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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Shuman, A. (2018). No Longer 'Sick': Visualizing 'Victorious' Athletes in 1950s Chinese Films. *Historical Social Research*, 43(2), 220-250. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.43.2018.2.220-250>

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# No Longer 'Sick': Visualizing 'Victorious' Athletes in 1950s Chinese Films

*Amanda Shuman*\*

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**Abstract:** »Nicht mehr ‚krank‘: Die Visualisierung ‚siegreicher‘ Athleten im chinesischen Film der 50er Jahre«. This essay focuses on the narratives and visuals of athletes in several popular sports films produced in 1950s Maoist China, arguing that the Chinese leadership intended such visuals to convey the strength of the new socialist state. Since the early twentieth century in China, modern sports and physical culture (*tǐyù*) has been associated with an official narrative of overcoming national humiliation, in which the nation suffered from "victimization" at the hands of foreigners – often succinctly described using the phrase the "Sick Man of East Asia" (*dongya bingfu*). Yet more than a decade prior to the release of the popular martial arts film "Fist of Fury" (Hong Kong, 1972) in which Bruce Lee famously destroys a placard reading "Sick Man of East Asia," mainland China's sports film industry was showcasing youthful Chinese athletes who no longer suffered from this past humiliation. On the contrary, the images of jubilant, victorious athletes in Maoist-era films like *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*, *Ice Sisters*, and *Two Generations of Swimmers* served as visual embodiments of a nation that, under Chinese Communist Party leadership, had overcome a century of humiliation and was now no longer "sick."

**Keywords:** China, sport, socialism, gender, film.

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## 1. Introduction

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When I was young I knew an athlete who represented his country in an international competition. But foreigners laughed at him. They thought it was funny that the Chinese "Sick Man of East Asia" was going to take part in a sports competition. Reporters wanted him to take off his shirt so they could take pictures of him bare-chested. At the time he didn't get it, but later he realized that they weren't insulting him, they were insulting our country, our people.  
(Coach Tian in the film *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* [1957])<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This translation comes from *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* - Film Script, trans. Tim McCahill and Tom Moran, published by MCLC Resource Center, December 2005 and available online at <<http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/girl-basketball/>> (Accessed May 18, 2017). The original film can now be viewed on YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FHWC9>>

Since the early twentieth century, modern *tiyu* (loosely translated as “sports and physical culture”) in China has been associated with an official narrative of overcoming national humiliation, in which the nation has suffered from “victimization” at the hands of foreigners – often succinctly described using the phrase the “Sick Man of East Asia” or “Sick Man of Asia” (*dongya bingfu*).<sup>2</sup> The origins of this phrase date back to the late nineteenth century when Chinese intellectuals, foreign missionaries, and others more generally described the weakness of the late imperial Chinese body politic. They described this weakness as stemming in part from the oppressed status of women in Chinese society. The “sick man” – epitomized at the time by an effeminate male intellectual – was incapable of saving Chinese women and, by extension, China. Alongside humiliation, the “sick man” became permanently grafted into the foundations of Chinese nationalism. The phrase continues to be invoked to the present, especially when giving reasons for China’s obsession with the Olympics (Fish 2016).

Between the fall of the empire (1911) and the establishment of the People’s Republic (PRC) (1949), a narrative of national humiliation flourished (Cohen 2010, 36) and the “sick man” phrase became fused with national needs for sports and physical education. One of the earliest proponents of *tiyu* in this period was Mao Zedong, who in 1917 penned an essay correlating the strength of the Chinese nation with the physical bodies of the populace. Mao argued that China was weak because “the physical condition of the population deteriorates daily” (Mao 1917). In order for the nation to gain strength, it was necessary that people be made conscious of both the problem and importance of *tiyu*. Mao’s statement was not radical at the time; discourses around the relationship between a healthy body, sport, and the nation circulated in various European states (Eiben 2015) and North America. Many Chinese intellectuals and elites – influenced in part by these Euro-American discourses – likewise felt that improvement in mass physical fitness would contribute to a superior national race and a stronger nation.<sup>3</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese athletes were often portrayed as lagging behind both their Western counterparts and Japanese athletes, while working hard to overcome the backwardness of their nation on the world stage.

After 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set forth on a path of socialist transformation that sought to firmly establish its rule by repudiating the previous regime and building a socialist state. An intrinsic part of socialist

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AIVDw> (Accessed April 23, 2018). The lines quoted above can be found at [59:43- 1:00:10]. All translations are by the author.

<sup>2</sup> The humiliation refers to Chinese defeats in the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War, the Boxer rebellion, and during the war of resistance against Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. Peter Gries (2005) has worked on the aspect of victimization, Susan Brownell (2008) on humiliation and sport.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this earlier period, see the work of Andrew Morris (2004).

construction was transforming the population into strong, productive socialist subjects who were both resolutely patriotic and voluntarily labored for the nation. The entire population was tasked with participating in *tiyu* activities, especially girls and women; the CCP firmly believed that only when everyone was mobilized into the socialist cause could it succeed. Producing competitive athletes in this period was seen as an important way to boldly represent the nation on the world stage, while also providing the populace with athletic models for their own practices.

In 1956, Mao described the nation's current status in terms that many likely found familiar: China was now no longer the "sick man" suffering the humiliation of foreigners, but rather had gained new strength (Mao 1956). In short, the national humiliation narrative changed from one that claimed victimhood to one that claimed victory (Gries 2005, 109). This "victory" was communicated to the broader public through the display of athletic bodies in visual media. Images of athletes proliferated not only in magazines and newspapers, but also featured prominently in colorful propaganda posters, on newsreels, and in film. These visuals emphasized what successful model athletes looked like, as well as their behaviors, lifestyles, training methods, dedication to socialist construction and (in the case of top competitive athletes) bringing glory to the nation. Combined with narrative reinforcement, visual displays of athletic bodies, trained under communist leadership, were meant to displace the "sick man" image of the national body politic from being a thing of the present to having become a thing of the past.

This essay focuses on the narratives and visuals of athletes in several popular sports films produced in 1950s Maoist China. The CCP felt that film was one of the most effective ways to communicate its official message to the broad masses (Zhou 2016, 1-2), and had nationalized the film industry by the mid-1950s. Over the next few years, national film studios produced several feature-length sport films. The three most prominent, which I analyze in detail below, were shot in 35mm color, received generally positive reviews, continue to be shown on Chinese TV, and are included in retrospective sports film collections.<sup>4</sup> More than a decade prior to the popular martial arts film "Fist of Fury" (Hong Kong, 1972) in which Bruce Lee famously destroys a placard reading "Sick Man of East Asia," mainland China's sports film industry was showcasing youthful Chinese athletes who no longer suffered from past humiliation. On the contrary, the images of jubilant, victorious athletes in these films complemented narrative plots that, together, were meant to convey the strength of the new socialist state. In short, athletes served as visual embodiments of a nation that,

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<sup>4</sup> A DVD collection produced at the time of the Beijing Olympics includes the three films discussed in this essay. These films can also be found online in the original, sometimes with the CCTV logo indicating that they have been publicly broadcast in China.

under CCP leadership, had overcome a century of humiliation and was no longer “sick.”

