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What Happened to the Women?
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The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was so magnificently awe-inspiring as to prompt the NBC anchors to declare that, if there were a trophy for the opening ceremonies, then it must be retired. Vancouver and London certainly have their work cut out for them. Yet as I watched a string of stunning performances of Chinese men—banging on brass drums, doing quasi-qigong dance, executing a shanshui painting with their bodies while dancing on the world’s largest LCD screen, etc., etc., all capped by the 7’6”-tall flag bearer Yao Ming—I wondered, where did China’s 640 million women go? Sure, a 9-year-old girl sang the national anthem, and another 9-year-old girl floated over the mixed-gender group of children from the 56 recognized nationalities. The group of schoolchildren in the end was also mixed gender, but adult women were minorities in the evening’s performance. I kept squinting at various performers in an attempt to ascertain their gender, but the fact that I had to look so hard indicated that something was wrong.

Many gorgeous women floated around the stage in modified Tang costume, moving very delicately, as if they actually were dolls made of porcelain (or perhaps as if their huge dresses were unbearably hot and heavy). A single woman floated out on a magic carpet-type platform supported by dozens of people beneath her, and her entire performance of swirling colored scarves around herself while she “floated” lasted maybe 2 minutes. Another handful of women actually did float like angels over the 90,000 spectators in the Bird’s Nest, with lights illuminating their ever-smiling faces of serene beauty. But that was about it. In his world-class exposé of pre-packaged Chinese culture, Zhang Yimou cast women as docile, delicate, and demure pin-up girls.

I’d never be one to say that China—or any nation in the world—has full gender equality today, but neither would I dismiss the very real advances that China has made in that direction. Shouldn’t that be recognized and celebrated on the world stage? Apparently Zhang Yimou does not think so. He lost a very wonderful opportunity to challenge the stereotype of submission that plagues Asian women everywhere. Yet China’s 639-strong Olympic team has already won 6 gold and 2 silver medals. One of the gold’s was won by 48-kilogram Chen Xiexia, who lifted 117 kilograms, more than twice her own body weight, seemingly without even breaking a sweat (US’ers can see the video on nbcolympics.com).

This intrigues me given that I recently finished Andrew Morris’s book, Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China, in which he goes against what many scholars have said—including Fan Hong in her agreeably uncritical book Footbinding, Feminism, and Freedom, and Wang Zheng in her portrait of women’s physical educator Lu Lihua in Women in the Chinese Enlightenment—to assert that the world of Chinese athletics from the late Qing through the early Communist era was expressly male-centric. Morris argues that even the well-executed attempts of many Chinese women to re-define physical culture to be more inclusive failed because “women were still disproportionately blamed for their lack of attention to physical fitness and were stereotypically described in terms of a history of weakness and sloth” (p. 118). In other words, men policed the
boundaries of "their" world of physical activity to keep women out, and they continually defined the
aim of sport to be ridding China of the ignominious title of "Sick Man of East Asia," a male-centric
geopolitical goal of proving Chinese masculinity to the imperialist nations whose Orientalism cast
Asians as passive and weak. Morris says that, although some advances for women were made through
physical culture, in reality it was just a shift from Cherry Coke to Vanilla Coke—women's bodies, first
defined and controlled by Confucian patriarchy, were in the Republican and early Communist eras
defined and controlled by nationalist patriarchy.

I'm going to be optimistic and assume that things are at least slightly different in Chen Xiexia's China,
despite the sometimes violent persistence of nationalist patriarchy (there and everywhere!). I'm going
to let a 106-pound woman who easily lifts 258 pounds over her head represent today's Chinese
women, despite the fact that Zhang Yimou's testosterone-filled celebration pulled on my heart strings.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics