Chinese women and sport success, sexuality, suspicion

Riordan, James

要 約

1990年代における中国女性競技者の成績はスポーツ界に類をみえないものである。彼女達は世界選手権の獲得や世界記録の達成において驚異的な進歩をなさずに、国際スポーツにおいて中国男性の成績を圧倒している。

筋肉的なものから知的なものまでに至る広範囲のスポーツにおいて優越する力を見す中国女性の急速な台頭は多くの疑問をもたらす。成功の理由は何か？彼女達は、西洋の女性がスポーツにおいて直面する多くの障害を、どのように回避したのか？女性スポーツを優先する中国政府の動機はなにか？この論文はこうした問題を検討している。

キーワード：中国、女性、スポーツ


Key words: China, Women, Sport

Introduction

The performance of top Chinese women athletes in the 1990s has been unprecedented in the history of sport. Not only have they made remarkable progress from virtual obscurity to world champions and record breakers, they have far surpassed the performance of their male compatriots in international sport. This unique phenomenon extends from middle- and long-distance running to swimming and diving, from weightlifting and chess to volleyball and basketball, from shooting and archery to wrestling and rowing, from badminton and gymnastics to softball and soccer—and table tennis dating back to the early 1970s.

In running alone, within the space of one year, 1993, Chinese women won three world titles, set three junior records and three world records, ran the four fastest marathons of the year and filled the first four places in the World Cup Marathon. At the World Championships in Stuttgart, Chinese women won four gold medals (Chinese men won none), putting China second in the medal table behind the USA, but ahead of Russia, Germany and Britain. They made a clean sweep of the 1,500 m, 3000 m and 10,000 m. Until then, Chinese women and men had won just seven medals in world track and field championships, including two golds, in the three previous meetings put together. Chinese women had taken no more than two of those medals. Further, at the 7th National Games held in Beijing in September 1993, Chinese women athletes broke six world records—the 10,000 m by as much as 42 seconds.

An even more remarkable success occurred at the 7th World Swimming Championships held in Rome in September 1994; Chinese women won 12 of the 16 swimming and diving world titles (and five silver medals), setting five world records. Chinese men won no swimming medals at all. While the men had also won no medals at the inaugural World Short-Course Swimming Championships in December 1993, Chinese women won ten world titles, setting ten new world records; they also won five world diving titles at the 8th World Cup Diving Championships the same year.

In terms of swimming progress, suffice it to say that Chinese women had won no gold medals at the 1988 Olympics, took four gold medals at both the 1991 world championships and the 1992 Olympics; now, in 1994, they had trebled that total. An idea of the rapid progress may be gained from Chinese women’s place in world rankings (see Table 1).

These noteworthy achievements established

Department of Linguistic and International Studies, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 5XH, UK
Table 1  Chinese women ranked in the world top 25 swimmers in all swimming events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By contrast, only three Chinese men made the top 30 in all swimming events in 1993.

Source: Craig Lord, 'China's women shake the world,' Sunday Times, 11 September 1994, Sport Section p10; The Times, 13 September 1994, p42.

China in 1993 and 1994 for the first time as a major world power in sport. The attainment was gained almost entirely thanks to Chinese women’s success, what is referred to in China as the blossoming of the Yin (female) and the withering of the Yang (male).

The drug issue

Unfortunately, the blossom has been blighted by drug scandals involving Chinese sportswomen. Not only do these put doubt to the sporting achievements, they call into question the very validity of the record and China’s status as a world sports nation. While the drug issue is dealt with in more detail later, it needs to be raised here inasmuch as it casts a long shadow over all that follows.

The basic facts are that since 1988 as many as 47 Chinese athletes have tested positive for anabolic steroids; they include 38 in 1994 alone, including 11 swimmers. During the Asian Games of October 1994, 11 Chinese athletes, including seven swimmers, tested positive; and two female weightlifters tested positive a month later at the World Championships in Istanbul. All but one of those positives were for a potent anabolic steroid called dihydrotestosterone (DHT); a significant number of other Chinese athletes had elevated levels of DHT in their urine at the Asian Games, but not enough to be declared positive. The 11 swimmers who tested positive have to be set beside the ten from other nations who tested positive in the 22 years since testing began.

What is in the minds of many critics of China’s sport and drugs record is the revelations following the demise of communist countries in Eastern Europe. It is now known that there was long term state production, testing, monitoring and administering of performance-enhancing drugs in regard to athletes as young as 7-8. It was this mendacity of the old regime-loudly condemning drug abuse in the West as a typical excess of capitalism, while concealing its own involvement in a far more extensive programme of state manufacture and distribution of drugs—from growth stimulants to growth retardants, anabolic steroids to blood doping and hypnosis—that so tarnished the image of sport among many people. In late 1991, the year that the Soviet Union disintegrated, four one-time leading East German swimming coaches issued a statement confessing to widespread use of anabolic steroids among their swimmers in the 1970s and 1980s. And a long stream of evidence has been emerging, particularly from the ex-USSR and GDR, of state-controlled administration of drugs (Berendonk; Mader; Kuhnst; Heinrich-Vogel; Riordan, 1993, 1994).

We now know that, following the unification of Germany, a number of East German sports doctors and coaches went to work in China.

While it is true that drugs were used in Eastern Europe and are now being used in China, the same is also true of the West. Whatever the political ideology, the stakes in international competition are high. Victory brings increased status for the individual and his/her family, it results in financial and career rewards and boosts the image of the nation. Defeat can result in personal humiliation, loss of career and it does nothing for the image of the athlete’s nation. Today, in international sport, there are relentless pressures on athletes from coaches, sponsors, the public and even governments. Certain countries with few social, economic or scientific achievements, or countries who wish to demonstrate the superiority of their socio-political system, use sport to enhance their prestige. The promotion of sport has become a major political concern, and if success is believed to be possible through the use of drugs, then drugs are used. It is possible that in some countries, athletes, coaches or doctors, not believing in the ethics or benefits of doping procedures, may be forced to use them.