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## 2. Origins of the “Sick Man” and Its Connection to *Tiyu*

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The “sick man” phrase originated among Chinese intellectuals and foreign missionaries in the late nineteenth century to describe everything that was wrong with the Chinese empire under Qing rule. As many Chinese elites pushed for self-strengthening reforms that would restore the empire while grappling with how to understand China as a nation-state on (what was to them) a new world stage (Karl 2002), the “sick man” view gained currency following China’s loss in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 (Brownell 2008, 35). Chinese intellectuals argued that the crisis of China’s position in the world called not simply for cosmetic changes, but for a new worldview and a different kind of statecraft.

Increasingly, the weakness of China was also linked to the physical condition of the population. Writings and images from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, by both westerners and Chinese, depicted Chinese men in particular as decrepit opium-smokers and effeminate scholar-types (Graham 1994, 31). Western missionaries described students with “hollow chests, stooping shoulders, shuffling gaits, and flabby muscles” in need of physical training for “an erect carriage, firm step and toughened muscles” (ibid., 31-2). Both Chinese and non-Chinese described Chinese male bodies as weak, idle, impotent and sick, incapable of “saving” Chinese women and the nation (Brownell 2008, 98-9; Morris 2000, 885). By the time the empire officially fell in 1911, this link between a physically weak body politic and the population of bodies had become entrenched in the minds of many.

As intellectual elites and nationalists further developed a narrative that placed China behind that of other nations (Cohen 2008, 86), the “sick man” image spurred much interest in developing modern *tiyu* in the early twentieth century. YMCA missionaries promoted Anglo-American physical education, while Chinese intellectuals also looked to Japanese and German models (Morris 2004, 5-6). It was within this context that Mao wrote his 1917 “A Study of *Tiyu*” essay in which he argued that national strength and national goals could only be achieved by strengthening peoples’ bodies through *tiyu* (Mao 1917). The development of modern *tiyu* in China thus rose in tandem with a nationalism that stressed the weakness of the nation-state.

As Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s participated in a “liberal, democratic *tiyu*” embedded within a global discourse that recognized sport as a scientific discipline (Morris 2004, 47-8), they began to promote physical education as an important part of modern citizenship. The “sick man” phrase remained omnipresent for describing national humiliation and weakness that could be cured

through *tiyu*. A 1927 advertisement in a sports magazine stated this connection bluntly:

Why do we advocate the sports movement? Because sports are a magic potion to cure our weak and decrepit China! Why do we worship stars from the sports world? Because sports stars can win glory for the nation and wipe away the humiliation of the Sick Man!<sup>5</sup>

Visuals occasionally accompanied descriptions. The inside cover of a 1929 handbook titled the *National Humiliation Gymnastics* used a cartoon image to stress the connection between the sick Chinese body(ies), the humiliation of the nation, and the necessity for gaining physical strength through western science and training methods. A western, muscular man faces a frail, weak Chinese man and says: “Model yourself on my body and who will dare bully or humiliate you? My pharmacist, my physician and I tirelessly worked together to achieve this body, which is the result of vigorous physical training.” The Chinese man replies: “I not only get sick from having a weak body; I also suffer bullying and humiliation. Even little dogs can bully and humiliate me” (Wang 1929; Callahan 2007).

This narrative and corporeal representation of the national body politic as a “sick man” was part of the official discourse of both the Nationalists and Communists (Morris 2004, 125-6). Both parties placed *tiyu* on their official agendas and linked it explicitly to national humiliation. Chinese Olympic participation under Nationalist rule in this period simply reinforced this narrative in the eyes of the public. When the Chinese delegation of more than 200 athletes failed to produce a single medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, some Chinese leaders concluded that the endeavor was a waste of time and money and only served to demonstrate national weakness. A Chinese newspaper mocked the failure of the athletes when it published the picture of a giant “goose egg” which represented the “0” medals won by Chinese athletes at the games (Morris 2004, 180-1). A frail Chinese man, clearly meant to signal China’s “sick man” dilemma, sits on top of the egg. This image propagated the – by now – common wisdom that poor athletic performances could (only) be attributed to the sickly Chinese (national) body.

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### 3. Athletes in 1950s *Tiyu* Films

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The victory of the Communists over the Nationalists in the Civil War led to the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The CCP firmly believed that building the new socialist state could only be accomplished with the participation of a

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<sup>5</sup> Advertisement for *Tiyu shijie* [Sports World] in *Liangyou* 12, January 15, 1927. Quoted in Morris (2004, 69).

healthy population; *tiyu* was still considered the solution. However, in these early years, the new leadership needed to legitimate and consolidate its rule, as well as organize and institutionalize *tiyu*. Early PRC leadership, inspired by what it saw in the Soviet Union and across the socialist bloc, was determined to make *tiyu* a central feature of a socialist culture that worked to transform the citizenry into socialist subjects. Soviet-inspired mass sport programs such as the “Ready for Labor and Defense” system were adopted to encourage all-round physical development at the lowest levels, while simultaneously helping identify and cultivate competitive athletes. As in the Soviet Union, everyone was obliged to participate in a range of *tiyu* activities and practices (Shuman 2014, 109-34). Additionally, under the banner of “men and women are equal,” official *tiyu* programs and propaganda targeted women in particular, who were seen as necessary participants in realizing socialist construction (ibid., 131, 172-3, 191).

Visual culture became an important component for communicating official messages related to *tiyu*. The CCP has always viewed cultural production as an educative tool for the masses,<sup>6</sup> but this was especially true in the early years of the PRC when illiteracy was still high. In Maoist China, propaganda posters were the most ubiquitous representations of an official agenda in all social realms, and could be found hung on the otherwise drab walls of the workplace, schools, stores, and even in homes (Landsberger 2013). Posters were complemented by a wealth of other officially-produced visual sources. In the early 1950s, images of Soviet and socialist bloc athletes circulated in Chinese magazines, newspapers, and newsreels. This reverence for the Soviet Union changed in the latter half of the 1950s as a result of the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet relationship. By mid-1956, in the aftermath of the death of Stalin and rise of Khrushchev, the relationship between the PRC and the Soviet Union had already become strained as the Chinese leadership disapproved of de-Stalinization (Lüthi 2008, 47-8). Mao then officially declared at the Eighth Congress in the summer of 1956 that,

China used to be stigmatized as a ‘decrepit empire,’ ‘the sick man of East Asia,’ a country with a backward economy and a backward culture, with no hygiene, poor at ball games and swimming, where the women had bound feet, the men wore pigtails and eunuchs could still be found, and where the moon was inferior and did not shine as brightly as in foreign lands. In short, there was much that was bad in China. But after six years’ work of transformation we have changed the face of China. No one can deny our achievements. (Mao 1956)

Mao did not deny the important role played by the Soviet Union in China’s recent transformation, but it was under Chinese Communist rule that China had

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<sup>6</sup> Mao’s Yan’an talks on art and literature (1942) made this explicit: art and literature were for the masses, operating “as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people” (Mao 1942).

overcome its previous weaknesses (described in very corporeal terms here), transformed completely, and was now no longer “sick.” In short, he claimed that the CCP alone had successfully ended a century of humiliation.

