China rejuvenated? Governmentality, subjectivity, and normativity: the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

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III

CHINESE BODIES THAT MATTER
CHAPTER 3 CHINESE BODIES THAT MATTER: THE SEARCH FOR MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

Me: Why do people cast such high expectations on Liu Xiang?

Interviewee 1: Because Chinese do not know much about track and field sports, Liu Xiang as a Chinese performed so well in the track and field sports, then everyone certainly expected much from him.

Interviewee 2: The pride of Chinese, he is the fastest.

Interviewee 1: Yes, we all shared the thought that the Bird’s Nest [the National Stadium] was built for him, it cost RMB 38 billion, then he withdrew from the competition . . . Track and field sports, Chinese don’t really understand them, interests in track and field sports are chiefly because of Liu Xiang, that’s why everyone was interested in track and field sports.

Me: Wasn’t there a female athlete, Wang Junxia [a former long-distance runner who won a gold medal at the 1996 Atlanta Games], was it?

Interviewee 1: Yes, but that was in 1992, she broke the world record, or was it in 1991, then it was in the long-distance; short-distance, Asians are not good at that . . . Chinese men are not performing so well in sports, for example, in this short-distance track and field sports competition, China had never had good results.54

The rumor that the Bird’s Nest was built for Liu Xiang (刘翔) spoke for the hope and expectations cast on a male athlete. Liu Xiang shot to fame overnight when he won an

54 Chinese Olympic volunteers whose serving point was at the Bird’s Nest.
Olympic gold medal in the 110-meter hurdles in the 2004 Athens Games. This moment was discursively produced as a significant historical moment for Chinese as it was believed that Chinese were not good at track and field games, just as my interviewees suggested. Liu might have been the first Chinese male who won a gold medal in track and field events but he was not the first Chinese gold medalist in these games. In fact, the first Chinese track and field Olympic gold medalist was Wang Junxia (王军霞), a female athlete specializing in the long-distance track event in the 1996 Atlanta Games — not in 1991 or 1992 as my interviewee said. Wang Junxia was not the only one; Wang Liping (王丽萍, a female race walker) also won a gold medal in the 2000 Sydney Games. Wang Liping recalled that her participation in the female 20-kilometer race walk was not an important game in the eyes of Chinese: When she won the game, no Chinese journalists were around. It was later when the journalists heard the news that they ran to the venue (Olympics Approaching [奥运来了], shown on April 19, 2008). These female athletes never enjoyed popularity like Liu. This prompts one to ask why the significance of a male athlete winning a gold medal outweighed that of female athletes. Rather than suggesting it as yet more evidence of a male-centered/-dominated discourse, I believe this could very well be a point where gender intersects with Chineseness. The “Chineseness” I am referring to here is linked to China’s historical background and its march to modernity.

The Olympic Games are never just about sports. How a nation-state performs in sports competitions is associated with the strength of the nation: not only in terms of its politico-economic strength but also the symbolic strength of the nation as a whole. As sports historian J. A. Mangan writes, “Sport is a mirror in which nations, communities, men and women now see themselves. The reflection is sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes distorted, sometimes magnified. The metaphorical mirror is a source of mass exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, bonding and alienation” (2006: 1–2). In the hope of demonstrating a strong and modern China that is no longer “the sick man of Asia,” Chinese athletes have embodied this dream of the nation to perform well in international sports competitions. Athletes who win gold medals in the Olympics are seen as heroes/heroines, often assigned with a star-like status. Much has been written on the importance of sports for displaying national strength (see, for example, Dai 2001; J. Dong 2005; Brownell 1995, 2005; Close, Askew, and Xu 2007). Given the popularity of many athletes in today’s China, research on the representation of both male

Informed by Judith Butler’s (1993) idea of performativity, this chapter examines the construction of gender roles pertaining to the Chinese athletes in the period leading up to the 2008 Olympics. Three questions guide my analysis here: (1) What kind of masculine ideals and feminine ideals were assigned to athletes of different time periods? (2) How did these gender performances of athletes articulate specific versions of Chineseness? (3) How did these performances change over time?

History and politics intersect with gender perception. Through the representation of Chinese athletes of three different Olympic moments, I study the changing perceptions on femininity and masculinity. The existing literature on athletes and sports in China focuses mainly on the success of female athletes; little attention is paid to their male counterparts (see for example, Brownell 2005, 2008). Similarly, gender studies in general and Chinese gender studies in particular, tend to focus largely on women (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002; Y. Chow 2008; de Kloet 2008: 286; Teng 1996: 143; Hershatter 2004, 2007). In fact, studies focusing on Chinese women have grown extensively in the past three decades (Hershatter 2004, 2007) and Chinese women studies has become an established subfield in China studies (Teng 1996; Hershatter 2007). In recent years, researchers have made attempts to address this lack of “Chinese men studies” (see, for example, Richard Fung [1991] on Chinese gay men and queer sexuality; Kam Louie [2002]; Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom’s edited book Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities [2002]; Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar [2006] on how men should act in Chinese cinema; and Yiufai Chow [2008] on Chinese diaspora in the Dutch context). Despite these efforts, insufficient academic attention has been given to Chinese men in general and male athletes in particular, especially in relation to national identity and nationalism. As Teng writes, “while our knowledge of women in China has greatly expanded, we must examine issues of masculinity as well as femininity if we wish to gain an informed understanding of gender in China” (1996: 144).

Dong Jinxia and J. A. Mangan (2001) give a detailed description of China’s football history, in which more attention is given to male football history. However, they mention nothing about the representation of male athletes.
Instead of reading gender as a fixed and predetermined category, and focusing solely on the inequality between men and women, I study in this chapter the constructedness of sex, gender norms, and the cultural and historical contexts that give rise to masculine and feminine ideals. Researchers in women studies have found the sex/gender distinction useful to avoid biological determinism implied in this approach. Sex usually refers to biology (which is seen fixed at birth) while gender often refers to “the roles, behaviors, and symbols attached to anatomical sex in a particular culture; it is said to be learned and culturally variable” (Scott 1991; Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002: 24). Butler, however, finds this sex/gender distinction inadequate and insufficient to explain the existing categories. She asserts that sex (biological body) is not a taken-for-granted natural fact. What seems to be natural is produced and constructed through repeated performative utterances and discourses (Butler 1999 [1990]). The concept of performativity is central in Butler’s argument. She elaborates that performativity does not simply refer to “performance” or “theater”: One does not choose to perform a sex or gender role as this would assume a priori existence of subjectivity (2004b, 1993). Rather, one is interpellated to be “girled” or “boyed” (Butler 2004b: 140). In discussing how performativity should be understood, Butler writes:

In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. (1999 [1990]: XV)

Sex, gender, and body (the idea how sex and gender are ascribed onto the body) preexisted the individuals; there is a whole body of discourses surrounding them and these discourses have given them — sex, gender norms, and body — authority as truth and as natural fact. Performativity as a concept shows the mechanism of how an unnatural “thing” obtains its “naturalness” and becomes truth.
The concept of performativity is a useful analytical tool to tease out the prescribed gender roles assigned to male and female Chinese athletes. In the first instance, it denaturalizes what appears as *normal* or *ideal* masculinity and femininity embodied by male and female athletes. It enables one to question and to see in what ways gender norms are discursively and linguistically produced and materialized onto the body; and to see how the bodies are materialized as sexed and gendered. It also allows one to see the fluid and non-static aspects of gender roles, that is, how gender roles change over time. Repeated acts consolidate gender norms but, at times, they also give room for changes (or, moments of resistance) as in every performance (or repeated utterances), there exists difference(s) in utterances.

The body is central in the construction and performance of gender roles. Informed by Foucault, Butler asserts that a body is not a natural and uncontested fact, rather it is a field on which sex and gender roles are ascribed. In Butler’s words, “The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (2004a: 114). My analysis demonstrates how manliness and femaleness are cultural as well as political products produced according to the needs of the nation and the state at different historical moments.

In the rest of the chapter, I begin with a discussion about the importance of sports and bodily image in China’s nation-building project. Then, I present my analysis on the representation of the three sets of male and female athletes: (1) Liu Changchun and Yang Xiuqiong (representing the revolutionary China); (2) Li Ning and Lang Ping (representing the post-opening up period); and (3) Liu Xiang and Guo Jingjing (representing a global China). I conclude this chapter with a summary of my arguments and some questions for future research.

