



The Socially Constructed Body: Publications and the Multi-facet of Women's Sport in Modern China (1840-1949)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of modern publications addressing women's issues on the development of women's sports and physical education in modern China. It also examines the significant value of these publications in the liberation of women's bodies and related studies. By considering the shift towards cultural history, this study contemplates the future direction of research on modern Chinese women's sports. The findings reveal that while modern publications addressing women's issues positively influenced the development of women's sports, they also had some negative effects. Nonetheless, as a crucial medium and platform for the liberation and development of women's bodies, the historical materials provided by these publications are of significant value for research on women's sports in modern China. In the context of the cultural history turn, the study of women's sports in modern China based on these publications can employ interdisciplinary research methods, drawing from different perspectives and theories. Global and transnational history also represent emerging trends in the study of modern Chinese women's sports history. The exploration of women's sports in modern China based on these publications warrants the attention and further research of scholars in the field.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

As argued by Xiaohong Xia, "The profound impact of publications on all aspects of Chinese social life is a widely recognized fact; their creation of a public space has played an immeasurable role in changing the fixed patterns of thinking, speaking, writing, and communication among Chinese people."¹ Modern publications focused on women² played a crucial role in the rise of women's consciousness, the liberation of women's bodies, and the development of women's sports in China. They also reflected the complexities of power, culture, and gender relations in modern China. The emergence of modern publications in the late 19th century was rooted in the need for social revolution and expression. They were products of China's specific historical conditions. These publications flourished between 1840 and 1949 and evolved through various historical phases. Each phase was characterized by distinct features tied to the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts of the time. The establishment and development of these publications were closely linked to their founding reasons, creators, main authors, and target audiences. Modern publications addressing women's issues disseminated new ideas about women's sports. They criticized outdated notions, imparted scientific knowledge about women's physical education, and explored issues related to women's sports. These publications reflected the state of women's physical activities and conveyed developments in this field. They sketched the landscape of women's bodily liberation in modern China and highlighted various aspects of the development of women's sports. They bore witness to the ideological journey of women's bodily liberation and sports development. In essence, these publications

¹ Xiaohong Xia. *Wanqing nvxing yu jindai zhongguo* [Women in Late Qing and Modern China]. (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004):2.

² In this paper, publications addressing women's issues do not solely refer to those run by women or bearing the name "women's publications." It also includes publications managed or edited by men, as long as they study and discuss women's issues, reflect women's lives, or target women as their primary audience.

can help future researchers transcend temporal boundaries, reconstruct virtual scenes, and appreciate the long-gone social and historical atmosphere.³

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON MODERN WOMEN'S SPORTS IN CHINA AND THE WEST

Based on modern publications, especially women's sports publications, specialized research on women's sports in modern China has achieved notable results among scholars in China. A representative work is Professor You Jianming's *Women's Sports in Modern East China*. This book is divided into two parts. The first part, "Public Opinion, Sports Policy, and Campus Culture," focuses on the emergence of women's sports discourse, the implementation of school sports policies, and how sports became integrated into the lives of female students. The second part, "Media, Society, and Women's Sports Competitions" utilizes different voices from the media and the public to interpret the position of women's sports in modern China. The book not only discusses the nationhood issues most concerned in modern Chinese history but also presents how new concepts and behaviors introduced by Western sports gained significance across public opinion, school education, student life, sports competitions, audience reactions, mass media, and visual culture.⁴

Additionally, Professor You published *Images of Women's Sports in Modern China: Historical Photos and Cartoons Before 1937* and *When 20th Century Chinese Women Encountered the Media*.⁵ The former includes images from school sports meets, regional games, national games, and precious images from international events like the Far Eastern Championship Games, as well as popular female sports stars of the time. The latter, in its second chapter "Female Athletes in East China (1927-1937): A Discussion Based on Newspapers and Magazines" studies female athletes, sports figures, and audiences, emphasizing the impact of games on female athletes and the interaction between society and female athletes, presenting the social and cultural implications of the time.⁶ Wang Yun's doctoral dissertation, *Women's Sports in Modern China from a Gender Perspective*, studies women's sports from 1843 to 1937 from feminist and gender perspectives. She emphasizes that "no role designed for women within the framework of the nation-state could lead to true women's liberation," but as women's awakening and educational levels improved, women actively embraced new roles and identities within the national framework, symbolically accepting the equal sports rights granted by the state.⁷

Furthermore, there are studies focused on specific publications, such as *Ladies' World* (Nvzi shijie), *Beiyang Pictorial News* (Beiyang Huabao) and *The Young Companion* (Liangyou) which include content on women's sports and body liberation. Zhou Ting's study of women's sports in *Ladies' World* during the 1911 Revolution period emphasizes understanding the sports concepts in *Women's World* within the context of women's liberation and national independence.⁸ Li Congna's research on *Beiyang Pictorial* explores the modern transformation and evolution of women's bodies under media scrutiny, revealing the gender significance and cultural value behind it. Chapter three focuses on "The Health Construction of Modern Chinese Women's Bodies", proposing that "health and beauty" gradually became important criteria and value orientations for assessing women's physical beauty.⁹ Li Kexin's research on the body representation of urban women in *The Young Companion* also touches on the construction of "health and beauty" in modern women, focusing on the discussion of "health and beauty" in *The Young Companion*, sports scenes involving women, and other related content.¹⁰ Overall, extensive research on women's sports in China relies heavily on historical materials from publications addressing women's issues. These research findings deserve to be translated and promoted in the West, as they provide different perspectives and analyses on the body emancipation of women and the development of women's sports in modern times from a sports-focused viewpoint.