The leadership employed visual media, especially in the realm of sport, to demonstrate the truth of this assertion. In the years 1956 to 1959, as the number of sports schools (and participants) proliferated, the average citizen frequently encountered athletes in magazines, newspapers, feature films, and other paraphernalia. At the height of the Great Leap Forward (in 1958 and 1959), a massive official campaign that sought to accelerate national economic and industrial development in order to surpass the United Kingdom in 15 years (MacFarquhar 1983, 17), *tiyu* propaganda flourished in the lead up to the first National Games in 1959. PRC leaders aimed to forge a uniquely Chinese path for *tiyu*.

Feature-length sports films began to appear in these years and were popular. The leadership considered film a particularly powerful medium for helping spread official messages to audiences with little education and low literacy. Whereas in the Republican period just one feature film appeared exclusively on sport (*Sports Queen*, 1934), film studios in the PRC produced approximately a dozen sports films in the ten-year period between 1956 and 1966. Increasing state control over film production and the widespread viewing of films fostered the rise of a mass nationalized cultural production that played down regional and class variations, included new audiences, and helped spread standard Mandarin as the national language (Clark 1987, 57-8). Movie going was also becoming a popular leisure activity, in large part because it was inexpensive or even free (Zhou 2016). In urban areas, cultural palaces and workers’ clubs held film showings, and sports grounds within work units were transformed into make-shift theaters on weekend nights (ibid., 100-1).

The content of sports films, like other films at the time, often included common elements: remembering the past (unfavorably), promoting cheerful and youthful idealism, and new nationalized styles or elements (such as musical numbers) (Clark 1987, 94-118). They strove to educate general audiences on the societal importance of sport and how to become an ideal, patriotic socialist citizen. For example, all sports films emphasized the rewards of hard work, strict discipline, and collective (over individual) effort. The most successful, as I will show below, also contrasted the role of competitive athletes in the “old” society (pre-Liberation, before the communist takeover) with the “new” society in order to strengthen the narrative that CCP leadership gave more priority than past leadership to competitive sports programs, cultivating athletes, and improving international status. Many films explicitly imbued the pursuits of elite athletics with national importance. Films also introduced new sports institutional structures, such as spare-time sports schools, providing a glimpse into how leaders envisioned they might be run and athletes trained. And if one was not participating actively as a coach or athlete, then these films showed how one was still expected to offer their utmost support for state-



sponsored athletes: large crowds of enthusiastic fans and spectators cheer at all the competitions, and those who do not initially support athletes are transformed into supporters over the course of the film. Finally, female athletes featured prominently in these films, underscoring the official slogan that “men and women are equal” and meaning here that women participated in similar sports programs – and the exact same kind of training – for the sake of the socialist collective. At the same time, the dominance of male authority figures throughout (as coaches, officials, bosses, fathers, boyfriends) clearly demarcated the limits to such equality.

In sum, these films showcased hardworking athletic bodies as visual embodiments of the national body politic and socialist state: they were signs of a China that had successfully overturned its “sick man” legacy. They thus reinforced the new regime’s legitimacy by delivering the official message that the healthy, fit, athletic, male and female bodies produced under state socialism demonstrated a China no longer in decay.

### 3.1 *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*

The most popular *tiyu* film of the decade, *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* (*Nü lan wuhao*, color, Shanghai Tianma, 1957)<sup>7</sup> set a high standard for the genre. As the first color *tiyu* film in China (Xiao 1957, 23-4) and the first written and directed by Xie Jin, who later went on to even greater fame with such films as *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) and *Two Stage Sisters* (1965), the film is thus also considered an exemplar for reasons extending beyond its subject matter.<sup>8</sup> The plot follows the lives of Lin Xiaojie, a young female basketball player who has just signed up with a Shanghai basketball school, her teammates, and their new coach, Tian Zhenhua, who was formerly a coach for the Southwest Army team. Throughout the film the audience is reminded of contemporary socialist themes, such as collectivism, discipline, and hard work, as well as the utopian socialist idealism that marked the period.

These themes are constantly reinforced through visuals of the basketball players themselves, whose bodies symbolize the prosperity and strength of the new socialist state. Early in the film, surprisingly upbeat music accompanies an intense training scene in which we see the female athletes, clad in shorts and shirts, line up for a roll call before Coach Tian sends them off for a jog and then leads them in a series of basketball drills [Figure 1]. With stern looks on their faces, they toil away in the brutal Shanghai heat with few breaks. When the exhausted players take a water break [Figure 2], they begin to complain

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<sup>7</sup> *Nülan wuhao* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957. Beijing: Zhongguo aolinpike weiyuanhui chupin, Guojia tiyu zongju tiyu wenhua fazhan zhongxin bianzhi, Zhongying yinxiang chubanshe chuban, 2008. DVD.

<sup>8</sup> The film won the silver prize at the sixth International Youth Film Festival held in 1957 (Wang 2011, 144).

about the level of training and their ability to win a medal. But when one player accuses the coach of “mistaking us for a men’s team” another quickly retorts, “Don’t forget, men and women are equal!” Although the coach relents and even offers to cut back on training, the message is clear: female athletes need to work just as hard to train their bodies as their male counterparts.

**Figure 1:** The Players Warm Up with a Jog. Lin Xiaojie (played by Cao Qiwei), Is Second from Right. Lin’s Haircut in the Film Inspired Schools to Have Their Students Adopt the Same “Number 5” Style



Still from *Ni lan wuhao* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 00:16:52.

**Figure 2:** Taking a Short Break from an Intense Training Session to Chat with Coach Tian



**Figure 3:** Players Gather in the Coach's Room to Welcome Him



Stills from *Ni lan wuhao* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 00:18:28 and 00:13:33.