**SPORTS, BODY, AND NATION**

“The sick man of Asia” has been discursively mobilized to shape Chinese attitudes toward sports, body, and nationalism. The repetitive performances of the image is, in recalling Butler’s words, “at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation”
In narrating China’s century-old Olympic dream, the links between sports, fragile Chinese bodies, and China’s humiliating past are often drawn. The story unfolds as follows: The dynastic empire under the Qing government was too weak to defend itself against the invading Western imperialists. China’s incapability of defending itself gave it an insulting title — “the sick man of Asia.” Images about the old China — often depicting men in pigtails looking malnourished, tired, and slave-like in poverty-ridden settings — were shown in Olympicad (figures 3.1–3.3). Their frail bodies, coupled with their expressionless faces, gave the impression that they lacked both physical and emotional strength. What contrasted sharply was the manliness embodied by the powerful imperialist West: Western men were seen to wear short hair and fit-to-body clothes, an image of fitness and neatness that they would be ready to take on any physical action (figure 3.3). Chinese men’s pigtails and their loose clothes in the form of cheongsam (长衫), changpao (长袍), or dagua (大褂) made them look clumsy and effeminate as only Western women would wear long hair and dress-like clothes.

Masculinity is often constructed around men’s ability to protect their family and to defend their country — a strong country needs strong men. Facing the imperialist West, Chinese men became the impotent Other that lacked manly strength. To visually manufacture a sense of collective pain, these images borrowed the reductionist and self-orientalizing stereotypes about China and the West: the fragile and effeminate Chinese versus the strong and masculine West. They selectively remembered the pain of certain bodies and forgot the rest: Think, for instance, of the masculine bodies personified by the martial arts masters in films like Fearless (霍元甲), Ip Man (叶问), etc. This reminds us of Abbas’ words on the notion of forgetting: Forgetting should be understood as “remembering something as something else” (2012, forthcoming). The representation of a clear Chinese-Western divide, despite its attempt to manufacture a sense of shame and nationalistic sentiments, enhances the Orientalist way of seeing the West and the Orient (Said 1978). China is the West’s feminized Other. These archival images of Chinese men show how the Orientals have orientalized themselves: how they come to understand themselves through the eyes of the West and how they evaluate themselves through the standard set by the West. Rey Chow points out that orientalism as a way of seeing “can be

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56 The Qing Dynasty, from 1644 to 1911, was the last dynasty in Chinese history. It was overthrown after the 1911 Revolution and was succeeded by the Republic of China.
used by natives and non-natives alike” (1993b: 7). The representation of these different bodies reveals what Butler writes, “the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (2004a: 113). Whereas Butler’s concerns are mainly the heterosexual-normativity, I borrow her idea to apply on a normativity derived from the Caucasian body. The repetitive performances of the Chinese male bodies vis-à-vis the Western bodies shape one’s perception on what constitutes an ideal manliness and what needs to be done to achieve this ideal.

Figures 3.1–3.3: Images of Chinese men shown in *Olympiad.*

Women’s bound feet is another bodily symbol of China’s feudal past (Duara 1998; Brownell 2008; Ko 2005). The bound feet is a *stand-in* for the suffering of oppressed Chinese women. In Hershatter’s (2007) elaboration on Ko’s (2005) viewpoint on footbinding, it says “footbinding became the Other of modernity, a shameful remnant that had to be overcome in order for a healthy nation to emerge.” (37) Unlike the repeated performance and articulation of the sickly Chinese men, footbinding is rarely mentioned or shown in these representations. A plausible explanation would be that women are not the

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primary defenders of a country whereas men are often made to carry the burden of defending the country physically. Just like the infamous “sick man” label, the primary focus is the sick man, not woman.

This, however, does not mean that Chinese women are exempted from pressures to change brought by the West. Many Chinese intellectuals and reformers in the early twentieth century and during the May Fourth Era\(^58\) associated China’s backwardness with the physical weakness of its women (Hershatter 2007; Brownell 2008; Teng 1996) and their poor social status. They believed that Western women were physically stronger and more mobile than Chinese women. For a long time, the proper place for Chinese women was the “inner” realm — the family and the household (Rofel 1999; Hershatter 2007). It was said that a virtuous woman should not leave her own household (三步不出闺门). Chinese women at that time were living “in a condition of virtual servitude” (Brownell 2008: 98). These intellectuals equated the condition of Chinese women to the strength of China as a nation: China was weak because its women were weak, China is strong when its women are liberated and strong (Brownell 2008: 98; Teng 1996; R. Chow 1991; Edwards 2000; Greenhalgh 2001; Duara 1998). The question of how to liberate women from the oppressive feudal society was, as such, a key concern for them (Duara 1998; Teng 1996).\(^59\)

As Jinhua Emma Teng (1996) writes, “woman’ became a figure for the struggle between tradition and modernity” (117). A strong China needed its women to be modernized. Women were told to unbind their feet and to engage in physical activities (figure 3.4). All these ideas, however, were proposed, initiated, and led mostly by Chinese men\(^60\) (see, for example, figure 3.5). As Duara explains these male-led social reforms, “women were to be liberated for and by the nation; they were to embody the nation, not to be active agents shaping it” (1998: 370).

\(^{58}\) The May Fourth Era (around 1915–1921) refers to the period leading up to and after the May Fourth Incident (五四运动) in Beijing on May 4, 1919 — a mass protest against the Chinese government’s intention to sign the unequal treaty of Versailles that would give Shandong (山东) to Japan. The May Fourth Era refers to the attempts to modernize China with the Western concepts of democracy and science. It is often associated with the New Culture Movement (新文化运动). Some of the leading figures of the period were, for example, Yan Fu (严复), Kang Youwei (康有为), Tan Sitong (谭嗣同), Lu Xun (鲁迅), Sun YatSen (孙逸仙).

\(^{59}\) Yet, Teng also warns that equating “woman as a figure for the ‘nation,’ [male] reformist empathy for ‘woman’ could be linked to the awareness of China’s feminization vis-à-vis the Western imperialist powers during this historical period when Chinese sovereignty was under threat” (1996: 117).

\(^{60}\) An exception is the famous revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin (秋瑾) — an anti-Qing empire revolutionary who was executed after a failed uprising. There were numerous Chinese women who sought to change women’s social positions; however, they were never as well-known as their male counterparts.
At the turn of the twentieth century, many Chinese elite — under the influence of Social Darwinism — felt the urgency of transformation. They associated China’s weakness with the physical weakness of its people (read, for example, Nyiri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010). They blamed the Confucian tradition as the cause of China’s weakness, a tradition that placed strong emphasis on the mind (literacy) and undervalued the body (physical strength).61 The ideal in social Darwinism, survival of the fittest, had convinced many that “strong bodies” made a “strong nation” (Caffrey 2009a: 1010). To save the nation, the bodies of men and women had to be emancipated.62 What this exemplifies is a biopolitical discourse that links the development of subjects to the overall strength of a nation (Sigley 2004).

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61 Mencius’ famous words “Those who work with their brains rule; those who work with their brawn are ruled” vividly capture this deep-seated belief (Brownell, 2005; Xu Guoqi. 2008b. “The Body Beautiful: Jonathan Spence’s Final Reith Lecture.” http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2008/07/body-beautiful-jonathan-spences-final.html [accessed on Aug 10, 2008]). With the emphasis on memorization of the Classics, the civil service examinations (the method of selecting government officials from the population) practiced since the Song dynasty discouraged all physical activities in the society.

62 The elites at that time were mainly Han people and their nationalistic sentiments were largely Han-centric, excluding the ethnic minorities living in China (Duara 1997).
In unfolding China’s sports history, the life story of Zhang Boling (张伯苓) — the founder of Nankai University (南开大学) and a pioneer in promoting physical education⁶³ — is often mentioned. His story is one that exemplifies China’s pursuit of modernity and the possibility of transformation.

Images of Zhang give a glimpse of these changes. Figure 3.6 is a portrait of Zhang as a cadet officer in the Beiyang Fleet (北洋舰队). The Qing officer costume and his emotionless face seem to suggest that he was just another powerless male officer in the Qing court. When he adopted the Western way of manliness (as signified by his short hair, bow tie, and suit), he radiated an aura of confidence — looking directly into the camera — as shown in figures 3.7 and 3.8. To be a man was to be and to act like one’s Western counterpart: wearing short hair, growing a moustache, wearing suits with a bow tie, and being physically active. Driven by the desire to be like the modern West, Zhang, like many members of the Chinese elite at that time, went through the process of self-transformation, internalizing the masculine standard set by their Western counterparts. How one carries oneself, in Butler’s words, is “never fully self-styled, for styles have a history and those

⁶³ Nankai was first established as a high school in Tianjin in 1904 and became a university in 1919. Official materials like the program Olympiad & China have linked Nankai University to China’s Olympic quest.
histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a corporal style, an ‘act,’ as it were [was], which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (2004a: 113). These changes in bodily image exemplify not simply a changing perception of manliness but also the productive aspect of power, as Foucault suggests (1980a). The transformation empowers people to connect with the outside and to be able to initiate changes. This, however, does not change the fact that the very act of transformation enforces the hierarchy of the West and the rest.