For a genuine understanding of drug-taking in Chinese sport, it is important not to make sweeping generalisations, nor to take a holier than thou view of China or the old communist system in Eastern Europe. What follows is an attempt to provide a broad understanding of Chinese women and sport, putting the drug issue into perspective.
Chinese women's contribution to the Olympics and world championships

An examination of Chinese women's contribution to China's Olympic record at the past three Summer Olympics reinforces the Chinese women's achievements; it is a phenomenon unique in Olympic history (see Table 1). While men won eight gold to women's seven gold medals in 1984, they won fewer gold medals than Chinese women in 1988 and 1992 (2 to 3, and 5 to 11 respectively). What is more, while the men's gold medals were confined to five sports (weightlifting, shooting, gymnastics, table tennis and diving), women's gold medals were spread over twice as many sports (gymnastics, archery, fencing, shooting, volleyball, diving, table tennis, swimming, judo and track and field).

In the Winter Olympics, China has competed since 1980, though initially merely as a symbolic gesture: in the three Games up to 1988 the best result was 16th place in the women's 5000 m speed skating at Calgary in 1988. It was, nonetheless, women who provided the break-through.

Table 2 Chinese Women's and Men's Contribution to China's Results in the Summer Olympics, 1984–1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summer Olympics</th>
<th>Medals won</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Men (Gold)</th>
<th>Women (Gold)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>G S B</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>5 11 12</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>16 22 16</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In 1984, men won gold in weightlifting (four medals), shooting (2) and gymnastics (3), archery, fencing, shooting and volleyball. In 1988, men won gold in gymnastics and table tennis; women won gold in diving (2) and table tennis. In 1992, men won gold in shooting (2), table tennis, gymnastics and diving; women won gold in swimming (4), diving (2), table tennis (2), judo, gymnastics and track (10 km walk).


While men won no medals, women took three silver at Albertville in 1992 and a silver and two bronze at Lillehammer in 1994 (see Table 3).

An idea of the emphasis placed by the Chinese authorities on women as the vanguard of the Chinese international sporting thrust may be gained from the male-female composition of China's and other teams in the 1988 Summer Olympic Games. See Table 4. Although they had more men in their squad than women, the Chinese easily had the highest percentage of women.

It is important to bear in mind that at the 1988 Olympics there were 26 sports and 165 events for men compared with 22 sports and 83 events for women.

Table 3 China's Performance at the Winter Olympics, 1980–1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Olympics</th>
<th>Medals won</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>0 0 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>0 3 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>0 1 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Sports, June 1994, p13

Table 4 Numbers of male and female competitors in Olympic teams, 1988: countries with established sports traditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>%Females in team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDR</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GB</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRG</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
women; overall, women constituted 25.84 percent of all competitors.

An illustration of Chinese women's comparative contribution to China's overall performance at the 1988 and 1992 Summer Olympics is given in Table 5 below. Apart from confirming the Chinese improvement from 5 to 16 Gold medals on aggregate, in-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1988 Summer Olympics</th>
<th>1992 Summer Olympics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total gold medals</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's gold medals</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's%</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sports in which Chinese women have achieved world success in the 1990s

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARCHERY</td>
<td>Wang Xiaozhu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BADMINTON</td>
<td>Ye Zhaoying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASKETBALL</td>
<td>team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHESS</td>
<td>Xie Jun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISABLED*</td>
<td>Zheng Peifeng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIVING</td>
<td>all 3 golds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FENCING</td>
<td>foil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GYMNASTICS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUDO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROWING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHOOTING**</td>
<td>Li Duihong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHOT PUTT</td>
<td>Huang Zhihong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCCER</td>
<td>five times Asian Games champs and World Univ Games champs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOFTBALL</td>
<td>2nd in WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEED SKATING</td>
<td>Ye Qiaobo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWIMMING</td>
<td>12 WC, 5 WRH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE TENNIS***</td>
<td>women's team champs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRACK ATHLETICS</td>
<td>won 1500 m, 3000 m and 10,000 m at WT &amp; FC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLLeyball****</td>
<td>team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEIGHTLIFTING</td>
<td>19 WRH and 10 WC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRESTLING</td>
<td>3 WC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Unlike other state socialist countries, China set up national sports associations for the disabled from the early 1980s (27 1983-85), held three national paraplegic games and hosted the 6th Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled in September 1994, at which it completely dominated the other 41 states, with a total of 298 medals (Australia in second place won 50).

** Chinese women won the air pistol title at the 1987 WC.

*** The first Chinese player to win the WC (singles) was Qiu Zhanghui as far back as 1961.

**** The Chinese women's team first won the WC in 1981, retaining it five consecutive times, creating what many Chinese describe as the 'breakthrough' for China into world sport and provoking the outrush of mass feeling that may well have caused the Chinese leadership to try to link patriotic feelings with world sports success.

Legend: OGM = Olympic Gold Medal; WRH = World Record Holder; WC = World Champion; W Cup = World Cup; POC = Paraplegic Olympic Champion; WCC = World Cup Champion; WT & FC = World Track and Field Championships.
cluding 3 to 12 to women, the Table shows that Chinese women had caught up with the world's top women by 1992 and made a substantial contribution to China's rise to become a leading sports nation.

But China's success is by no means confined to a handful of sports. As the following list indicates, the spectrum of Chinese women's success extends to 21 sports. As evidence of the sexual imbalance in Chinese world performance, it is noteworthy that Chinese women in 1992 and 1993 contributed 71 and 77 world titles won by China out of 89 and 103 respectively. Moreover, no Chinese man has ever come near to challenging for the world chess crown.

Outside competitive sport, Chinese women are demonstrating considerable endurance and skill by, for example, climbing Mount Everest and crossing one of the world's most extensive (and dangerous) deserts-Xinjiang's Taklimakan—a first for women explorers. This swift emergence of Chinese women as a dominant force in such a wide range of sports, cerebral as well as muscular, raises a number of questions.

What are the reasons for these achievements?
How have Chinese women evidently evaded many of the obstacles confronting Western women in sport?
What is the government motivation in apparently prioritising women's sport?
How has the success been attained and at what cost?