In contrast, in the West, several influential studies on the development of modern women's sports have emerged. In *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom*, Fan Hong delves into the intricate connections between religious beliefs, cultural codes, political dogmas, gender relations, gender concepts, and the human body in the Chinese context, with a particular focus on women's bodies. She explores how these factors shape and influence notions of gender, the roles assigned to women, and the understanding of the human body within various cultural and social frameworks.¹¹ Gao Yunxiang, using *Ling Long* magazine as an example, analyzes the debate on "healthy beauty" from nationalist and feminist perspectives in the 1930s.¹² Gao's book *Sporting Gender: Women Athletes and Celebrity-Making during China's National Crisis, 1931-45* explores the emergence of female athletes as celebrities in China during the national crisis caused by the Japanese invasion. By examining the lives and

³ Xiaohong Xia. *Wanqing nvxing yu jindai zhongguo* [Women in Late Qing and Modern China]. (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004): 2.

⁴ Jianming You. *Chaoyue xingbie shenti: Jindai Huadong diqu de nvzi tiyu* [Transcending Gendered Bodies: Women's Sports in Modern Eastern China]. (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2012): 14.

⁵ Jianming You. *Jindai daxue nvxing de yundong tuxiang: 1937 nianqian de lishi zhaopian he manhua* [Images of Women's Sports in Modern China: Historical Photos and Cartoons Before 1937]. (Teibei: Boya Bookstore, 2012).

⁶ Jianming You. *Modeng daguanyuan: dang 20 shiji zhongguo nvxing yudao meiti* [When 20th Century Chinese Women Encountered the Media]. (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2022).

⁷ Yun Wang. *Shehui xingbie shiyuzhong de jindai zhongguo nvzi tiyu* [Women's Sports in Modern China from a Gender Perspective]. Nanjing: Nanjing University, PhD thesis, 2011.

⁸ Ting Zhou. *Xinhai geming shiqi funv baokan <nvzi shijie> Zhong nvxing tiyu yanjiu* [A Study of Women's Sports in the Women's Newspaper "Women's World" During the Xinhai Revolution Period]. Shanghai University of Sport, master thesis, 2009.

⁹ Congna Li. *Jindai zhongguo baokan yu nvxing shenti yanjiu* [A Study of Modern Chinese Publications and Women's Bodies]. (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Kexin Li. <Liangyou> *Zhong dushi nvxing de shenti biao Zheng yanjiu* [A Study of Urban Women's Body Representations in "Liangyou" (1926-1937)]. Henan University, master thesis, 2021.

¹¹ Hong Fan, *Footbinding, Feminism, and Freedom: The Liberation of Women's Bodies in Modern China* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).

¹² Gao Yunxiang, "Nationalist and Feminist Discourses on Jianmei (Robust Beauty) During China's 'National Crisis' in the 1930s," *Gender & History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 546-573; Gao Yunxiang, *Sporting Gender: Women Athletes and Celebrity-Making During China's National Crisis, 1931-1945* (Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

careers of individual women athletes, administrators, and film actors within the wartime context, Gao delves into their experiences of navigating nationalist expectations, unwanted male attention, and the complexities of modern fame. Through themes of state control, media influence, fashion, and evolving gender roles, she argues that these athletic women played a pivotal role in shaping a new ideal of modern womanhood in China, where women's emancipation and national interests were intertwined. Denise Gimpel (2006) studied the acquisition and ideological liberation of women's sports concepts in the late Qing and early Republican periods. By exploring diverse perspectives and interpretations of physical education (tiyu/ticao), this text aims to illustrate how it could be utilized to either maintain the existing subordinate female role or carve out an autonomous space for female development.¹³ Elizabeth A. Littell-Lamb (2008) examines the role of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and its YWCA Normal School of Hygiene and Physical Education in China in the years following the 1911 revolution. The article argues that the YWCA leadership strategically utilized the school to establish a presence within the missionary community, gain recognition from reform-minded Chinese educators, and engage with the emerging public sphere of Chinese women.¹⁴

Both Chinese and Western academia have produced influential research on the emancipation of women's bodies and the development of women's sports in modern China. However, in the past decade, Western attention to this field has somewhat declined. Modern publications are essential mediums for studying women's sports in modern China. By examining publications addressing women's issues from different historical periods, regions, social classes, natures, and themes, the diversity and development of modern women's sports can be deeply explored. Currently, research on women's sports based on publications addressing women's issues needs further expansion and in-depth exploration.

THE MULTI- FACETED ASPECTS OF WOMEN'S SPORTS IN MODERN PUBLICATIONS

Gender is not a self-evident, fixed social phenomenon. As a social construct, it is always in a state of flux, neither absolute nor a universal truth, but rather a relative and mutable existence. Publications addressing women's issues have significantly influenced various aspects of Chinese women's social lives, playing a crucial role in reflecting, constructing, and altering perceptions of women's bodies and sports in China. Modern publications addressing women's issues illustrate multiple dimensions of the development of women's sports, with these dimensions intertwining and exhibiting different characteristics across various historical periods. This section will primarily explore the development of women's sports in modern China from the perspectives of nationalism and feminism, as well as modernity and consumerism.

Nationalism and Feminism

Late Qing to Early Republic Period

The formation of modern Chinese concepts of the body is closely linked to the socio-political transformations of modern China, intertwining with the imagination and construction of the modern nation-state. The perception of women's bodies followed a similar trajectory. As Tani Barlow stated, thoughts on femininity and the formation of the modern theme of "women" are closely related to the patriotic sentiments of modern China. Women's bodies became a serious social issue, representing social bodies, moral bodies, and political bodies.¹⁵