Modern sports and physical activities — a by-product of Western imperialist expansion in the nineteenth century (see, for example, Close, Askew, and Xu 2007; Brownell 2008) — were seen as the answers to save the country and the people. As Brownell writes,

Western sports were a key symbol in the criticism of Chinese tradition because they embodied so many of the attributes of the West that China did not have – or so it was claimed. These included manliness, martial vigour, military strength, a penchant for action, democracy, freedom and a whole host of other traits. Chinese people took to heart the image of the ‘sick man of East Asia’ and it became a clarion call for the development of sports in China. (2005: 1182)

Over the years, sports performance has come to symbolize the strength of China and its people. Poor performances of Chinese delegations in international competitions like the Olympics (e.g. the 1936 Berlin Games or the 1952 Helsinki Games) are translated as failures of the people and the country. It brings back the whole history about China’s humiliating past and the shameful “sick man” title. To do well in the Olympics is not simply a quest but a necessity for the government and for the people. Brownell points out how the Western sports tradition has been appropriated to meet China’s nation-building project: “Sports were emptied of their muscular Christian moral content and replaced with contents that suited the needs of the politics and tenor of the times in China. The muscular Christian morality of fair play, citizenship, and democracy was replaced over time with

64 Some sports such as polo, football, and golf, are said to have originated in ancient China.
Chinese discourses about national prestige and international competition” (1995: 12). This nationalistic sentiment has existed since Republican China, and has persisted till today. Sports and the athlete’s body have come to play a symbolic role in the development of a new China and the rise of Chinese nationalism.

“I CAN COMPETE! (我能比呀!)” — LIU CHANGCHUN (刘长春) AND YANG XIUQIONG (杨秀琼)

The modern Olympic Games, re-created after the Greek Olympic Games three thousand years ago, symbolize the origins of Western civilization. Historian Xu Guoqi writes, “Sports and the Olympics in particular, show well how nationalism and internationalism come together in China: Chinese participation and interest in modern sports are largely motivated by nationalism, but by importing sports from the West and taking part in world competitions, China has also engaged the world community” (2008a: 3). The competitive spirit in modern sports is seen to represent the spirit of modernity, an important element constituting Western civilization (Brownell 2005). Participating in the Olympics signifies China’s ambition to pursue modernity and to catch up with the Western others. This ambition was articulated in the first Chinese translation of Olympiad — 我能比呀 (literally meaning “I can compete”), a term coined by Song Ruhai (宋如海), the first official Chinese representative to the 1928 Amsterdam Games.65

65 Mentioned in episode 1 “I Can Compete” of Olympiad.
Figures 3.9 and 3.10: Images of Liu Changchun (left) and Zhang Xueliang (right) shown in *Olympiad*.

Liu Changchun is described as China’s first Olympic athlete. His life story and his pursuit of the Olympic dream were brought up repeatedly in the Chinese media in the period around the Beijing Games. A film *The One Man Olympics* (一个人的奥林匹克), a 24-episode TV series *Chasing Dream* (追梦), and many documentary programs (e.g. *Olympiad*) are some of the known examples. Liu was portrayed as a doomed national hero born in a time of turmoil. Despite all the challenges surrounding him, Liu never gave up and he managed to represent China in the 1932 Los Angeles Games. He embodied not only the dream of China, but also the ideal Chineseness — patriotic, tough, and resilient. Among the images shown in the documentaries, the archival news images of Liu before embarking on the Olympic journey showed how he embodied this national dream. As Dyer (1997) writes, “clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class” (146). Liu’s clothes — a *cheongsam*, unlike the others in suits — displayed his embodiment of the nation’s ambition. And, yet, his stern face and his covered-up body seemed to suggest that

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he was burdened by the nation. In contrast, Zhang Xueliang (张学良) stood next to him looking confident and relaxed; the nation did not weigh down on him as it did on Liu, as shown in figures 3.9 and 3.10. His suit empowered his position, showing that he was a modernized Chinese who could bridge China and the outside world (Zhang made China’s Olympic dream possible by donating eight thousand yuan for Liu to go to the 1932 LA Olympics). In the filmic representation The One Man Olympics (hereafter The One), Liu was usually shown wearing Western-style clothing but when it came to moments emphasizing his cultural and national identity — as a son to his father, as a husband to his newly-wed wife, as a father to his soon-to-be-born child, as a compatriot to his Chinese counterparts, and as a Chinese in front of Japanese invaders — he wore clothes that reminded the audience of his Chineseness.

In many of the archival images, Liu was mostly seen wearing shorts and sleeveless shirts. The display of his body empowered him, allowing him to show off his manliness just like Western men. In his university days at Northeastern University (东北大学), Liu’s

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67 Zhang Xueliang, known as the Little Marshal, was the son of Zhang Zuolin (张作霖), a warlord in Dongbei (东北). The Xi’an incident (1936) — in which he kidnapped Chiang Kai-shek and forced him to unite with the Communists to fight the Japanese invaders — turned him into a hero in mainland China.
outstanding track record made him the center of attention. Liu at that time looked confident (if not flamboyant), a confidence enabled by his athletic physique. As figures 3.11–3.13 show, he was posing: eyes looking straight at the camera, arms open leaning on his hips, legs apart, chest out showing his torso. He was not only aware but also proud of his figure (figures 3.11–3.12). Nevertheless, once he took on the mission to represent China, his body became the vehicle for a nation’s dream. His flamboyance gave way to modesty (figure 3.13). The nation seemed to rest heavily on his shoulders.

In *The One*, Liu’s manliness (played by Li Zhaolin [李兆霖]) was made visually explicit through his tanned, trained muscular body — a built body — and a masculine body image widely seen in the West (see figures 3.14–3.15). This bodily image showed that the West still maintained a dominant position over the Oriental Other, not only on the political and economic levels but also on the cultural and symbolic levels. This domination manifested itself in a subtle way. In the premiere, Li Zhaolin looked more like the boy next door instead of the Sparta-like warrior shown in the film. His skin color was fair and he did not appear to be very muscular. The director Hou Yong (侯咏) said the following in our interview:

I did not think of it as a Western body type, I think this physique materializes what we understand as body beauty, it shows a contrasting image of what the West thought of China, the “sick man of Asia.” Chinese people at that time, because of malnourishment, they were rather skinny, not like now. I think it is a better image, the Liu Changchun in our mind was a healthy and strong person, though it’s not quite like this in real life. Chinese athletes in 100m and 200m sprints are not that muscular, experts can tell that he [Li, the actor playing Liu Changchun] is not a short-distance runner. Well, he used to run 100m and 200m, when he went to the film academy he started bodybuilding. . . . I told him to get tanned, this would look healthier, save some efforts on make-up, he also lost some weight for this role, this helped change his muscular body, from a broader body built to a slender one.

The ideal manliness projected on the body of Liu (李) was visually defined by a muscular body, an archetype defined by Western standard (Dyer 1997). This built physique
speaks to the need for an affirmation of Chinese manliness. A hard and contoured body protects Chinese masculinity from being submerged into the image of the effeminate Oriental. As Dyer (1997) writes, “bodybuilding in popular culture articulates white masculinity” (148), which “invokes a US, and a fortiori California, life style, with a characteristic emphasis on ideas of health, energy and naturalness” (149). It is a body achieved through hours of training and agonies one has to go through to attain it; it signifies “the most literal triumph of mind over matter, imagination over flesh” (ibid.: 151–53). This built physique need not be a white body per se; yet, it is a globally appealing body as it is shown in Hollywood films and embodied by celebrities (de Kloet 2008). What appears to be a beautiful and healthy body type can never be taken for granted, as Butler (1999 [1990]) reminds us, it has a group of discourses revolving around it. As Foucault writes in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1989 [1969]), every discourse has a genealogy and the discourse of a beautiful body is no exception. It is through repetitive reenactment of this body image, that a body figure is masculinized and idealized.

Another point of reference is the tanned body. Tanning is something white people usually do; a tanned body is usually identified as a symbol of wealth, leisure, and a healthy lifestyle (Dyer, 1997: 155). For a long time, a tanned Chinese body has been associated with low social status as the skin color would suggest outdoor labor like farming or migrant labor, whereas fair (white) skin color has been associated with wealth and high social status as one does not need to work outdoors. Only in recent years has the tanned body become popular for it suggests a healthy lifestyle. This paradoxical development is a good example showing how the aesthetic body beauty is constructed and how it can be modified and shaped if a particular form is performed more and valued higher. The body image embraced in *The One* is taken from the globalized imageries of the West. This makes one wonder what if China’s first Olympic athlete were a woman, how would she be represented?