Role of sport in Chinese society

For newly-independent nations trying to establish themselves in the world as world powers to be respected, even recognised, sport may uniquely offer an opportunity to 'win' against the best in the full glare of world publicity—e.g. at the Olympic Games. This is particularly apposite to those nations faced by boycott and/or subversion from big powers. Where other channels have been closed, for example, success in sport would seem to have aided such countries as Cuba, the USSR and East Germany—as well as other modernising states-to attain a measure of recognition and prestige internationally. Sport here is unique in that for such nations it may be the only medium in which they are able to take on and beat the economically-advanced nations. For some politicians, sports success can mean more than medals; as a Chinese writer has put it,

Victory in the Olympics or World Cup can bring instant acclaim, international respectability and status. Sport, therefore, is no longer used merely to judge the competitive level of a country's athletes, but it is also an instrument to demonstrate the physical, economic, military and cultural superiority of a political system (Jiang).

This puts particular responsibility on athletes from developing countries insofar as they are viewed by politicians as imbuing a sense of pride in their team, nationality or country, even political system.

For China, as with other state socialist countries, sport has traditionally been controlled by the state. So material and human resources may be concentrated far more easily than in a market economy on prioritised goals, like 'sporting diplomacy' or Olympic performance. Sport in China, furthermore, has since 1949 reflected foreign policy and, on occasion, been blatantly utilised to effect foreign policy changes—as with the so-called ping-pong diplomacy in the 1970s. 'This was a shortcut that China took to restore diplomatic relations with the USA' (Jiang). As another Chinese sports scholar writes,

... sport is used to serve international diplomatic ends and to demonstrate superiority over capitalist systems. Sport is directed by state policies, decrees and plans. The policy of developing competitive sport was established in 1956 when the first Chinese athlete broke the world record in weightlifting. But until 1979 competitive sport was restricted to the domestic arena or international friendship tournaments because China was isolated from international sport for two decades. Moreover, during the ten years of Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the competitive spirit was discouraged, even criticised; Chinese competitive sport was seriously hindered. However, with economic reform in the 1980s a great change took place in every aspect of society ... National sports policy was revised from 'Friendship First, Competition Second', advocated by Mao Tse-tung, to an all-out quest for global recognition and status (Dong).

The primary target in China's sports policy since the early 1980s, therefore, has been to produce a winning formula in Olympic and world...
arenas-as other state socialist nations (notably the Soviet Union, Cuba and East Germany) had done from the 1960s. Chinese sports officials made no bones about the fact that ‘The highest goal of Chinese sport is success in the Olympic Games’ (Wu) or that ‘the all-important Olympic Games (is) the real yardstick for a nation’s actual strength in sport’ (Xu).

But China was a ‘late starter’, making its Olympic appearance only in 1984, in Los Angeles (when most other communist states boycotted the Games), after an absence of 32 years (since the 1952 Helsinki Olympics) during which time it had been prevented from taking part largely because of US opposition. Upon resuming its seat on the International Olympic Committee in 1979, its politicians sounded a clarion call of ‘March out of Asia and into the world!’ (Xu). Although China made little impact at the 1984 and 1988 Games, by 1992 it was beginning to show signs that ‘the tried and tested model of early selection and training, special sports schools and sports science was having an impact on results’ (Jones).

Sport then began to play a salient part in restoring pride and dignity to the world’s largest nation. An American scholar has written that ‘China’s political and sports officials openly acknowledge that they view sport as one instrument for promoting national pride and identity, which is a primary motivation behind the expenditure of over 300 million yuan annually for sports.’ (Sage). In other words, international sports success helps to bind the nation together as it goes through turbulent political and economic change. Such sentiments are explicit in statements by the Chinese themselves:

In modern times, China has suffered from domestic unrest and foreign aggression, and has been in the position of a backward underdog. China has been described as ‘the sick man of East Asia’, ‘a tragic race!’ ... Since it is unable to boast about its economic achievements, it is like the Soviet Union and wardevastated Japan in seeking a means to raise political prestige and show that it is a large and powerful country. It dreams, therefore, of becoming a strong sports nation (my italics—JR) (Jiang).

A writer in the official sports monthly China Sports talks of sports success helping to assuage the Chinese ‘inferiority complex’:

Today the Chinese are not so impotent as they used to be in world sport. They can take pride in more than table tennis and women’s volleyball; they have astonished the world by their meteoric rise in women’s track and field where previously they had always hung their heads in humiliation. They have rid themselves of their inferiority complex (Li).

As the most famous of all Chinese coaches, Ma Junren, has said of the spirit that motivates his team and himself:

To win honour for our country—that is what motivates our team. . . . The Chinese are not ‘a nation of rice-eaters’ or the ‘sick man of Asia’—labels that Westerners have stuck on our people. We can do what others can, perhaps even more. The worst thing is not that you are not able to do something, it’s that you dare not do it (Song).

Having set a target of becoming ‘a top world sports power by the end of the century (Xu), Chinese officials set about prioritising elite, especially Olympic, sport and working to fulfil this plan. It entailed massive financial investment: in the decade 1978–1988, gross national income rose from 301 billion yuan to 1177 billion, a 290 percent increase. Government sports funding rose from 254 m to one billion yuan, an over 200 percent increase. Of that amount, two-thirds went into elite sport (Jiang). To gain Olympic medals, moreover, the investment was relatively huge: it is estimated that China spent US52m on each gold medal won at the 1988 Seoul Olympics by contrast with the host country’s US9m. Altogether China invested US260m in success at the Seoul Olympics (Jones). Winning bonuses took a big part of that: rising from 8000 yuan for gold medal winners in Los Angeles (1984) to 18,000 in 1988 and 80,000 in 1992 (with silver medalists receiving 50,000 and bronze medalists 30,000). The 13-year-old diving champion Fun Mingxia gained an additional 463,000 yuan from various sponsors (Jones). This may be a paltry sum when compared to the earnings of top US athletes, but it is a staggering fortune in a country where a school teacher, for example, earns some 150 yuan a month. In other words, the 13-year-old diver gained in winnings the astonishing amount of 3620 times more than a teacher’s monthly salary.

