In this book, Gao Yunxiang follows the individual lives of prominent sportswomen – female physical educators, athletes, and an athletic film star – in order to trace “aspects of social and political negotiations over the meaning of sports, gender, and nation” (p. 7) during China’s period of national crisis (1931-1945). Wartime tensions and mobilization efforts during this period dominated the development of tiyu (physical education, sports, and physical culture). Nationalists, Communists, and liberal intellectuals all sought to strengthen citizens’ bodies through tiyu, create “a fit Chinese womanhood” (p. 14), and build a stronger, militant nation to face the Japanese. Gao argues that sportswomen emancipated themselves by creating “new, personal solutions as they pushed into new gendered arenas” (p. 5).

At the same time that sportswomen served the larger nationalist project to strengthen the female citizenry, new forms of media also began to promote sport and foster the rise of a fan culture. Within this context, Gao contends that sportswomen, especially young female athletes, blurred and breached the boundaries between the “naughty Modern Girl” and “virtuous New Woman” archetypes (p. 10). The Modern Girl was depicted as young, fashionable, and sometimes scantily clad in popular magazines, while the officially endorsed New Woman was “strongly nationalistic and educated, and pursued love on the basis of free choice and social improvement rather than personal fulfillment or sexuality” (p. 11).

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a framework for understanding the transnational context of tiyu and gender in this period. Chapter 1 traces the life of Zhang Huilian, the “Mother of Women’s Modern Physical Education,” as she “carved out a career as a female tiyu professional in a world dominated by men” (p. 17). Zhang, who studied multiple times in the United States, skillfully navigated female and male patronage networks to secure her own career. She became the most prominent female P.E. administrator in China pre-1949 as her use of scientific data and equal-rights rhetoric helped promote and legitimize women’s participation in sports and physical education. Chapter 2 examines the rise of a discourse on jianmei (“the quality of robust or healthy beauty”) – a cultural translation of Western-dominated global media – in publications such as Linglong, a popular weekly magazine for women published in Shanghai in the 1930s that
included articles on Western celebrities and culture. Cultivated through *tiyu, jianmei’s “plain, make-up free style”* (p. 59) was fashionable and exemplified morality. However, the bare skin of female bodies associated with *jianmei* also clashed with the spirit of the Nationalists’ New Life Movement to return to traditional morality. Gao argues that *Linglong*, which helped raise public awareness and interest in sport, also served as a platform where women fashioned “active roles for themselves” (p. 60) through their discussions over topics like *jianmei*.

Chapters 3 through 5 examine the real lives of elite female athletes in basketball, track, and swimming, their media images, and connections to larger nationalist goals. Chapter 3 traces the famous Private Liangjiang Women’s Tiyu Normal School’s basketball team in Shanghai under the direction of female physical educator Lu Lihua, whose entrepreneurial spirit and use of male patronage networks helped fund the school’s facilities and the team’s frequent travels. Her deft handling of the media, especially as the team competed internationally, helped the team gain an overall positive national media image as professional and cosmopolitan. The media often highlighted the team’s players as representatives of the patriotic New Woman admiring them for their “masculine strength and manly style” (p. 116), but sometimes labeled players as the more problematic Modern Girl, such as for choosing a bobbed hairstyle. Likewise, national track and field stars, the subject of Chapter 4, were often portrayed by the media as either masculine, an image that could be softened by highlighting so-called traditional feminine virtues, such as a genial personality, modesty, and girlish innocence, or as Modern Girls. Chapter 5 follows Yang Xiuqiong (1918-1982), the illustrious elite swimmer who attended the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Yang and other female swimmers became symbols for the New Life Movement, and the media admired and promoted them for their less-masculine athletic physiques, while simultaneously striving to desexualize their exposed bodies. As the first Chinese woman to win overseas athletic competitions, Yang became very famous and went on nationwide tours. Gao argues that Yang’s beauty, fashion sense, intelligence, and athleticism blurred the lines between the New Woman and Modern Girl. When she competed well, media touted her as a New Woman who had won glory for the nation; when she lost, she was blamed for her Modern Girl “high living” (p. 170).

All female athletes had to navigate the broader, gendered territory of women’s sport in China at the time. Many female athletes had relatively short athletic careers and very limited post-athletic options – many became physical education teachers. Gendered basketball rules and
unruly crowds of male spectators created headaches for Lu’s team. In all cases, the media’s coverage of these women helped popularize female participation in sport despite these issues.

In the last chapter, Gao reflects on the life the athletic movie star Li Lili, who was known for her roles in films like *Sports Queen* (1934). Li, with two Communist parents, was athletic, patriotic, and fluent in standard mandarin. Her onscreen athletic image broke gender norms by projecting the female body into public and national view, and became a place “where ideological values and political systems constructed and contested notions of nation and state during the national crisis” (p. 16). Communist filmmakers emphasized her sports performances as representative of strong female working-class citizens, and Nationalists as representative of internationally strong and healthy middle-class Chinese women. Filmmakers maintained that her bodily image was desexualized and innocent, even while exploiting her sexual appeal to attract a captive audience. Gao argues that Li, through actively working with male filmmakers to fashion her onscreen portrayals, maintaining political agency, and controlling her personal life, created “her own model of female citizenship” (p. 209), with a strong and morally chaste off-screen media image.

Overall, Gao’s deft use of biography to link famous sportswomen to the rise of the nation and new forms of media allows her to observe how gender contradictions within larger national projects played out more personally. Those who study gender beyond China will find the chapter on *jianmei* intriguing for its connections to a larger, global discourse at the time. Additionally, Gao’s astute and nuanced understanding of emancipation opens up discussion over the ways in which female agency can be exercised within a predominately patriarchal society. Of course, not all sportswomen had equal opportunities or received the same treatment. Female elite athletes, for example, faced comparatively more challenges than sports administrators, particularly when trying to negotiate their media image amidst public interest in their sexuality, rowdy male spectators at their competitions, and officials who “applauded the female athletes while plotting to make them their concubines” (p. 9).

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