation and contested. The Nationalist Nanjing government consolidated its control of the east coast in 1927, but sizable if shifting regions in the interior remained under Communist control. Japanese imperialism in 1931 carved out a new puppet state, called Manchukuo, in the northeast. Most studies of China in this period focus on Shanghai and, to a lesser extent, Beiping and on Nanjing, the Nationalist capital. In this study, I extend my discussion of the influence of sports and nation building from Shanghai and Beiping to the Northeast

(Manchuria), to Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Canton) in the south, and to Chongqing and other cities in the west. I do so because athletes from these regions competed in national and international games, where they represented the Chinese state and its culture. I emphasize the areas primarily under Nationalist control because the modernizing influences of sports on women were far more visible in the regions that the Nationalist government directly controlled. Nationalism did not mean the same thing to all. China's citizenry all shared such goals as creating a stronger and healthier nation and repelling the Japanese invaders. The sportswomen discussed in this book often had their own versions of nationalism, one that demanded a stronger female public presence and recognition.⁴³

No single approach can bring all these themes together, nor can a single method apply equally to the lives and social developments I describe and analyze in this book. At the same time, I have striven to address the common themes of the meaning of sports accomplishments, state control, media influence, fashion, and changes in gender and personal fates in each chapter. Accordingly, in Chapter 1, I spend much time examining the life and career of Zhang Huilan, a tiyu intellectual and educator. Zhang's example tells us much about the construction of tiyu culture and politics in women's colleges and about the interaction between Western missionaries and intellectuals and Chinese sportswomen. I then show how Zhang's intellectual work affected government and private sponsorship of competitive athletics. I compare her personal style with that of the Modern Girl.

The decade of the 1930s was a period when government policy meshed with popular enthusiasm for bodily fitness. Emphasis on personal health and hygiene supported the resistance against the Japanese and promoted a new vision of a fit Chinese citizenry in place of the unwanted image of a sickly nation. Chapter 2 is the least biographical chapter in the book. It looks at the rise of *jianmei* (robust/healthy beauty) as a force through examination of popular print press and demonstrates how Chinese women generally adopted an athletic style. The next few chapters are about sportswomen and their sports. Chapter 3 illustrates the rise of women's basketball during the national crisis by focusing on the basketball team of the Private Liangjiang Women's Tiyu Normal School (Sili liangjiang nüzi tiyu shifan zhuanke xuexiao), which was the signature project of the Shanghai physical educator and entrepreneur Lu Lihua. I look at how Lu realized her great ambitions for her team's athletic success. She often measured this by their prominence in international competition. I also examine the choices the players made about careers after college and how they constructed their identities as women in response to media pressure. Lu's players benefited by playing for an academic institution

rather than seeking fame individually. I also study the gendering of basketball rules. Chapter 4 covers the lives and careers of track and field stars such as Li Sen and pioneers such as the “Harbin Four” and Qian Xingsu, who became “national heroines” in the early 1930s. I look at how athletic success brought them sudden fame, study the difficulties they experienced in maintaining their notoriety and athletic careers, and show how the Nationalist government used their examples to bolster its war effort. I also show how they faced key life decisions on love, marriage, and career based on their athletic identity. Chapter 5 illuminates the career of Yang Xiuqiong, the champion swimmer whose exploits captured the hearts and imagination of the Chinese people. While focusing on Yang’s career, I trace the rise of swimming as a popular sport and examine the significance of Chinese female swimmers as performers and objects of adoration, and of their unique position as healthy and sensual women approved by the New Life Movement. This chapter analyzes the meaning of female competitive swimming and accompanying fame during a period in Chinese history when fitness and athletic prowess became intertwined with national political goals and individual ambition. Chapter 6 focuses on how the movie actress Li Lili’s “athletic movie star” image served as a site where ideological values and political systems constructed and contested notions of nation and state during the national crisis. A concluding chapter considers the influence of these sportswomen on the later history of China.

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