China had inherited the Soviet sports structure, with its professional coaches, sports medicine and science, major sports clubs sponsored and financed by the armed and security (Dinamo in
Eastern Europe) forces, sports ranking system, residential boarding schools, etc. But China took the system further. Whereas the Soviet Union had 46 sports boarding schools in 1990, and East Germany 20, China had 150 (Riordan, 1994; Dong) whereas the USSR had 15,000 professional coaches, China had 18,173 in 1991 (Dong). It is revealed that full-time athletes in China spend an average 7-8 hours a day on sports training and they are distributed as follows: 15,602 in provincial team sports centres, 28,192 in sports boarding schools and 47,315 in elite 'spare-time schools' (Dong). All training, board and lodging are free.

In order to improve the system and bring it into line with major reforms in the mid-1980s, the government moved to a multi-level, multi-channel system which, while still based on state overall control and planning, was made more flexible and polymorphous. Corporate sponsorship was introduced and the financial rewards were substantially increased.

This, then, was the basic infrastructure of China's sports system and the springboard from which to make an assault on the world sporting citadels. In this context, the emphasis on elite women's sport may be seen, partly, as an attempt to win titles and recognition swiftly in events vulnerable to a concerted and well-planned assault—such as middle- and long-distance running, swimming, diving, weightlifting, soccer, wrestling, volleyball and table tennis—events that may be won more easily than others or those of men. As a writer with *Transworld Sport* (which gave the long-distance runner Wang Junxia the 1993 Sportswoman of the Year award) has put it, 'women's long-distance running events are more than usually prone to a world record blitz' (Lewis). Lou Dapeng, Vice President of the Chinese Track and Field Federation, is reported as saying that 'it has been our policy to concentrate on women's sport' (Macleod). The swimming coach Chen Yunxipeng has said that 'The outstanding achievements made by female athletes... have encouraged Chinese sports authorities to channel more funds and manpower to women's events than to men's, resulting in wider participation and higher technical standards among women' (Xie).

Here, then, is one, official, reason for support for women's sport. But what of the women themselves? What has motivated them to undergo such rigorous training necessary to become world champions? After all, the path of world success and acceptance has been long and tortuous for Western female athletes.

**Chinese women and sport**

In general, the greater the economic and social resources of a country, particularly in terms of education, health care and nutrition, the more likely it is that women will be part of a national sports scheme. But developing states (whose women make up two thirds of women in the world) are relatively poor, with limited resources. In addition, other factors, such as tradition and religion, tend to militate against the promotion of women's sport. As a result, most developing countries have only a small number of female Olympic competitors, or none at all. Thus, between 1952 and 1972, the number of countries in the Olympics rose from 69 to 121—a 75 percent increase; but the number of countries that entered women (Asian states like Pakistan and Bangladesh had no women athletes at all in the 1988 Olympics) rose from 41 to 61—an increase of only 49 percent (Hargreaves).

China is highly eccentric in this general pattern. As we saw in Table 3, China headed all nations in 1988 in having 46 percent of female athletes in its Olympics squad; the nearest Asian state was Japan in 14th place, with 26 percent, while no other developing nation had over 10 percent.

The answer to what factors, other than state encouragement, have facilitated women's progress in sport would seem to lie in a nexus of sources, several of which not only run counter to Western experience, they actually challenge many dominant Western theories of sporting activity.

1. 'Chinese first, women second'

In connection with the official policy of giving priority to women's elite sport, the justification is frequently made by Chinese sources that their sportswomen are Chinese first and women second. In other words, in the overriding state priorities and among the public, in the patriotic zeal and social integration, produced by victories of Chinese women swimmers, runners, volleyball players, etc., their *Chinese identity* is seen as more important than their *gender identity*. Any polarisation of males versus females is therefore overwhelmed by feelings of 'China v. the world'.
This is a phenomenon starkly at variance with the historical ‘male v. female’ dichotomy common in Western sporting nations, but it is closer to the situation that existed in much of East European and Cuban sport. For example, at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games, sportswomen from the Soviet Union made up a third (35 percent) of the Soviet team (all women comprising 20.58 percent of competitors) and contributed 36 of the 125 Soviet medals (almost 30 percent). The women of East Germany made up 40 percent of the GDR team and won more than half the team’s gold and silver medals. By contrast, US women comprised just over a quarter (26 percent) or 112 out of 425, British and West German women slightly over a fifth (20.6 and 21 percent respectively), and French women less than a fifth (18.3 percent) of their teams. The teams from Latin America had virtually no women at all, with the notable exception of Cuba with 55 women out of its team of 200. Further, in the Winter Olympics of 1976, Soviet and East German women contributed more than half their teams’ medals more than twice the number won by US, West German, French and British women put together (Riordan, 1985).

China therefore is following the path pioneered by other state socialist nations in seeking international sports success based on its women.

2. Traditional attitudes to women’s sport

By contrast with Western historical experience which, from at least Ancient Greece until recent times, has regarded most sports as male preserves, in China, martial arts (the principal form of indigenous sport to survive until today) have never been perceived as an area of life exclusive to virile young men. The figure of the female warrior (wudan) has existed down the centuries and is a stock character in martial arts novels (wu xia xiaoshuo) and other literary texts, and operas (wuxi) (Brownell).

There is evidence that in the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) a form of football ‘became more popular than ever for women, even with bound feet, spreading from court attendants to the general populace’ (Brownell). Wrestling by both men and women was a popular court entertainment, and the top women’s wrestlers became quite famous. As the US scholar Susan Brownell writes,

For men, polo, kick-ball and wrestling were regarded as important methods of military training. Though there were certainly gender differences in the ways these sports were played and the meanings assigned to them... the fact that these were the same sports that women played seems to demonstrate that throughout Chinese history these sports were not regarded as an exclusive ‘male preserve’ (Brownell).

This traditional involvement of women in combat sports helped to maintain women’s active role in the face of the introduction of Western sports with their male bias at the turn of the century-during the colonisation of China and the Republican period (1912-1949). ‘Because Western sports were introduced into China through Western-run schools, and especially by the YMCA, the Western bias against women in sports was reflected in the limited participation of Chinese women from the turn of the century until the 1930s. Women were not included in the National Sports Games organised by Westerners in 1910 and 1914’ (Brownell).

However, as the Chinese increasingly took over the organisation of the Games, the situation changed. Thus the Third National Games, held in 1924 (i.e. in the Republican period), contained three exhibition sports for women, and the Fourth National Games in 1930 added four sports for women (track and field, volleyball, basketball and tennis). As Susan Brownell comments, ‘Chinese women did not particularly lag behind men in sports that are strongly identified with masculine identity in the West’ (Brownell). Female athletes also participated in the Second Martial Arts Festival of 1932 and, in the Seventh National Games in 1948, women’s wrestling was an exhibition event.

It is clear that not only have women had a long accepted involvement in sport in China, they have been able to practice ‘muscular’ combat sports like wrestling, boxing and wushu (various forms of hand-to-hand combat and weapon skills contests) with apparent official and male approbation and even encouragement. The same applies to Chinese women’s involvement in bodybuilding: the first Chinese Bodybuilding Championships for men and women took place in December 1994.

3. Sports as lower-class activities

From the Song Dynasty onwards—i.e. after 960, education for the elite in China increasingly
emphasised the mind at the expense of the body; henceforth sports tended to be marginalised in the education of the ruling class and its male offspring. By the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), scholars spent much of their lives memorising a vast amount of knowledge in order to pass the Imperial Examinations and therefore move up the social rankings scale.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese situation singularly differed from that in Western Europe, especially Britain, where 'character-building sports' were an integral part of the education of upper and middle class boys. The influence of this historical denigration of engagement in sporting activity in China persists today in the popular consciousness: 'The influence of China's long history is evident in the fact that, despite the efforts of the state, sports still do not play an important role in the educational system. Chinese parents do not like their children to devote too much time to sports because they perceive education as the way to a better life' (Brownell).

A Chinese writer confirms that 'The Chinese put much store by intellectual education and display a negative attitude towards sport; some parents do not like their children to engage in sport' (Dong). As a result of this intellectual bias against sport, sport is still widely viewed as an activity engaged in only by 'lower-class, uneducated people'- and, hence, an acceptable pursuit for women, thereby reinforcing the historical precedents described above. As we shall see below, a significant proportion of elite women athletes is from a rural, less educated background. By contrast with the United States and Western Europe, and even Japan, therefore, 'Chinese athletes have a relatively lower standard of education' (Dong).

For Chinese women athletes sport is an open channel to material and social advancement. Inasmuch as the state has substantially subsidised sport, this has enabled 'talented working class and rural-based women' to enter sport and realise their potential (Dong).

It has to be remembered that China is a developing country. Only 1.8 percent of the population had received a higher education in 1987, and only 33 percent of those were women—the same figure as in 1976 and not even double the number of the 1950s (Dong; Rai). What is more, of the 230 m of the population that is illiterate, some 70 percent are women. Women's education, therefore, is 'relatively restricted by comparison with advanced countries' (Rai). On the other hand, some dramatic changes have occurred in health: women's life expectancy rose from 35 in 1950 to 71 in 1991 (and to 76 in Beijing); the current women's life expectancy is therefore close to that in the world's richest countries (Women of China).

Given the popular attitudes to sport and women's lower educational position, men (including those running a 'paternalistic' state) are unlikely to stand in the way of women who wish to engage in an activity that is relatively unimportant to men in the first place. This 'lower-class stigma' has implications for the way in which gender is linked with social class/status in contemporary sport.

4. Sport, the countryside and Confucian philosophy

Of China's 1.2 billion people, 80 percent live in the countryside. More than half of the rural population—some 550 m—is female. There are certain characteristics of rural women in China that predispose them towards sport. First, as noted above, sport traditionally has been regarded as a lower-class pursuit and therefore open to women as 'lower-class citizens', especially peasants, in the historically hierarchical, male-dominated society. Second, the very nature of peasant labour, requiring a strong physique and mental toughness, has some affinity with qualities required in sports training. Further, in a communist country whose ideology has glorified manual labour and labourers, the notion of a strong, tough, muscular woman has been an officially-approved and propagated ideal stereotype that has reinforced and authenticated the traditional stereotype described above.

It is therefore no surprise that the majority of Chinese women athletes come from an urban working class or rural background, where the largest reservoir of sporting talent lies. As Susan Brownell attests, 'a growing proportion of China's most outstanding athletes have come from the countryside. The low status of female peasants makes them superior for sports training because they are accustomed to physical hardship and are highly motivated to take advantage of sports opportunities in the face of limited options.' A Chinese source supports this view: 'Many girls in remote and poverty-stricken villages have become world-famous athletes....
Although freed from the fetters of feudal custom... Chinese women, particularly in rural areas, have inherited the virtue of obedience to their elders, and to their coach in sports training. They can bear all hardships involved in training and obey their coaches' (Xie).

Susan Brownell quotes a male sports official as an illustration of this point:

Truly, women are more able 'to eat bitterness', endure hardship and labour. For thousands of years they did all the housework, they rose very early and toiled all day long, then went to bed and got up again. That ability, that tradition, persists. Women are therefore more disciplined and obedient than men. If you are working with three women and three male athletes, you have to watch the men a lot closer; they're inclined to sneak off and cheat on workouts (Brownell).

The official here unconsciously rejects the longstanding Western notion of a polarisation between biologically weak women and strong men.

It is perhaps significant that when the coach Ma Junren, under pressure to achieve with men what he had done with women, took on male athletes (in 1994), the experiment lasted no more than a couple of months before the men walked out, ostensibly 'because of a dispute over money (Powell, a). Ma Junren, incidentally, had deliberately taken on girls from villages: 'Most of them hail from the countryside and are therefore honest, obedient and hard-working' (Deng). His most outstanding protegée, Wang Junxia, the holder of world records from 1500 m to 10 000 m and recipient of the prestigious Jesse Owens Trophy in 1994, the world's highest athletic honour, grew up in a village, the daughter of poor peasants, and is said to have had to run 16 km to and from school every day. During training with Ma, she and other female athletes had to run 220 km a week or almost a marathon a day; sometimes she has to run as much as 170 km in four days' (Yang).