Before the Opium War in 1840, Chinese women were heavily constrained by traditional Confucian ethics, confined to domestic spaces with the societal expectation that "a woman's virtue lies in her lack of talent," preventing them from receiving education like men. Moreover, women's bodies suffered from practices like foot-binding and corseting to meet male aesthetic preferences, making the concept of women's sports non-existent. However, post-1840, with the invasion of Western powers, the influence of Western culture on China deepened, sparking self-reflection and a heightened sense of urgency for national salvation among the Chinese. In this social context, women, previously restricted to the domestic sphere, began to garner attention from intellectuals. They started to consider the relationship between national salvation and women's liberation, linking the emancipation of women to the political revolution, with women's liberation becoming a crucial aspect of saving China. A group of Western-educated intellectuals with strong patriotic sentiments and a sense of duty ventured into the publishing industry, launching a series of publications addressing women's issues. In 1898, the Chinese Women's School Association in Shanghai founded the *Women's School Journal* (Nv xue bao), the first women's periodical in modern China, advocating for "women's education and women's rights."¹⁶ This journal promoted women's independence and gender equality, elevating women's liberation to the level of national liberation and calling on women to shoulder the mission of national rejuvenation.¹⁷ As the revolutionary fervor of the early 20th century grew, publications addressing women's issues entered a golden age of development. From 1902 to 1912, around 40 different women's publications were established nationwide.¹⁸ These publications became the vanguard for advocating women's bodily emancipation during this period.

¹³ Denise Gimpel, "Freeing the Mind through the Body: Women's Thoughts on Physical Education in Late Qing and Early Republican China," *Nan nü* 8, no. 2 (2006): 316-358; Denise Gimpel, "Exercising Women's Rights: Debates on Physical Culture since the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm: In Search of Chinese Modernity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 95-130.

¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Littell-Lamb, "Gospel of the Body, Temple of the Nation: The YWCA Movement and Women's Physical Culture in China, 1915-1925," in *Jindai zhongguo funv shi yanjiu* [Studies on the History of Women in Modern China] no.16, 2008: 167-207.

¹⁵ Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Fanke Meng, *Zhongguo funv zhizui* [The Most Notable Chinese Women]. (Beijing: China Travel & Tourism Press, 1989): 40-47.

¹⁷ Guanghui Yang, *Zhongguo jindai baokan fazhan gaikuang* [An Overview of the Development of Modern Chinese Publications]. (Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 1986): 576.

¹⁸ Shanghai Women's Federation. *Shanghai funv yundongshi (1919-1949)* [The History of the Women's Movement in Shanghai (1919-1949)]. (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1990):18.

To find effective ways to save the nation, intellectuals elevated women's issues to national issues. They believed that women's physical weakness was the root cause of the country's decline and backwardness. Thus, breaking the feudal constraints on women, abolishing foot-binding and corseting, and promoting women's education were seen as necessary measures to strengthen China, assigning women the crucial role of "mothers of citizens" with significant value in national preservation. In 1903, Jin Yi wrote in the preface of *Women's World* that "To renew China, we must renew women; to strengthen China, we must strengthen women; to civilize China, we must first civilize our women; to save China, we must first save our women, there is no doubt about it."¹⁹ Similarly, in "On Shaping the Mothers of Citizens", Yate emphasized the importance of women in national preservation, stating, "Without mothers of citizens, how can the citizens survive? Without mothers of citizens, the nation will not be a nation."²⁰

The topic of how to emancipate women's bodies sparked intense debate among modern Chinese intellectuals. Initially, they prioritized abolishing foot-binding, as the deeply ingrained practice limited women's social activities and deprived them of education, work opportunities, and physical exercise. At the end of the 19th century, the reformist movement promoting "anti-foot-binding and women's education" opened the gateway to modern women's enlightenment. The implementation of anti-foot-binding policies by missionary girls' schools and the establishment of "Natural Foot Societies" effectively advanced the anti-foot-binding movement in modern China. Subsequently, discussions on anti-foot-binding frequently appeared in various publications.²¹

Under the influence of early thoughts on women's bodily emancipation, intellectual women began to focus on their physical health. However, they did not seek equal status and rights with men within the family or in the society but clearly believed that women's physical health was essential for the nation's strength.²² Zhang Jianren, a student at Guangdong Girls' School, wrote in "Urgent Methods for Saving Women in 1904" that "Women are the ancestors of civilization, the mothers of citizens. If their bodies are not strong, how can the branches be vigorous? Thus, the physical weakness of women is a national problem."²³ In 1905, an article titled "Women's Education" asserted, "Women need to pay more attention to physical education than men,"²⁴ emphasizing the importance of women's strength for giving birth to healthy children.²⁵ Moreover, with the rise of militaristic educational thought in the early 20th century, the concept of "martial spirit" was incorporated into the discourse on women's physical education. Military-style gymnastics became an important method of militaristic education. An article titled "On Women's School Gymnastics" claimed that practicing military-style gymnastics greatly benefited women's physical strength and called for its inclusion in women's schools.²⁶

At the turn of the 20th century, the emancipation of Chinese women was closely linked to national strength and survival. This connection determined that the discourse on women's liberation in China was intertwined with the grand narrative of the nation-state from the beginning. The various publications addressing women's issues established during this period unveiled the prelude to women's liberation, propagating ideas of emancipation closely tied to nationalism. The liberation of women's bodies and the development of women's sports were intimately connected with nationalist discourse.

THE MAY FOURTH NEW CULTURE MOVEMENT PERIOD

During the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1915-1925), discussions on women's issues were closely linked to the pursuit of the May Fourth spirit of "democracy" and "science." Advocating for women's liberation became a breakthrough point for criticizing feudal thoughts and morals, aiming to establish a modern democratic and scientific nation. This period saw the proliferation of feminist ideas in China, with various magazines or journals dedicated to women's issues flooding the publishing scene, and the representation of women becoming increasingly diverse. The development of publications addressing women's issues during this time reflected a significant shift towards modernization. Firstly, the founders of these publications shifted from individuals to groups. Before the May Fourth Movement, most publications addressing women's issues were initiated by individuals, such as Qiu Jin with *Chinese Ladies' Journal* (*Zhongguo Nvobao*), Chen Xiefen with *The Ladies' Journal* (*Nvobao*), Ding Chuwo with *Ladies' World* (*Nvzi Shijie*), and Chen Zhixun with *Shenzhen Women's Journal* (*Shenzhen nvobao*). However, during the May Fourth period, many publications addressing women's issues were established by groups or organizations, such as the *Women's Federation Weekly* (*Nvjie lianhehui xunkan*) founded by the Shanghai Women's Federation in 1919, the *The Ladies Weekly* (*Funv zhoukan*) by the Beijing Women's Youth Society in 1919, and *Women's Rights* (*Nvquan*) by the Kaifeng Women's Association in 1920.²⁷ Secondly, in addition to specialized publications addressing women's issues, many comprehensive magazines and newspapers established women's columns, special issues, or special sections. For instance, *New Youth* (*Xinqingnian*) had a "Women's Issues" column, *Chenbao* (*Morning Post*) featured "Women and Family Issues," and *Yishibao*

