THE GENDERED Tiyu DISCOURSE IN MODERN CHINA:
A COMPARATIVE READING OF CHINESE SPORTS FILMS

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ABSTRACT

The national discourse of western concepts of "sports" and "physical cultivation" has been very popular in China since its first introduction at the beginning of the twentieth century. What lies behind its popularity in modern China is a deep concern with the idea of national salvation that is prevalent in colonial countries. It should also be seen as part of an obsession with body, which manifested itself in modern Chinese literary/cultural practice. Although scholars have recently devoted much attention to the general roles of a sports film (Tiyu huanghou 体育皇后) made in 1930s, and three early PRC films made during late 1950s and early 1960s: Niulan Wuhao 女篮五号 (Girl Basketball Player No. 5), Nü tiaoshui duiyuan 女跳水队员 (Girl Divers), and Bingshang jiemei 冰上姐妹 (Skating Sisters). Through a close reading of these films, I offer a general
survey of how the *tiyu* discourse has historically embodied as well as been
imbedded into other ideological/political/social master narratives of the time, and
how its promotion in media was gendered (in different ways) within both its
Republican and PRC contexts.
To my parents
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the 1922’s preface to his first collection of short fiction, Nahan (Call to arms), Lu Xun records his motive of “qi yi cong wen 弃医从文” (giving up medicine to pursue literature) during the famous “transparency incident” as follows:

The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement.¹

Disappointed by the numbness of the Chinese spectators at the execution scene of a Chinese who was charged with being a spy in the Russo-Japanese war, Lu Xun decided to give up his previous career plan to be a doctor and engage in the cultural/intellectual enterprise. For Lu Xun, a sound body became insignificant,

¹ See Lu Xun, “Preface to Call to Arms”, in Na Han (Call to Arms), in Yang Xianyi et. Galrds Yang trans., The Complete Stories of Lu Xun (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1981).
compared to a sound mind/ideas, and the task of transforming the latter appeared most urgent.

As the father of modern Chinese literature and the May Fourth intellectual movement, Lu Xun’s choice of choosing spiritual transformation over physical cures as the most crucial route to nation building is representative of most Chinese intellectuals and elites at the time, according to whom, change of mind/idea would ultimately lead to change of reality. While voices of the New Culture movement emphasized transforming weak spirits, the weak body remained a primary concern. Historically, “illness” and the “physical strong body” have become among the most noticeable metaphors for the process of nation building in modern Chinese discourse, probably because of the well-known discriminatory naming of China as the “dongya bingfu” (Sick Man of Asia) at the beginning of the 20th century. Based on Darwinism and evolutionary theories that were introduced in the late 19th century, concern about this “sick body” occupied an essential part of the national discourse. Various body-related modern discourses, such as race, Western medicine, hygiene, and eugenics, are direct reflections of this emerging attention to the body. Among all these discourses, the $tiyu$ (sports/physical cultivation) is one of the most prevalent and well-established modern ones. As a kind of ideology centered around the culture of the body, in constant interaction with
other ideological discourses, *tiyu* discourse is also embedded in the overall narrative of modern nationalism.

To summarize very briefly, the Chinese term *tiyu* is imported from the west, through the mediation of Chinese intellectuals, who studied in Japan and were much influenced by modern Japanese nationalism, before it circulated in the first ten years of the 20th century. The term itself is a direct translation of the Japanese term *taiiku* (the Chinese term *yun dong* 运动[Sports] is also a direct translation from the Japanese term *undo*). Its first and formal entrance into Chinese was in Kang Youwei 康有为’s *Riben shumuzhi 日本书目志* (Catalogue of Japanese Books), when Kang used three Chinese characters “*ti yu xue*” 体育学 to denote the Japanese word (In English, neither “sports” or “physical cultivation” qualifies for summarizing the implications of *tiyu* in its modern Chinese context, although the former is a direct equivalent in most translations. As an imported/re-invented neologism emerging at the beginning point of the modern nation-building process, it is an example as well as a result of what Lydia Liu has called the “translingual practice” 3). However, the connotation of the term in the late Qing and even early Republican period slightly differs from its later uses when it was “rewritten” into history in the hands of New Culturists and May Fourthers, who tried to reassert premodern

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1 Bi Shirming 柏世明, “三种说法究竟哪个准确？——关于“体育”一词最早出现时间的核查 (Which is Exact After All in 20Versions----About the check for earliest appearance of Chinese vocabulary ‘physical education’”), in *体育与科学* (Sport and Science), 2005, vol.2.

imperial forms of physical culture into a linear progressive history. This lead to
the modern physical culture of the Republican era (which is very similar to the
case of “vernacular movement”) when Chinese nationalism reached its peak.
Andrew Morris aptly summarizes it as follows:

Competitive and rational tiyu belonged to, and was understandable only
in the context of the nation-state. By May Fourth, modern physical
culture had provided gratifying, energizing, and liberating experiences
for many Chinese people for more than two decades. Yet its heyday
could begin only when the momentous national and international
meets of the 1910s brought this national context to the forefront. As
the nation needed the masculine, muscular boost that was tiyu, so did
tiyu need the nation and its (imported structure).

In terms of different forms of modern tiyu, although the term had already come
into use before the 1910s, there were actually two main types: the ticao of
German and Swedish gymnastics and calisthenics and the Anglo-American team
sports of ball games and track and field, with the former taking a dominant
position especially in educational systems. By the beginning of the May Fourth
movement, the latter mode of competitive team sports had emerged as the
strengthening and unifying tiyu of choice, with ticao calisthenics lingering on as
a disciplinary supplement. At the end of the 1910s, the form of physical exercise
and recreation in China marked by the term tiyu greatly resembled Western
“sports” or “athletics.” And the assumption and tenets of the May Fourth

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4 Andrew D. Morris, Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 42.
5 See Morris’s outlining of Republican China's physical culture.
thought molded “modern” tiyu into the idea that “the national body would be strengthened and unified by a fit, competitive, disciplined citizenry that could work and play together as a team.”6 This lays the foundation for the general conceptions of the term and its use till today.

In this thesis, I give a comparative reading of sports-themed films made in two historical periods: a Republican film Tiyu huanghou 体育皇后 (Queen of Sports) (dir. Sun Yu, 1934), and three films made in early PRC era, Nülan wuhao 女篮五号 (Girl Basketball Player No.5) (dir. Xie Jin, 1957), Bingshang jiemei 冰上姐妹 (Skating Sisters) (dir. Wu Zhaodi, 1959), and Nü tiaoshui duiyuan 女跳水队员 (Girl Divers) (dir. Liu Guoquan, 1964). Through analysis of these sports films on both the representational and cinematic levels,7 I examine the ideology of tiyu discourse these films embody and how it relates to nation and gender. Based on the presumption that in the modern Chinese context, athletes’ bodies are never completely their own, but are subjected to a master narrative of nationalism, and the fact that women’s bodies dominated the media’s representation of sport,8 I contend that this modern tiyu discourse is

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6 Morris, 17.

7 The representational level consists of those elements that might be considered to refer directly to reality outside the cinema, such as characters, settings, costume and so on. The Cinematic level consist of those elements specific to the cinema: camera angles, editing strategies, and so on. I borrow the usages of terms from Chris Berry’s analysis. See Chris Berry, “Sexual Difference and the Viewing Subject in Li Shuangshuang and The In-laws”, in Berry ed., Perspective on Chinese Cinema (London: British Film Institute, 1991).

gendered; the mode of male coach disciplining female athletes is prevalent in these films, and this hierarchy of the male coach-female athletes informs my feminist perspective.

Specifically, *Queen of Sports* features two seemingly contradictory discourses: a metropolitan consumerist male gaze on the sexual female body and a hard-core revolutionary discipline of the “liberated” new woman. For the early PRC sports films, the male coach as the agent of party/state exerts an absolute control of female athletes whose feminine identity is moralized as negative against the socialistic construction project. After separate readings of these two types of sports films, I conclude with a discussion of the commonalities and disparities and argue for a rather consistent and gendered *tiyu* discourse over time. In terms of ideology, constant recalls of nationalism dominate these sport films; and just as in other national projects, women are subject to the complicity between nationalism and male/patriarchy.
CHAPTER 2

QUEEN OF SPORTS: CONTENDING DISCOURSES

2.1 Introduction

*Queen of Sports* is directed by Sun Yu, one of the most prominent directors in China during the 1930s-40s. A graduate of Qinghua University, Sun went on to study drama at the university of Wisconsin. He later studied film writing and directing at Columbia University as well as cinematography, film developing, and editing at New York University. He returned to China in 1926 and directed his first film, *A Romantic Swordsman* (1929) for Minxin Studio. Sun Yu’s films, such as *Tianming* 天明 (Daybreak) and *Dalu* 大路 (High Way) are generally acknowledged as attaining an unprecedented level of artistic success and contribute a lot to the modern Chinese film making enterprise.⁹

However, the ideology embedded in Sun Yu’s films has been the subject of more contention, especially his political “standpoint.” Some emphasize his association with leftist film makers, and that the “message in his films is

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⁹ Zhang, 245.
indistinguishable from the political position advocated by underground Communists at the time.” Others point out the “strong passion in humanities” in his cinema, that “the romantic and unrealistic world view and values were marginal to the larger left-wing culture which was much more combative and urgent in tone.” A more accommodating opinion sees Sun Yu as belonging to the group of directors, whose ideological standpoints are summarized as follows:

they showed their strong anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist inclinations, whose newly politicized filmmaking proceeded from their sense of national crisis and discontent with various social problems. However, they did not necessarily espouse communism or hoped to bring about radical social change by overthrowing the existing government and cautiously kept themselves at a certain distance form the CCP activists.

In term of his favorite motifs, Sun Yu’s films often feature melodramatic stories of sexually appealing female figures, who are positioned against a corrupt social environment and become the mouthpiece of various ideological concerns with an overall leftist hue. In the following analysis, I first begin with an analysis of spatial representation, then I examine various aspects of the film’s representations of the female figure: the positioning and meaning of the female

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10 Zhang, 245.


12 Jabin Hu, Projecting A Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1940 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 82.
body as “mise-en-scene;” the heroine’s conflicted identity; and her connections to male figures, especially the coach. In the concluding section I put this film in the context of the leftist filmic discourse in terms of its theme and the ideological conception it reflected at its time, and thus its historical significance.

### 2.2 Urban Shanghai as background: spatial representation

*Queen of Sports* is a about a young female athlete in 1930s’ Shanghai. Brought up in rural Zhejiang, Lin Ying is an heiress to a rich family and comes to Shanghai for her education. In Shanghai Jinghua (the characters of the name literally mean “compete” and “China”) Physical Education school, she meets her childhood friend, Yunfei, who is by now a young and handsome coach. A gifted runner, Lin undergoes special training in preparation for a national meet. In the process of training, she and Yunfei develop a mutual admiration, though it is unacknowledged. Later, after winning the national championship, she focuses less on training and begins going out with one of her pursuers, a soccer star.

Meanwhile, her excellent performance has aroused jealousy among her schoolmates. Yunfei rescues her from sexual harassment and later successfully disciplines her. In the selection for a Far Eastern Championship Games, after witnessing the death of one of her schoolmates, who is so anxious to beat her for personal glory, she decides to give up the glory of competition and her crown of “queen of sports” and devote to the “mass sports movement” together with her
now companion/comrade Yunfei.

The film opens with a typical Shanghai scene: the Bund, the big clock of the Customs House, and the Huangpu River docks. A few minutes later, in a long POV shot from Lin’s perspective as she leaves the port and enters the city, the symbol of an urbanized Shanghai, the modern skyscrapers are shown with detailed cinematic language. In fact, it is quite interesting that metropolitan Shanghai, closely related to western-centered imperialism and colonialism is chosen to be the locus where the story unfolds, rather than either politically important Nanjing or culture-capital Beijing, a point I will return to later.