Even some Chinese critics accused Ma of 'cruelty and inhumanity' in regard to his charges, intolerant of the slightest deviation from a strict regime which involved no boyfriends or make-up, and close-cropped hair (China Sports, July, November 1994). On one occasion, he is said to have kept Wang's brother's death in a car crash and the subsequent funeral from her for several weeks until after the two championships in which she was competing; he did the same after the death of another runner's father. According to Ma, 'women are more susceptible to discipline and hard work than men' (Deng).

Other Chinese experts, explaining Wang's remarkable achievements, have claimed that 'one reason she has been able to run so fast has to do with her rural background...the hard life in rural China is just what is needed to produce the kind of determination and endurance that Wang obviously has' (Yang).

A similar strict regime exists for female swimmers; they were reported in Le Monde of training and competing 364 days a year, with a daily two-hour gymnastics warm-up followed by six hours in the pool. No TV, no leisure time, no boy friends, no right to visit their families during the training year, even on holidays. The 16-year-old world 400 m freestyle champion Yang Aihua admits to swimming 120 km a week in training (Georges). Some female divers are subjected to such training regimes even before their tenth birthday (Fu Mingxia and Sun Shuwei won world championships when they were 11 and 13 respectively).

This spirit of obedience and socially-conditioned aptitude for hard work and endurance have been reinforced by the philosophical traditions of Confucianism. In accordance with the 'three obediences' of Confucianism, women were expected to obey men (father, husband, sons) and to be humble, compliant, respectful. Despite attempts by the communist authorities to root out such attitudes, as a Chinese scholar writes, 'Confucianism continues to have a substantial impact on Chinese female athletes to endure incredible training loads...that reinforces discipline in training and makes it easier to manage women than men. Women are socialised to be obedient, particularly to men from childhood; and since most head coaches are men, female athletes rarely violate regulations and schedules laid down by male coaches' (Dong).

To sum up, both a rural background and vestiges of Confucian philosophy stressing women's subordination to men have certain implications for women's greater involvement in and success at sport.

5. Sport and gender

In the West, sport with its heavy masculine image has complemented other socialising agenc-
Chinese women and sport success, sexuality, suspicion

ies—school, family, media, children's organisations and literature, religion and the state—in presenting stereotyped norms for girls and boys to develop their sexual identity. This growing-up process is based on number of assumptions about behaviour being natural (or unnatural), universal and ageless, and being directly related to biological make-up. Boys and girls are 'born that way'.

This rigid Western conceptualisation of gender has implications for those people who are perceived to cross the boundaries between 'female' and 'male' behaviour, nowhere more so than in the erstwhile 'male bastion' of sport where accusations of 'butch' and 'lesbian' have often been levelled at 'muscular' women. The Chinese attitudes have been quite different, as Susan Brownell writes: 'in China, a woman who plays soccer might be considered 'vulgar' (cw), but she is never considered 'butch'; in other words, the primary axis for moral evaluations is based on class rather than 'sexuality'. She sums up by maintaining that 'Although sports have played a role in changing perceptions of the body, they have not been used to separate females from males or to support claims to female biological inferiority as in the West . . . the successes of Chinese women athletes have now precluded this possibility' (Brownell).

All the same, times are changing, as anyone who has read Wild Swans will testify: it vividly shows how Chinese women have traversed three generations from feudalism to capitalism—communism in a historical journey that took other nations six or seven centuries (Chang). Today, the opening up of the country to the market, of television and other media to Western 'culture', to women's fashions and other items of conspicuous consumption are clearly contributing to a reformulation of gender and of women's role in society. Especially in urban centres, romantic love would appear to be rivaling social status in marital choice; men and women are becoming increasingly aware of their bodies (at an early age) as forms of sexual attraction, consumerism and hedonism are challenging for dominance in people's value systems, and increasing numbers of women are becoming economically independent of men. All this has led to a mounting debate on women's roles in society.

All these processes are bound to be reflected in sport. It is perhaps a sign of the times that in late 1994, 16 of the 19 female athletes walked out on coach Ma Junren. As Wang Junxia put it, 'We simply could not take it any longer . . . Ma made excessive demands, was over-critical and cruel . . . We had absolutely no freedom. The pressure was too great.' Another bone of contention was money. Apparently, Ma had kept most of the athletes' winnings: of the 10 m yuan prize-money accumulated since 1993, he had given Wang 170 000 and his other star athlete Qu Yunxia 65 000 yuan, while spending 7 m on his own training centre (Powell, b).

It appears that rapid social change is reinforcing the trend towards women's economic and social independence, and that is bound to have even greater repercussions on women's sport in the future.

6. Women, sport and socialism

The changes that have taken place in women's consciousness and economic position generally and in sport in particular are to a large extent the result of social transformations wrought by new attitudes to and of women and their roles in society, to which the communist ideology has undoubtedly played a not inconsiderable part. As Shirin Rai has written,

The Chinese communists regarded themselves as engaged not just in class war but also in social liberation: 'Women hold up half the heaven' was a favourite epigram of Mao. The post-revolutionary Chinese state was both socialist and developmentalist in nature. It was thus highly interventionalist. This allowed it to affect the course of family life, the position of the woman within the family and within the public domain through policy-making and implementation . . . Under this paternalistic political system Chinese women did make significant gains in social status and economic position (Rai).

Nevertheless, it has to be borne in mind that China, like almost all the erstwhile communist states, emerged from a largely traditionalist, patriarchal, semi-feudal way of life only recently. Emancipation of women has been complex and uneven; there have been areas in which some Western societies have progressed further in advancing women's rights. What is more, the point has to be made that the reasons for official encouragement of women to engage in sport have to be sought, too, in the state's political, military and material needs as well as its ideology.
In sport there is little doubt that the social policies pursued by the communist government led to what a number of sources claim to have been 'fairly equal opportunities for men and women since the establishment of the sports schools in 1955' (Brownell). Susan Brownell makes the telling point that 'If one takes the passage of Title IX as the point when American sportswomen began to achieve legal parity with men, then 1972 was the year when the American situation approached the Chinese. That means American women lagged 17 years behind the Chinese. If one considers the actual situation rather than the legal ideal, then American women have nowhere near the parity that Chinese women have' (Brownell). Such more-than-equal opportunities, however, by no means extend beyond sport. Even within sport, most of the major administrative and coaching positions are held by men, as Table 6 shows.

