Yunxiang Gao


China’s outstanding sports performance in the past decades goes hand in hand with the country’s growing economic and political influence. Clearly, China is using sports performance to cleanse past humiliation as well as to mark its ascendency onto the world stage. Athletes that bring glory to the country are promoted as national heroes/heroines. Very often, they are glorified and commercially made into stars and celebrities. Sporting Gender: Women Athletes and Celebrity-Making during China’s National Crisis, 1931–45 is a very interesting and valuable study that demonstrates a historical account of this intertwining relationship between athleticism and nationalism. Utilizing archival materials, newspaper and magazine accounts of that era with contemporary biographies and autobiographies, Gao traces specifically how female athletes, sports administrators and athletic movie stars – their bodies and social behaviours – were guided and disciplined to help present a modernizing and strong China during the crisis years of the 1930s to mid-1940s. Gao’s attentiveness to details offers a vivid account of the lives and times of these women. Its extensive use of media materials convincingly shows how the media played an important role in the display and construction of Chinese femininities.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the book consists of six chapters. All chapters, except Chapter 2, are organized around one specific woman or a few athletic women that were representative in China’s development of tiyu (physical culture). Gao shows how the Nationalists, Communists and some intellectuals used the national crisis to urge citizens to strengthen their bodies and minds with the goal to build a strong China that could fight off foreign aggressors.

The first chapter looks into the “Mother of Women’s Modern Physical Education” – Zhang Huilan (1898–1996). Much of the contemporary official account of Chinese’s sport development focuses on male sports administrator such as Zhang Boling (1876–1951) of Nankai University for his contribution to China’s Olympic history. This chapter offers a refreshing and insightful biographical account of Zhang Huilan and her contribution in China’s tiyu development. Zhang was one of the very few Chinese women who attended YWCA missionary schools at the turn of the twentieth century and got a doctorate in physical education from an American university. This transnational experience equipped her with robust scientific knowledge and skills to cross gender and racial lines that helped improve female students’ sports performance. The
author describes her as a sophisticated academic administrator who skilfully manoeuvred powerful male patrons and got their support for her cause to develop female physical culture. Gao also shows how Zhang Huilian – a Chinese feminist pioneer – had given in and chosen to uphold a more conventional and conservative motherhood and wifehood role in public in order to avoid social judgment of her homosexuality.

Chapter 2 breaks with the book’s general focus on athletic figures by tracing the development of the discourse of jianmei 健美 (robust/healthy beauty), physical beauty acquired through regular and systemic exercises. Drawing on an analysis of the popular magazine Linglong 玲瓏 (Elegance; published between 1931 and 1937), Gao explores how the press played an instrumental role in propagating the discourse of jianmei and how this discourse was intimately linked to those of Chinese modernity. This chapter provides insightful background information about the period of national crisis and how this crisis affected the bodies of female citizens.

Through a focus of another sport administrator Lu Lihua 陸禮華 (1900–97), Chapter 3 looks into the rise of women’s basketball. It pays particular attention to the basketball team of the private Shanghai-based school Liangjiang Tiyu 兩江體育. Lu’s entrepreneurial skill had helped popularize the Liangjiang basketball team, turning it into a brand that attracted commercial and popular interests. Nonetheless, the more popular the team became, the more criticism the female basketball players drew because they appeared “over-liberated, superficial ‘Modern Girls’ who indulged in sexual and material pleasures. Despite their momentary fame, many of these basketball team players faded into anonymity. Like Zhang Huilan, Lu was aware of the importance of acquiring support from powerful male patrons; however, she never did receive the kind of backing she wanted.

Chapter 4 focuses on the three track queens – Sun Guiyun 孫桂雲 (dates unknown), Qian Xingsu 錢行素 (1915–68) and Li Sen 李森 (1914 [1917?]–48). Influenced by social Darwinism, track competition has often been seen as a clear display of human power and speed. How Chinese women performed in track competition was read as a direct reflection of the country’s strength. Gao presented an elaborated analysis on how the track sports clothes had exposed these female athletes’ bodies, making them vulnerable to predators and turning them into subjects of rumour and ridicule. To fend off scandals and unwanted predators, these sportswomen employed self-defence tactics such as celibacy or cultivating a girlish asexual look and persona.

Chapter 5 discusses the female athlete of Sporting Gender’s cover – Yang Xiuqiong 楊秀瓊 (1918–82), China’s first Olympic swimmer. Known as “Miss China” and the “Mermaid,” Yang was hugely popular in the 1930s. Coupled with