The players continue to train vigorously and spend all their time together in sparse but relatively nice living quarters. Yet they are also cheerful youth, full of energy and hope – smiles abound and the mood is matched by the bright lighting of the film set [Figures 2 and 3]. This boundless optimism was present in many films of the period, but as mentioned previously, state-sponsored athletic work was relatively new. The positivity of these athletes demonstrated to the audience that, under socialism, it was glorious to be a competitive athlete.

In addition to training, the team members gather for meetings to discuss strategy, and are expected to share playing time on the court [Figure 4]. Many scenes show the athletes gathering in order to convey that they are a collective and work together. Poor sportsmanship is frowned upon and players are reprimanded publicly. When Lin Xiaojie suggests taking advantage of another team's weak offense, Coach Tian decides to bench her for the practice game. She then decides that instead of attending a mandatory team meeting (which will decide whether or not the game will even be held), she will have dinner with her boyfriend's family because it's her birthday. When she misses the meeting and subsequently shows up late to the game, Coach Tian refuses to look at her but states indirectly and in front of the other players that "someone who is undisciplined and does not think of the group" can be of no use in the game. Birthday or not, everyone, including Lin, accepts that maintaining strict discipline for the sake of the collective is far more important than individual pursuits.

**Figure 4:** Discussing Team Strategy in the Players' Living Quarters, Lin Xiaojie Suggests Taking Advantage of Another Team's Weak Offense. Coach Tian Appears Displeased



Still from *Nǚlán wuhao* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 00:44:42.

The film also makes it abundantly clear that these athletes embody the new socialist state, which has successfully overcome past national humiliation. It is the male coach, however, and not a female athlete, who plays the leading heroic figure throughout.<sup>9</sup> Coach Tian, we find out, is a former star basketball player who played for Shanghai's East China team in the 1930s. Through a series of flashbacks, we follow his pitiful, impoverished life as an athlete in the "old" China. This is framed by a film set that is intentionally dark and cramped [e.g., Figure 6]. In one scene, set in the late 1930s, Tian and the East China team are in the middle of beating a foreign team of sailors when two foreign audience members decide to bribe the boss of the East China team – a man depicted in an expensive fur coat and smoking a cigar – so that his team loses. Initially the players, though annoyed, follow orders and begin to play poorly. But Tian is visibly distraught [Figure 5] and calls a timeout to goad his teammates with "We can't lose! We have to win!" They agree with him and beat the foreign team – even as Tian suffers a minor injury to do so – ultimately defying their boss. The local audience is ecstatic with the win, but soon after the victory thugs are sent to beat up Tian in an alley and he is hospitalized [Figure 6]. The message is thus clear: when greedy capitalists like this boss of the East China team ran society, national dignity meant very little. Tian's broken body embodies a nation and society in decay, and even the best and most sincere athletic efforts cannot overcome this.

**Figure 5:** Tian Sweats as He Faces a Tough Decision in the "Old" Society



Still from *Nǚlán wuhào* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 00:26:26.

<sup>9</sup> The "male heroic image" was common in many films (and other forms of narrative) in China at the time (Dai 2002, 113).

**Figure 6:** Tian's Bruised Body Lies in a Dark Alley in the "Old" Society



Still from *Nǚlán wúhào* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 00:29:23.

In a subsequent scene, following Tian's accusation that Lin Xiaojie has neglected strict discipline and the collective, and her telling the team that she quits, Tian delivers a poignant monologue about not quitting that is based squarely on his past. He explicitly invokes the "sick man" humiliation narrative to describe this experience. As quoted at the beginning of this essay, he explains to the team that he "knew an athlete" that foreigners and reporters mocked as a "sick man" during international competitions. Full of emotion and with a pained look on his face [Figure 7], Tian connects the (male) athlete's "bare-chested" body to national humiliation: foreigners and reporters insulted not just him, but the entire Chinese nation. Tian thus explicitly employs the "sick man" stereotype to associate national humiliation both with the earlier basketball match (the "old" society) and, by extension, international sports competition in general. National humiliation is also literally inscribed on the body of the athlete. When one of Tian's players innocently asks "what happened?" to this athlete, Tian replies, "What happened? ... He won a championship for China." Grasping the medal from this earlier competition in his hand, Tian emphatically adds that, in contrast to this earlier period, "things are different for your generation. Every second, every moment of your lives is blessed."<sup>10</sup> In short, Coach Tian embodies the transition from "old" to "new" China: National humiliation is a thing of the past, and it should not be forgotten how much better things are in the present.

<sup>10</sup> *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* - Film Script.

**Figure 7:** Coach Tian Delivers a Poignant Monologue about the Previously “Sick” Chinese Nation



It is no coincidence that this monologue is framed by a poster promoting the Olympics with a smiling Chinese athlete. The film was released in the wake of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, at a time when building an elite athletic base for future Olympic glory was an official priority. Still from *Ni lan wuhao* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 00:59:40.

In one of the next scenes, Coach Tian, dressed in a Mao suit to embody Party leadership, goes a step further: he argues that sports participation is as important as, or perhaps even more vital to, the nation’s health than other endeavors. Lin sustains an injury and is recovering in the hospital when her book-smart boyfriend, Tao Kai, comes to visit. Tao is depicted as un-athletic (in fact, he is dressed like an office worker) and he complains to Tian that Lin has not spent enough time studying for her college entrance exams. Tao argues that she “could make an outstanding engineer” for the country in its pursuit of socialism, but instead “she’s wasting time jumping around and playing ball” [Figure 8]. Tian sternly responds that visible displays of Chinese athletic recognition in international sport are precisely what the nation needs to overcome national humiliation. The camera again focuses closely on Tian’s face as he assumes a pained expression and recounts his own experience:

A few years ago, I had the chance to go with a sports delegation overseas. I saw the flags of the Soviet Union, the USA, and England flying over the stadium, even flags of countries with populations of no more than a couple of hundred thousand. As a veteran athlete ... as a Chinese ... nothing hurts more than to look up and not see your nation’s flag flying. Just think, if we could raise our red flag with its five stars at an international meet and play our national



anthem, then no matter what country you were from, even if you were against us, you'd have to stand up and take your hat off to our flag and think about the fact that you were up against a country of six hundred million people.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 8:** Tao Argues that Lin Is Wasting Her Time Playing Basketball



Still from *Nǚlán wúhào* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 01:08:36.

Such a statement describes humiliation viscerally – the veteran athlete is emotionally “hurt” through this past experience of not seeing his nation’s flag at an international competition. Moreover, with the phrase “up against a country of six hundred million people” it is clear that elite athletes embody communist China (“red flag with its five stars”) on the world stage. In the final scene of the film, Tian and much of the team stand in the national uniform – along with male team members – as the anthem plays [Figure 9]. They then happily board a modern airplane – another sign of national progress – to head off for international competition.

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<sup>11</sup> *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* - Film Script.

