

HEROES AND HEROINES, LEGENDS AND MYTHS

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Making Sporting Heroines in Modern China

The rapid development of women's sport in China in the 1980s and 1990s surprised China and shocked the world. The Chinese puzzled how on earth the phoenix (the symbol for women) could fly higher than the dragon (the symbol for men). Academics now try to find explanations. They offer four reasons: socialist ideology, which gives women equal access to sports training, funding and facilities; the low status of sport in society, which gives women easy access to sport; Chinese women's, especially rural women's, circumstances of "eating bitterness," which has enabled women to endure harder training than men; and drug abuse.

However, some questions must be asked of these reasons. First, socialist ideology has been practiced since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, so why did women only become dominant athletes in the 1980s and not before? Second, to what extent has the status of sport changed over time in modern Chinese society? History tells us that from the moment modern sport came to China in the middle of the nineteenth century it played an important role in unifying the nation. Chinese Liberals, Nationalists and Communists all used it as an important political instrument. The slogan "develop sport to vitalize China" has been popular under different political ideologies and regimes for decades. Third, most Chinese contemporary female athletes were born in the 1960s and 1970s and came from urban middle class families. Historical suffering did not have a significant impact on them. This argument is more sexist than fact. Furthermore, women in various developing countries in Asia, Africa and South America also have had to "eat bitterness," where are their sports stars? Finally, the belief that Chinese athletes are caught up in a similar state-run drug system to that former East Germany is more political than factual.

To review the actual complexity of the issues, this paper, based on a wide ranging literature survey and personal interviews, examines Chinese women's sport in historical, social, cultural, political and commercial contexts. Three issues receive particular attention: the significance of Chinese women's struggle to achieve physical freedom during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); the political exploitation of patriotism and nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s; and the strong influence of commercialism on female athletes.

The Cultural Revolution, on the one hand, advocated equality between sexes, and on the other, created a demand for sporting skills that enabled thousands to use or develop their sporting talents. Women took advantage of the political circumstances and gave the lie to traditional beliefs about their physical and psychological abilities. They took their physical liberation a long step further into the world of competitive sport. The massive development of women's sport during the Cultural Revolution helped pave the way and lay down stepping-stones for the success of Chinese athletes after the Revolution. Once bodies were trained, could the gold medals be far behind?

Sport also helped China to transform her image. The success of sport on the international stage has made the Chinese and the Party believe that China has entered the ranks of powerful modern nations. Therefore, competitive sport has been increasingly developed in a patriotic and politically unimpeachable form, supported by the might of the Chinese State—a process further stimulated by the growth of “sports fever” nationwide. In such a climate, sporting heroines emerge.

Finally, China is a country in which commercialization is having a dramatic and widespread impact. In modern commercialized China the reformed sports system encourages financial rewards and corporate sponsorship. Medal winners receive huge sums from state and sponsors. Sport has become a money making machine. Therefore, for individuals (women and men), sport is increasingly regarded as a means of achieving social mobility, financial wealth, personal fame and political power. This should not be overlooked.

In short, to find the secret of the success of Chinese female athletes in the 1980s and 1990s we need sensitive, comprehensive and subtle studies of sport in modern China.