Outside sport, the absence of women from political positions (discounting Mao's wife Jiang Qing) is glaringly apparent. In a continent noted for women's leading roles in society, five other Asian states can boast women prime ministers past and present (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Turkey), while in 1990, as Shirin Rai reports, only 21 percent of deputies to national and provincial people's congresses were women, and 29 percent of political officials at all levels (Rai; Liu). The American authors Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter found in Shanghai (China's largest city) that only a quarter of the city's Communist Party members were women (Honig). We have already noted above the far-from-equal position of Chinese women in education.

At least the realities should warn against unreal expectations that if only the social order is changed, women will be liberated almost overnight. As the two above-mentioned American authors write of China:

Perhaps the most serious flaw in Chinese discussions of gender was the assumption that since China had had a socialist revolution, time alone would solve all remaining problems. Yet until gender was put at the centre of an analytical model, it seemed likely not only that these problems would persist, but that their causes would remain opaque to those who raise criticism from within Chinese society about the situation of women (Honig).

Evidently, a socialist society may remove the class relationships between men and men, and women and women, but it does not necessarily promote emancipation of women at the same pace. Prejudice and traditional attitudes amongst both men and women, and a set of factors associated with economic backwardness and international tension, act as brakes on progress.

### 7. Other factors: physique, medicine and science

A consideration sometimes mentioned by Chinese sources in explaining the difference in international attainments of their men and women is that of height and weight. Thus, the sex difference in athletic achievements has something to do with the fact that Chinese women are by no means inferior (in physique) to their foreign counterparts in many sports, while Chinese men are often inferior in this regard (i.e. shorter and lighter) (Xie). While this may be true in some sports (in the 1992 Olympic swimming events, for example, the average body height difference between Chinese women and other finalists was insignificant, while there was a difference of 7–8 cm in terms of the men) (Xie), size has not prevented either Japanese or Korean (or, indeed, Chinese) men from performing well in a wide range of sports. It is also the case that in a nation of 1.2 bn people, it is surely possible to find the ideal anthropomorphic types for given sports. For example, the average height of the Chinese men's basketball team is 1.987 m (the women's is 1.845 m), with one member, Shan Tao, as tall as 2.15 m; this, a Chinese source admits, 'is in no way inferior to European nations' (Xie Kainan). Similarly, the Chinese men's volleyball team averages 1.95 m in height (with four players over 2 m) and the women's 1.85 m (Huang). It is hard to believe that such factors provide an insurmountable

<table>
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<th>Table 6</th>
<th>Respective numbers of male and female professional coaches, 1990</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Chief coach</td>
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<td>Aggregate</td>
<td>1669</td>
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<td>Of whom:</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>220</td>
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hurdle to Chinese men given the centralised sports system and the vast population.

A more complex and certainly controversial area is that of medical, including chemical, assistance to performance. Some claim that this assistance has a greater effect on women than it does on men. The Chinese swimming coach Chen Yungpeng has said somewhat nebulously that 'traditional Chinese regimens and medical theories have been widely applied to sports training for rapid recovery from fatigue. Perhaps some of these have produced more effects on women' (Xie). What is unclear is whether traditional medicine and the state sports medical service give Chinese women the edge over opponents, whether fewer sportswomen in the world are on stimulants than men are, or whether they work better/faster on women (it certainly is true that women generally have lower testosterone and haemoglobin levels than men).

We know from evidence in other state socialist countries (eg the Soviet Union) that some women athletes have been encouraged to conceive and later abort, utilising the body change benefits for sports training and competition. Such evidence of cases of manipulation of female bodies has not emerged from China. What is abundantly clear, however, is that a significant number of top Chinese athletes (and very few men) have been identified in international drug tests as having taken performance-enhancing drugs (see earlier section on the drug issue).

The State Sports Commission started carrying out drug testing in some domestic competitions in 1988; the next year, it announced a three-pronged anti-drug policy of 'strict prohibition, strict examination and strict punishment'. Three years later, in 1992, the Chinese Olympic Committee formed a special Anti-Doping Commission; at the end of 1993, this Commission published the results of tests on 2205 urine samples taken in random domestic tests during the year; it uncovered 24 cases of drug taking (mainly anabolic steroids) and meted out (undeclared) punishment to the guilty athletes (China Sports, July 1994). The tests were conducted at the newly-established IOC-accredited Anti-Doping Centre in Beijing. It is an indication of the confusion prevailing over drugs that a month earlier, the same source had quoted 1608 samples tested (1032 in domestic events, 261 in international competitions held in China, and 315 in outside competitions) (China Sports, June 1994). Both sources agree on the 24 positive tests.

However, it was the results of tests on Chinese athletes undertaken by non-Chinese bodies outside China that started in 1993 to record an alarming rate of positive drug tests. The first top woman athlete to fail a drug test was swimmer Zhou Xin in March 1993 (tested in January); she was banned for two years by FINA. Then came Zhong Weiyue, world record holder in the 50 m and 100 m back stroke; she was suspended in February 1994 for two years by the Chinese Swimming Federation. These two swimmers were followed by Ren Xin and Bai Xiuyi in August 1994; they were also banned for two years. At the Rome World Swimming Championships in September 1994, Yang Aihua, 400 m freestyle gold medallist, was caught and received a two-year ban.

The biggest haul of drug users came in early October, during the Asian Championships, when a further 17 Chinese swimmers were tested, of whom as many as seven tested positive—an almost 50 percent 'strike rate'. They included top swimmer Lu Bin who had won four gold and two silver medals in Rome. The same testing netted two canoeists, a cyclist and the women's 400 m hurdles gold medallist Han Qing. Previously, in September, China's top discus thrower Qiu Qiaoping had been caught taking anabolic steroids.