**Figure 9:** Athletes Stand with the Chinese Communist Flag as the Anthem Plays



Still from *Nülan wuhao* [Girl Basketball Player No. 5]. Directed by Xie Jin. Shanghai Tian Ma, 1957, 01:21:26.

It is worth noting that one of the most compelling aspects of the film was the inclusion of a romantic sub-plot that appealed to many viewers, while also reminding them of other ways in which the living standards and quality of life were currently much better than they had been before 1949. When Tian first arrives as the new girls' coach at the Shanghai school, his friend and former East China teammate teases him for still being a bachelor. The audience also learns soon thereafter that Lin Xiaojie's mother, Lin Jie, disapproves of her daughter's choice to play basketball. In a twist of fate, we find out through a combination of Tian's pensive encounters with Lin Xiaojie and flashbacks to his days as an athlete that his love interest in the 1930s was none other than Lin Jie – who also happened to be a basketball player and the daughter of the scheming East China team boss. When Tian is hospitalized following his encounter with the thugs, it is she who rushes to his side and pawns her most valuable possessions – including a medal given to her by Tian – so that he can have surgery. While Tian is recovering, Lin's father, who clearly disapproves of the relationship (in addition to Tian's disobedience in the game, he lives an impoverished existence and shares a dilapidated one-room flat with his teammate), pays him a visit. The father returns the medal to Tian without telling Lin and convinces Tian to move on. Lin is forced by her father to marry a rich man and through her flashbacks we see that this marriage was so unhappy that she took her infant daughter and fled. Thus Lin Jie represents the tragic female figure of “old” China, in which she must submit to the patriarchal demands of her father by entering an unhappy marriage. We also come to understand that



this past has clearly made her apprehensive about her daughter's interest in basketball because she believes that nothing good can come from being an athlete. When Lin finds out from her daughter that the new coach is Tian she is visibly shocked but says nothing.

It is at this point in the film that the story of an unfulfilled romantic relationship leaves the audience hanging in suspense: will Tian and Lin meet each other again and, if so, what will happen? Not until Lin Xiaojie is injured and in the hospital do the two meet face-to-face again and discover that Lin's father lied to them both – and that they still harbor feelings for one another. In the final scene, as Coach Tian and Lin Xiaojie get ready to board a plane for an international competition, Tian assures Lin that they will be back soon, to which she replies affectionately, “No matter how long it is, I'll be waiting for you.” Although this happy ending may seem clichéd, it captivated audiences. For some filmgoers this “very human” plot full of “complex emotions” (Qiu 1957) in a changed society is what made the film, alongside its superb directing and acting, well worth watching.

Gender messages in this film seem contradictory, but match other official propaganda at the time. For example, the slogan “men and women are equal” meant that women should engage in the same work as men. This is especially evident here in the intense athletic training and competitions. Nevertheless, gender equality only went so far: in a film purportedly about a female basketball player, the authority figures and main character in the film are men. It is Coach Tian who guides the team both on and off the court. The romantic subplot clearly seeks to demonstrate that in “old” society women had it worse off, as seen in Lin Jie's arranged marriage,<sup>12</sup> but this does little to deter the audience from Tian's humiliation and powerful presence – or from the fact that Lin Jie appears to be an unemployed and doting mother whose only hope for a better future is her relationship with Tian. Note that even in the hospital scene [Figure 8], Lin Xiaojie's future – which really is a discussion about the importance of athletes and engineers for the nation – is debated by two men, Tao and Tian (as embodying a new kind of “public patriarch” – the CCP),<sup>13</sup> with little to no input from Lin, her mother, or any of the female players surrounding her bed.

Film critics have continued to highlight the script's plot as “where the value lies” (Chen 2009, 103) and what has made the film's legacy endure.<sup>14</sup> Out-

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<sup>12</sup> One of two major reforms that the CCP pushed through following the establishment of the PRC was the Marriage Law. This law emphasized disparaging arranged marriage in favor of companionate marriage (Bailey 2012, 102-3).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Bailey (2012, 101) uses the term “public patriarch” to refer to the shift of marriage from a “private” transaction to one involving the state. Here I use it to mean something similar but in a different context: instead of a father or other male kin (such as Lin Jie's father) deciding her future, Coach Tian is the CCP patriarch making that decision for her.

<sup>14</sup> This film has left a lasting legacy. It made a comeback in the late 1970s and in 2008 was included in a collection of popular sports movies produced for the Beijing Olympics.

standing direction, a multilayered plot that included two well-known actors in a romantic sub-plot, real athletes, and the use of color have led at least one scholar to conclude that the film's "political undertones" appeared to "take a backseat" (Fowler 2010, 204-5). Yet one should not forget that these sports films were produced within a highly politicized society for a specific purpose. For example, it was not good enough to rely on established actors and actresses, and in this respect *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* started a trend in sports films to use actual athletes. The actress who played Lin Xiaojie, Cao Qiwei, was herself an 18-year-old volleyball athlete who had just entered the Shanghai sports institute when Xie Jin selected her for the lead role; she later went on to play for the national volleyball team (Zhonggong zhongyang 2008, 88). Cao was chosen because she resembled Yang Jie, the real-life "Number 5" who had played for the national women's basketball team since 1954 and whose life Xie Jin had studied in preparation for the film (Liang 2009).<sup>15</sup> This use of real-life athletes signaled a certain degree of realism sought in cultural production.

The film did receive some minor criticism at the time. Some apparently felt that the basketball team's lack of a Party representative did not reflect the Party's leadership; others believed that the film's focus on skills and technique indicated an air of "trophyism" (Wang 2011, 144). One critic complained that the clothing and some of the sets tended to "beautify life" beyond reality (Ren 1958), suggesting wasteful spending in film production. But these were minor criticisms that had little to do with the plot or depictions of athletes, their coach, or sport, and the film became a yardstick by which critics measured other sports films.

### 3.2 *Ice Sisters* and *Two Generations of Swimmers*

The athletes portrayed in two subsequent films released in 1959, *Ice Sisters* (*Bingshang jiemei*, color, Changchun) and *Two Generations of Swimmers* (*Shuishang chunqiu*, color, Beijing),<sup>16</sup> share some characteristics with *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*, but reflect changes that came during the Great Leap Forward and reminded the audience about what kind of work athletes were expected to perform. The plots of these two films focus on elite athletes as harbingers of national glory and reiterate common socialist themes such as good sportsmanship, strict discipline, the collective, and (implicitly or explicitly) criticisms of the old regime. Visually, however, the films include more scenes of intense athletic training and competitions – including close-ups of

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<sup>15</sup> Cao was also chosen over at least one other potential athlete because she spoke with a standard Mandarin accent (Xiao 1957, 24).