¹⁹ Jinyi. Nvzi Shijie Fakanci [Preface to Women's World]. Nvzi shijie vol.9, no.1 (1903):1.

²⁰ Yate. Lun Zhuzao guominmu [On Shaping the Mothers of Citizens]. Nvzi shijie vol.7, no.7: 1-2.

²¹ Zhaomin Li. Gu Chanjiaoqu [The Ancient Song of Foot-Binding]. Nvduo, vol.2, no.22 (1923):8. Xiaojing Wang. Lun Qianshan chanzu de lousu [On the Vile Custom of Foot-Binding in Qianshan]. Nvduo vol.16, no.9 (1928):20. Xinsheng. Cong Sancun jinlian shuoqi [Starting from the Three-Inch Golden Lotus]. Nvqingnian vol.13, no.6 (1934):36. Jingyi Guo. Jie Chanzu shizige [A Song of Ten Words Urging to Stop Foot-Binding]. Nvxing, vol.3, no.10 (1934):22.

²² Yun Wang. Shehui xingbie shiyuzhong de jindai zhongguo nvzi tiyu [Women's Sports in Modern China from a Gender Perspective]. Nanjing: Nanjing University, PhD thesis, 2011:48.

²³ Jianren Zhang. Jijiu jiachennian nvzi zhi fangfa [Urgent Methods for Saving Women in 1904]. Nvzi shijie no.6(1904): 15-17.

²⁴ Tieren. Nvzi jiaoyu [Women's Education]. Anhui suhuobao no.20 (1905):2.

²⁵ Chuwo. Nv Hunlun [On the Spirit of Women]. Nvzi shijie no.3 (1904):12-13.

²⁶ Anonymous. Ji Nvxue ticao [On Women's School Gymnastics]. Nvzi shijie no.7 (1904): 90.

²⁷ Renfeng Liu. Zhongguo funv baokan shi yanjiu [A Study on the History of Chinese Women's Newspapers and Magazines]. (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012):180.

(Yishi newspaper) published a "Women's Weekly." Lastly, the wave of women's liberation during the May Fourth period not only gave birth to new publications addressing women's issues but also reformed existing ones. For example, The *Ladies Journal* (Funv zazhi) initially conservative and promoting feudal morals, became an open platform for discussing women's issues nationwide during the May Fourth Movement. These publications became the frontier for spreading new ideas and criticizing old concepts.²⁸



Cover of Ling Long²⁹

During this period, advocates of the "New Culture Movement" and national political leaders promoted the emancipation of women's minds and bodies within the discourse of nation-building, closely linking the shaping of women's bodies to nationalist rhetoric. In 1915, New Culture Movement leader Chen Duxiu pointed out in "Today's Educational Policy" that Chinese education "suffers from two major shortcomings: neglect of physical education and mental health," emphasizing that the weak physical condition of Chinese students was inadequate for the task of national strengthening.³⁰ Chen Duxiu frequently highlighted the importance of physical education to the nation and the people in *New Youth* and often answered readers' questions about sports and health under the pseudonym "Reporter" in the "Correspondence" section.³¹ Various publications addressing women's issues called on women to strengthen their bodies in the name of national strength. Numerous articles in *Ladies Journal* argued from the perspective of national interests that women's health was crucial both for the nation and themselves, urging women to focus on physical exercise to prepare for the future. Zhang Shengyi's statement reflects society's expectations of women's bodies during this period: "Now, those who aspire to great ambitions must follow them with exercise. They should possess both scholarly and martial qualities, exuding the demeanor of refined gentlemen and the skills of brave warriors. Women, in particular, should rid themselves of the delicate and soft attitudes, thus becoming worthy of being new youth in the revolutionary era." She also emphasized that "for the sake of a prosperous nation and strong people, focusing on women's physical education is indispensable."³² Selu in "The Liberation and Transformation of Women" argued, "Only with a healthy body can there be a healthy mind," further questioning, "Our country's women are known for their frail and delicate nature. In the past, they were often unfit for household duties. If they suddenly achieve the goal of liberation, can they undertake the significant responsibilities of society and the nation with their weak bodies?"³³

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that while nationalism continued to influence the women's liberation movement, women's self-awareness was also awakening further. During the May Fourth period, more women left their homes to receive education in schools, and many gained economic independence through participation in social labor. Additionally, by engaging in social revolutionary movements, women won more social and family rights, gradually participating in media and literary creation to voice their own aspirations and convey their pursuit of independence. In schools, a large number of female students engaged in competitive sports, while in society, women participated in sports activities through organizations such as the YWCA.



Modern Beauty: Down with the "Lin Daiyu-type" of beauty³⁴

²⁸ Anonymous. Funv zazhi fakanci [Women's Magazine: Preface], Funv zazhi vol.1, no.1 (1915).

²⁹ Ling Long, vol. 2, no.61 (1932): cover page.

³⁰ Chen Duxiu. Jinri zhi jiaoyu fangzhen [Today's Educational Policy]. Qingnian zazhi vol.2, no.1 (1915).