Some idea of the scale of the positive tests in swimming may be gained from the fact that the number of apprehended Chinese swimmers exceeded the total number of failed tests recorded by all other swimmers in the previous 22 years (Hong Kong Standard). That is not to say that other nations' swimmers-or other athletes-take no performance-enhancing drugs or are less guilty than Chinese swimmers. It may be recalled that no East German woman swimmer tested positive, yet 20 East German swimming coaches admitted, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, that there had been systematic drug taking in East German swimming. As a punishment to Chinese swimmers and a warning for the future, the International Swimming Federation (FINA) is to conduct random tests in China and an on-site investigation there, while the four charter nations of the Pan-Pacific Swimming Association (Australia, USA, Japan and Canada) banned China from its championships in Atlanta in the summer of 1995.

What is not yet apparent is the extent to which
the Chinese authorities (political as well as sports) are involved in the manufacture, testing, monitoring and administering of performance-enhancing drugs as we now know the East German, Soviet, Romanian and Bulgarian authorities were. It is known that East German coaches and sports medical specialists were working in Chinese sport since the mid-1980s; and one such swimming coach, Klaus Rudolph, has added his voice to the belief that Chinese athletes are caught up in a state-run drugs programme: ‘China, and particularly sport in China, is centrally controlled ... a doctor is on constant call for national team members and permanent monitoring is provided by the Medical Research Institute in Beijing’ (Sunday Times). As the Sunday Times commented, ‘Rudolph casts doubt on the idea that those swimmers who have tested positive for steroids had acted unilaterally’ (Sunday Times).

Another source - a Chinese technician from the IOC-accredited Anti-Drug laboratory in Beijing - claimed that China maintained a floating anti-drug laboratory off the shores of South Korea during the 1988 Summer Olympics (the USSR did the same) and that the Chinese authorities had been involved in other cover-ups in Beijing (Almond).

As Wei Jiehong, Secretary of the Chinese Olympic Committee and head of the Anti-Doping Commission, admits, ‘We recognise that doping ruins the image of Chinese sport’; he has threatened a lifetime ban for transgressors (Loh). The drug revelations have certainly caused considerable damage to China’s chances of staging the Olympic Games in the near future and caused embarrassment to IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch (and others) who had declared several times, most recently during the 1994 Asian Games, that he was convinced that Chinese sport was ‘drug-free’ (Tait).

All that can be said for sure is that it is unlikely that a relatively poor country like China can match the huge amounts of money that prosperous countries like the USA can spend on drugs in sport, albeit on a private enterprise, not state-directed, basis. On the other hand, it may be tempting for a developing country that ardently desires international recognition and prestige through sports success to take short cuts. There are certainly fewer controls over the sale of drugs in China than in most Western countries. However, the Chinese authorities are taking measures to combat drug taking in sport and are severely punishing drug cheats and those behind them (officials, coaches, medics) - including the threat of imprisonment. This is vital because, unless serious steps are taken to reassure the world public, much of the admiration for Chinese sports achievements generated by outstanding Chinese women athletes will turn to anger and contempt, and make China a pariah among sports nations.

Conclusions

Never in history has a nation’s international sporting success owed so much to its women. Nor have women athletes made such rapid progress in a wide range of events in such a short time - some two-three years, or improved world records by such remarkable margins. The reasons for such progress have been located in the following factors:

1. There has been the absence in China of a number of deep-seated prejudices in regard to sexuality that have been common in Western historical development: prejudices centred on the notion that sport was a ‘male preserve’. Chinese women are thereby challenging traditional cultural assumptions about behaviour being directly related to biological make-up, and demonstrating that many of the male and female characteristics for long taken for granted by the dominant ideology of Western society are determined by social custom rather than by genetics.

2. That does not mean that the Chinese believe that the ability of male runners to run faster than female runners has no genetic component. Rather, there is a firm conviction that women’s biological disadvantage in physical performance may be compensated for by socially-conditioned superior abilities of hard work, discipline and stamina.

3. The official prioritising of elite women’s sport as the principal thrust of China’s international sports challenge has less to do with women’s liberation than with national pride gained in the only clearly visible area where China can take on and beat the world’s most economically advanced countries. That women’s liberation is a secondary consideration is evident in the lack of effective government action to alter the relative subordinate position of women in sports administration and coaching, not to mention in politics, education and science.

4. The major factors that have facilitated
Chinese women’s progress in sport have to be sought in various elements intrinsic to Chinese society and shaped by historically-conditioned attitudes to sport and women which differ markedly from those that have formed the dominant values of sport in Western society, at least since the time of Ancient Greece. Such factors include the long-standing involvement of women in martial arts, the general regard for sport as a low-class activity, the rural background of many sportswomen, the influence of Confucian ideology in inculcating such traits in women as obedience, sacrifice, discipline, humility and respect in regard to men. They also include the socialist ideology of equal opportunities for women in the period dominated by Mao.

5. The rapid economic and social transformation that has opened up China since the early 1980s to the all-pervasive influence of market values and Western consumerism is undermining traditional attitudes, philosophies (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism) and institutions. This trend is likely to grow stronger and, in sport, draw China’s leading athletes into the mainstream of the transnational elite sports community dominated by Western market values. This may provide more economic independence for Chinese women and erode patriotism and loyalty to Chinese society; it is also likely to make them less willing to undergo the sort of training regime associated with Ma Junren, though more susceptible to chemical manipulation of their bodies.

The next few years will give us a much better understanding of the progress, and reasons behind it, of Chinese women athletes and the implications that their progress will have for women and Chinese society generally. Certainly, the list of achievements by Chinese female athletes is long and imposing, particularly when set alongside those of women in the economically advanced nations of the West. Insofar as worldwide women’s sporting attainments are reflecting, reinforcing and sometimes even precipitating processes of social change in the role and status of women, the Chinese women’s example offers exciting prospects for the future of women in all societies, particularly the modernising communities of Asia and Africa.

Summary

The performance of Chinese women athletes in the 1990s has been unprecedented in the history of sport. Not only have they made remarkable progress from virtual obscurity to world champions and record breakers, they have far surpassed the performance of their male compatriots in international sport.

The swift emergence of Chinese women as a dominant force in such a wide range of sports, cerebral as well as muscular, raises a number of questions. What are the reasons for the success? How have Chinese women evaded many of the obstacles confronting Western women in sport? What is the government motivation in prioritising women’s sport? How has the success been attained and at what cost?

This paper examines these and other issues.

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