

Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic. By Susan Brownwell. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995, P. xi + 393, acknowledgments, glossary, references, 23 illustrations, 1 figure, 8 tables, index, ISBN 0-226-07646-6 cloth, 0-226-07647-4 pbk.)

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

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Anyone with an interest in China who watched the 1996 Summer Olympic Games might have wondered how they were being perceived in the People's Republic of China. Indeed, sources from within China reported anger, controversy and protest over NBC's coverage of the Games. In *Training the Body for China*, Susan Brownwell delves into some of the fundamental concepts inherent in Chinese sports today and sheds light on the "body culture" of contemporary China. Drawing upon extensive field work, including her own gold-medal winning participation in the 1985 National College Games, Brownwell examines the ways in which sport is understood in China and the various roles it has played in the construction of a national identity. Arguing that Chinese notions of the body differ significantly from Western concepts, Brownwell explores the changes that have occurred in Chinese sports ranging from "traditional" martial arts forms to Western-influenced competitive team events. While her focus is on sports, the author also shows an obvious link between the physical body and the socio-cultural body as well as exploring how the "[b]ody culture is embodied culture" (p.11). Through the use of internal documents, magazine articles and personal narratives, Brownwell brings attention to issues of personal as well as cultural identity as she explores the shifts and changes both individuals and the state have made to the body culture.

In this book sport is not solely a metaphor for the nation. Maintaining a micro-level approach, Brownwell convincingly articulates how both individual athletes and the state have used sports in furthering cultural and social change. Combining European and American theories of practice and agency, Brownwell offers an engaging look at the sporting world and its relationship to economic, social and cultural changes at work in contemporary China. While the focus is largely on elite sports, the approach is deeply rooted in the realm of everyday practice. Brownwell utilizes theories of festival, ritual, and performance to analyze sporting practices and their relationship to larger socio-cultural forms. Divided into five sections, each with its own focus, the book is tied together by an overall concern for the ways in which China is reconstructing its identity.

The first part offers a long-overdue history of sport in China (which has already begun to be referenced by other scholars [e.g. Riordan and Dong: 1996]), emphasizing the ways in which China has defined the body culture at various

times. Noting that it was Western organizations such as the YMCA which brought a shift in Chinese sports, the author, in this and other sections of the book, details the changes Chinese individuals have made to Western constructs. Although there is an emphasis on agency, the argument that China's values and aesthetics are changing with a growing influence from the West is, however, woven throughout the book.

The second section is devoted to the complex relationship between consumer culture and perspectives upon the body. Here, an analysis of public culture in China reveals that public display events help shape and are shaped by ideas of the state. Moreover, it is argued that the consumer culture has in large part been created by the body culture.

Part three focusses on the realms of class and status. Athletes and their sporting world are seen as existing on a shifting plane of identity. While linked historically and having ties to workers and peasants, athletes and physical education programs are undergoing a change in social position as they become embraced by the "modern" culture of urban China.

The fourth section deals with the interdependent relationship athletes have with their families, the state and their own identities as individuals. As the door opens further to Western ideas and practices, athletes are confronting differing values and ideas about their own body culture. One important distinction made throughout the book and detailed in this section is that between Western notions of sexuality and the Chinese emphasis on "alliance." Whereas the body culture of the West focusses largely on sexuality and gender identity, Brownell argues that the body culture in China is more concerned with class and social status. Questions of sexual and/or gender identity of female athletes in China are not raised as they are in the West. Moreover, the idea of linking gender identity with sports, Brownell points out, has little if any place in Chinese constructions of the body. Where athletes are able to position themselves on the social ladder is far more important than any "feminine" or "masculine" qualities which might be projected.

The final section of the book focusses on recreation, which is discussed in terms of its liminal status in the body culture. In particular, two arenas of leisure activity are explored: bodybuilding and "old people's disco" dancing. Arguing for a fragmented state and the power of non-official body culture, Brownell examines how individuals have challenged social and political structures through manipulating popular recreational activities. This section also provides an important discussion of the fundamental differences between

Western ideas of “fair play” and Chinese notions of “face.” Largely misunderstood in the West, concepts of face have a powerful if not pivotal role in Chinese sports, especially with respect to such international sporting events as the Olympics. Described and analyzed in two guises (moral and prestigious), face is juxtaposed with Western notions of “fair play” which are often taken for granted by the Western sporting world. The argument is that, for China, sports such as the Olympics are not “just games” but have real social and individual consequences. This sort of discussion opens the door for further analysis of such controversial issues as drug-use among athletes and training methods employed by various coaches, issues barely evoked in Brownell’s text.

Brownell ends her book with a powerful epilogue on Beijing’s bid for the 2000 Olympics. What makes this section so important is her insistence that Chinese sport not be seen as part of a totalitarian socialist program. Providing specific examples of the divergence between state and local powers, Brownell urges us to avoid imposing stereotypes of former Soviet and Eastern Bloc sporting programs upon those of China (see for example, Riordan and Dong: 1996). The book as a whole has brought the reader to this level of understanding by detailing the relationships between state notions of the body culture and their articulation in actual practice. Focussing on the ways in which individuals — coaches, athletes, senior citizens and others — continue to play with concepts of the body as part of a larger movement to “modernize,” Brownell allows us to view not only sports but all public aspects of Chinese life as complex and malleable dimensions of a changing culture.

Reference Cited

Riordan, James and Dong Jinxia. 1996. “Chinese Women and Sport: Success, Sexuality and Suspicion.” *The China Quarterly* 145: 130-152

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