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68 In recent years, the trend has experienced slight changes: too much tanning is a signifier of the working class.
Much of the information related to China’s Olympic history in the early days was on male athletes. Information about female athletes then was scanty. Thus far, only two female athletes have been mentioned, they were Yang Xiuqiong (杨秀琼) and Li Sen (李森). Li was a track sprinter — the first female track and field athlete to represent China in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Her name and her life story were rarely heard of. Yang — a swimmer — became first known by representing the British colony Hong Kong at the Fifth National Games in China in 1933. It was said that her outstanding swimming records gave her instant fame and the title of “the beautiful mermaid” (美人鱼). Yang was presented in Olympiad as if she was the first and only female athlete; while Li was only briefly mentioned in a sentence. The producer of Olympiad has chosen to define Yang through her beauty first, then the fact that she was one of the athletes representing China in the 1936 Games (see figure 3.16, the subtitle reads “Yang Xiuqiong, known as the beautiful mermaid, had participated in the 1936 Berlin Games.”) Her beauty — often linked to her modern-ness — was given the center of attention, as made evident by portraits and interview clips of her (figures 3.16–3.18). Her short and slightly curly hair, her gracious smile, her slender physique in swimsuit, and her confidence in speaking to the public drew the audience’s attention to her beauty. She exemplified the archetype of a

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69 She won all five medals in swimming at the National Games at the age of fifteen.
modern feminine beauty in the 1930s. Her modern-ness was made visible by her swimsuits, something that might look ordinary to most of us today but not in early twentieth-century China. In the hope of emphasizing this point, the producers of *Olympiad* juxtaposed a clip of Guo Jie (郭洁, a male discus thrower participating in the 1936 Games) in this section. Guo said:

> At that time sandals, plastic sandals were new. How could women wear that, the toes would be exposed. Then when I arrived in Shanghai, as a guest to my friends’ home, then I saw women wearing sports shoes, those you could see the toes inside, then I thought how strange, how could it be accepted? I was like this [conservative].

If exposing toes was considered unconventional, then a swimsuit would have been even more controversial in the old China. The message that Yang embodied the quality of a modern woman was strengthened by the fact that she was elected by the *Young Companion* (良友画报)70 as one of the ten model modern women in the 1930s, a fact highlighted by *Olympiad*.

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70 *The Young Companion* was said to be the most influential magazine that promoted progressive thinking in early twentieth-century China. Many influential intellectuals such as Lu Xun (鲁迅) and Yu Dafu (郁达夫) had written for the magazine. The *Young Companion* was also the first Chinese magazine that included photographs, had celebrities on the cover, and was printed in color.
According to the *Young Companion*, an ideal modern woman would be equipped with one of the following criteria:

Virtuous and helpful to husband like Song Meiling; with artistic skills like He Xiangning; well-known and famous like Hu Die; literally gifted like Ding Ling; swimming so well like Yang Xiuqiong.

(有宋美龄之相夫肾德; 有何香凝之艺术手腕; 如胡蝶之名闻四海; 有丁玲之文学天才; 如杨秀琼之入水能游)\(^71\) (quoted in *Olympiad*)

These women were praised for their distinguishing qualities — as a presentable wife with diplomatic skills, an artist, an actress, a writer, and an athlete — all of them had achieved something beyond their traditional roles as a daughter, a wife, or a mother. They were not only talented but also well-known for their love for the nation.\(^72\) They stood out as a contrasting image of the oppressed weak women with bound feet. Being emphasized as a model modern woman,\(^73\) Yang helped constitute and perform a feminine ideal China that sought to embrace at that time. By representing Yang as a modern woman and by bringing in the discourse of model women, China’s dedication to embrace modernity was reaffirmed and enunciated. It also showed that China was on the path of becoming a strong modernized nation.

Despite the repeated emphasis on modern-ness, most of the criteria mentioned in the model modern women still reflected the feminine ideals emphasized by the Confucius

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\(^71\) Song Meiling was the wife of Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang, therefore also known as the First Lady of the Republic of China (ROC). He Xiangning was a female revolutionist and a famous painter in the early twentieth century. Hu Die was a famous actress during the ROC. Ding Ling was a well-known woman author and social activist supporting Communism. These women were well-known for their times, yet, to me, Yang was the least heard of. If it was not for this documentary, I would not have known her and her contribution to Chinese sports history. This shows how the past is selectively called into the present to furnish a collective memory for the Chinese viewers.

\(^72\) Song was a very presentable first lady representing China in the international political arena. He Xiangning was a revolutionist who fought alongside Dr. Sun Yatsen. Hu refused to act in a Japanese propaganda movie. Ding was an activist aiming to bring a better future for China. Yang represented China to compete in an international sports event.

\(^73\) According to Hershatter (2007), the modern new woman envisioned by the revolutionaries in the May Fourth Movement “would be educated, employed, independent, concerned with public life, and attentive to the plight of women more oppressed than she” (86).
tradition: the four virtues (四德)\textsuperscript{74} of moral behavior (妇德), proper speech (妇言), good manners (妇容), and diligence (妇功). A model modern woman was still by and large defined by being a good and presentable wife who knew her place, acting and behaving properly, as well as having artistic and social skills to please others. As Duara points out insightfully, there was this “tension between the desire to modernize (the lives of women as well) and to conserve the truth of their regime in the bodies of women” (1998: 299).

Despite the desire to modernize women and China, women were still largely seen as the site, the body that preserved the authentic “unchanging essence and moral purity of that nation” (ibid.: 296). Yang’s athletic skills appeared to have made her stand out as a new modern woman of her time. However, her active public appearance and social life\textsuperscript{75} were said to be the cause of her doomed destiny when she was forced to divorce her first husband to marry a warlord, Fan Shaozeng (范绍增),\textsuperscript{76} and become the eighteenth concubine of him. Her athletic life also stopped from that moment onward, as Olympiad unfolded her life story. Implicitly, this seemed to suggest that Yang was punished for her unconventional role, as Butler reminds readers that “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler 2004a: 114; Butler 2004b).

**CHINA EMERGING — LI NING (李宁) AND LANG PING (郎平)**

Sport itself is not about winning or losing, the spirit promoted by Olympism is not only about gold medals, but people’s enthusiasm about gold medals has clouded their judgment, [they] have lost their rational thinking.

(Song Shixiong [宋世雄], a sports commentator)\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} The four virtues are mentioned in the proper conduct of women in traditional Chinese culture — The Three Obedience(s) Four Virtues (三从四德). This guide of proper conduct is often read as a proof of Chinese women’s subordination and low social status. Yet, some researchers like Dorothy Ko (1994) criticize the oversimplified view about the Three Obedience(s) Four Virtues (Teng, 1996: 121).

\textsuperscript{75} Yang was often shown socializing with other celebrities or famous people in Shanghai in the 1930s.

\textsuperscript{76} Fan met Yang during the national swimming competitions in Chongqing (重庆) in 1937.

\textsuperscript{77} This quote is taken from the fourth episode “Smile * 1988” of Olympiad.
Mao Zedong was the first to realize the importance of sports in both domestic and international politics in China (Close, Askew, and Xu, 2007). As Dong and Mangan writes, “from the moment of the birth of the ‘New China’, sport has been... a means of internal and external projection illustrating the capacity of the system and people to more than hold their own with those of other nations. In short, sport has been the ‘stage’ on which the Chinese perform in pursuit of world recognition, respect and esteem” (quoted in Mangan 2008: 751). The excellent performance of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist nations in the 1952 Helsinki Games marked these countries’ ascent in the international political arena. This experience had long-term effects on China’s national sports system. China was driven to achieve better sports results to demonstrate that the country had leaped forward and was doing well in all aspects. Thus, China has been investing a lot on training its athletes.

Nian Weisi (年维泗), former chairman of China’s National Football Association, said, “Later on, we learned that it took ten thousand farmers’ yearly income to send one football player to Hungary to learn how to play better football. When the country was so poor, this determining gesture was a big boost to us... we took this opportunity and wanted to play better to bring glory to our country” (Episode 2, Olympic). During the Cold War, China cut its connections with most of the international sports organizations. It had not sent a delegation to the Olympics for three decades. When Deng Xiaoping came to power, he made many policy changes to reconnect the PRC with the world. Sports again played a crucial role. In 1984, China sent an official delegation again to the Los Angeles Olympic Games, winning its first gold medals in history.

