
Yu Chien-ming’s well-crafted new book is the first systematic study of the complicated relationship between Chinese women and physical education. The book makes two significant contributions to modern Chinese women’s history. Firstly, it overcomes the narrow nationalist view of the purposes and methods of women’s physical education by examining the topic from the perspectives of a number of different subjects—female athletes, spectators, media representations, schools and students. It introduces us to a world where various actors contested the meaning of women’s physical education, and it offers new insights into the relations between physical education and state, society, and culture. Secondly, the book reveals the agency of the Chinese women involved in physical education by showing how female students and athletes used it to explore their physical potential, transform their bodies, and then used them to rewrite the history of Chinese women. Yu defines “Eastern China” as Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, Shanghai and Nanjing, where both women’s education and schools for women’s physical education were most developed. Based on a meticulous study of school archives and publications, newspapers and periodicals, and historical sources, Yu argues that the Western notion of “health and beauty” and sport-related new ideas and behaviors produced gendered meanings in China through physical education, tournaments and competitions. The book has two parts consisting of three chapters each.

In Part I, Yu explores media discussions, the evolution of policies, and the campus culture of women students’ physical education. She analyzes the effects of political changes on women’s physical education policy in Chapter 1 and finds that nationalist discussions on “strengthening the nation and the race” and “saving the nation through physical education” were replaced by a “health and beauty” discourse in the 1920s-30s. She observes that some educators took gender differences into consideration, proposing particular methods as normative and establishing separate rules for girls’ physical education. Investigating the changes in girls’ physical education at various schools in Chapter 2, Yu notes that calisthenics for “militarizing the nation (jun guomin)” in the late Qing and early Republican years was gradually replaced by
diversified exercises—dance, competitive athletics, ball games and cycling. She argues for a major change after Chinese unification in 1928 when the Nationalist government institutionalized physical education in schools, promoted it for all citizens, held national sports meetings and built gymnasiums. Yu emphasizes the importance of schools in training physical education teachers, and notes that women’s physical education schools promoted both feminist (“emancipate Chinese women”) and nationalist goals (“strengthening the mother of the nation”).

Yu explores what women students gained from physical education in Chapter 3 by studying the culture of girls’ physical education. She finds that physical exercise provided girls with chances to organize themselves and to defend their rights and freedoms at co-educational schools. Yu argues that sports broadened the horizon of female athletes as they competed at regional, national and international levels, inspired women students to dream big and reach their potential, and kept school girls in touch with modern civilization. She concludes that physical education engendered a new standard of beauty for women students, and increased interaction and mutual support between male and female students. Participants were seeking fame, good health or simply enjoyment.

In Part II, Yu examines how the media and society viewed women’s athletic competitions. She finds in Chapter 4 that while the media portrayed female athletes in competitions as heroines, it also generated news about them unrelated to sports (their clothes, make-up, emotional changes and private lives) to satisfy readers’ voyeuristic desires. She notes that the audience did not just come to watch sports, but also to watch women athletes and their bodies. Yu explores how advertisement, art and culture portrayed women’s physical exercise in Chapter 5, and argues that where the phrases “strengthening the nation and the race,” and “health and beauty,” and the term “sports” were used to advertise tonic food, cosmetics, medicines and sports utilities, they also spread the notion of sports to readers. She studies city dwellers’ changing responses to women’s physical exercises by analyzing cartoon representations, and finds images of women with sports equipment became a new way of portraying feminine grace. Yu notes that movies were advertised and produced in the name of “health and beauty”. Actresses who played athletes on screen copied their dress off screen in order to increase their popularity, and songs about girls’ physical education emphasized the importance of strong bodies in strengthening the nation.

Yu analyzes how ordinary people perceived women in athletic competitions in Chapter 6 and finds that they not only watched sports from different perspectives but also understood the
meanings of women’s competitions differently. Besides linking women athletes to nationalism, they also emphasized the positive impact of sports on women – improving their health and beauty, challenging gender segregation, correcting the view that women are unfit for aggressive competitions. Yu highlights the problems in physical education. While schools trained elite athletes for competitions, they ignored the physical education of other students. It remained a privilege of students and had nothing to do with ordinary people. Famous athletes enjoyed privileges at school and could get by with poor academic performance. Yu argues that women athletes were perceived as new women and modern girls, and she analyzes how women’s journals criticized female athletes for their vanity, lack of progress, and improper life styles. Yu shows how the media condemned unruly audiences for failing to understand the true meaning of sports.

The book has two extra features, which make it even more interesting to scholars. Firstly, it includes ninety-five images of the culture of girls’ physical education in eastern China in 1895-1937. Secondly, Yu’s comparison between eastern China and Taiwan under Japanese colonial control uncovers the influence of political structures on the development of girls’ physical education.

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