<sup>16</sup> *Bingshang jiemei* [Ice Sisters], directed by Wu Zhaodi, Changchun, 1959, and *Shuishang chunqiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959. Zhongguo aolinpike weiyuanhui chupin, Guojia tiyu zongju tiyu wenhua fazhan zhongxin bianzhi, Zhongying yinxiang chubanshe chuban, 2008. DVD.

athletes' faces and bodies – and there are no romantic subplots. Moreover, any lingering traces of femininity are gone as the difference between male and female athletes becomes even less distinct. There are no direct statements about gender equality – it is just presumed that in spare-time sports schools all athletes perform the same training routines, sometimes even side-by-side, attend the same competitions and don nearly identical sports clothing.<sup>17</sup> (It is worth noting that this gender sameness did not, however, extend beyond athletic training, where women are shown in the domestic realm or as subordinate factory workers and all authoritative positions are held exclusively by men.<sup>18</sup>) This reflected major changes taking place in both sport and society as a whole in 1959. Spare-time sports schools, launched in 1956 and 1957, proliferated during the Great Leap Forward and especially in the year leading up to the first National Games in October 1959. Sprinkled throughout these two films are lively scenes full of bright, young athletes, male and female, who voluntarily and enthusiastically spend their leisure time training in such schools. They are also workers and students contributing to building China – simultaneously model athletes and model citizens, devoted to realizing national goals. Finally, these films strive to show that athletes of all backgrounds had the chance to work hard for the possibility of participating in national and international competition. Ironically, actual Chinese participation in international competition was in limbo following China's withdrawal from the Olympic committee in August 1958. There was thus no imagery like the Olympic poster found in *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*, and it is unclear in these films – as it was in real life – what kinds of opportunities lay in store for internationally competitive athletes.

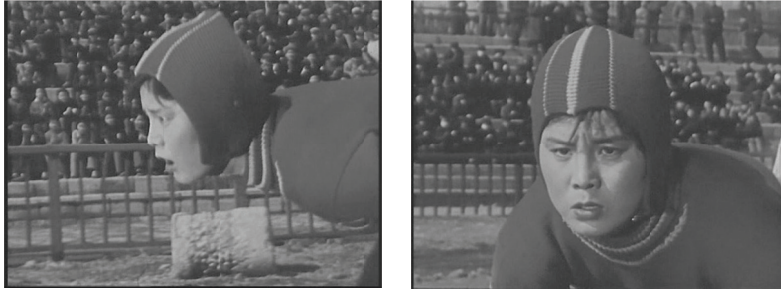
The protagonist of the film *Ice Sisters* is textile factory worker and speed skater Ding Shuping (played by Lu Guilan, a Shenyang sports institute student), praised for her good sportsmanship in competition and self-sacrifice. In the first scene of the film, the camera zooms in on rookie skater Ding's intensely focused expression [Figures 10 and 11] as she beats veteran speed skater Wang Dongyan in a provincial competition. Instead of congratulating Ding for her victory, however, Wang is annoyed and behaves rudely to Ding – an example of an older generation athlete who has still not “reformed her thought” properly.

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<sup>17</sup> Dai Jinhua has argued that “characters on screen lost their gender identity” in this period in favor of “political and class difference” (Dai 2002, 102). Nevertheless, competitions depicted in the film – as in real life – only show athletes competing with those of the same sex.

<sup>18</sup> In China, domestic work and childrearing was – and to a large extent still is – presumed to be women's work, though it is largely invisible in the historical record (Hershatter 2011, 183). For this reason, sportswomen who want to work post-athletic retirement are presumed to be faced with a “double burden” of having to maintain a career while at the same time managing the household and raising children. Whether as coaches or as sports administrators, statistics are dismal and confirm that women rarely have held authoritative positions in the world of sport (Dong 2003, 213–4).

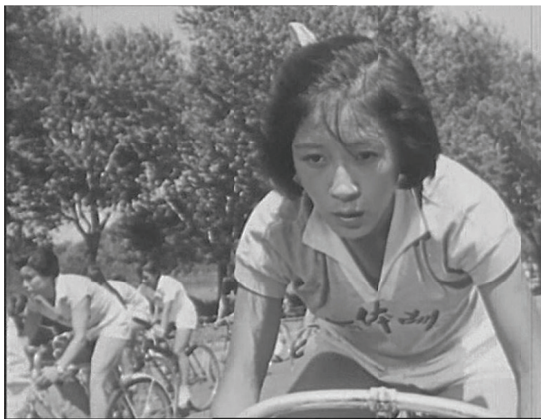
**Figure 10 & 11:** Close-Ups of Ding Shuping as She Competes



Stills from *Bingshang jiemei* [Ice Sisters], directed by Wu Zhaodi, Changchun, 1959, 00:05:44 and 00:06:01.

Unlike Wang, Ding decides to dedicate much of her spare time and energy to Yu Liping, a young speed skating fan with athletic potential who joins their sports school. While Wang criticizes Yu at every opportunity, Ding instead acts as a big sister – encouraging and consoling Yu when the athletic training regime gets tough. And it is indeed very tough: the film spends much time covering the rigorous, year-round training of these athletes, which we see includes a variety of indoor and outdoor activities. Close-ups of individual athletes, faces dripping in sweat and wearing serious, focused facial expressions, evidence the intensity of exhausting sessions [Figures 12 and 13]. As viewers, we are repeatedly shown how hard these athletes work as a testament to their devotion to strengthening their bodies – models, to be sure, not only of athletic work but of how every citizen is expected to be arduously working for the socialist cause.

**Figure 12:** A Close-Up of Yu Liping and the Team Cycling Outside on a Hot Summer Day



Still from *Bingshang jiemei* [Ice Sisters], directed by Wu Zhaodi, Changchun, 1959, 00:37:40.

**Figure 13:** The Camera Focuses on Ding Shuping's Face Dripping of Sweat during an Indoor Training Session



Still from *Bingshang jiemei* [Ice Sisters], directed by Wu Zhaodi, Changchun, 1959, 00:33:27.

In one particularly dramatic scene about the errors of individualism versus bodily self-sacrifice for the greater good, the school goes off for a group hike in the mountains and Wang leaves the group to climb on her own. Ding follows her and pleads she not go off alone, but Wang resists. A few seconds later Wang slips and falls, only to be caught by Ding, who then takes the tumble herself and ends up in the hospital with a broken leg. Despite the potential this injury has to ruin her career, Ding's robust athletic body and continued determination (especially to help Yu Liping) – symbolic of the Chinese nation as a whole – gives her what she needs to overcome this setback. In the end, Ding's willpower and her guidance of Yu pay off: in the final scene of the film Yu beats both Wang and Ding to win the national championship in the 3000-meter competition. Ding is nothing but proud of Yu's victory and they share in the glory; Wang is also finally supportive. The messages of this film are clear: intensely working together and maintaining strict discipline are necessary for the victory of the socialist collective (and, implicitly, the health of the socialist state and future generations). Athletes are successful models for how to accomplish this, but the message is not restricted to athletic work. Moreover, as the protagonists of the film are female athletes, the audience is reminded that the participation of women is required. The film was hailed in the official media as being "highly educational" and reflecting the new generation's "strong will and noble communist style" in ice-skating as well as physical exercise more generally (Yu 1960).