³¹ Zhijun Zhou. Chen Duxiu qianqi tiyu sixiang tantao [An Exploration of Chen Duxiu's Early Thoughts on Sports]. Sports Cultural Guide [Tiyu wenshi], no.4 (1988):8-11.

³² Shengyi Zhang. Nvxuexiao jixu zhuyi tiyu zhi wojian [My Views on the Urgent Need for Attention to Physical Education in Girls' Schools], Funv zazhi, vol.13, no.4 (1927): 2-3.

³³ Selu. Funv zhi jiefang yu gaizao [The Liberation and Transformation of Women], Funv zazhi, vol.5, no.12(1919): 12.

³⁴ Ciyang. Down with the "Lin Daiyu-type" of beauty. Wanyou zhouban, no.1 (1930): 2.

Furthermore, the strong promotion of radical discourses like “democracy” and “science” led women to further shape their bodies through individualization, embodiment, and objectification, with increasing attention to women’s health from both society and women themselves. Women began to showcase and transform themselves from the perspectives of health and beauty, attempting to break traditional gender roles. This integration of Western individualistic “healthy beauty” ideas into the process of women’s sports participation was evident. Many advocated for a healthy body from feminist or gender equality perspectives. Luo Shuyao pointed out the need to “break the male-centered ideology, strive for women’s rights and equal treatment, and promote sports as the vanguard of the women’s rights movement.”³⁵ Feminist Chen Xuezhao argued that French women’s courage in taking on responsibilities was due to their strong physiques, thus calling on women to value health in their movements.³⁶ Additionally, to emphasize the importance and necessity of women’s sports, some publications analyzed and reported on the relationship between sports, women’s rights, and women’s knowledge, promoting the spread of sports ideas and advancing the development of women’s sports in China. Overall, during this period of national crisis and social turmoil, the pervasive nationalism was expected, but the advocacy for healthy beauty also highlighted the private aspect of women’s bodily emancipation. Narratives promoting gender equality and freedom liberation contributed to the awakening of women’s self-awareness, driving the wave of women’s liberation in modern China.

The Nationalist Party Period

The Nationalist Party, under the leadership of General Chiang Kai-shek, established its regime in Nanking on April 18, 1927. After its establishment, the Nanking government began to gain control over most Chinese provinces, including the realm of physical education and sports.³⁷ The Nationalist government planned to use physical education and sport as tools to popularize its ideology, fostering a new way of life among the Chinese people through civic education and a return to traditional morals. It aimed to instill notions of Chinese nationalism and national consciousness.³⁸ Physical education and sports were regarded as significant avenues for nation-building, with the government heavily promoting the idea of “saving the nation through sports” and emphasizing the need to “promote sports that can rejuvenate the nation and achieve national revival as soon as possible.”³⁹

After gaining power in 1927, the Nationalist Party used political propaganda to control and influence the women’s movement, consolidating state authority and strengthening party rule. The ideal female citizen envisioned by the Nationalist Party was someone capable of managing domestic affairs and fulfilling national duties.⁴⁰ This vision emphasized women’s roles in fostering national identity and their responsibility towards the state and society. To unite and engage women and women’s organizations in the Nationalist Party’s anti-Japanese war efforts, the party initiated the New Life Movement (1934-1949), which included the establishment of the Women’s Advisory Committee to promote women’s work.⁴¹

During the Anti-Japanese War, the New Life Movement, women’s liberation, and national salvation became closely linked. The Women’s Advisory Committee actively encouraged women to participate in childcare, wartime services, and rural services, making women an indispensable force in the national salvation effort. Women gradually realized that only by becoming “female citizens” could they seek their own liberation and the liberation of the people and the nation.⁴² As Guang Lu argued, Chinese women took up “the task of national salvation as their civic responsibility, playing highly visible roles alongside men in national affairs.”⁴³

The Nationalist government’s focus on national salvation and national revival, along with the promotion of the New Life Movement, shaped the themes of women’s sports during this period. The idea of Women’s sports extended beyond strengthening the nation to include saving the nation through sports and achieving national revival. Women’s physical education was vigorously promoted by the Nationalist government. Articles by various authors, including political figures, intellectuals, sports experts, feminists, and female students, emphasized the importance of women’s physical fitness for national salvation and the realization of national revival. For example, articles such as Xiao Guozhong’s “Advocating Women’s Sports and the Revival of the Chinese Nation”, Run Shan’s “Women’s Sports”, and Zhang Zhijiang’s “An Exhortation for Female Comrades to Emphasize Physical Education and Martial Arts” all made similar arguments.⁴⁴

³⁵ Xuezhao Chen. *Funv yundong jinqiu de yimianguan* [An Observation on the Recent Trends of the Women's Movement]. *Dagongbao*, September 1928.

³⁶ Yu Wang & Jiazhogn Wan. *Minguo chuqi nvxign tiy yanjiu* [A Study of Women's Sports in the Early Republic of China]. *Tiyu kexue yanjiu*, vol.24, no.5 (2020):19-26.

³⁷ Alice Henrietta Gregg, *China and Educational Autonomy: The Changing Role of the Protestant Educational Missionary in China, 1807-1937* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1946), 143.

³⁸ Shenzhan Liu & Dengke Cheng. *Fuxing minzu tiyu* [Sports for the Revival of the Nation]. *Tiyu zazhi* vol.1, no.2 (1935): 6-11.

³⁹ Jianmign You. *Chaoyue xingbie shenti: Jindai Huadong diqu de nvzi tiyu* [Transcending Gendered Bodies: Women's Sports in Modern Eastern China]. (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2012): 26.

⁴⁰ *Zhongguo guomindang di sici quanguo daibiao dahui disnajte zhongnyang zhixing weiyuanhui xunlianbu baogao* [Report of the Training Department of the Third Central Executive Committee of the Fourth National Congress of the Chinese Nationalist Party], in Yangzhi Lin ed., *Zhongguo guomindang dangwu fazhan shiliao-Funv gongzuo* [Historical Materials on the Development of Party Affairs of the Chinese Nationalist Party - Women's Work] (Taipei: Zhongguo guomindang zhongnyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui, 1996) 48.

⁴¹ In February 1936, the General Association of the "New Life Movement" decided to establish a Women's Guidance Committee, with Soong Mei-ling serving as the Chief Guide, specifically focusing on the "New Life Movement" among women.

⁴² Yinting Chang. *Goujian de lishi he lishi de goujian: nvxing zhuyi yu funvshi yanjiu wenji* [Constructed History and the Construction of History: A Collection of Essays on Feminism and Women's History Studies]. (Taiyuan: San Jin Press, 2009): 222.

⁴³ Zhang Dewen. "The Making of National Women: Gender, Nationalism and Social Mobilization in China's Anti-Japanese War of Resistance, 1937-1945," PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2013: 2.

⁴⁴ *Zhongguo Xiao. Tichang nvzi tian yu zhonghua minzu zhi fuxign* [Promoting Women's Sports and the Revival of the Chinese Nation], *Tiyu jikan* vol. 3, no.2 (1937): 145-7; *Zhijiang Zhang. Gaomian nvtongzhi ying zhuzhong tiyu guoshu* [An Exhortation for Female Comrades to Emphasize Physical Education and Martial Arts], *Nvduo* vol.20, no.3-4(1931): 91-2; *Minjun. Xianhua funv: Funv jiankangmei de yangcheng* [Informal Talks on Women: Cultivating Women's Health and Beauty], *Fanzhou*, vol.3, no.2 (1936): 17-18. *Runshan. Funv de tiyu* [Women's Sport], *Funv zazhi*, vol.1, no.1 (1940): 31.

Notably, compared to the late Qing and early Republic periods, where the emphasis was on “strengthening the nation and the race” and the role of women as “mothers of citizens,” the advocacy for Women’s sports during this period shifted towards the discourse of “saving the nation through sports” and national revival. Martial arts master Zhang Zhijiang, in an article in *Nvduo*, called on women to develop strong physiques to shoulder the nation’s strength.⁴⁵ In 1934, an article titled “How to Be a Healthy Woman” sparked widespread debate, arguing that national permanence could be achieved through women’s physical fitness. Subsequently, women gradually accepted their roles and responsibilities in national salvation.⁴⁶ Articles like “My Thoughts on Saving the Nation” and “Women During the National Crisis” emphasized that female students should embody the spirit of national salvation through sports.⁴⁷ “The Cultivation of Women’s Health and Beauty” also stressed that women must have strong physiques to bear the responsibility of saving the nation.⁴⁸ Other articles drew on Western examples to encourage women to build strong bodies for national prosperity. For instance, then Shanghai Education Bureau Chief Pan Gongzhan emphasized that European countries valued women’s sports and that for the prosperity of the Chinese nation, female students had significant responsibilities, including physical exercise.⁴⁹

While nationalism dominated the era and significantly influenced the development of women’s sports, an increasing number of women, especially urban women, began to pursue body emancipation from the perspective of “healthy beauty” and engaged in sports. In 1934, the article “The Ideal Wife” published in *Shenbao* caused a strong social reaction, asserting that a woman’s beauty lay not in external adornments but in her physical and mental health, highlighting the importance of sports in shaping the ideal woman.⁵⁰ Hu Huaichen wrote in *Renyan zhoukan* that “a truly beautiful woman should emphasize physical fitness and engage in outdoor sports; the beauty of an athlete is the true beauty.”⁵¹ Yi Ping, in “The Refinement of Modern Women” stated that “everyone wants to be a modern woman; fundamentally, it is about your body, which must be perfectly developed and well-exercised.”⁵² Besides personal appeals, the YWCA used its publication *Youth Women* (*Nv Qingnian*) to tirelessly promote women’s sports. Liao Xing in “Why?” argued that women’s health was paramount, otherwise, national salvation would be mere empty talk.⁵³ Pingxia, in *Ladies Journal* proposed the slogan “without a healthy body, there can be no healthy mind.”⁵⁴ It is evident that the advocacy for women’s sports, though largely rooted in nationalist discourse, fundamentally concerns women’s own interests. The above statements promote sports and health from the perspective of women’s liberation, linking sports with beauty. In this way, the national responsibility embedded in women’s sports gradually internalized into a “health” demand related to personal interests. This shift from passive to active engagement allowed the advocacy for women’s sports to some extent to break free from the grand narrative of nationalism. The image of the new, healthy woman, vigorously promoted by publications and elite intellectuals, gave rise to new feminist imaginings.



Women swimming became the typical portrayal of the "modern woman" in the media ⁵⁵

In conclusion, from the establishment of the Nanking Nationalist Government in 1927 to the outbreak of the full-scale war against Japan in 1937, the advocacy for women’s sports evolved from the discourse of “strengthening the nation and the race” to “saving the nation through sports.” Proponents of women’s sports transitioned from a single group (thinkers) to a diverse group (sports experts, political leaders, feminists, and female students), although most could not escape the politicization and

⁴⁵ Zhijiang Zhang. Gaomian nv tongzhi ying zhuzhong tiyu guoshu [An Exhortation for Female Comrades to Emphasize Physical Education and Martial Arts]. *Nvduo* vol.20, no. 3-4 (1931): 91-92.

⁴⁶ Chao. Zeyang caipei zuo yige jianquan de nvzi [How to Be a Healthy Woman], *Nvzi yuekan*, vol.2, no.12 (1934):3281.

⁴⁷ Jianming You. Chaoyue xingbie shenti: Jindai Huadong diqu de nvzi tiyu [Transcending Gendered Bodies: Women’s Sports in Modern Eastern China]. (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2012): 31.