Moreover, the characters in the film have an interesting “dual” background. The beginning shot of a ferry with steam whistles welcoming the crowds and boats busy transporting people from the country to the city, is echoed by another film by Sun Yu, Daybreak: the act of arrival at Shanghai marks a “beginning” of a story that would unfold in the stage-like metropolis. Most of the young athletes in the film have rural backgrounds and come from poor families, although it seems a bit at odds with the fact that the heroine Lin Ying comes from an apparently well-supported propertied family whose members mainly reside in Shanghai. As in his other films such as Daybreak and Highway, where he seems to prefer a rural vitality and purity to urban decay and capitalist corruption, in this film Sun Yu portrays all the urban Shanghai citizens (eg. Lin’s uncle and aunt, also her potential pursuer Mr.Gao) as physically inferior to their
rural counterparts: too slim, too fat, or too weak. Lin’s identity as “country girl” at the beginning of the story enables her to make innocent and “naïve” comment on the unfairness of the society, hence ideologically distancing her from her propertied family background and purging from her sins of the rich and the bourgeois class according to the 1930s’ leftist film discourse. And the director Sun Yu’s social critique is explicit.13 Here the social-economic status is directly indicated through each character’s physical condition. Rural/inland China, with its vitality, seems to be the foundation of the whole Chinese nation-state, while the metropolis, despite its modern achievements, only breeds materialistic corruption. However, as China’s greatest metropolis and one of its earliest treaty ports in coastal China, Shanghai provides the best setting for a film featuring athleticism, since the latter also derived from a complicated entanglement of imperialism, colonialism and nationalism.14

As the story unfolds, Lin’s identity goes through a series of changes: first as a naïve, almost “primitive” country girl who climbs to the top of the smokestack of the ship on which she arrives in Shanghai; then as a typical modern “new woman,” a metropolitan femme fatale so to speak, who is aware of her own sexual appeal; finally, she is successfully transformed into a heroic martyr-like model, who sacrifices her personal achievement for “the true spirit

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13 Unlike a typical leftist filmmaker, “Sun Yu was widely called the ‘poet director’, referring to his cinema’s strong passion in humanities. He admitted in an interview: ‘my ideal world is beautiful, powerful and glistening, where I can find archetypes of perfect images of women, students, and even workers.’” Paag, 99.

14 See Morris.
of sport.” (It is very interesting to compare the transformation of Lin Ying (also played by Li Lili)’s identity with that of Lingling in Daybreak (Tianming) (1933), whose identity undergoes a very similar transformation from a naïve and “pure” country girl to a sexually self-conscious metropolitan prostitute and ends up as a sacrificing, revolutionary martyr.) Just as her identity changes, the film’s representation of space is organized around two contradictory types: the one is the lavish, pleasurable, and quite “loose” lifestyle of an heiress, signaled by the modernized interior design of the mansion and the dancehall she frequents; the other is a stoic, rigid, disciplined dorm life in the physical education school, featuring excessive physical training and a standardized collective life. It is very hard to tell which lifestyle is preferred by the director, though the latter seems to be the focus of the whole film, a point I will make in later discussion.

The cinematic language at the climax of this film, the competition for the preparatory selection for the Far Eastern Championship Games, is especially illuminating on the role urban setting plays in successfully promoting a nationalistic “tiyu enterprise” in the 1930s’ Chinese context. To illustrate this, I give a detailed reading of a series shots that constitutes background to the sports meet. I believe the cinematic language of this series of shots gives the best illustration of the tiyu project’s engagement with modern nation building. The first shot, which lasts for approximately seven seconds, is a close up shot of a
banner with the words “Preparatory Selection for the Far Eastern Championship Games” set against the background of various banners of provincial and regional divisions. The implication of this shot is thought-provoking: as a national exposition of athletic bodies, the Far Eastern Championship, as the target of this national selective sports meet, with its explicit western-centered naming, enables the athletes as well as Chinese audience to “imagine” China’s place as a nation among East Asian countries. (In fact, China’s introduction to the international world of sport was via the Far Eastern Championship Games, which was almost exclusively held in Shanghai.\textsuperscript{15}) This is followed by a hectic street scene of modernized downtown Shanghai, emblematically featuring the Bund and piers along the Huangpu River, followed by a montage of different modes of modern transportation. The steam ships and trains are presented as the materialistic base on which a modern nation is constructed. The next shot seems to present a ticket vendor outside the stadium, where crowds of people gather to buy tickets for the games. Then the camera focuses on the excited viewers seated in the stadium. Especially remarkable is a close up shot of child’s excited and expectant facial expression viewing the spectacular parade of boy scouts.

This series of shots conveys clear messages: on the one hand, athletes from all parts of China make the long journey (by modern means) to come together for the shared national purpose of competing to represent China at the
international games; on the other hand, a mature sports spectatorship exists in China and shows great enthusiasm in viewing sports meets. Especially, these spectators are both loyal consumers who enjoy the excitement of an afternoon’s experience at the expense of a cheap ticket and good republic citizens who are actually taking part in an ongoing nation-building process. In other words, at the ritualistic opening ceremony of a sports meet, these urban spectators envision the making of the nation right before their eyes; and it is the young generation who is the most important receptor/target of such a patriotic pedagogy.

The shot of banners printed with regional divisions appears up to four times in a two minute duration. This series of shots are good illustrations of sports’ significance as a new important “site” of exposition of national solidarity. The second time the shot appears, it is immediately followed by a close up shot of the spectators’ facial expressions: every one “stares” at the banner in a serious manner. Adults take off their hats and children salute. The sense of a united Chinese nation-race is most explicit when shots of banners from the northeastern regions, namely Harbin, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, are consciously accentuated. After this is a close up shot of the stern look of one of the spectators. Judging from his apparel, which contrasts with the fashionable suits of other spectators, he is probably in exile of his Northeastern province hometown. The three Northeastern provinces had been invaded by Japanese troops in 1931, thus a strong sense of a still united China is aroused among the Chinese audience in
*Queen of Sports* when the competitors from those areas make their appearance at
the national games. As Morris describes the case of the 1933 national games,
“the ritualistic appearance by Chinese sons and daughters of the occupied
Northeast was the highlight of the games, assuring many patriots...that there
was a strong and united China with whom the Japanese would have to
contend.”¹⁶

2.3 Female body as foreground

One might well wonders why does this film deal with a “sports queen”
rather than a “sports king”? This question is closely related to the very
beginning of the film when crowds of urbanities gaze upon the protagonist’s
body, especially the part below her waist, as she climbs down the ship’s
smokestack. The shots are taken from a very low angle, exposing the alluring
female body to the male gaze. This debut sets the tone for the whole movie. In
many aspects, this sports queen is no different from a typical public image of
“new woman” that emerged in the 1920s. Well-educated and equipped with all
kinds of new thoughts, their emergence in media (mainly print culture and films)
was justified in the new cultural discourse. However, it is *tiyu* that offers a
justification to the exposition of female bodies to the public/male gaze.

¹⁶ Morris, 155
2.3.1 Female bodies as “mise-en-scene”:

In addition to the shot at the very beginning, there are several shots of a direct exposition of female bodies. As I have mentioned before, the presentation of a new “collective life” consists of panoramic shots of all the female students’ morning routines. The film presents a detailed picture of how these young modern girls treat their bodies every morning, how they get up, wash their faces, brush their teeth and slightly swing their bodies/hips while doing all this. The camera even shows them taking a morning shower with totally naked backs exposed to the audience. As demonstrated from the previous discussion of shots taken in the national games, the notion of modern ｔｉｙｕ in China does not merely invoke a focus on “sports” itself, it also carries a whole set of ideological assumptions. Beside a nationalistic awareness aroused through the modern ritualistic spectacle, it also suggests a scientific, rational, and institutionalized social organization and also a “civilized” life style that accentuates the healthy physical body through such things as clean teeth. This ascetic, highly disciplined life style may directly relates to the KMT government’s official policy, a point I will address later. Here I want to stress that, catering to an urban male/voyeuristic desire, the female body seems to be a more conducive means to this propagandistic end, as the following analysis shows.

A very long chapter titled “New Life”, which is quite independent of the main story line, is devoted to a series of detailed shots of the new modern life.
The first shot consists of a ringing bell, which is the signal of a standardized collective life. This is followed by a wide angled tracking shot as well as crane shots of female athlete-students getting up. The female athletes then do calisthenics on their beds, documented by a close up shot. The film then cuts to the routine of washing (both their faces and their bodies) and brushing teeth. In fact, the quite abrupt insertion of such a long sequence of collective dorm life resembles a pedagogical documentary that might be targeting a Chinese audience unfamiliar with a standardized collective life. The most interesting of these series shots of collective life lies at the end, where a gradual zoom in and later extreme close-up shot show how the heroine, with her female friends, brushes her teeth. The shot lasts for ten seconds; in a somewhat unnatural style, the heroine grinds her teeth as if to show their good condition as well as the correct way of brushing teeth. These scenes remind me of Leo Ou-fan Lee’s discussion of the “display of the female body as part of a new public discourse related to modernity in everyday life.”\(^{17}\) His emphasis is on the connection between a new public discourse of domesticity and that of physical health and family hygiene. In advertising a new public discourse, the female body as embodiment of physical health carries a market value.\(^{18}\) In my reading of Queen of Sports, such linkage seems not confined to a bourgeois domesticity, rather, it


\(^{18}\) Lee, 67-74.
is presented through a totally contrary life style—a well disciplined almost militarized collective life.

If the film’s opening low angle shot of the heroine climbing the smokestack can be dismissed as a demonstration of a un-gendered rural vitality, and the scene of dorm life of female students can be justified as using the female body as a popular means to the ends of promotion of a disciplined, standardized life style, then the next two shots to be discussed unquestionably bear an erotic sense. In one scene, Lin is dressed in a qipao, about to go out on a date with the soccer star. She is talking with a friend as she puts on a stocking; she lifts her leg and puts her thigh in a very provocative pose. Toward the end of the film, after witnessing the death of a competitor, she refuses to take part in the race, crouching on a couch with her legs crossed in a very suggestive way. There might be nothing unusual for girl students of P.E. schools to wear shorts in 1930s’ Shanghai, but it is clear that the bodies of sportswomen, whose uniforms are generally more revealing than typical street clothes, are exploited for a male gaze in the popular media. Moreover, with the actress Li Lili’s feisty and thigh-flashing image, as well as the naked bodies in the shower, the cinematic language here seems implicitly targeted at a male voyeuristic desire, and is perhaps also a marketing ploy.

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18 Susan Brownell makes the similar observation on the fact that sportive female body of woman volleyball player is prone to a "masculine libido of the market" in the 1980s. See Susan Brownell, "Strong Women and Impotent Men: Sport, Gender, and Nationalism in Chinese Public Culture" in Mayfair Yang ed. Space of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 207-31.
Along this line, the title of the film, “queen of sport” becomes immediately problematic. The naming of the “queen” is tagged with such ideologically charged concerns such as “individualized” or “aristocratic,” which are denounced at the end of the film. On the representational level, “queen of sports” is a term promoted by one of Lin’s admirers, who happens to be a newspaper heir. But is there something more behind the title “queen”? In the 1933 national games, just one year before the making of the film Queen of Sports, a fifteen year-old Hong Kong swimmer Yang Xiuqiong became famous for her record-setting sweep of all four women’s swimming events in Nanjing. She was by far the best-known athlete in 1930s China, and was later an unofficial government spokeswoman of sorts, putting on swimming demonstrations during the New Life Movement.20 She was also a member of the Chinese women’s swimming team during the 1934 Tenth Far Eastern Championship Games and later the 1936 Chinese Olympic delegation.21 Her stardom relates to her background: that she came from a rich Hongkong family probably constitutes an important aspect of her positive reception among the mainland public, who, while fantasizing about the exotic charm of a colonial metropolis, applaud her patriotic deeds, which proved the solidity of a “pan-Chinese” identity. Yet it is her stunning beauty that put her on the covers of dozens of magazines and quickly became the subject of endless marriage rumors.