Li Ning and Lang Pang were among the athletes in the Chinese delegation to the 1984 Olympics. Both of them won gold medals. In the eyes of Chinese at that time, they were the hero and heroines. Li Ning, a former gymnast, is widely known as the “Prince of gymnastics” (体操王子). His outstanding performance in the Games — three gold medals, two silver medals, and a bronze medal — turned him into a household name and a celebrity in China. His Zhuang (壮族) ethnic background was rarely brought up and was submerged into the large and encompassing family of the nation. Lang Pang, also known as “Iron Hammer” (铁榔头) for her powerful spikes, was a member of the Chinese volleyball
Many believed that it was her powerful spikes that had brought many championships to the female volleyball team in the 1980s. Brownell recounts her popularity then:

Over 100 groups and individuals sent them gifts, including Young Pioneer scarves, Youth League pins, school badges, commemorative badges, valuable food items. Embroidery, metalwork, and fresh flowers. Famous artists sent them a seal, calligraphy, artwork, and statues created in their honor. More than 30,000 letters were mailed to the team members; star spiker Lang Ping alone received over 3,000. Thousands of letters were written to editors of newspapers and magazines and sports departments of television and radio stations. Newspapers carried frontpage headlines in red; magazines devoted entire sections to day-by-day accounts of the victory and the diaries of the athletes. (2008: 102)

The burden of the nation falls on everyone, regardless of gender. Under the national flag, there is no individual — only a collective identity as a Chinese person. In interviews, athletes often highlighted how much they were driven to bring success and glory to the nation. Luan Jujie (栾菊杰), the first Asian and Chinese who won the gold medal in fencing, mentioned that she could endure the tremendous pain because she remembered the filmic image of how the People’s Liberation Army went through great pain and sacrificed for the motherland (Episode 3, Olympiad). The nation is above everything, as Guo Jie said, “The most honorable event for an athlete is to participate in the Olympics. We are Chinese, a Chinese should have a serious attitude.” A Chinese athlete must train hard in order to represent China and bring glory to the nation (Episode 2, Olympiad).

Female athletes often appeared to be as hard and tough as their male counterparts. Lang Ping at that time (see figures 3.19–3.20) looked androgynous: She was tall, flat-chested, and slender in built; her boyish short hair, her swift responses, her hammer-like

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78 The Chinese female volleyball team was highly popular in the early 80s. Brownell writes that “the greatest standouts were the national women’s volleyball team members, who became national heroes and a focal point for the revival of Chinese patriotism when they won the world championship in 1981.” (2005: 1183)
79 In the 2008 Beijing Games, she represented Canada to compete in fencing.
hard strikes, her determination, and her full attention in the competitions all displayed traits that would usually be identified with manliness. Even in still portraits that were supposed to show the best image of her, she looked *ordinary*, giving the impression that feminine beauty was not important. Lang’s image paralleled that of the Iron Girls (铁姑娘) — “with her steel shoulders and desexualized look” (Z. Zhang 2000: 98) and “who were said to rival or exceed men in their capacity for heavy labor” (Hershatter 2007: 96). Unlike Yang Xiuqiong, Lang Ping’s “beauty” was not derived from her physical feminine attractiveness, but from her capability of bringing glory to China. This sexless image of the female athlete is said to be a result of the sports system under Mao’s regime. According to Brownell:

In the 1980s, sportswomen were still the product of a sports system that subjected boys and girls to the equalizing effects of a uniform military discipline, intentionally erasing gender differences. Removed from their families and put into sports boarding schools, they were trained into military-style discipline from a young age. Sports team rules were especially draconian with respect to gender and sexuality. (2008:110)

Rather than erasing gender differences, the sports system asked female athletes to downplay their feminine side and to act and behave like their male counterparts, whereas male athletes could retain their manliness. Gender equality actually concealed the fact that women had to be like men, not vice versa. Think, for instance, of Li Ning who, because of his exceptional performance in gymnastics, was called a prince — a term referring to a desirable man; while Lang Ping got the nickname “iron hammer” — a tool. A prince and a tool!

These athletes were trained to put sports and national glory ahead of everything else. Lang recalled these tough trainings, “1984 was an important year, for me personally, I found it extremely important, and my position as the prime striker, which gave me a lot of stress. At that time, our everyday lives were ‘three points one line’ — canteen, dormitory and the training venue. We didn’t have any interaction with the outside world” (Episode 3, *Olympiad*). Lang operated her daily body movement like a machine: Her duty was to perform and function well in competitions. The body ceased to belong to oneself as the
nation came before everything else. Even when the female volleyball team won a championship, they were not allowed to smile or show any signs of joyfulness. Lang said:

We were taught not to smile when we played volleyball, we needed to take it seriously, when you smiled, you gave people the feeling that you did not take things seriously. That’s why even when we had a lot of emotions or thoughts, we could not show them on our face. (Episode 3, Olympiad)

Her daily bodily experience was one that required the self to manage, regulate, and discipline. Her gender and sexuality were minimized and rendered invisible — yet, not insignificant as a female athlete was still expected to hold up more than half the sky. China’s historical burden required women to perform their role to appear strong and modern. As mentioned above, China was strong when its women appeared strong, and this need to be performed, re-enacted, re-experienced, and re-enhanced — through repeated victory and triumphant moments made possible by these athletes. The ideal femininity here was not so much about bodily beauty, attractive appearance, but about how a female athlete brought glory to the nation. This would be what Marilyn Young called “socialist androgyny,” paraphrased by Hershatter (2007), “with women portrayed as political militants and military fighters alongside men, generally under their benevolent political guidance” (95). Gender roles that were ascribed onto female athletes were inseparable from the national duties assigned to them. The new woman, as Hershatter rephrases Dai (1995), “became either a heroic woman warrior ready to sacrifice herself for the revolution or a mother who embodied the suffering of the masses and their capacity for endurance.” (2007: 97)
The smile, one of the most basic forms of affect, could be read as not taking things seriously and therefore needed to be regulated. When Li Ning failed to live up to the people’s expectations in the 1988 Seoul Olympics as he trapped and fell in still rings and pommel horse competitions, his immediate reaction on site was to smile. This innocent and somewhat embarrassed smile (figure 3.23) brought him severe criticism within China. Yang Ming (杨明), a reporter from Xinhua news, said, “I found it especially hard to put up with, or say I could not possibly understand, you have already made such a mess, you at least should show remorse, how could you smile?” (Episode 4, Olympiad). It is not hard to imagine that Li was using his smile to cover up his embarrassment and shame (以笑摭丑).

As the title “Prince of gymnastics” suggests, Li was seen as the man representing the country — a legitimate heir of a nation. Coincidentally, he also appeared in white (just like the prince on the white horse) in this Olympics. His body represented literally the body of China, and this body became the laughing stock of others. The prince would not be exempted from discipline and punishment when he brought embarrassment to the nation.
Figure 3.22: Li Ning falling from pommel horse.
Figure 3.23: Li Ning smiled right after the fall.
Figure 3.24: Today’s Li Ning.

From his fall to his ascendancy as a well-acknowledged successful businessman, Li Ning allegorically embodied the dream of the nation: from the “sick man of Asia” to today’s status as a global economic engine. His life story parallels the discourse of coming back, a discourse that is often gendered and assigned to men. A “real” man should not fear failure, what matters is how he can endure hardship and stand up again to show the world he is not a loser. He said in episode 4 of *Olympiad*, “I think having setbacks in life, if we look at them from a different perspective, is actually wealth. If I didn’t fail in Seoul, it might not have encouraged me to start anew, this passion to learn and pick up new things.”

Li performed that he had made autonomous social and economic choices on the basis of his own interests. Men are expected to do great things, or at least to appear successful. Phrases and idioms associated with this discourse, such as 苦尽甘来, 出人头地, 卧薪尝胆 appeared frequently in media reports related to Li. His story was told and

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80 Happiness and good things come after long endurance of hardship.
81 A person becomes known and famous after hardship.
82 A person endures difficulties and hardship in order to achieve a goal.
retold again and again in the media in the period leading up to the Olympics in 2008,83 for example in Bazaar (時尚芭莎男士),84 a magazine that aims to sell tips and to guide men to act like a “real man.” His company — Li Ning (Sportswear) Co. Ltd. — also tried to capture and capitalize on this discourse of coming back and never giving up by presenting the slogan “Anything is possible” (一切皆有可能)85 in its Olympic campaign.

Figures 3.25–3.26: Li Ning as the last torch bearer who lit the Olympic cauldron.

