Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic

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In a recent edition of the *People’s Daily* there is a photograph depicting four middle-aged and elderly women in Yunnan sitting on a curb, each wearing a large number signifying her registration in an athletic contest. The text beneath draws our attention to the women’s small (bound) feet and states that they are contestants in a run around the city. Anecdotal as this photograph may be, it brings into sharp relief the encounter between modern competitive sports and Chinese body culture, a topic that has received scant attention from scholars until now.

For anthropologist Susan Brownell, “body culture” includes those bodily routines, techniques, dispositions, modes of perception, moral sensibilities, and forms of public exhibition that are shaped in the changing currents of political and public culture. The introduction of competitive sports into China by Western missionary schools challenged the paramount culture and body politic of Chinese tradition that gave slight regard to physical competition. The encounter stimulated reform-minded Chinese to revitalize their culture by promoting competitive sports. This included attempts to incorporate Western sports into a new culture and body politic, which in turn provoked resistance and counter-attempts to revive and raise the status of indigenous forms of physical culture such as martial arts. While competitive sports became popular, attempts to form an occupational class of athletes that could compete with their Western counterparts was, and continues to be, frustrated by the deeply rooted cultural prejudice that favors mental discipline over physical discipline. Athletes are thus consigned to a position of “moral ambiguity” in the occupational hierarchy. The implications of this class-based moral ambiguity provide a major focus for much of Brownell’s discussion.

Chinese communism, especially in its militant or Maoist phases, suppressed the sports establishment, especially that aspect of it which emphasized competition for medals and trophies. The proletarian body culture of the Maoists favored icons that employed brute strength in economic production. In recent decades, however, the proletarian icons have begun to fade behind new icons of fashion and consumption. In the sports arenas, the emphasis on competition is driven with a new fervor to win medals and bonuses in the quest for honor and wealth. Communist officials who previously rejected boxing because of its “bourgeois” appeal to base instincts now accept it for the forty-eight medals available in Olympic competition. New forms of competition include privately sponsored body-building contests that violate official sensibilities, especially when these con-
tests require female contestants to wear bikinis; but here, too, official China has relented based on the need to conform to international standards.

Shaped outwardly by international standards, the new consumer-body continues inwardly to resonate Chinese cultural sensitivities. In one of her most insightful and provocative chapters, Brownell analyzes the conflict in motivational structures between the Western tradition of “fair play” and the Chinese notions of “face.” Brownell cites observations of how “Chinese are often not ‘good sports’” (p. 302). There is often trepidation that a sporting event will end in open strife, and there is the constant promotion of “socialist spiritual civilization” and appeals for self-discipline. Generally absent from this discourse are appeals to “fair play,” which is difficult in any case to translate adequately into Chinese.

“‘Fair play’ focuses on the morality of the process by which the winner and loser are determined” (p. 302). Chinese, according to Brownell, show less appreciation for the game as an end in itself, and more concern for an end result that confers “face” (mianzi) in the sense of “prestige” on the winner. This focus on hierarchy coupled with the moral ambiguity of competitive sports in Chinese culture means that the “personal morality” aspect of “face” (lian) is not brought into play. Finding much to recommend in Brownell’s analysis, I cannot help reflecting on how Americans, supposedly motivated by “fair play,” conduct their sporting contests in a wash of money, ill-will, litigation, sabotage, and brawls.

There is an important point here, however: different cultures cast the same kinds of behaviors in different realities. In this light, Brownell’s analysis is sensitive to the hermeneutics of translation (the problem of cross-cultural understanding) as well as to the power differences that shape communication and ultimately a people’s sense of reality. Even within the same culture, there are different discourse communities. Brownell shows in detail how these different discourses contend with one another. In China, the terms for “face” are used in ordinary talk but are not used in official discourse. Official discourse construes a different reality with its use of words for “honor” and “spiritual civilization,” which are acted out in grand ceremonies that open many official sporting events. There is also discourse that is not expressed in the arena of “public opinion.” For example, talk about women wearing bikinis in settings other than body-building contests is not (yet) open to public discussion. Finally, there is discourse that is “inexpressible”; it makes little or no sense in Chinese. This includes talk about “feminism” or bodies that “sexualize” or “essentialize” gender differences.

Assuming Chinese culture to be more restrictive on women than American culture, Brownell was surprised to find that women in China faced fewer obstacles to participation in competitive sports than she had as a high school student in small-town America. It is worth noting here that Brownell is only the latest American woman to express surprise at the ostensible difference between the relative difficulty that Chinese and American women face when seeking influen-
tial positions in the public sector. Writing in 1941, Pearl Buck was struck by how women in China were so easily accepted as business and bank managers, for example. Brownell is quick to recognize that the difference she experienced was not due simply to the influence of communist doctrine, but goes back to traditional notions of gender and class. In the West the transition to modernity valorized sports, thus making it a preserve for men, while in China the refined classes neither venerated nor restricted physical games. This slight regard for physical games allowed anyone to play; women with bound feet, for example, indulged in the popular game of “kick-ball.” The determining factor was not gender per se but a person’s social relationships, questions of propriety, obligation to family—the need to make a good marriage and to bear children. Brownell roots this notion of gender in Foucault’s terminology of “social alliance.” In China a woman’s social relationships disclose her essential nature rather than as in the modern West, where a woman’s essential nature tends to dictate social roles. This seemingly subtle distinction, Brownell points out, helps explain not only the relative ease with which Chinese women have participated in sports, but also the kind of limitations that Chinese culture imposes on women. For instance, it is widely believed in China that physical training during menstruation may impair later childbearing and that physical development (often stated in terms of becoming “fat” rather than becoming “masculine”) may impair a female athlete’s ability to find a suitable spouse. In keeping with the theme of contending discourses, Brownell describes certain restricted social contexts in which Chinese do “sexualize” gender differences, which may be the result of increasing Western influences.

This book is an ethnohistory based on extensive ethnological comparisons combined with ethnographic materials that the author collected as a member of Beijing University’s track and field team. In this role, Brownell was not only an observer but a true participant in the culture. In the 1986 National College Games, she won a gold medal and fame throughout China. In addition to her many shared experiences, she collected a wealth of data from the popular media, the circulation of private and sometimes confidential memoranda, interviews, and scuttlebutt. The book has numerous photographs and a useful glossary of Chinese terms. For me the book is a bit long with perhaps some unnecessary redundancy, especially in the analysis of opening ceremonies; but this also means that many of the best chapters are fairly self-contained and may be read individually. Having said this, I must also say that there is a great deal more to this book than I have touched on in this review. It is a first in its field and a real contribution to modern Chinese cultural studies.

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