20 Morris, 156-7.
In fact, she was then known as “the beautiful mermaid” and “Miss China,” titles that bear resemblance to “the queen.”

Here I do not suggest that there is a biographical connection between this real-life “The Beautiful Mermaid”/“Miss China” with a fictive onscreen “Sports Queen”; however, it is evident that by the early 1930s, for a female sports star like Yang, the crucial element in her speedy rise to athletic stardom lies in her beauty. Thus the title of “queen” easily reminds one of those “beauty contests” in the late Qing courtesan subculture, in which periodic contests were held among old-styled literati to select the most renowned courtesan22 or more modern and popular beauty contests of the Republican era which often served more commercial ends.23 Whereas courtesan culture declined and was gradually displaced by a new discourse about prostitution, the concept of “tiyu” seems a more inviting and justifiable way to display female beauty. Inviting because, as I mentioned before, sports apparel reveals the body more than common street clothes (Yang was a swimmer, and simmers probably have the most chances to directly show their physical bodies), justified because the whole tiyu discourse is from the beginning imbued with a serious national and modern concern, and is thus distinguished from the by then “low-brow” courtesan-prostitute culture as well as from an unabashed capitalism and commercialism. Thus, even before the


23 As described in Wang Anyi’s novel Changhen Ge.
cinematic presentation of female body as mise-en-scene, the title of the film has already subconsciously guaranteed to the male gaze a fulfilled voyeuristic pleasure under the name of tiyu.

2.3.2 The desired female body:

Beside these direct displays of the female body exposed to public/spectator gaze, female bodies become desired in various ways by male characters in the films. The heroine Lin Ying has three pursuers in the films. One is a physically weak, clownish and narrow minded heir of a rich family who has just returned from abroad. The second is a college student, a soccer star, and a dandy, who is morally despicable despite his good physical condition. The former’s family owns a popular newspaper and the latter is a rising professional soccer player. They are both examples of a newly emerging modern bourgeois class that flourished by that time in metropolitan Shanghai’s social status. Such a dominant intellectual-elite social status is obviously tinted with a negative hue in the film, as it is in other contemporary left-wing films in which “sexuality that is directed and performed under men’s sole interests is ideologically criticized.”24

The third pursuer, Yunfei, is the central male hero of the film. His physically fit appearance, ideologically correct ways of thinking, and a proper proletarian background make him a more legitimate candidate for a romance with Lin. His

24 Pang, 16f.
relationship as male coach with the female athletes is the central part of a later discussion. Here I am interested in the role of two workers at the P.E. school. Despite their lack of connection to either Lin’s romance or her sports career, their relatedness to the female students’ school life exposes the underlying significance of such desired female bodies, albeit in a more abstract way.

Generally speaking, these two workers take on a Hollywood style comic tint, not surprising given the fact that Sun Yu received his film education in the United States. Their first appearance in the film is quite interesting and indicative: the first shot of these two comic figures immediately follows the dissolving shot at the end of the “collective life” scene, right after the shot of the young girls’ swaying bodies. The sharp contrast between their clownish manner of swinging their bodies while brushing their teeth and the elegant, refined way of female students achieves, of course, a certain comic effect. My point here is that these two workers offer a proletarian perspective that contrast with these elite-competitive sports girls. Working as cleaners in the school, they are far from qualified pursuers of Lin, yet their marginal position within the school brings them a chance to “peek” at the daily activities of these modern girls/new women. As they mimic the daily morning routines of the “upper” class students, one of them speaks to another: “...to get up, go to the toilet, put on your pants, brush your teeth, wash your face, better finish these all in a minute, so that you deserve to be working in such a P.E. school!” The voice of these two workers
represents “the masses,” the majority of the common people, who remain excluded from tiyu and all the promise of its modern ideals. Now that they have a glimpse of such modernity—the well-organized dorm life in a new-fashioned P.E. school—naturally they have to literally adjust their paces during their daily morning activities to catch up with this ideal mode of a rational and efficient modern life. And the ideal mode they desire and seek to identify with is signified by these very young females. In this light, the quick shifting, almost overlapping shots between the girl students and these two workers seem to hint at an identification with these female students on the part of these “genuine” proletarian workers. In other words, for almost all the male characters in the film, the female body becomes the object of various desires: Gao and the soccer star want a female body that is a liberated “new woman,” an equivalent of bourgeois wealth and respectability; Yunfei wants a more progressive, revolutionary, totally disciplined and submissive “new woman”; for these two workers, the female body isstriped of its sexuality and turned into a signifier of a “new life” that they presumably want and need.

The “new life” presented on the screen inevitably reminds one of the historical New Life Movement. As a trickle-down movement initiated by Nationalist elites, it largely aimed to connect the general populace’ disciplined everyday (body) practice with a “native” modernity. According to some scholars, the ideology embodied in the New Life Movement is part of a larger “Confucian
Fascism” the KMT promoted during the Nanjing decade.\textsuperscript{25} The purpose of the
movement, along with the contemporary cultural policy known as “Nationalist
Literature and Art,” was to downplay class conflict through advocacy of a
nationalism defined in the KMT’s own terms. Queen of Sports was made in
1934, the same year the Propaganda Committee of the Central Headquarters of
the KMT stipulated that film companies should take the New Life Movement as
the central theme in their film creations.\textsuperscript{26} The onscreen emphasis on everyday
details of the collective militarized life seems to reflect Chiang Kai-shek’s own
concerns: “Chiang’s obsession with neatness and orderliness, coupled with his
constant frustration at the slovenliness of the peasant troops he commanded,
their leggings unleashed and trousers unbuttoned, lent a fussy air to this imitative
fascism, which confounded manners with morals. ...Chiang Kai-shek somehow
seemed to equate tooth-brushing and public sanitation with the collective engine
of power and popular will that fascism represented in the mid-1930s.”\textsuperscript{27} The
ideals of the New Life Movement are shown at the very end of the film, when a
montage shows orderly militarized masses that seem readily mobilized. Just as
beautiful and charming real-life Yang Xiuqiong became the symbolic
spokeswoman of the New Life Movement, here, Lin and her female schoolmates

\textsuperscript{25} Frederic Wakeman, JR, “A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism” in Frederic
Wakman, Jr et Richard Louis E ed., Reappraising Republican China (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2000), 141-78.

\textsuperscript{26} Hu, 88.

\textsuperscript{27} Wakeman, 171.
have also became the representatives of “new life” that is marked by personal/collective hygiene, a uniformed pace of lifestyle, and strict discipline; it was targeted at the “masses” as exemplified by these two workers.

2.3.3 Female identity: from new women to queen of sports

In this film, as I have mentioned before, the heroine’s female identity seems to be mainly caught between the typical image of “new woman” of earlier times and that of a “progressive,” who verges on revolutionary figure.28 Brought up in a wealthy family, with permed hair, a fine figure, and fashionable outfits, Lin is in every aspect, representative of the “bourgeois” girl student, an archetype of “new woman,” whose origins date back to the New Culture movement and even earlier. The “new woman” is characterized by “an eagerness for education, an appetite for all things new and western, and a demand for sexual autonomy.”29 In a very comprehensive study of the New Woman in May Fourth literary representations, Jin Feng argues that “the figure of girl student proves to be not only the ‘earliest’ type, but also the ‘archetype’ of all new women.”30 I find in my reading of this film that, in every aspect, Lin offers an exact illustration of this general rubric of “girl student.” Indeed, Lin is a typical

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28 I use the term “revolutionary” in a more general meaning: although it always invokes a leftist sense, here it does not necessarily relates to CCP. In fact, KMT’s propaganda often figure itself as the “revolutionary party”.


30 Feng, 16.
girl student and also a good one. She is enlightened and an avid advocator of “\textit{tiyu jiu guo}” (to save the nation by means of sport); even before she attends the P.E. school, she is an outstanding student, not only physically but, more important, academically. She dares to try every thing new: from a bourgeois modern life style of a “\textit{xiaojie}” to a disciplined collective, almost militarized training program, not to mention all the \textit{tiyu} knowledge her male mentor teaches her. As for sexual autonomy, she rejects more mediocre and conservative pursuers of her own social status in favor of a more progressive and radical proletarian instructor.

However, the heroine’s identity as girl student in this film is by no means unified: on the contrary, it is the tension in her portrayal that makes this film worth examining. Continuing my previous argument about how the representation of female body as mise-en-scene becomes a signifier of an imaged modern life that flourished in 1930’s Shanghai, here the heroine’s self-identification also reflects an oscillation between the progressive female disciple favored by male radicals/revolutionaries and a pleasure-seeking modern woman who seems to fully enjoy all the benefits of a westernized modern lifestyle, which the 1930s leftists were denouncing as bourgeois. For instance, even as she makes off-hand comments about the huge social discrepancy between the rich and the poor in Shanghai, she is an heiress in a rich family, and she remains quite comfortable with her status. In the scenes where she stays at
home, her favorite companion is a pet dog. Playing with a pet dog would later denounced as the bourgeois idleness and spiritual emptiness “taitai xiaojie zuofeng” (Mrs. and Miss manner), a Maoist phrase that refers to female members of the propertied class. Her well-chosen outfit for a date, attendance at the professional soccer league game, and her appearance in a ball room are hallmarks of the bourgeois lifestyle.\textsuperscript{31} All the materialistic details of a “modern” daily life, such as the pet dog, the qipao and fur coat, the cosmetics, and the ball room are inevitably feminine-tinted. What is worse still is that she sometimes shows her autonomy with her male mentors: When Lin becomes content with herself and slackens her training routine, what most vexes Yunfei is her dating others. The detailed cinematic language shows how she pulls on her socks and puts on her qipao, how she smiles with her thighs in a very provocative manner. Besides staging the female body as mise-en-scene in catering to an urban male gaze, such scenes also implicitly connect her tarnished image with a willful female who gains a certain autonomy and even subjectivity by freely choosing dating partners, an image that was once extolled in earlier May Fourth discourse of individualism and free love. After all, Lin is not only away from home but also financially independent of and superior to Yunfei. Kaplan’s remark on the femme fatale in Western film noir captures the symbolic threat a dressed up Lin poses to Yunfei in their confrontation: “The heroine is now a femme fatale,

\textsuperscript{31} As in Xin Nixing (New Women) where the synchronic montage shows sharp contrasts between daily lives of different class status in the 1930s’ Shanghai. Again the inequity of different classes in Leftist discourse should be separated from the denouncement of luxury and extravagance during the New Life movement
exuding her seductive sexuality directly. Man at once desire her and fears her power over him. Drawing man away from his goal, her sexuality intervenes destructively in his life. Marked as evil because of her open sexuality, such a woman must be destroyed."

32 Back to the beginning of the film when the protagonist makes her first appearance climbing up and down the smokestack, it appears that she seems to self-consciously put herself on display. Everyone is staring at her and she enjoys the attention. In *Queen of Sports*, Lin’s “frivolous” feminine traits as well as female subjectivity related to her sexuality are all dismissed, suppressed, and corrected by a male instructor, the agent of a “true spirit” of *tiyu*. As Morris writes, “By the mid-1920s, the nation, modernity and *tiyu* had become so intertwined that there could be no separating them, only attempts to push this ideology in different directions.”

33 In the more strident political atmosphere of the 1930s, the relative liberal atmosphere of the May Fourth has converged into a leftist nationalist “grand narrative” that emphasizes on the “masses”. Since such national discourse is, to a large extent, masculine, this leads to the next part of my discussion of the gender-power relationship in this film.