Compared to the prince of the past, Li Ning in 2008 appeared to be a cautious, knowledgeable, and sophisticated man. His corporeal style — grey hair with receding hairline, wrinkled face, his stout body, serious, and polite but reserved manners — reminded one of the image of a successful (business)man. His body was not only “matured” but also materialized as a “real” man (see figure 3.24) — a real man did not

83 This could be partially related to his company’s Olympic sales campaign; that is to say, his popular appearance does not only have cultural and political, but also economic meanings.
84 The magazine targets the middle to high-end male market; it usually includes feature stories on brand names and reports on successful men, like actors, businessmen, etc. See “Li Ning: Beyond Our Century-old Dreams [李宁: 跨越世纪的梦想 Beyond Our Century-old Dreams].” 2008. Style and Olympic: The Development for China’s Olympic Sports Industry [奥运中国体育产业的梦想征途], Bazaar (時尚芭莎男士) 276 (July): 88–99.
85 The slogan could be seen as a response to (or a copy of) the Adidas Olympic slogan “Impossible is nothing.” Adidas was the official sponsor of the 2008 Games. It provided sportswear for all the Olympic staff, including volunteers.
need to be good-looking but he needed to present himself as a man with substance (wisdom) and resilience. His manliness was reasserted by an official albeit physically demanding act as he ran a lap of the stadium while being suspended in mid-air to officially announce the opening of the 2008 Beijing Games by igniting the Olympic cauldron. Li Ning was like an almighty superman flying in mid-air (see figures 3.25–3.26), an act that claimed originality in Olympic history. The dream of a century was officially completed by a “real” Chinese man. This seemingly extravagant act could be read as a rite of passage — a ritual that signifies an individual’s progress to another social status — for Li Ning and for China.

Li re-emerged as a high-profile come-back hero, whereas Lang Ping’s reappearance in 2008 gave rise to a somewhat ambivalent situation. Women, as the primary child-care providers, are often assigned the role as “transmitters of traditional culture” (Duara 1998; Teng 1996: 122), and “the upholders and preservers of our culture” (A. Wilson, 1980: 39). Lang’s huge popularity in the 1980s was not only related to the fact that the volleyball team had brought pride and glory to the nation in the international sports arena, but also largely related to the (gendered) expectations placed on her as an upholder and a transmitter of a nation’s tradition and culture. As a woman, Lang fulfilled her gender expectations: She demonstrated the strength of the nation and she guarded her country like she would do for her family. In 2008, Lang became the coach of the U.S. female volleyball team, one of the key opponents of the Chinese female volleyball team and also the opponent against whom she and her teammates had competed in the 1984 Los Angeles Games. Coaching is comparable to the maternal responsibility of teaching and guiding the offspring; her new role as a coach for the U.S. team could be an unpatriotic act: Instead of coaching the Chinese and helping them to win, she was helping the opponents. Her role as a U.S. coach was read with mixed messages. Various internet forums had discussion threads on whether Lang Pang was a traitor to the Chinese nation.86

This sensitive topic was posed implicitly in the official television programs. One could see Lang’s repetitive emphasis on her Chineseness in the Chinese media; this could very well reflect what Latham calls “Olympic didacticism” as the official media guided how media consumers should understand the Olympics-related events (2010: 806). News reports showed how Lang explicitly expressed her wish that “China would win”; and expressed that “China has this capability to win at their home Games,” etc. (Sports News, CCTV5, August 6, 2008); and, in another occasion, she was shown saying:

To have Chinese to lead different teams, it means, you know, [our] volleyball level is great in the world. Compared to the Italian coaches, they have five coaches to coach five different nations; I think they are even better than us. I hope in the future we can see more Chinese coaches leading different teams (CCTV9 Daily News Report, August 4, 2008).

Chinese should take pride in leading their opponents — the Americans — not the other way round. She tactically rehearsed her Chineseness by repetitively mentioning “being a Chinese myself” and explicitly expressing her wish that China would win. The message was that even as a Chinese coaching a U.S. team, she remained a Chinese at heart.

In comparison with Li Ning’s attention-grabbing come-back and popular media appearance, Lang’s showing-up in 2008 seemed to be a low-profile reappearance. Her previous record of bringing glory to the nation was marked as part of China’s sports history. Unlike Li who ignited the Olympic cauldron, Lang was selected by the United States Olympic Committee as torchbearer in San Francisco — not by the Chinese and not on Chinese soil. This seems to suggest that she played little role in present-day China.

“Liu Xiang won [the competition]! Liu Xiang won [the competition]!
Liu Xiang has made history, a black-haired yellow-skinned Chinese
became the fastest sprinter in the world. Liu Xiang has made history.”

(Commentator of an old clip recording the moment Liu Xiang
won the 110-meter hurdles in the Athens Games.
*Dream Weaver* and *The Road to Glory — Sprint*)

Images showing how Liu Xiang won the 110-meter hurdles in the 2004 Athens
Games were the most frequently shown Olympic clips on Chinese television in the period
around the Beijing Games. Figures 3.27 and 3.28 are some examples. Liu Xiang was shown
wearing a red-yellow sleeveless sports shirt that bore the word “China” in the middle. The
Liu Xiang depicted here was young, confident and determined (figures 3.27 and 3.29, his
determined face reminds one of Bruce Lee), energetic and swift, expressive and passionate
(figure 3.28). The recurrence of these images turned Liu Xiang into a regularized body, a
body that was to signify a new hegemonic image of Chineseness — the rise of China that
spelled confidence, certainty, and fearlessness. The bodily experience and affect of the
athletes from the previous generations reflected China’s lack of confidence. Liu Xiang
signified a new emotion and affect that China wanted to acquire.

After thirty years of reforms, China has gained strength and a place in the global
arena. It eagerly looks for channels to express this acquired power and confidence that
dispels the humiliating “sick man” title. Liu Xiang’s victory in the 2004 Games presented
this desire of the nation to express a new kind of manliness, a masculinity that was assertive,
confident, lively, and unrestrained. In an interview, Liu expressed that:

[They] can’t run faster than me! Haha! . . . Only I myself can beat me, that is to say,
I am competing with myself. I was only thinking about the Chinese track sprint
competition, grab it [the championship], now I got it, I grab the national flag and
run a lap of the stadium. Come! [I] will win more in the future, let them know what
Asian swiftness is. (Liu Xiang in a replay clip broadcast in Olympics Approaching)

As Butler writes, “gender reality is created through sustained social performances”
(2004a: 115). Here, it was not only gender but also how the nation, like a man, needed to
perform so that this image would be ingrained into the minds of the people. In a word,
what these images did was to consolidate an alternative gender performance, in which the
Chinese body claimed victory over the hegemonic “Western” bodies.87


Liu symbolized this hope of the nation. He was a national model (hero) that the
government promoted, as the slogan “learn from Liu Xiang” (向刘翔学习), paralleling
that of “learn from Lei Feng” (向雷锋同志学习), revealed. Young athletes watched his
glorious moments so as to learn from him, as shown in Dream Weaver. What Liu symbolized
was strengthened, re-emphasized, and re-enacted through the many advertisements he

87 In studying Dutch-Chinese masculinities, Yiufai Chow points out the two interlocking dominating
discourses related to the perception of masculinities: “Only certain white male characteristics would be
considered masculine, and that certain Chinese male characteristics would be considered neutered or even
effeminate” (2008: 331)
endorsed. In 2007 alone, he took up advertising endorsements for fourteen companies including Visa, Nike, Yili, Lenovo, etc. In 2008, everywhere one went, one could find images and news of Liu Xiang: He was the megastar of China. His symbolic significance was revealed by the fact that he was given the privilege and the prestige of being the first torchbearer in the 2008 Games. As shown in figure 3.29, he received the torch from China’s president Hu Jintao: The torch was passed from the political icon to the symbolic icon of China. Liu held the torch high with vigor and pride to declare his mission to support and uphold the nation. In a humorous way, this posture reminds one of the Statue of Liberty. The day that Liu Xiang was going to compete was scheduled on August 18, 2008 (2008–08–18) — with 8 being the auspicious number for Chinese, just like the Opening ceremony (2008–08–08). He was expected to make it a historical day for the Chinese.

