

GENDER, MENS, AND WOMENS SPORT

The Y.W.C.A.'s Citadel in China: Gender, Religion, and the Gospel of the Body at the National Normal School of Physical Education

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This paper explores the goals, influence, and ultimate decline of the National Normal School of Physical Education, established by the Young Women's Christian Association in Shanghai in 1915 and led by American physical educator Abby Shaw Mayhew. It examines how the Y.W.C.A. included physical activity programs for women as part of its attempt to encourage balanced, unified lives for females, as well as how it used gender, culture, religion, and an evangelical message that intertwined health and spirituality to advance its goals in China.

Abby Mayhew referred to the Normal School in Shanghai as "our citadel to which we hope to draw the earnest, educated, Christian girls of China." In her citadel, she envisioned using American physical educators to train Chinese women, who would then move out across the country to preach both good health and Christian principles. She viewed the Normal School as an opportunity to change the lives of women in China, and she set out to make her students "fit for the Master's use." In this process, she created an eclectic curriculum that drew on her own training at the Sargent School in the United States, sought only students who could make the necessary physical and spiritual commitment to her work, and consistently saw her school as both an avenue for improving the health of Chinese women and advancing Christian propaganda.

For a while, the school flourished and trained some 120 women between 1916 and 1924. But, various factors within the school, the Y.W.C.A., and the political situation in China ensured that the Normal School would not serve as a permanent training ground for Chinese women, nor that its particular gender strategy could overcome past and future conditions for women in China. As higher education

opportunities for females in China increased, Mayhew recognized the precarious situation her school faced, and thus she turned the institution over to Ginling College in 1924. When enrolment numbers in the physical education program at Ginling floundered Mayhew and some former students discussed reopening the Normal School, but by this time a lack of Y.W.C.A. staff, no existing facility, and Mayhew's impending retirement kept this goal from occurring. Mayhew had benefitted from the Y.W.C.A.'s expansion and growth when she arrived in China, but by the time of her departure, she and the Y.W.C.A. were faced with the realities of a rising Communist influence in the country and a waning interest on the part of Chinese women to be trained by American missionaries. The "citadel" which Abby Shaw Mayhew and the Y.W.C.A. worked so hard to establish ultimately did not last, but its existence allowed the Y.W.C.A. an important outlet for its evangelical goals and reveals today a significant interaction that existed between physical education, gender, religion, and cultural dominance.