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33 Morris, 85.
2.4 Gender relationship: The male-coach/female athletes mode

The construction of the discourse of “new woman” and its implicit power-relationship have been studied by many feminist scholars in the field of modern Chinese literature and culture. Jin Feng summarizes this as follows:

...male intellectuals of the May Fourth period in fact initially focused on the girl student as the quintessential modern Chinese woman, the key witness and primary beneficiary of the success of their push for enlightenment, who would, it was claimed, inspire a wide-spread modernizing movement among all Chinese women. This practice implicitly consigned all Chinese women to the role of pupils, awaiting initiation into modern womanhood at the hands of male modern intellectuals, who had a monopoly on knowledge of western literature and ideology.34

This statement about a gendered discourse of enlightenment as well as an overarching, hierarchical relationship between male intellectuals and female disciples is applicable to our discussion of male coach-female athletes here. Throughout the film, Yunfei is not only her physical trainer but also her spiritual mentor. In a series of close up shots, the spectator is told that the general course in P.E. schools consists of various subjects, most of which offer a western-imported scientific/materialistic base for the burgeoning tiyu discourses at the time, such as “anatomy” and “history of world-wide sports.” However, what seems the most essential, namely the “core” of tiyu, is taught by their coach, whose image as a passionate and authoritative preacher is established.

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34 Feng, 18.
through his very interaction with his female students. In terms of cinematic representation, such interaction is established through shot/reverse shot in the scene where all the female students are attending the Principles of Sport course. Standing on the platform, the male coach is always shot from a slightly lower angle, and is framed at the very center of the screen. In contrast, shots of female students, especially the heroine Lin, are always taken from a side/higher angle. As for facial expressions and gestures, the male instructor is marked with a stern and resolute look, accompanied by a crunching fist, whereas the heroine is shown with a lovely smile and adorable look with a very feminine and attractive gesture: biting the end of her pen. The most important message, namely the “true spirit” of tiyu, uttered by the hero, is projected through intertitles. The shot/reverse shot between the instructor and students, coupled with different shot angles and frames, serve the important narrative function of suggesting that the students embrace their teacher’s message. The different roles of male as instructor and females as “girl students” are constructed through dependence on female or feminized “other,” against which the male intellectual/instructors establish and assert their authority and subjectivity.

It is also this very pedagogical connection that lays the foundation of the relationship between Lin Ying and Yunfei in the development of the plot. As I have demonstrated in the previous section, according to leftist thinking, the individual’s heterosexual desire, if not sublimated to a greater political purpose,
such as national salvation, was deemed worthless and even denounced. Thus pedagogy in the name of enlightenment seems to be the most plausible and justified way to annul heterosexual desire. In his survey of pedagogy and uses of same-sex-desire in early-twentieth century Chinese fictions, Ta-wei Chi has outlined a theme of eroticism and pedagogy within the same-sex love in modern Chinese literary texts. One of his arguments is that de-sexualized same-sex desire “functions as a buffer for those who seek to repress desire in pedagogical situations.”

The assumption of this argument, namely desire and pedagogy inform each other in the process of enlightenment, is especially pertinent to my discussion of the relationship between the female athletes and the male coach. As mentioned before, the female body of “new woman” is the desired object of fantasies of men from almost all social classes. Yet only Yunfei qualifies as a pursuer because of his very role as instructor. On the other hand, just as Lin Ying’s double identity swings between a desired “new woman” and a disciplined girl student, the male identity is also, in the same way, split between an authoritative instructor, who has absolute control of his student’s minds and that of a poor and keen admirer of a rich beautiful girl. The shift between the double identities is demarcated by the discrepancy between a “public” space and a private one, as I discuss below.

35 Ta-wei Chi, “In the Name of Enlightenment: Pedagogy and the Uses of Same-Sex Desire in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction,” in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture 17 No.2 (fall 2005), 169.
In one chapter titled “Special Training” in which Lin prepares for the national games under the guidance of Yunfei, a relatively private space is created when the two are able to spend some time alone. The pedagogical boundary between their roles as instructor and student is blurred within such a private space. In terms of cinematic representation, many close ups of Lin Ying’s innocent yet still seductive facial expressions from Yunfei’s subjective perspective indicate an intense male psychology. Spectators are invited to identify with the male perspective of Yunfei,\(^\text{36}\) in whose eyes Lin Ying’s identity has changed from that of a girl student to a “sexy goddess.” However, this romantic-tinted transgression is interrupted just in time by a “mistake” on Lin Ying’s part. Because she has sweated after a long run, she puts some cosmetic powder on her face, an act that is immediately corrected by Yunfei, who insists that “a P.E. student is not supposed to use cosmetics.” Thus appears an ironic paradox: attracted by her beauty, Yunfei constantly and consciously rejects her feminine side. Considering his identity as a representative/spokesman of a new tiyu project that is subject to a masculine/national concern, his disapproval of Lin Ying’s “feminine” disposition is understandable. As I have demonstrated in the previous discussion, a metonymic link between the female body and a burgeoning urban materialistic culture in 1930s’ metropolitan Shanghai has rendered the latter inevitably gendered. Thus even a qualified and domicile “girl

student” as Lin is, the male character, with his proletarian background, still feels threatened by her overt “feminine” acts, acts that sometimes reveal a dangerous sexuality that verges on the femme fatale type. Ironically, it is the same handkerchief tinted with Lin’s sweat and cosmetic powder, perhaps the most “feminine” cultural image in the Chinese literary tradition that becomes the only pledge of his desire for her when he sits alone in his room missing her. Gazing at the handkerchief, the symbol of her existence, and speaking to himself “she is from a rich family,” he throws it away. In other words, only by invoking the huge class discrepancy between them is Yunfei able to stop his fetishistic act.

In the end/climax of the film, after Lin Ying allows a fellow competitor to win the championship, she and Yunfei march along side by side. With a resolute facial expression while staring forward, Lin Ying speaks to Yunfei: “…the ‘queen!’ Those who want to be the ‘queen,’ all those who support the ‘queen,’ someday we will bury all of them!” Yunfei replies approvingly: “As for all the unfair, aristocratic and individualistic championships, the new epoch will leave them behind! For the true spirit of tiyu, we will do nothing but strive for it and march forward!”

What is remarkable about this manifesto is its abrupt and crude insertion into the story line. What Lin Ying learns from the death of her competitor immediately turns her into a self-conscious and qualified revolutionary and automatically marks the completion of her role as the object of the pedagogical
process. Moreover, the hero and the heroine begin to use the first person plural pronoun “we” instead of singular form “I,” implying a transformation of their self-identifications. Their double identities have converged into a unified leftist revolutionary subjectivity, as indicated by an ideologically charged discourse, such as “to bury” (maizang), “to fight for” (douzheng), and “new epoch” (xin shidai). As in many early leftist films, their private romance is replaced by a more legitimate political comradeship, and their potential sexual relationship has been completely subsumed under/ sublimated to a higher concern for the mass tiyu movement. This last image of the two lover-comrades marching together quickly cuts to a montage of large-scaled athletic-military training and marching. In this sense, Lai-kwan Pang’s claim that “in Chinese 1930s’ ‘revolution plus love’ films, rather than romance being sublimated by the nation, the latter was only a disguise to fulfill the libidinal drive that was not permitted in the allegedly political cinema” is useful to my analysis of the gender relationship but inadequate because the dichotomy between the two is from the beginning not so clear-cut. Rather, love and romance are reoriented as an indispensable part of the discourse of revolution

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39 Pang, 98.
and national salvation. Lin Ying’s admiration for Yunfei is an exclusive, unconditional, one-dimensional, almost masochistic subjection to the male as the agent/signifier of enlightenment, truth, and power, as indicated by her confession “For all things, as long as you are willing to give instructions, I am always willing to follow,” which she says on different occasions. As for Yunfei, even in their most intimate moments, he never gives up his role as an enlightenment instructor; and in order to dispel his unrequited passion, he has to constantly invoke the class discrepancy between them. What I want to stress is that, the personal romance in Queen of Sports is itself imbued with patriotic/revolutionary concerns from the beginning, and the romance/libidinal drive is doomed to be sublimated to the political/ideological ends.

2.5 Alternative representation of female bodies: sportive females and urban prostitutes

In discussing the appropriation of women by male film makers in their effort of constructing a male collective subjectivity in 1930s’ Chinese cinematic culture, Laikwan Pang draws attention to an “obsession with women’s story” in the left-wing movement. Films by male film makers focus on women’s fates

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41 Pang, 113-29.
and struggles, and, to a certain extent, women’s liberation with an overall nationalistic tone. Underlying this urge to tell stories through women is, as scholars of Chinese literature argue, a Confucian tradition in which politically disenfranchised intellectuals resort to the most “marginal” (such as women) to serve their representational ends. Such an intellectual bond with tradition might be reflected in the 1930s’ Chinese film makers’ practice, where woman’s suffering is used as evidence of general social injustice. Female figures, either those innocent uneducated peasant women at the bottom of the society or the urban educated females transformed by the May Fourth movement, are depicted as victims, insulted and injured. The patriarchal mechanism behind such victimization is that China, mistreating its women and thus figured as male, was then treated like a woman by stronger nations and foreign colonial forces.

The most common way of representing female victimization is the figure of the prostitute. In a famous essay on women’s liberation, Lu Xun predicted that prostitution was one of only two “ways out” for the “new woman.” What interests me here is the obsession with the female body in such representation. Various studies have revealed a new “corporeality” in May Fourth literary practice. For example, Ann Anagnost argues that May Fourth experiments in literary realism began to locate a new narrative in the “new

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42 See, for example, Rey Chow, Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

43 Lu Xun,
materiality of the body.” According to her, “a new metaphysics that literally inscribed people’s body with a rhetoric of suffering and retribution” leads to the practice of “narrating bitterness” in the Chinese Revolution. Larissa Heinrich offers a quite refreshing discussion about the rhetoric of science and medicine to what she has called “medical realism” in the writing of Lu Xun. (In fact, this corporeality also manifests itself in another motif-image of females in left-wing cinema: the child-bearing mother.) In an effort to historicize and localize sex and prostitution and Chinese urban modernity, Hershatter points out that the emerging public discourse of prostitution of Shanghai in the early twentieth century constitutes one of the many ways Chinese intellectuals justified their masculine, nationalistic project to build a modern nation in a threatening semicolonial situation. The discourse of prostitution experienced a transformation from the traditional elite courtesan culture to that of “disease-carrying, publicly visible, disorderly, and victimized” streetwalkers who are the very victims of the semi-colonial and modernized urban city. The sexually exploited, diseased, and weakened female body offers a discursive space in which the venereal disease spread by low class street walkers is seen.

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47 Hershatter, 157.
both as cause and evidence of urban decay, violation of eugenic regulation, and overall racial/national backwardness in terms of China’s Darwinian struggle for survival. In other words, the poverty-striken and pathologically “sick” female body is deemed a direct symptom pointing to a “morbid” social body as well as a weakened national physique that calls for immediate curative remedies.

In this sense, the gendered Queen of Sports offers an interesting counterpart to the discourse of prostitution, in terms of the director Sun Yu’s “viewing Chinese women (who come from countryside) mainly as sexual beings in the revolution,” a motif that constantly reappears in his other films such as Daybreak and Highway, Lin Ying shares exactly the same fate with her symbolic sisters Lingling in Daybreak and Moi in Highway, especially the former, since, as I mentioned before, both of them undergo a very similar transformation. Both originally come from countryside and are depicted with an exalted (gendered) pureness and vitality. And such quality of rural primitive/virginal vitality requires immediate discipline from the part of male revolutionaries for a lofty project or it would be contaminated and ultimately destroyed by the corrupt metropolis. In Daybreak, Lingling dies because she missed the chance of being disciplined, though her body and her mind remain pure/ virginal; her lover, a potential revolutionary enlightener, is absent while she is raped; finally, it is prostitution that enlightened her; and her prostituted

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and “polluted” female body can only be redeemed by her altruistic and revolutionary self sacrifice. On the other hand, Lin Ying in Queen of Sports ends well because her athletic, energetic, and virginal body receives timely rescue and discipline from her male coach and probably because her virginal vitality is of some help (in a more positive and active way) to the revolutionary cause.