When Liu withdrew from the Olympic Games, the whole nation was shocked. The great expectations and the dream of seeing Liu create another historical moment were shattered. A volunteer interviewee who was stationed in the Bird’s Nest witnessed the moment and said it was the most unforgettable moment of his volunteering service:

When Liu Xiang withdrew, I was very angry. I felt like being cheated. All the reports said that he had fully recovered, and for the last two years he had very good results, I trusted him a lot . . . We all expected a lot from him. But, all of a sudden, he had this severe injury, I found it all very strange, the spectators also found it strange, nobody understood what ‘withdrawal’ meant, they asked us if it meant he would move to the other heat, or if it was a change of competition date and time, we said we also had no clue. Many spectators became very emotional; some swore and scolded at people around. Some spectators refused to leave the venue, they just sat there, even the police came to persuade them to go, an old man, really quite old, he just sat there, and he refused to go, no matter how we persuaded him. When the venue was empty, he finished the food he brought to the venue. After that, he left; it gave a lonely and disappointed feeling.
Again, the official media immediately took up the responsibility to guide viewers how to react and understand the events. Commentators said “He [Liu] was under a lot of stress placed on him by the nation; his body, his right ankle, at this very moment, I think he just could not bear it anymore” (Live Report of the 110M Hurdle Competition, Liu Xiang [直播男子110米栏预赛，刘翔出场]. 2008). Another commentator highlighted the fact that Liu knew the importance of this competition, if it was not a really impossible circumstance, he would not have withdrawn: “Everyone knows what it means for Liu Xiang to compete in the Beijing Olympics, what it means for an athlete, but at this moment, his injuries, I think Liu Xiang has made his own decision, and this, I think, is a logical choice” (ibid.). A press conference was held immediately after the match to explain Liu’s withdrawal. It was the first time for CCTV to withdraw Olympic live reporting to concentrate on a single athlete’s withdrawal. In brief, the impact of Liu’s withdrawal was assigned great importance.88

Figures 3.30–3.31: Images of Liu Xiang when he withdrew.

After Liu’s withdrawal, two sets of images were shown constantly. The first set was when Liu Xiang turned around, one could only see his back (see figure 3.30); and in the

88 There were differences between the official and non-official media responses as Latham (2010) has demonstrated.
second set Liu was almost naked — topless, with only a pair of short pants and the Nike
tailor-made running shoes (figure 3.31). In both sets of images, his back-facing posture and
his semi-nakedness stood in painful contrast with the images of him before the withdrawal,
which were front-facing, looking confident, and assertive. These images exposed him and
revealed a painful fact: He was just an ordinary man, not more muscular nor masculine
than any ordinary man. In fact, if one compares him with other athletes, Liu’s physique was
slender, with lean muscles, small waist, and seemingly soft skin; his avoidance of eye
contact with his head down made him look shy and mysterious — in a word, effeminate.
The manliness once associated with him was stripped away. The body that was exposed
was a vulnerable body, as Dyer writes,

This is so in the most fundamental sense — the bare body has no protection from
the elements — but also in a social sense. Clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of
wealth, status and class: to be without them is to lose prestige. Nakedness may also
reveal the inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals. (1997: 146)

The sign for “China” attached to his competition shirt was not visible; what one
saw was a disappointed ordinary man. He was reduced to an average body; he ceded to
bear the dream of the nation as he no longer bore the label “Chineseness.”

One could observe that there was a stronger emphasis in the media on male
athletes, especially Liu Xiang and Yao Ming (姚明), than on female athletes. The
appearances of Liu and Yao outnumbered all the other athletes, male and female. The most
“visible” female athlete would be Guo Jingjing. See, for example, figure 3.34, a promotion
clip for the Chinese diving team. The center, the most attention-catching position, was
occupied by male divers — Wang Feng (王峰) and Qin Kai (秦凯). Guo Jingjing was the
only recognizable female athlete; given her fame, she was placed on the right hand side
next to the male divers. One could see other female divers (because of their swimming

89 Yao Ming, the renowned basketball player, was the first Chinese who played in the National Basketball
Association (NBA). He was ranked the top in Forbes’ Chinese celebrities for six consecutive years between
suits), yet they were placed in a marginal position and one could hardly tell who they were. The same applied to some advertisements, such as Adidas’ most frequently broadcast advertisements, where one could see a mix of male and female athletes; and yet when the moment came to stand on the podium — the no. 1 position — it was a male athlete. A plausible answer for this strong emphasis on male athletes would be that it tried to correct the image of impotent men who were supposed to lead and guide their women and yet they were lagging behind them. In the field of sports, female athletes often out-performed their male counterparts. The saying “the yin [female] waxes and the yang [male] wanes” (Brownell, 2005: 1183; Dong and Mangan, 2001: 92) bears on this phenomenon. Men as the patriarchs were intimidated by women, thus there have been attempts to regain and prove men’s masculinity.

Figure 3.32: Guo Jingjing.
Figure 3.33: Guo Jingjing in a McDonald’s advertisement.
Figure 3.34: An advertisement of the Chinese National Diving Team.

Male athletes need not be handsome to be popular. This is, however, not the case for female athletes. Nowadays, for a female athlete to be popular, her appeal lies largely in her youth and beauty. There were many successful female athletes who had won Olympic gold medals and brought glory to the country, but not many of them were as popular and
well-liked by commercial enterprises as “the princess of diving” (跳水公主), Guo Jingjing. The emphasis now is not on the toughness of a woman and her compatibility to a man; rather, it lies in feminine beauty, youth, and sexuality next to the athlete’s athletic skills. The latter has become more like a decorative and promotional item that helps to sell better. This renewed interest in femininity through a strong emphasis on gender difference corresponds to the social changes led by thirty years of economic reform (Evans 2008). Lisa Rofel (1999) argues that this resurging emphasis on gender difference is “a critique of a failed Maoism and an assertion that ‘natural’ gender roles had to be recognized in order for China to reach modernity” (rephrased by Hershatter 2007: 46); as consumption and commodification of these bodily images and pleasure are to signify the modern like the West. In Harriet Evans’ words, the consumption of this beautiful and fashionable young female “blur clear distinctions between the ‘Chinese’ and the ‘West’” (2008: 373). This change of trend makes one think: If Lang Ping would be active in today’s China, how would she look? And would she be as popular as in the eighties?

Guo won six Olympic gold medals in her diving career, outnumbering the former diving queen Fu Mingxia (伏明霞). Guo was not only acclaimed for her athletic achievements but also for her physical beauty. Media images of her often focused on her youth, innocence, pureness, vitality, and bodily beauty with slender figure, long hair, fair skin tone, and her smile (for example, figures 3.32–3.33). Her beauty conformed to the hegemonic ideal of feminine beauty circulating in modern China: fair skin, slender body, and young. Moreover, her not-yet-married status allowed her to be the object of fantasy: as a potentially eligible and chaste girlfriend or wife. This might explain why she was called “the princess” of diving. As a princess, she was the object of desire and the object of gaze for the public. And yet, she was not that “mature” to be a queen in this regard, as “queen” would suggest power, adulthood, and an old-fashioned motherly figure. Guo as the princess of diving still retained her appeal of being an attractive, tamable girl who could be indulged and pampered by men. Forbes China compiled a celebrity and income list in 2008 in which Guo ranked number four.90 It was said that she earned over RMB 10 million in a year, and she had numerous endorsement contracts with international and Chinese

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corporations such as Coca Cola, McDonald’s, Red Earth, Yili, Avon, etc. Her popularity in the commercial sector had earned her the title “the queen of advertisements” (广告天后). This title, unlike her title of princess, signified power and control in the advertising industry; however, it could be read as a mixed message — with admiration but also fear, fear of her growing strength and wealth, and therefore, she needed to be disciplined and tamed. Her relationship with Kenneth Fok (霍啓剛), the son of a Hong Kong tycoon, had added extra glamour to her as a media celebrity in both mainland China and Hong Kong. Guo exemplifies a modern feminine model, a subject equipped with the skill to serve the nation but also a beauty that could be turned into wealth and abundance. Serving the nation and pursuing wealth can go in tandem.

This romantic relationship has drawn a lot of media attention. There were numerous rumors about her marriage to the Fok family and therefore retiring from the national diving team. Like a fairytale, it ends when the princess meets the prince, and that they would live happily ever after. The rumor about her retirement prompted her to respond with the following: “Many people asked me why I trained so hard, but I think, it seems like they are thinking, if I have an Olympic gold medal, then I won’t need to dive anymore, I should go on to do something else. I actually don’t think this way, that’s why I want people to focus on my performance in diving again” (Appointments with Famous Athletes [名将之约], shown on CCTV 4, August 28, 2008). Guo could be a very good diver but ultimately what society wanted to see is if she could marry well, become the wealthy wife of a tycoon and lead a life of abundance. The normalized “value” for a girl lies in how well she marries, not how much and how well she achieves.