⁴⁸ Xianhua funv: Funv jiankangmei de yangcheng [Informal Talks on Women: Cultivating Women’s Health and Beauty], *Fangzhou*, vol.2, no.3 (1936):17-18. Runshan. Funv de tiyu [Women Physical Education and Sport], *Funv zazhi*, vol.1, no.1 (1904): 30-31.

⁴⁹ Gongzhan Pan. Fuxing minzu yu nvzi jiaoyu [Reviving the Nation and Women’s Education]. *Nvzi yuekan*, vol.1, no.2 (1934):1767-1768.

⁵⁰ Ruiqing. Lixiang de qizi [The Ideal Wife], *Shenbao* 22 January 1934, 12.

⁵¹ Zhuzhong nvzi tiyu duiyu nvquan fazhan de guanxi [The Relationship Between Emphasizing Women’s Sports and the Development of Women’s Rights], *Renyan zhoukan* 6 March 1928.

⁵² Yiping. Shidai nvxing de molian [The Training of Modern Women], *Funv zazhi* vol.1, no.1(1940): 1.

⁵³ Liaoxing. Weide shenm ne [Why?]. *Nv qingnian* vol.16, no.13 (1934):34.

⁵⁴ Pingxia. Funv tiyu yundong de xuanze wenti [The Issue of Choosing Women’s Sports]. *Nv zinnia* vol.6, no.10(1934):25.

⁵⁵ Tongguang. Typical of Women of the Times. *Tianxin*, no.13 (1931): 11.

nationalist undertones of sports. Concurrently, under the influence of the feminist wave, women's bodies continued to be further liberated, and women's sports developed further.

MODERNITY AND CONSUMERISM

Society's "Gaze" on Women's Bodies

Professor You Jianming proposed that modern narratives surrounding women's bodies unfolded mainly in two dimensions: on one hand, women's bodies were politicized through the concepts of national strength, racial preservation, and saving the nation through sports; on the other hand, women's bodies were redefined from the perspective of healthy beauty.⁵⁶ During the 1920s and 1930s, China experienced relatively stable political and economic development, leading to the rise of consumer culture alongside a burgeoning commodity economy. Coupled with the growth of modern publications and media, the notion of healthy beauty for women gained widespread popularity. The rise of consumer culture endowed women with new social roles and redefined beauty standards, creating new societal expectations for women. Consequently, the "modern girl," a product of the consumerist era, garnered significant social attention. To align with this trend and boost sales, the news media shifted from a traditionally serious and rigid narrative style to a more relaxed and lively tone, often critiquing these "fashion icons." Female athletes, as embodiments of "healthy beauty," saw their off-field gossip widely reported by the media. As a result, gendered bodies became commodities for public consumption, with gender consumption and market demand becoming increasingly intertwined.

During this period, besides regular coverage of women's sports activities, journalists frequently focused on female athletes' appearances, body shapes, and clothing. Female athletes seemed to understand their role in promoting modern trends and thus paid great attention to their outward appearance, often considering themselves fashion trendsetters. For example, at the 1927 Far Eastern Championship Games, the Chinese women's volleyball team members all sported trendy short hairstyles, which amazed the audience. The *Shenbao* newspaper reported on this, calling the short hair of the Chinese players a symbol of new women.⁵⁷ Subsequently, female athletes with short hair were labeled as new women, attracting the attention of journalists and spectators, while those with other hairstyles were deemed out of touch. At the 1930 Fifth National Games, Shanghai athlete Yin Linzhen faced media criticism for not having short hair. Additionally, reporters at this National Games paid extraordinary attention to the looks and appearance of female athletes, with comments such as "the most exquisite uniforms were worn by Hong Kong female athletes, with rose-colored jackets and silk sports pants; the most graceful were swimming champions Yang Xiuqiong and her sister, who had the most elegant figures"⁵⁸ and "before competing, Guangdong's Yuan Peiwan applied makeup, presenting herself as a match for mermaid Yang Xiuqiong."⁵⁹ Interestingly, reporters seemed particularly intrigued by female athletes' tears, sensationalizing their emotional expressions on the field. Examples include reports like "Xiao Meizhen, a national high jump champion, failed to clear four feet one inch, and sat on the ground crying after her defeat" and "Tianjin female runner Zhan Zongzeng refused to participate in the 200m relay due to a quarrel, despite the coach's persuasion, and burst into tears."⁶⁰ Such reports emphasized irrational female images driven by personal emotions, reinforcing deep-seated gender stereotypes and media-led female portrayals.

Off-field anecdotes of fit and healthy women also drew public attention, especially those related to sexual mishaps. At the 1935 Sixth National Games, the *Ling Long* published several sensational stories to attract readers, such as "Wang Wenqin Takes Off Her Pants" and "Nie Qiwei's Displeasure" reflecting the media's tendency to induce sexual fantasies in male readers. For instance, swimming became a trend in the 1930s, attracting many modern women and male spectators. In 1933, a news story about thousands of people in Jinan watching four women swimming became a laughing stock,⁶¹ and in Guangzhou, spectators "lined up like a wall" to watch women swim, further exaggerating the phenomenon.⁶² Some women even took pride in attracting male attention and showing off. A cartoon published in the *Dawanbao* in 1935 mocked this situation, depicting a woman striking seductive poses by the pool without actually participating.⁶³

In fact, the media's focus on female athletes' appearance, body shape, and attire aimed to send a signal to female readers that improving one's "external beauty" could quickly enhance social status. Due to gender stereotypes, female athletes in traditionally male sports like track and field or basketball, despite their remarkable achievements, struggled to gain social recognition and were often ridiculed. For example, Sun Guiyun, a prominent track and field athlete at the 1930 Fourth National Games, was nicknamed "Flying General" or "Northeast Five Tigers" both male titles. Meanwhile, Qian Xingsu, a grand slam winner in the women's track and field events at the Fifth National Games, faced mockery due to her dark complexion, short and sturdy build, and fierce expression during races, earning derogatory nicknames like "Short-legged Female Tiger" and "Flea."⁶⁴ In contrast, sports that highlighted femininity, such as gymnastics, dance, and swimming, received social approval, and athletes in these fields

⁵⁶ Jianming You. *Wusheng zhisheng-jindai zhongguo funv yu shehui (1600-1950)* [The Silent Voice: Women and Society in Modern China (1600-1950)] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2003): VII. Jianming You. *Chaoyue xingbie shenti: Jindai Huadong diqu de nvzi tiyu* [Transcending Gendered Bodies: Women's Sports in Modern Eastern China], 56.