Charles Bernheimer decodes the word “prostitution” in this way:

“etymologically, prostitution means to set or place (Latin: statuere) forth, in public (pro).” 49 This etymological reading of the word “prostitution” is also applicable to a tiyu discourse, since the latter also makes “public” something that is usually “private”: the body. In my reading of Queen of Sports, for example, various public perceptions conflict with each other: an elite, “aristocratic” trophyism based on western individualism prevalent during the 1920s; a nationalistic mass tiyu movement; a cinematic representation of a pleasure-seeking “bourgeois” lifestyle; and a direct advocating of ascetic left-wing-tinted discipline. Indeed, while prostitution has come to be the most frequent motif of female victimization in 1930s’ cinematic culture 50 and one of the few morally justifiable ways to expose the female body to a public audience, the significance of Queen of Sports might lie in presenting a more constructive alternative: a new, energetic and well-built body, an untainted female body that


is part of a collective national subjectivity. Yet unlike other politicized left-wing films featuring “new women” whose sexuality has been displaced and emptied out,\(^{51}\) in *Queen of Sports* the female body is disciplined while being exposed to the sometimes unabashed urban male gaze. In the male filmic discourse, “sports queen” should be read both metonymically and metaphorically: that is, a sportive female figure is related to a new and westernized life inscribed with a colonial urban modernity as well as a symbolic signifier of a nationalistic construction.

Based on his close reading of *Yeban gesheng* (*Songs at Midnight*) (dir. Ma-xu Weibang, 1937), Yomi Braester argues that much of leftist cinema in the 1930s exhibits a cinematic tension between Hollywood and revolutionary styles and an ideological tension between bourgeois values and socialist values.\(^{52}\) Such an argument, especially the ideological tensions, is generally applicable to my discussion of *Queen of Sports*. However, while in *Song at Midnight*, the stylistic and ideological tensions seem to be pushed to two extremes (that is, the flavor of a Hollywood-styled sensuous horror film in *Song at Midnight* is as clear and strong as its uncompromising revolutionary tones), in *Queen of Sports* we see more a negotiation between the ideological/stylistic poles. It bears some Hollywood traits in respect to its representation of a sexually attractive female

\(^{51}\) Yingjin Zhang, for example, has argued for the absent and devoid sexuality in Shennü, the most famous film about prostitutes.

\(^{52}\) See Yomi Braester, “Revolution and Revulsion: Ideology, Monstrosity, and Phantasmagoria in Ma-xu Weibang’s Film *Song at Midnight*”, in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* vol. 12, No. 1 (spring 2000), 81-107.
body in a voyeuristic view as well as a melodramatic love story. On the other hand, its hinted revolutionary message appears ambiguous/diluted since it seems to invite a double decoding. Its dispersed class consciousness and the final abrupt revolutionary message, obviously targeting the bourgeois mode of individualistic elite sports, exhibits identification with leftist ideology; yet its advocated athleticism of a “mass tiyu movement” that serves the purpose of national defense, was also part of the Nationalists’ mainstream policy. This ambiguity of Sun’s ideology may reflect the political/culture atmosphere in the 1930s, when most progressive intellectuals, out of their dissatisfaction with reality, inclined to leftist thoughts in various degrees, but were never totally devoted to it. However, the film’s historical significance may lie in the fact that these supposedly conflicting discourses were reconciled in a fluid manner, demonstrating the artistic level the early Chinese films achieved in the 1930s and successfully giving birth to the first sports film as a prime model along the “genealogy” of sports films in Chinese film history. The fact that the leftist and rightist (to an extent) discourses surround the conception of “tiyu” were so well-blended in the film implies that, the line between the two seemingly contending ideologies on the micro level of body politics, between the mobilization of “the masses” and that of “the proletarian,” is very subtle. What lies behind the similarities is perhaps the totalizing/disciplining nature of the modern tiyu discourse. Morris suggest that many of the KMT’s measures in
promoting a mass tiyu (especially during the war years 1937-49) made possible

the organizational and philosophical directions of the CCP's later “red”

physical culture. And this lead to my next discussion of the “read” sports

films.

53 See Morris, 15.
CHAPTER 3

EARLY PRC SPORTS FILMS: STATE DISCOURSE AND

THE FEMALE BODY

3.1 Introduction

Sports, as well as conceptions of the body, occupy a very important position in PRC’s official public propaganda, probably because of the materialistic nature of the Marxist worldview. Incorporated into and keeping in accordance with the socialist/proletarian ideological frame, the ultimate purpose of this attention given to body is “revolution.” “The body is capital for the revolution” (shenti shi geming de benqian) is one of the most familiar phrases of a bygone Maoist era, and is still frequently quoted among people in Mainland China today. Since tiyu (as sports and also as physical cultivation) bears the most direct connection to body, it was inevitably accentuated in the overall Maoist state discourse. Examination of sports films made during the “seventeen year” period along with a comparison with its Republican counterparts will deepen our understanding of tiyu’s essential role in projecting the modernization of China, a consistent theme in the past 150 years.
In this chapter, I focus on three sports films, *Nülan Wuhao* (Girl Basketball Player No.5), *Nütiashui duiyuan* (Girl Divers) and *Bingshang jiemei* (Skating Sisters). All of them were made during the period between the foundation of the PRC in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966. Unlike *Queen of Sports*, whose conflicting ideological messages reflect a relative diverse and liberal atmosphere of artistic creation during the Republican era, the three films can be seen as the mouthpiece of a unified/totalistic state ideological discourse. Since these three films share the same narrative cliches and stylistic features (all of them are politically didactic, emotionally manipulative, and aesthetically formulaic), I first generalize common features of these films and then give more detailed readings of each one. Thus slightly different from my analysis of *Queen of Sports*, I first pay attention to and draw my conclusion from an analysis of the gender relationship on their representational levels before an examination of the cinematic level. My concern is largely centered around the same issues raised in my discussion of *Queen of Sports*. They can be summarized as: how was the female body appropriated in the socialist state discourse and what does this tell us about the *tiyu* discourse, whose construction was shaped by various power relationships.
3.2 The problematic State Feminism

*Girl Basketball Player No. 5* was released in 1957. The story is a simple one about a city-sponsored summer training camp, where a group of high school girls prepare for a national basketball championship. Their coach is Tian Zhenhua, a former basketball player for a professional league team in "old China." He is very strict with the girls, especially the most "gifted" one named Lin Xiaojie, who is portrayed as interested in basketball but does not take it seriously or as a career goal. It happens that Lin Xiaojie’s mother turns out to be Tian’s former lover. The film presents two long flashbacks from their separate points of view, describing their relationship and how it ended. Predictably for a socialist film, the relationship ended because of the “evils” of the “old society,” represented by Lin’s father, a heartless yet powerful Capitalist who does not want his daughter to marry a basketball player. As the film progresses, Lin Xiaojie, as the other female athletes, is disciplined by Tian, and begins to realize and correct her own shortcomings and determines to attend athletic college. In the end, the team wins the national championship and will go abroad for a tournament and “win the glory for the nation.” The two lovers are reunited.

Released in 1959, *Skating Sisters* tells the story of two female figure skaters. During a provincial meet, Ding Shuping’s debut performance exceeds that of her teammate, the experienced star-athlete Wang Dongyan, and she wins
the championship. Yu Liping, a middle school student, has an interest in and wants to learn skating. Wang refuses her request, whereas Ding helps and befriends her. Later, when Ding criticizes Yu, the latter leaves the training camp. During their vacation, in the process of trying to save Wang from an accident, Ding injures her leg. Her altruistic deed makes Wang feel guilty and realize her own mistakes. It so happens that both Ding and Yu are attracted to the same guy, Luo Lin. Ding sacrifices her love by stepping back in this clichés of “ménage a trios”. After learning this, Yu is moved and returns to her training. In the national championship games, Yu is about to let Ding, who has by then recovered, win the championship by deliberately slowing down during the race. Again she is criticized by Ding and their coach. Finally Ding, Yu, and Wang all break the national record, with Yu the winner.

*Girl Divers* is the story of female diving athletes. Chen Xiaohong, a middle school student, is selected by director Wang to attend athlete training. After making great progress, she becomes content with herself and refuses her teammate’s help/advice. She realizes her shortcomings after some “thought work” (*sixiang gongzuo*), led by director Wang. Later comes a new coach, who is quite quick-tempered and impatient with the athletes’ “slow” progress. He encourages them to “win personal glory” through an excessive regime of unpractical drills. As a result, Chen fails to win the national junior championship games. Director Wang intervenes in a timely way to correct the new coach’s
mistaken way of training along with his “individualism.” In the end, as winner of the national championship, Chen is going abroad to “win the glory for the nation.”

In a sharp contrast to the sexually attractive female protagonist in Queen of Sports, the most prominent commonality among these films lies in its de-feminized female athletes: they all feature robust and stout women. Although not completely androgynized like their successors in the Cultural Revolution, they are totally free from a traditional sense of feminine passivity and physical weakness in terms of their appearances. The construction of a virile and productive female athlete image is, of course, a direct result and a conscious demonstration of Maoist gender equality under the new socialist regime. Such “state feminism,” as many scholars have already demonstrated, seems to be achieved at the expense of an erasure of female identity. In Mayfair Yang’s words, “gender became an unmarked and neutralized category, its role as a vessel of self-identity was greatly diminished, and it lost its significance for gender politics, which was replaced by class politics...In socialist state feminism, which does not emphasize the male-female binary, it has been difficult for women to assert independence from a male state machinery, since the very category of ‘woman’ in opposition to men is not salient.”

54 In traditional Chinese aesthetics, usually home-bound aristocratic and elite women are deemed as “beautiful” because of their detachment to physical labor.

55 Mayfair, “From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women’s Public Sphere in China” in Mayfair ed., Space of Their Own, 42, 35-67.
This observation is generally helpful, especially in terms of a critique of a masculine standard of gender equality, according to which women must act like men to gain social recognition. However, on the micro level, such a statement of “feminine gender-erasure” cannot fully explain the frequent appropriation of the category of nüxing to address nationalistic concerns, such as the construction of socialism. Recently, scholars have begun to question the universality of such “repressed sexuality” during the Mao era. Harriet Evans, for example, offers a detailed description of how sexuality, especially difference in male/female sexuality in the Maoist era, was constructed on a western biological knowledge and then discursively regulated and controlled.\textsuperscript{56} As Xueping Zhong in her illuminating discussion of the Maoist “youth” discourse writes: “at issue, is not just the masculinity or androgyny of Chinese women. Rather, the issue is better understood in terms of a construction of female subjectivity…”\textsuperscript{57} Her analysis of the representations of young women in the film Girl Basketball Player No.5 indicates a linkage “between the construction of an ideal youth and the ‘purity’ of women, a linkage that equates women with ‘truth and beauty’ at the expense of a fuller, more complex understanding of women and their sexuality by cutting off their connection with traditional domesticity.”\textsuperscript{58} Her discussion is targeted at and pertinent to a gendered youth discourse. Continuing her discussion about a

\textsuperscript{56} Harriet Evans, \textit{Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949} (New York: Continuum, 1997).

\textsuperscript{57} Zhong Xueping, “‘Long Live Youth’ and the Irony of Youth and Gender in Chinese Films of the 1950s and 1960s”, \textit{Modern Chinese Literature and Culture} 11 No.2 (fall 1999), 179.

\textsuperscript{58} Zhong, 180.
female’s role as symbolically elevated in such a gendered youth discourse, I will try to show how a morally gendered female weakness of adolescence first stands as the “other” obstacle to a male-subjective nationalistic construction and then is disciplined by the patriarchal party-father.

3.3 The party father and its virginal daughters

3.3.1 Female identity: problem of sexuality

Like Queen of Sports, these three films feature a male coach-female athlete relationship. In Girl Basketball Player No.5 and Girl Divers, such a relationship is foregrounded: the coach has absolute authority over everything. This is very different from the male coach’s rather more subtle form of discipline under the name of enlightenment in Queen of Sports, where the female athletes still have a degree of autonomy. In PRC sports films, the male coach gives speeches whenever he sees fit, decides the progress of training, the attendance of teammate in the game and even regulates athletes’ communal daily life, not to mention their thoughts/minds. In terms of cinematic framing, the male coach is always centered and surrounded by all the female teammates, who listen to him fervently. Although a larger part of Skating Sisters seems to focus more on the affective connection between two female characters, the hierarchical gender-power relationship still exists as an implicit background, and as always,
turns out to be the momentum that pushes forward the development of the plot (For example, when the female athletes have issues with each other, the male coach’s timely instructions always become the healing remedy). This fictive gender hierarchy presented in propagandistic films, which were at the time claimed to be aesthetically “socialistic realist,” on the representational level may well reflect the situation in reality in the socialist state, since “the gender hierarchy in the sexual division of labor where men continued to occupy higher level decision-making positions is one of the most explicit forms of gender domination under the state socialist order.” Such gender domination is best illustrated by a party/father-daughter hierarchy.