As “the queen of advertisements,” Guo reached a celebrity status comparable to the stars and actresses in the entertainment industry. The fame and the wealth she derived from endorsements could turn Guo into a threat that challenged the male ego — her wealth made her independent, her fame made her unreachable to the layman. Her achievement has turned her, at the same time, into a subject of criticism in the media. For

92 Henry Fok Ying-tung (霍英東), the head of the Fok family, was seen as the most powerful HongKonger who had political connections with the PRC. The Fok family is not only politically influential, but also very wealthy. Kenneth Fok is the grandson of Henry Fok.
instance in *Executive*, she was criticized for being stiff and rigid in media interviews. Given her popularity, she was however placed only in the tenth place in a special report on Olympic stars. The title of the report, with both English and Chinese language, was called “Aesthetic fatigue” and “审美疲劳的广告天后” (the fatigue-looking advertising queen), suggesting that the media consumers were fed up with her. It wrote at great length about Guo’s problems, for example, complaining that Guo had the same rigid unnatural smile in all advertisements, even going so far as to say that “some people even think that the more you look at Guo Jingjing, the uglier she becomes.” Today’s China requires not only a female athlete to bring glory to the country, but also how she needs to present herself to the media and the population. When it comes to the latter, it usually forces the female athlete to perform the expected femininity assigned to her: being pretty, pleasing, diplomatic, and media savvy. When she fails to meet these expectations, she is punished and criticized as bored, self-conceited, arrogant, ignorant, etc. It is a paradoxical development: She is liked for her beauty, but her beauty has also turned her into a threat. The princess will become a queen some day, and the latter is not always welcome.

**CONCLUSION**

Rey Chow, writing in response to the 1989 demonstrations in China, raises the following questions related to gender as an analytical category: “The problem is not how we should read what is going on in China in terms of gender, but rather: what do the events in China tell us about gender as a category, especially as it relates to the so-called Third World? What are gender’s limits, where does it work, and where does it not work?” (Quoted in Hershatter 2007: 116) The Olympic Games are such events that urge one to engage with the question on what the Olympic Games told us about gender as a category in China. Much has been written on the role of women and China’s nation-building project, but not so much has been written on the role of men in it. Thus, I find it necessary to look into how Chinese men — in events like the Olympics — took their share. Instead of seeing Chinese women as the perpetual victims of inequality and oppression, my analysis shows

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94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Harriet Evans (2008) also addresses the limits of gender as a single analytical category; and argues for the need to bring in the historical context and the domestic, familial, marital, and sexual aspects in studying gender.
that men and women both carry their share of national burden. Through Butler’s concept of performativity (1999 [1990]) and my analysis of media materials, I show how gender ideals assigned to athletes have been products of discourse and power relations. It is through the media — ritualized repetition of images like clothing and corporeal expressions, and reporting on ideal manliness and ideal femaleness — that ideals are structured, produced, and regulated as natural and unquestionable facts. Iterability and repetition entail temporality, the concept also helps explain how gender ideals are not a set of static norms but something that would be subject to transformation and change according to the needs of a particular historical moment. Through the three time frames and the three sets of athletes, I have shown how these gender ideals as analytical categories are only useful if one brings the other factors — in this case, history and politics — into consideration.

The repeated articulation of the insulting title “the sick man of Asia” and the recurring images of the sickly and frail bodies in China’s narration of its humiliating past served as a perpetual reminder of how Chinese needed to transform themselves — both physically and mentally — in order to strengthen the nation. By contrasting images of fragile Chinese male bodies with images of strong and confident male Caucasian bodies, the manliness embodied by the Western Other was not only made explicit but also clear that those were the types of bodily style that should be embraced. The Western bodies were bodies that regulated and were being regularized as the ideal masculine bodies. Chinese men underwent self-transformation to acquire this aura of manliness. Liu Changchun, discursively described as the first Chinese Olympic athlete, exemplifies this transformation. The images of him, both in archival and filmic representations, articulated a manliness (short hair, no pigtails, looking neat and tidy, muscular body, and stern corporeal expression) similar to that of the Western bodies. Although Chinese women have long been associated with the struggle between tradition and modernity, they were hardly shown in these Olympic media materials. This does not mean that they were free from the struggle. Rather, one could see that the strength of the nation was still largely linked to the men. Yang Xiujiong, the first female Olympic athlete, was portrayed as a beautiful modern woman of her times. Unlike the traditional woman with bound feet, Yang was active and confident. Her modern-ness was to contrast with the traditional roles bore by woman in the domestic sphere. Yang came to represent China’s pursuit for modernization. And, yet,
Despite this emphasis on her unconventional characters, her doomed fate — forced to be the concubine of a warlord — seems to suggest that her modern-ness was praised but not encouraged.

The 1980s was a time when China tried to re-insert itself in the global arena. Sports achievements in the Olympics were of particular significance. Athletes were tools that brought glory to the nation. Their bodies were trained like machines, their corporeal expressions were regulated to look serious and smiles were prohibited. Li Ning and Lang Pang, because of their achievements, became hero and heroine of their time. The significance of the nation seemed to surpass all differences, including gender. The discourse of gender equality — a product of the communist China’s modernization project — disguised the fact that female athletes had to look and act like their male counterparts, not vice versa. Lang Pang looked androgynous, and she was hard and tough like a man. The feminine ideal embodied by Lang was not her physical beauty but her capacity of bringing pride and glory to her country. Li Ning, for his outstanding performance in the 1984 Olympics, was praised as a charming prince — a legitimate heir of a nation. Nevertheless, when “the prince” failed to live up to the nation’s expectations (as he failed in the 1988 Games), he was dispelled and severely disciplined. The ideal manliness in the 1980s demanded man to function as a capable body of the nation. Li Ning’s recent appearance in the 2008 Games as a successful businessman coincided with the larger and timely discourse of China’s great rejuvenation: He was presented as an ideal Chinese man who could overcome all hardship and difficulties; and became prosperous, well-acknowledged, and respected.

The twenty-first century is a time when China fervently wants to display its strength and confidence, as the West’s equivalent Other. And this needs to be achieved through the male body. Female athletes might have outperformed their male counterparts in many sport fields; their achievements might have been acknowledged; and yet, they were still not taken symbolically significant as “the sick man of Asia” still haunted the nation. Liu Xiang’s unprecedented achievement in the 110-meter hurdles in the 2004 Games and his confidence and bright spirit were widely appraised as a new kind of manliness reflecting the rising China. However, when he failed to represent the country and subsequently failed the dream of the nation, the confidence and pride once associated with him were stripped away.
immediately. His fragility and vulnerable body once again reminded one that China was the effeminate and vulnerable Other of the West.

The twenty-first century is also a time when the market intersects with the nation. For a male athlete to be popular, he need not be good-looking; yet, for a female athlete to be popular, her feminine beauty is of great value. There is renewing interest in highlighting gender differences and in emphasizing feminine beauty. Sports achievement becomes an accessory item for promoting a female athlete. Guo Jingjing exemplifies this. In her one sees a resurgent emphasis on female’s physical beauty — pretty face, slender figure, shy and sweet like the girl next door, a desirable object that appeals to the larger market. This emphasis of physical beauty, on the one hand, is a response to the failed Maoism that promoted gender equality by making women act like men. On the other hand, it is a phenomenon echoing with the larger trend of consumption and commodification of bodily images as a way to signify that China would be as modern as the West.

To conclude, my analysis has shown that different sets of gender ideals have been constructed to respond to China’s century-long pursuit of modernity and its zeal to catch up and be acknowledged as the West’s equivalent Other. “The sick man of Asia” has been a discursive tool produced to remind the population of China’s endless struggle between the past and the modern and promising future. With the emphasis on “man” in “the sick man of Asia,” the nation needed “strong Chinese men” to showcase a strong China to the world. Though women occupied a significant role in this modernity project, their significance was overshadowed by the nation’s zeal to cleanse its past humiliation — a more prominent role played by the men in terms of inter-national relationship. When the male athletes failed to live up to the expectations, they were subjected to more severe punishment. The three female athletes analyzed here have demonstrated the ways in which feminine ideals — from being freed from the slave-like condition to erasing gender differences to the resurgent emphasis on feminine beauty — have changed throughout the last century. These changes seem to be more salient, if one compares them to the masculine ideals. Yet, if one looks more carefully, the feminine ideals placed on women are in response to the seemingly eternal struggle with tradition and modernity. Women are required to perform their modern-ness by taking up roles outside the domestic realm while keeping their traditional roles intact, as they are expected to be pleasing, obedient, diligent, and patriotic. Gender is not only about men and women, but about how gender as a
category intersects with the nation, the imagined Western Other, and more recently, the gaining importance of the market. Lastly, Butler’s performativity presents the possibility of resistance, a resistance that breaks the discursive norms and ideals. This in turn probes one to question: How do we locate the moments of resistance? And, in what ways is resistance possible to break these assigned gender ideals?