*Two Generations of Swimmers*, loosely based on a true story,<sup>19</sup> follows the very different trajectories of a father and his son in order to show the evils of old society and the vast improvements under the new regime. The film shows stark contrasts between two periods of time by first chronologically tracing Hua Zhenlong's life as a swimmer prior the establishment of the PRC. In the 1930s in the Chinese countryside, wealthy businessman Hua Qiye is being pulled along in a rickshaw when he stumbles upon peasant fisherman Hua Zhenlong's rescue of a drowning boy. Impressed by what he sees, he convinces Hua Zhenlong to come to Tianjin to participate in swimming competitions against foreigners for money; the purpose of which we soon find out is primarily so that wealthy Chinese and foreigners can gamble and humiliate him when he loses. The differences between Hua and the foreign (white and clearly well-off) athletes are obvious: as they warm-up, Hua practices tai-chi, and when they line up to start, he stands around looking confused as the others dive in [Figure 14].

**Figure 14:** Hua Zhenlong Looking Confused



Still from *Shuishang chunqiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 00:08:27.

But to everyone's surprise, and despite a delayed start, Hua easily wins the breaststroke competition. Afterwards, he narrowly escapes being beaten up by

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<sup>19</sup> The story was based on the real-life Mu family, which included a father-turned-swimming coach (Mu Chengkuan) and his three sons, all of whom gained fame as swimmers in the 1950s. The most famous of these three was Mu Xiangying, who competed for China internationally. Another son, Mu Xianghao, coached the Chinese Olympic teams in later decades before moving to the United States, where he now coaches in New York. <<http://www.coachmu.com/xhswim/coaches/>> (Accessed June 12, 2017).

thugs – sent by gamblers that bet against him – thanks to some kind-hearted local university students who optimistically tell him that “one day China will change.” To add insult to injury, several years later Hua returns to participate in another competition, but is instead kidnapped and imprisoned on the orders of another Chinese athlete – the son of a Nationalist army commanding officer, who goes on to win. The problem is thus not that Chinese athletes have no potential, but rather that the Chinese government under the control of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party is corrupt, and society in decay. Hua lives a rural, impoverished existence with his family because he is given no opportunities to train or compete as a swimmer. In this sense, his late start in the breaststroke competition and eventual win serves as a metaphor for all of China: the “sick” nation suffers because of its current state. The problem is not that Chinese people are incapable of succeeding, but rather that Hua cannot realize his potential because his class status as a peasant deprives him of such glory. In short, the social structure of society must change first.

After the communist takeover, everything changes – beginning with the social and class structure. Suddenly, Hua’s formerly deplorable status as a peasant is lauded. One of the college students Hua met in the 1930s, who has since become a sports official, pays Hua a visit and invites him to become a coach and run a swimming program at a youth spare-time sports school. Hua’s class status has thus become an asset, though at first he scoffs in disbelief at the prospect, “Me? Run a school?” he says, “You’re just joking!” After all, he points out, “I am not educated!” The film set for this scene, which includes a table full of food and better clothing, depicts Hua’s village life as materially better than in the past. Yet he acquires an even nicer home when he moves his family to Beijing to begin work as a coach. The family lives a comfortable lifestyle that includes good meals, clothing, and even a pet fish tank; at one point we also see his wife learning how to read and write.<sup>20</sup> The swimming school facilities are also impressive, and Hua is a popular and enthusiastic swimming coach. Hua is proof to the audience that professional work and upward mobility is possible in “new” China, especially for those who can contribute to state-sponsored athletic programs.

Hua coaches his son, Xiaolong, and other athletes at the school. Much of the film is shot around swimming pools, though we also get plenty of opportunities to see how swimmers diligently train outside the pool [Figures 15 and 16]. In scenes just like that of Figure 15, male and female athletes are shown performing the same exercises side-by-side, in nearly identical clothing, while in the background we see that the space is shared with other spare-time sports school athletes. Like *Ice Sisters*, training includes a diverse set of activities, such as calisthenics, weight room and dry land training, jogging, cycling, and even tai-

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<sup>20</sup> Illiteracy in rural areas, particularly among women, was high, and literacy campaigns were a major CCP initiative in the 1950s (Hershatter 2011, 102).

chi – and the coaches are always male [Figure 16]. There are also similar close-ups that show the intensity and sweat on the athletes' faces as they train [Figure 17]. The camera occasionally lingers on the swimmers' muscular and fit bodies, both male and female [Figures 18 and 19]. Such shots showcased to viewers the fruits of state-sponsored athletic work under socialism in the form of strong Chinese bodies, and perhaps such images also encouraged more youth to engage in such training. Either way, these athletes embodied for the viewer a “new” China that was no longer weak.

**Figure 15 & 16:** Dry Land Training and Pool Side Calisthenics



Stills from *Shuishang chungiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 00:26:14 and 00:49:58.

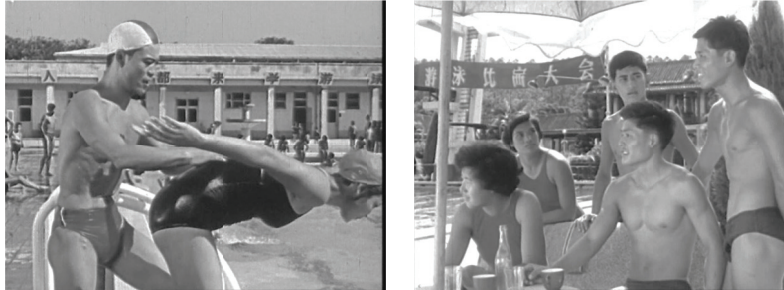
**Figure 17:** Hua Xiaolong Visibly Sweats during an Indoor Training Session



Still from *Shuishang chungiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 01:21:12.



**Figure 18 & 19:** On the Left, a Buff Hua Xiaolong Helps a Teammate with Her Dive Form. On the Right, both Male and Female Swimmers Watch the National Competition



Stills from *Shuishang chungiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 00:26:37 and 00:32:38.

Xiaolong trains hard and breaks the national record in breaststroke. He then decides that his real aim is the world record and, in addition to stepping up his training sessions with his father [Figure 20] that also include jogging, cycling, and more dry land practice, he secretly adds weight-training sessions at night.