In her discussion of spatial representation in *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*, Xueping Zhong argues for seeing the father-daughter relationship as more than mere submission:

the space occupied by young women in the film ...can be identified as a pre-domestic (gendered) space, one that allows young women to act more freely and independently than they might otherwise if they were exposed to a traditional domestic and public space where women’s value was tied to their traditional femininity. The irony, lies in the fact that the relationship between the male coach and the young women athletes also resembles the traditional paternalistic nature of women’s relationships with their natal families before they are married off.\(^{60}\)

Zhong reads the public communal space, which is filled with energetic young

\(^{59}\) Yang, 43.

\(^{60}\) Zhong, 179.
girls, as gendered. She based such observation on the differentiation between mother-daughter female generations, who separately occupy the domestic/private space and public/collective space in Girl Basketball Player No. 5. However, in Skating Sisters and Girl Divers, the difference between mother-daughter’s spatial “locations” is not obvious: there are no explicit hint of a sense of domesticity and traditional femininity in Skating Sisters or Girl Divers. In fact, the lack of femininity on the part of Chen Xiaohong’s mother in Skating Sisters, indicated by her Lenin-styled cadre suit as well as her authoritative words and comments on her daughter’s athletic experience, makes her seem to be an exact female copy of the male coach/leader. However, I agree with Xueping Zhong on her point of unsuppressed female traits, which, in my reading of these films, are usually related to the sexuality. On examining carefully the female characters in these three films, one finds a slightly furtive strain of what may be called “kiddy prettiness,” if not sexually attractiveness. Except during training, when athletic suits are required, they wear skirts and blouses, and some keep their hair curly and uncut. The Qipao, which is the privilege of mid-aged women and inevitably invokes an ideologically-charged sense of the “old society,” is abandoned, while new styled skirts and blouses are totally acceptable even indispensable.\(^61\) Moreover, Skating Sisters and Girl Basketball Player No. 5 both feature the presence of a boy friend, with the

\(^{61}\) Interestingly, the former is a traditional Chinese style whereas the latter are deemed by many as “fashioned” by the only “western” models from the Socialist Soviet-Union’s dress code.
former especially foregrounding a “ménage a trois” story. I do not suggest here that these young women athletes have already gained a sense of femininity by means of dressing up in a feminine way or being positioned in a heterosexual relationship. 62 Clearly, the film plays down female sexuality. My point is that such playing down of female sexuality may not be as absolute as many feminist critics claim it to be, as in the case of the Cultural Revolution. Here Xueping Zhong’s observation is still helpful for us to understand the subtle negotiation of Chinese women’s sexuality in this period. In comparison with their mothers, they are deprived of a more traditional domestic femininity (signaled by the way they dress as well as the space they occupy), which makes their female identities not so distinct. However, these young women’s female identity is by no means totally suppressed by a masculine standard of gender equality. On the contrary, it becomes all the more meaningful when standing in opposition to a patriarchal party, as revealed by the father-daughter dichotomy.

3.3.2 The patriarchal father-daughter hierarchy

In “Strong Women and Impotent Men: Sports, Gender, and Nationalism in Chinese Public Culture,” Susan Brownell examines how the public discourse (official as well as popular) of women’s volleyball teams has collectively

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62 All of the three films are banned and targeted as “bourgeois ideology oriented” in the extreme leftist political discourse during Cultural Revolution. It is my belief that setting of the plot and especially female characters’ costumes partly contribute to this charge.
overlooked their sexuality and appropriated their victory for a nationalistic course. The gender asymmetry in a series of “cultural rituals” (in forms of various official ceremonies and meetings) of celebrating women volleyball players’ victory during the 1980s leads Brownell to a bold statement:

…these women (the volleyball players) who symbolized national unity and progress were clearly subordinated to a masculine party-state…. the symbolic structure can be expressed in the formula woman:man::nation:state. Woman obeys the guidance of man just as the nation or the people obey the guidance of the party-state…. If, the subject-position in this popular nationalism is that of a heterosexual man, then who better to signify the nation, the object of his love, than young women?  

Although targeting a “popular nationalism” in the reform era, the statement illuminates the gender/power relationship in these three early Maoist films.

As my analysis of these three films shows, all of them have successfully built a symbolic father/party-daughter relationship in a most unabashed way. In all three films, there is a thought-provoking absence of a literal “father.” The main female figures’ fathers are always said to be “on errand” or “happen to be working in another place.” Instead, the order generation is represented by mothers and grandmothers. Moreover, there always exists at least a traditional-looking, apparently home-bound female. In all of the films, the existence of “fathers” of even the most peripheral characters has been erased. In

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63 Brownell, 207-31.

64 Brownell, 227-8.
both *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* and *Skating Sisters*, the only family member of these young female athletes is their mothers; in *Girl Divers*, the existence of a “revolutionary, cadre-like mother” is set off by an obviously tradition-bound grandma, who objects to her granddaughter’s interest in diving. The absence of biological fathers is best represented and summarized in the words of Lin Xiaojie, the young female basketball player in *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*. When the male coach Tian Zhenhua asks her about her family, she answers loud and clear: “I have no father!” Lin Xiaojie’s experience may be personal, but if we recall that her mother’s tragic experience was caused by the villains of the patriarchal “old society,” namely her bastard-husband and her father, then Lin’s simple declaration invites a more symbolic reading.

On the question of how the masculine state confronts feminine gender, Mayfair Yang’s generalization is particularly concerned with the absence of father:

The socialist state exerted gender power directly by penetrating down to the level of locality and family, displacing old gender norms, and directly confronting traditional patriarchy in state discourse. Through its concerted efforts to eliminate lineages and weaken the patriarchal family, the socialist state reduced the authority of male kin, weakened the divide that separated women from the public, and came to administer women’s labor and reproduction directly and transform them into loyal state subjects. This process achieved a systematic integration and direct absorption of women into a male state apparatus.  

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65 Mayfair Yang, “From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women’s Public Sphere in China”, in Yang ed., *Space of their Own*, 46.
In fact, only through a total effacement of a biological father, can the party-state as the new patriarchal order legitimize itself as the only and absolute authority and proclaim its validity in filling up the space formerly occupied by the “older” patriarchal father. For the gender/power hierarchy of male coach-female athletes, the old paradigm of revolutionary lovers, in which the male is able to assert his influence through his romantic connection to the female, as illustrated in *Queen of Sports* is obviously not as powerful as a generational hierarchy. As I have shown in my discussion of *Queen of Sports*, the ambiguity of both male and female identity in this “revolutionary plus love” formula in *Queen of Sports* disqualifies this mode for the nationalistic project of constructing a new “socialism,” which demands a more direct and totalistic control.

Other character types in socialist China’s realm of gender/sexuality, namely the “henpecked and impotent men,” can also be considered in this way. Although *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* and *Skating Sisters* feature the presence of boyfriend/potential spouse of the heroines, their sexuality is played down. In the latter, the male character in the triangular relationship possesses the gift of music, a “wenyi caiman” (artistic gift) that is traditionally associated with singing and dancing females. In the former, the de-masculinization seems more explicit: the male character Tao Kai is a thin and weak boy with a large pair of black rimmed glasses. In terms of personality, he seems to be petty, easily agitated, and (interesting) physically weak. During Lin Xiaojie’s fist
introduction to her teammates and the coach, Tao Kai makes an exhibition of himself by dropping a thermos, suggesting his physical incapacities. The fact that he is the only character in the film who is explicitly dissatisfied with Lin's participation in basketball makes him a relatively "negative" character, a backward and short-sighted intellectual who looks down upon the tiyu project. The implication of these desexualized male "spouses" of female athletes is obvious: now that the party/state has established its new masculine/patriarchal order, which is firmly based on a generational hierarchy of traditional Chinese society, the male sexual identity in his heterosexual relationship is also subject to this overwhelming power relationship. And the only "masculine" male figures are, of course, the coach/party representative figure, such as Tian Zhenhua in Nılan Wuha o. Their masculinity is projected more through their disciplining roles than their appearances, although the latter is hinted, as their relatively robust figure and "hard" facial outline shows. In this light, Mayfair Yang has concluded, "In Maoist Chinese state discourse, there is no obsession with male virility, but we find a desexualized narrative of a family-state of de-gendered revolutionary subjects led by a wise father." Thus standing against the party representative/coach are young virginal athletes, their desexualized boy friends and their asexual-reproductive mothers. Again Yang's comment "these examples

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66 Confucism, for example.

67 For example, in Diving Girls, the appearances of the two male coaches differ considerably. The Chinese audience might use the negative word "尖嘴猴腮" to describe the second (and more "backward") coach.

68 Yang, 46.
of the erasure of feminine gender suggest that we ask a different question from the usual question of how the state shapes gender and sexuality, which puts the state outside gender and sexuality. Instead, we need to ask ‘what gender is the state?’ is of particular relevance. By creating a literal absence of the father-figure as well as de-gendered male figures on the part of the nation/people, the party/state is able to establish its own hierarchical authority that bears an explicit masculine mark.

3.3.3 “Contradiction among the people”: the appropriation of femininity

The mechanism by which a gendered female is subjected to a masculine state has been studied by many feminist theorists. My concern here is how such “subjection” is carried out in the films under discussion. On the representational level, such subjection takes the form of a “transgression-discipline” mode: domicile and submissive as she usually is, the female protagonist always somehow commits some minor “mistakes” that require correcting. Again, this motif is also present in Queen of Sports. Borrowing Mao Zedong’s own words, these mistakes are “contradictions among the class (proletarian people), and should be corrected through criticism and self-criticism.” Chris Berry has pointed out: “before 1976, it was unknown for women to take the role of lead

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69 Yang, 45.
villain. At most, they might appear as the reluctantly supportive wives of male villains. For our discussion, we might substitute “villain” with the word “class enemy,” for in the socialist melodramas made in the Maoist period, the villain is always identified as a “class enemy” or “counter-revolutionary,” such as landlords, GMT spies, or bandits. In the films where there is a male villain, most female characters are portrayed as first victimized, then rescued and mobilized by the CCP, and finally transformed into female heros. In such films, having been gradually deprived of their sexuality, women becomes mere instruments in the confrontation between counter-revolutionary and the revolutionary forces, demonstrative of the “darkness” of the former and greatness of the latter. In the sports-theme films, the theme of “class struggle” is replaced by “contradiction among the people” and female is subjected to male as nation is subjected to party/state. The gendered psychological characteristics of the female, which are based on their physiological sexual identity, make them easily subject to the masculine socialist state. In each of the three films, their transgressions are always caused by their negative “feminine characteristics,” such as moodiness and vanity, traits that bear explicit feminine marks. In Girl Divers, delighted by her initial achievement in the contest, Chen Xiaohong begins to show off her skills and not concentrate on training. The same is true in

70 Berry, 32.

71 Among the most famous are Baimaonü (White haired girl) and Hongse niangzi jia (Red Detachment of Women).

Girl Basketball Player No.5 with Lin Xiaojie who breaks discipline by accidentally missing an important game because of her personal affairs. In addition to these “individualistic” and selfish mistakes, in Skating Sisters, even the altruistic young athlete, who is about to give her dear sister-like friend a favor by purposefully falling in the national skating games, can not escape the fate of being criticized for her “superficial” mistake of confusing collectivism with personal/individualistic affection between comrades/sisters; during most of the films, subtle suspicions and jealousy looms around the female athletes’ collective life until finally a resolution, aided by guidance from the male coach, is achieved.

Evans’s survey of the construction of female sexuality mainly based on the biological terms in Maoist public discourse is especially pertinent to my discussion:

Despite the general applicability of much of the 1950s advice for adolescents, many of its assumptions and preoccupations constructed it as ‘more of a problem’ for girls than boys...

The gender asymmetry in the construction of adolescence as a potentially problematic period...more significantly, was attributed to girls’ extreme susceptibility to irrational swings in mood. Warnings to girls to avoid ‘emotional fluctuations’ (qingxu bodong) and ‘psychological tension, excitement or depression (jingshen jinzhang, xingfen he yiyu) during menstruation attributed an emotionality and sensitivity to adolescent girls that were not seen to affect boys. The naturalization of the association between girls and the private sphere of the emotions made their ‘extremely unpredictable and irritable’ (fetchang bu zhengchang he jizao) swings an irreversible fact of life.

In naturalizing the gendered ascription of interest in emotional and sexual matters as private, feminine concerns, in contrast with the
masculine, public domain of professional, political and intellectual life, physiological development subjected girls to the rule of their reproductive organs. 73

In the above quotation, Evans aptly points out the public/official discourse's efforts to link females' physiology with their psychology, or in other words, sexuality with gender. Although in the Maoist discursive system, "sex" as well as terms directly related to "sexuality" were taboo, 74 a gender-based assumption of feminine "weakness" seems to be singled out against a nationalistic state discourse as the major impediment to the construction of nation/socialism. As Evan's observation and my analysis shows, the transformative process from biological sexuality to the field of social/ideological signification occurs in two steps: first, a gendered psychological difference is naturalized under the name of a westernized scientific knowledge; women are presumed as biologically prone to be "petty, narrow-minded, emotionally unstable (and thus intellectually inferior)." Second, such gendered characteristics are tagged as ideological backwardness in opposition to a masculine, public discourse because of their very individualistic/domestic nature. For example, in the nomenclature used exclusively in the CCP's disciplining system, the so-called sixiang gongzuō 思想工作 (thought/mind work), the most frequently used term for describing a certain degree of personal disagreement and free will against the higher

73 Evans, 62-63.
party/bureaucracy’s authority is “nao qingxu 阔情绪” or “nao bieniu 阔别扭” (to be disgruntled/in a mood). Originally, both of these terms were usually used in a domestic context, such as a familial dispute or a quarrel between spouses. And in most cases, these terms are not gender-neutral. More often than not, they are associated with female behavior.  These terms come to be used figuratively, with its site of application changed from a private, personal, and domestic domain to a public, ideological, and political one.  In this transformative process, their gendered implications are inevitably retained. Thus it becomes convenient to designate the feminine, individual, and personal concerns as ideologically backward and thwarting to the progressive, masculine, and nationalistic cause. What is at work here is a gendered sexual identity rather than a biological difference. For example, all the “backward” male characters, such as the second coach in Girl Divers and Lin’s boyfriend in Girl Basketball Player No.5, have already been “feminized” to an extent, as suggested by their character as well as their appearance: both are petty, narrow minded, and moody, far from a “gao da quan” (tall, big, wholesome) image of the male party representative.

For these PRC films, the playing down of both male and female sexuality

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75 It is not that a Chinese male can not “nao qingxu” or “nao bieniu”; however, in a domestic dispute, if a male is said to “nao qingxu” or “nao bieniu”, this will, in most Chinese’s conception, affect his masculine identification.

76 In terms of male intellectual’s appropriation of a private/personal feminine identity on a politically discursive practice, the case of the poet Qu Yuan with his metaphorical self-identification as beauty bears interesting similarities to the terms discussed here. See Qu Yuan, Chu Ci 楚辞 (Poetry of South) (Changsha: Hunan chubanshe, 1994).
and its replacement by socially and culturally shaped gender reminds me of Brownell’s point about the relevance of Foucault’s differentiation between “alliance” and “sexuality” in the history of gender in the west. “Alliance” is defined as “a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions.” Brownell hints that mainly because the Chinese conception of the person differs from Western individualism, gender is only one aspect constituting a person’s social identity and that Chinese people (including athletes)’s perception of marriage/heterosexual relationships is generally organized around “alliance” (the relationships between the young female athletes’ in these films and their boyfriends best illustrate this kind of “alliance”) rather than “sexuality;” a similar point is also made by Tani Barlow, who argues that “sex-identity grounded on anatomical difference did not hold a central place in Chinese constituting discourses before the early twentieth century. This also explains exchange of gender identity in other films that feature a progressive, almost stainless female character compared to their male counterparts. Take the film Li Shuangshuang, for example. It is Shaanghuang’s ideological correctness and mental “progressiveness” that mark her masculination, whereas her husband Xiwang’s ideological “backwardness” renders him emasculated/feminized. An underlying patriarchal logic is self-evident: the fact


78 Brownell, 218-9.

that even the most disenfranchised and marginal character who is supposed to be “backward” (such as a semi-illiterate rural woman, as in the case of Li Shuangshuang) is mentally so progressive and advanced would better mobilize the majority to work whole-heartedly toward a realization of the masculine/nationalistic program.

3.4 Gendered spaces: nation “guojia” and home

3.4.1 Public communal life as masculine

Related to the discussion of gendered ideology throughout these sport-themed films, the distinction between the public/communal and the private/domestic becomes important because only by breaking down the traditional/domestic/private can the party/state asserts its direct authority. For the female athletes, the boundary between a dominating nation and dominated family becomes blurred, just as the configuration of the Chinese words for “nation” (guojia) indicates.

In these three films, female athletes discard a domestic home-bound family life in favor of a public communal dorm life. Their life is disciplined, personal issues (such as quarrels, dates, and potential romances) become public and even the most private conversation with teammates and family members becomes the focus of hard-core didacticism. One of the most typical of the CCP’s
propagandistic techniques is the use of the “private,” such as diaries, letters, and conversations between intimate friends, in the successful transformation of recipient’s mind/thought. In the big, communal family, the coach tends to carry out all the responsibilities of a paternalistic leader: not only does he supervise female athletes’ physical training, their minds are also under his strict guidance. For example, in Girl Divers, when Chen Xiaohong has a misunderstanding with the team leader, who tries to persuade her to engage in a stricter self-disciplining, the coach/director Wang reads to Chen cheesy paragraphs from the team leader’s diary to prove the altruistic nature of her persuasion and to better “transform” Chen mentally. A diary, thus, becomes the mouthpiece of a “grand narrative” (as presented in the film) promoted so successfully that it is even reflected in the most private form of personal expression. The communal life of these athletes is under a strict and minute surveillance by state organizations.

A more interesting and humane detail in Girl Basketball Player No. 5 happens when Tian Zhenghua, the male coach, is about to write to his old sweetheart, Lin Jie, to report on her daughter’s situation. It is the first time he has written to her since their separation decades ago. A close up shot is taken from his point of view: first Lin Jie’s name appears on the letter paper; then there is a short pause before the original address is changed from “Lin Jie” to “Comrade Lin Jie.” The subtle difference in address seems to imply two different discursive spaces: the more casual one imparts a sense of their own
shared story in the past and thus indicates a private/personal discourse. The more formal one, with the title “comrade,” delivers an explicitly public implication, hinting at a neutral and detached attitude toward what had happened between the two lovers. And Tian’s hesitation between the two addresses seems to render the relationship between the two discursive contexts these addresses represent tension ridden: While the coach Tian feels it inappropriate to drop the title of “comrade,” the lover Tian feels equally upset to “bypass” their cherished past. The director of Girl Basketball Player No. 5, Xie Jin, is famous for his humanist way of approaching social melodrama. His handling of the romance in the film, just as Xueping Zhong has argued, along with careful use of mise en scene of the architectural background “may well exceed the political framework of the film.” Yet a more important function of this line of their personal romance is still to expose the evil of the “old society” and to demonstrate the superiority of the “new society,” and is always subjugated to the “taming” process of the daughter Lin Xiaojie. The romance is fulfilled (marked by the confirmed addressing of Lin Jie, with the title “comrade” dropped”) only after the daughter’s problem is solved and the two lovers experience the “sublime” moment of national pride during the ceremony held in Beijing right before their departure. Continuing Zhong’s argument about the difference in the Party’s gender discourse between the desired pure and virginal young women and the undesired traditional/domestic womanhood. I argue that the personal/private

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80 Zhong, 172.
romance has to be first symbolically sanctioned by the party/state before it
attains its complete fulfillment; only in being “publicized” does the feminized
figure regain a symbolic “virginity” by shedding off her traditional domesticity
and being consciously absorbed into the collective patriotic ideology.

In her analysis of spatial representation in *Girl Basketball Player No.5*,
Zhong finds a materiality and an accompanying hidden desire and fantasy
behind the film’s political message. Such feminized materiality is especially
delivered through a (gendered) “pre-domestic” *qìngchūn* (youth) space, which is
full of young, virginal, and energetic athletes and is distinguished immediately
from the traditional domestic space of “home” occupied by mothers. Generally,
I agree that in *Girl Basketball Player No.5*, spatial representation of the
traditional home as a bourgeois space harbors expressions of a desired nostalgic
materiality and a femininity, and the Maoist youth discourse is largely gendered.
Yet Zhong’s conclusion of a sexualized/feminized youth space of a communal
life seems largely based on a generational mother-daughter mode, and is not
applicable to our discussion. While filled with young giggling female athletes,
such space is nevertheless organized and centers around the omnipresent male
coach. Although shot in wide angle, with lots of artificial lighting and bright
colors, it is marked with a relatively simple interior decoration and facilities,
with at most light-hearted, optimistic hue (despite the poor material condition at
the time). In fact, in terms of material conditions, a communal/collective life
during the Maoist period more often than not aroused a sense of asperity, an
aseptic, puritan living style, rather than a sense of elegance and sophistication.
For athletes, it is especially so because they have to endure rigid standardized
physical training. Along with these hard material conditions is a life bereft of
personal privacy, as I have showed in the previous part. In fact, such highly
disciplined, paternalistic public life (along with its spatial configuration, which
is open and spacious) invokes a masculine bearing. Back to the dichotomy of the
Chinese word for “nation” (guojia), the difference between the public,
communal space and the private domestic space (only explicitly shown in Girl
Basketball Player No.5, probably because of the director’s taste) should be
figured as the difference between a masculine-shaped proletarian space of the
“nation” (guo) and a feminine, potentially bourgeois-oriented space of “home”
jia, with the latter represented by Lin Jie’s home marked by a refined and
sophisticated interior full of traditional Chinese furniture.

This mode of a gendered spatial representation is quite relevant to my
discussion of the gender ideology. As I have demonstrated before, it is not that
sexuality has completely disappeared in the PRC sports films, but rather that
discussion of it is not so significant because the socially constructed gender
(although based on the biological/essential difference) mainly inform the overall
discourse of sex. It seems that physical training gives women healthier and
perhaps better-looking bodies, whereas mental persuasion and discipline in the
patriarchal/national ideology prepare them to be better socialists. Thus, against a masculine tinted spatial/discursive background, their feminine defects are conveniently foregrounded to offer a valuable lesson on how to be more qualified “daughters and sons of socialism.” Therefore, any private space and space-related experience has to be subdued. In this vein, Lin Jie’s present-tense romance with Tian is played out with her gradual abandoning of traditional domesticity and its private space and her voluntary embracing of the new public space.