**Figure 20:** Hua Xiaolong Trains to Beat the World Record as His Father Hua Zhenlong Tracks the Time



Still from *Shuishang chungiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 00:47:51.

His fellow athlete and friend Zhou Huiliang, also a top swimmer, trains alongside and encourages Xiaolong. In the final scene this hard work and camaraderie pay off as both compete in the 100-meter breaststroke [Figure 21] and break the world record, with Xiaolong barely edging out Zhou for the win. Zhou is not jealous: he has sacrificed his own hard work for the greater good and, to-

gether, the two face the audience of spectators with their muscular, bare-chested bodies to happily celebrate their hard work and success. The film soon cuts to scenes of other swimmers and divers – competitive and non-competitive – before then cutting to throngs of athletes marching in Tiananmen Square holding a banner with the Mao slogan “develop sport, strengthen the peoples’ physiques” before finally coming to a close. The bodies of Hua, Zhou, and other swimmers and divers, are thus explicitly linked to the broader sports movement and, by focusing on athletes in Tiananmen, the significance of athletic work to the socialist nation as a whole.

**Figure 21:** Hua Xiaolong and Zhou Huiliang Compete at the National Swimming Competition



Still from *Shuishang chungiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 01:27:21.

Produced and released at the height of the Leap, there are several further characteristics about *Ice Sisters* and *Two Generations of Swimmers* that make them stand out as products of these specific years. For one, athletes enthusiastically contribute to the socialist collective outside of sport; they are generally productive citizens. Ding Shuping and Wang Dongyan are textile factory workers who cheerfully balance work with year-round intense training at a school that includes a variety of sports disciplines [Figure 22], while Hua Xiaolong and his friends are engineering students who help at a local factory [Figure 23]. Furthermore, *Two Generations of Swimmers* includes scenes where these urban-based athletes visit villages in the countryside and learn how to fish and work in the field;<sup>21</sup> they even hold a swimming exhibition for the peasants in a local,

<sup>21</sup> In the Maoist period, competitive athletes and their superiors were required to spend a certain amount of time with “the masses” but the emphasis here on a rural village is nota-

very primitive-looking, pool. In short, the films demonstrated to viewers that it was not good enough to *only* participate in athletic work, and that athletes were also responsible for sharing their knowledge with the broader masses.

**Figure 22:** Ding Shuping Looks at Print Designs with Her Factory Co-Workers



Still from *Shuishang chunqiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 00:21:50.

**Figure 23:** Hua Zhenlong Stops by a Local Factory to Help Out



Still from *Shuishang chunqiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 00:28:37.

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ble. Rustication programs aimed at urban youth began in the 1950s, grew in the early 1960s, and lasted through the Cultural Revolution and the late 1970s. These sent-down youth labored alongside peasants.

Like other films of the period, there is also a musical element in *Two Generations of Swimmers* that brings out the Great Leap Forward's revolutionary and patriotic tone. A male and female athlete cheerily sing about labor while on a rural fishing boat in one scene; in another, several teammates gather around a piano [Figure 24] and happily sing, "We are swimmers, under the red flag we exercise and grow [...] and strive for greater glory for the motherland."

**Figure 24:** Viewers Could Sing Along Using Subtitles like This One ("We are Swimmers")



Still from *Shuishang chungiu* [Two Generations of Swimmers], directed by Xie Tian, Beijing, 1959, 01:11:49.

Finally, reflecting the long-term goals announced with the official ten-year plan (Shuman 2014, 201-2), the athletes in both films are acutely aware of improving their athletic ability and striving to win national competitions and break records. *Ice Sisters* culminates with Yu's win, while *Two Generations* ends with a new world record. In fact, when Xiaolong initially sets a new national record in the breaststroke, we see that it is not good enough: he must endure excruciating training to strengthen his body and break the world record. His eventual success demonstrates that China is now strong and no longer lagging behind as a "sick" nation.

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#### 4. Conclusion

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Throughout the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first, Chinese textbooks, memoirs, and official media have justified the development of *tǐyù* – and especially competitive sports participation – by invoking a narrative of

national humiliation. Every regime has understood athletes as capable of overturning or having already overturned this humiliation. Just weeks after the closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the *China Daily*, an official mouthpiece for the government, declared:

Is it true that the West has already had a positive change of attitudes to China? In fact, the long-standing image of China as the “Sick man of East Asia” that the West fostered in history was broken more than 20 years ago when Chinese athletes snatched 15 gold medals in the Los Angeles Olympics, pushing it into the world camp of sports powers.

However, a sense of intrinsic superiority about its civilization still prevails in the Western world. The essence of their reluctance to see China play a crucial role in international politics or take it as an equal partner still remains, although Western countries have changed their deep-rooted mindset about China a little after the end of the Beijing Olympics. (China Daily 2008)

The importance of the early years of the PRC are clearly diminished in this Olympic story, but the humiliation narrative’s connection to sport has never disappeared – it has and continues to remind people about past national humiliation (and, in the case of this article, the supposed continuance of a Western narrative of “intrinsic superiority”). Although the “victor” narrative has firmly replaced that of “victimization,” constant reminders of past humiliation have become the necessary foundation for sustaining and legitimating the Communist party’s continued rule (Gries 2005). PRC leaders employed the “sick man” phrase to describe the nation prior to 1949, and this phrase continues to serve as a symbolic reminder for why the CCP still holds power. As the *China Daily* quote shows, victorious bodies of Chinese athletes have remained absolutely crucial to upholding this official party narrative.

The connection between athletes and overturning national humiliation dates to the early twentieth century, but it reached new heights during the first decade of Maoist rule. Just seven years after the founding of the PRC, Mao invoked corporeal terms to declare China’s “sick man” label as “no longer” – implying that the label represented the past, an “old” China that was constantly humiliated because it was in decay. Yet although he made clear that the CCP had established a “new” and strong China, he by no means abandoned the foundational role that this “old” society played in a national narrative grounded in past humiliation. On the contrary, for the purposes of reinforcing its rightful legitimacy to rule, the leadership frequently employed propaganda to contrast past humiliation and problems of “old” China with images of a “new” China. One prominent figure in visual propaganda was the healthy and fit athlete. By the late 1950s, robust Chinese athletes could be found everywhere in mass state-sponsored media, including film. To be sure, aspects of these films depicted an overly optimistic or even utopian ideal of life in “new” China, but state-sponsored sports schools and those engaged in athletic work did proliferate in the 1950s, especially during the Great Leap Forward. Sports films provided

ordinary citizens with images of model athletes, seeking not only to outline the important role athletes played in the new nation, but to also viscerally demonstrate how the Party had successfully transformed the “victimized” athlete (nation) into a strong “victor.”

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# Historical Social Research

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### All articles published in HSR Special Issue 43 (2018) 2: Visuities – Sports, Bodies, and Visual Sources.

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