3.4.2 Domestic feminine space and its subjugation

In her first appearance in the film, Lin is seen in a very old-fashioned Suzhou gentry-house with a delicate garden and various plants, an explicitly feminine-tinted locus. The interior of her room is shown to be crowded with refined wood furniture, huge mirrored dressers, frames of photographs and scattered souvenirs, conveying a not only feminized but also “bourgeois” decorative taste. It is hard to tell whether fantasy of such materiality is intended to be aroused among the audience or whether director Xie Jin’s has a personal taste toward things from the “old society,” because although all of these things are presented in a detailed cinematic language, the angle of the shots is slightly different from those used in shots of the public space. In the populated public space, the wide-angled shots are frequently taken from indoors with lots of
artificial lighting and long, wide windows bringing a bright, open and spacious atmosphere. In the scene with Lie Jie’s home in Suzhou as background, several significant shots are taken from outdoors, and the interior of the room is rendered dark and narrow. Toward the end of the film, Lin Jie takes a trip to Beijing after she hears from Tian and decides to “go out” of her house in Suzhou and reunite with him. There is a quick shift from the private domestic /feminine space to that of a public one: one minute she is packing a suitcase and reading the letter her lover has sent to her, the next minute she sits in a bus passing Tian’anmen square in Beijing. Indeed, the symbolic distance between her domestic, private Suzhou house and Tian’anmen square as the most renowned and largest “public space” (in its literal sense) could not be bigger.

The drive for her to make such a pilgrimage is of course her “private” concern, yet completion of such personal romance is achieved within the masculine, public space: the ritualistic ceremony of patriotic athletes. Stepping into the auditorium, watching her daughter and lover stand still, wearing uniforms embroidered with national emblems, she looks quite solemn, and a montage of images from her tragic love story in the past is superimposed on her solemn look. A ritualistic and lofty patriarchal patriotism is so overwhelming that it can even purge all the personal suffering of the past. The swift flashbacks of their shared personal memory seem to serve nothing but a literally cathartic effect, followed with the heroine’s symbolic “renaissance” that finally justifies
and blesses her romance with the coach. Borrowing Zhong’s terms of virgin daughters and “used” mothers, I use the word “renaissance” since it denotes Lin’s regaining of a symbolic “virginity” that is valuable to the patriarchal nation/state. Zhong takes such desired virginity in a literal way: as she writes “there is an underlying patriarchal logic at work: the young and unmarried woman remains a sex object with potential exchange value, whereas the value of a married woman is presumed to have been spent.”\textsuperscript{81} This idea is justifiable, given the fact that in real athletic training in China, where, as Brownell notices, “reproduction” is of primary concern to any individual, female athletes usually stop training after they got married or bear children: the socially domestic concerns and physically “declining” body condition no longer allow them to devote themselves to athletic training (the same with normal people, it is believed that once they are married, their attention will be “diverted” and will concentrate less on their “jobs” outside of the home). Thus in a double (society and nation) patriarchal logic (one should not forget that Chinese women’s designation of reproduction also derives from Confucian patriarchal ideas), female athletes have to choose between “nation” and “home.”

Because of this, I choose to read such virginity symbolically as a loyalty to the masculine nation/state. Just as their socially constructed feminine characteristics are moralized and politicized in a negative way according to the ideology of the state/Party, the same goes with their virginal bodies. The virginal

\textsuperscript{81} Zhong, 179.
female athletes are valuable because they are not yet disturbed by personal and domestic concerns and therefore exalted as being young, energetic, and vital; they show an unconditional submission by occupying and being actively involved with the new public space and thus engaged in the grander socialist nation building process. On the other hand, the domestic/married mothers are relatively useless because, thanks to their home-bound domesticity, they have, to a certain extent, cut themselves off from the new public space where the grand nation/socialism building process takes place. After being infected by and (voluntarily) infused with the public discourse, Lin Jie regains her “virginity” and her own reunion with Tian (officially) is justified (in the now empty auditorium, the same public site where she has just been converted). Discussing in terms of the impact of new regime/ideology on (female) bodies, if Xi’er in “White haired girl” is said to retrieve her humanity, as the cliché goes “xinshehui ba gui biancheng ren” (the new society turns ghosts into humans), then Lin Jie in Girl Basketball Player No. 5 can be said to become a “better human-being/(woman)” by retrieving her “virginity.” Thus, in the last scene of the film where Lin sends Tian and his basketball team off at the airport (another public space), she is rejoined literally and symbolically by crowds of dressed-up young (virginal) females who are giggling, whooping, excitedly weaving flowers. Finally, the heroine walks out of the space of “jia,” and enters into the space of “guo.”
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION: DISCONTINUITY AND CONTINUITY

Drawn from the previous discussion of sports films made in modern China, my overall argument is that there exists a continuous modern narration of tiyu from its first introduction to China. Just as with other imported neologisms at the beginning of the 20th century, tiyu is both the product of colonialism and a nationalist tool used to rebel against the former. Inevitably this continuity lies not only in its constant connecting of the strong individual body and the “master narrative” of national salvation but also in the fact that the narrative is gendered as male. But first, I briefly summarize some of the discontinuities...

Both Queen of Sports and the socialist sports film feature well-disciplined female athletes. The former focuses on a desired female body exposed erotically to the urban male gaze, whereas in the latter the key point is not so much their sexuality as their gender identity. For the Republican film, the central female figure is not only sexually attractive, but seems to be aware of her own appeal and thus owns a certain degree of subjectivity. For socialist sports films, however, the problem of sexuality is not of meaningful concern because the socialist state-feminism discourse works more on a constructed gender identity;
female athletes are completely submissive to the party/father and therefore remain (ideologically) immaculate. Accordingly, in the Republican film, the romance between the female athletes and male coach is legitimized through the pedagogical enlightening process; whereas, figured as “good daughters of socialism,” the female athletes in PRC sports films naturally abstain from any heterosexual connection with the male coach/the party father who obtain their authority by positioning themselves on the generational patriarchal hierarchy. In terms of their respective “master narrative” of nationalism, the ideological discourse in the Republican-era film seems rather ambiguous. On the one hand, it draws attention to class discrepancy and delivers a left-wing revolutionary message at the end of the film; on the other hand, the emphasis on “nation” and “the masses” does not necessarily point in proletarian direction and is in accordance with the Nationalist government’s promotion of the “mass tiyu” at the time, with an emphasis on rigid discipline of nationalistic citizens rather than class conflict. In contrast, the Communist tiyu discourse is more egalitarian in nature, with the working class and military body culture as its prototypes, through a centralized party/state’s absolute authority enforces the disciplining of athletes’ “mental situation.”

The discontinuities between the films surely reflect different historical contexts and discourses. Yet, since tiyu discourse in modern China was imported by and promoted in the hands of the enlightenment intellectuals under the name
of nationalism, it must be consciously and carefully regulated and manipulated by various political ideological discourse at the time. The ending of the Queen of Sports remains relatively open: spectators are only told the story of the successful disciplining Lin Ying, whereas the development of her romance with Yunfei is left to the imagination of spectators, who might worry about the fate of the young couple because of the huge class difference between them. From this perspective, the “old society” scenes in Girl Basketball Player No.5, featuring flashbacks of the relationship between the male coach Tian Zhenhua and Lin Jie, who used to be an athlete, bears interesting resemblances to the love story between Lin Ying and Yunfei in Queen of Sports. The two women are both from the propertied class and their romance with a proletarian male athlete is (as in the latter) or most likely would be (as in the former) prohibited by the patriarchal father, and from this perspective, Girl Basketball Player No.5 can be conveniently read as a sequel to Queen of Sports.

In this line, the tiyu discourses in Republican and early PRC periods discussed above should be seen, rather, as different versions of the same plot of “tiyu jiu/xing guo” (to save/build the nation through sports), a nationalistic theme especially popular in postcolonial countries. Under this overarching discourse, the concrete ways of thinking about the body and the nation in the modern Chinese intellectual milieu may vary, such as late Qing intellectuals’ reflection on the Social Darwinist position and Spencer’s biological metaphor,

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82 Another coincidence for example, both main female character’s family names are the same.
the Republican debates about the bourgeois elite competitive mode and the
nationalistic mass/military national defense training mode; the bourgeois
“medals-and-trophyism”; and left-wing focus on the proletarian, or eventually,
the egalitarian, militaristic and proletarian Maoist body culture where individual
bodies were rigorously disciplined. Yet just as in many other discourses of
modern third-world nations, the discourse inevitably resorts to females, who
appear to be subjects in the various representations of the tiyu idea, to address its
national concerns while establishing the male/patriarchal order. To complete our
discussion of the gendered tiyu practice throughout the process of modernizing
China, one should remember that, before the establishment of its modern
meanings during the May Fourth, in view of late Qing reformist intellectuals
such as Yan Fu, females should engage in sports activities so that they can give
birth to healthy new citizens.

4.2 Extension: obsession with sportive female body

A brief comparative review of the sport-themed films made during the
post-Mao reform era will shed more light on the nature of these films. Although
the sports-themed films of the reform era are much more diverse and richer in
meaning than Maoist sport-themed films, they should be seen as successors of

83 See Brownell, “Chapter II: Historical Overview: Sports, The Body and The Nation” in Brownell. Also see Morris.

the latter in terms of a confliction and subjection to the nationalistic goal on the part of female athletes. Examination of those variations will be constructive to our previous discussion of Maoist films. First, while a clear cut between the state and family becomes blurred in Maoist sport films, the boundary between the nation and domestic/personal concerns resurfaces in the early reform-era films, especially those featuring female athletes. First, with respect to gender relationships, the primary father-daughter hierarchy is replaced by heterosexually amorous athletic couples: presentation of romance is not only validated between male coach/supervisor and female athlete, as the case in *Ruan fei* 浪燕飞 (*Young Swallows* (dir. 1979)) and *Paiqiu zhihua* 排球之花 (*Women Volleyball Players* (dir. 1980)), but also put into direct confrontation with an involuntary patriotic passion rather than a coercive Maoist state discipline. The previous unconditional subjection to a “class” revolutionary yields to a conflict between a personal/private well-being and a patriotic urge to “win glory for the nation,” and such a conflict is more of a problem for female athletes than for male athletes. In other words, the domestic social structure of the family, which was previously dismissed in the Maoist period, at least becomes something valuable to be “sacrificed” for the sake of a grander purpose. Second, the acclaimed charges of obstruction to nation-building have shifted from “contradictions among the people” to the politically dystopic atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution. Thus female athletes have to battle with and
overcome the malicious social/political environment before reaching their personal achievements. The Maoist image of the party leading collectivist-socialist utopia becomes bifurcated: on the one hand, the state machine has been related to the “evil” leftist extremism as the major cause of the sufferings of the common people; on the other hand, Nation remains an “a priori” concern through which athletes are willing to sacrifice themselves.

Last, I want to bring to attention to the relatively consistent tiyu discourse from the beginning to the end of the 20th century. Investigations of the following two questions will give us a more complete picture of the modern Chinese tiyu discourse. First, to return to the dichotomy of mind-body raised by Lu Xun, for the obsession with a moralized body in modern China (elevation of physical soundness would lead to elevation of mental/spiritual soundness and vice-versa), does this obsession bear some connection to the traditional Chinese body theory, according to which, unification of mind and body renders the latter moralized? Second, while many discourses in modern China have undergone tremendous changes and transformations, a nationalistic (patriarchal) tiyu discourse remained relatively stable, despite being influenced by clearly diverse political/ideological narratives. Is it so because of China’s historical condition of a powerful nationalism (in a general sense) against its semi-colonial situation in modern times or is it so because the sports/physical culture’s forceful modern
discipline of the body in a Foucaultian sense is also applicable to the non-Western context of a third-world country as China? While I devote much of my discussion to the former explanation, I do not probe into the latter possibility, which, I believe, is worth pursuing in later studies.

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85 This is vaguely related to some of the analysis of "Queen of Sports", especially the part of female athletes' modern lifestyle.


**Filmography**


*Ruyan fei* 乳燕飞 (Young Swallows). Dir. Sun Jing 孙敬. Xi’an: Xi’an, 1979.


*Nülan wuhao* 女篮五号 (Girl Basketball Player No.5). Dir. Xie Jin 谢晋. Shanghai: Tianma Film, 1957.


Ye ban gesheng 夜半歌声 (Song at Midnight). Dir. Maxu Weibang 马维邦.
Shanghai: Xinhua, 1937.
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