⁵⁷ Zechang Lin. *Yuzhi huichang jianwen* [My Observations at the Games]. *Shenbao*, 28 August 1927.

⁵⁸ Dahui huaxu: xianggang shou baowei [Hong Kong Surrounded], *Ling Long*, vol.3, no.37 (1933): 2006.

⁵⁹ Dahui huaxu: rushuiqian de fenzi [Makeup Before Entering the Water], *Ling Long* vol.3, no.37 (1933): 2006.

⁶⁰ [Dahui huaxu: nvxuanshou de yanlei] [Tears of the Female Athletes], *Ling Long* vol3, no.37 (1933): 2000.

⁶¹ Zhen. *Jinan youyongchi de xunli* [A Tour of the Jinan Swimming Pool]. *Tiyu pinglun* no.48, 1933:138.

⁶² *Xiaji lvbo zhong kaishi fudong hongnan yu lvnv* [Red Men and Green Women Begin to Float in the Summer Waves], *Dawanbao*, 19 May 1934.

⁶³ *Shanghai Xiaojie: youyong* [Swimming]. *Dawanbao*, 15 June 1935.

⁶⁴ Tanzi. *Yundongyuan de sishenghuo: Qian Suxing shengli qi bianhua* [The Private Lives of Athletes: Qian Xingsu's Physiological Changes], *Yule* [Entertainment], no.1 (1935): 4.

quickly became media darlings. At the same National Games, swimmer Yang Xiuqiong's favorable appearance and graceful figure made her a media favorite, becoming an idol for men and a role model for women, unlike Qian Xingsu, despite their equal athletic achievements. This led many prominent track and field athletes like Sun Guiyun to switch sports. A 1933 article in *The Young Companion* magazine described Sun Guiyun's progress in swimming, suggesting that with continued effort, she could excel in this new field.⁶⁵

The scrutiny of female athletes' bodies in modern Chinese society extended beyond their athletic abilities and achievements, often reducing them to mere physical objects. The media industry, predominantly controlled by men, frequently reported on female athletes' appearances, fashion covers featuring "fit and beautiful athletes" and gossip about their private lives, all filled with a male gaze on women's bodies. Women were objectified to fulfill male desires, revealing that the advocacy for sports and fitness was, to some extent, a means of exploiting and consuming women's bodies.

Women and "Healthy Beauty" in the Consumer Space

Modern Chinese women could never escape the "gaze" of society. Beyond the news media, the film industry and various commercial advertisements also seized the opportunity to commodify women. After the 1930s, cinema provided urban women with a new form of leisure and entertainment. Film companies, eager to capture the market, followed the modern trend of "healthy beauty," often featuring women's sports or fitness themes in both imported and locally produced films to meet consumer demand and attract attention. In 1933, the Soviet film "Modern Womanhood" was released in China and caused a sensation. The film's advertising slogans were deliberately provocative, using phrases like "popularizing mysterious nudist exercises" and "sex education film," clearly reflecting the public's intense voyeuristic desire for women's bodies.⁶⁶ In 1934, *Shenbao* published a promotional poster for the American film "Search for Beauty" highlighting phrases such as "thorough study of human beauty" "great and novel sports and erotic film" "beauty of curves! beauty of muscles! beauty of health!"⁶⁷ These slogans accurately mirrored the public psyche and the needs of the times but also indicated that the term "healthy beauty" had subtly shifted from its original connotation of "health and strength" to superficial notions of sex appeal and physical attractiveness. As Linghe suggested, when people saw the term "healthy beauty", they naturally thought of women's breasts and thighs. These so-called "healthy beauty" films were merely entertaining and empty productions, failing to genuinely embody the essence of "health and beauty."⁶⁸



Women in Bodybuilding Movies⁶⁹

During this period, publications addressing women's issues also avidly reported on Hollywood actresses, instilling the idea that fashion consumption was directly linked to social status. Commercial advertisements leveraged sports and fitness to promote their products, often trapping women within the confines of consumer culture. As mentioned earlier, the booming film market of the 1930s saw numerous famous Hollywood actresses become idols for the Chinese public. Both in movies and pictorials, these actresses exuded elegance and charm, stirring admiration and imagination among domestic young women, subtly influencing modern Chinese women's lifestyles. Social media naturally capitalized on this trend, extensively covering Hollywood actresses. The 45th issue of *The Young Companion* magazine featured leisure photos of the most beloved Hollywood star among women at the time, Clara Bow. *Ling Long* even established a "Screen Flavors" column to comprehensively introduce Hollywood stars, including their interests, lifestyles, and personal experiences. However, the media often deliberately emphasized the connection between athletic consumption and social class. Photographs and posters of Hollywood stars frequently included sports equipment, suggesting that sports were a symbol of modern consumerism and social status, significantly motivating women's consumer behavior. For instance, *Ling Long*'s 10th issue featured a photo of a Hollywood star with the caption, "We initially thought Virginia Valli was a quiet woman, but it turns out she is also a basketball player—supporting actress of *City Lights*."⁷⁰ At this time, basketball, water polo, and swimming were less about the sports themselves and more about symbolizing fashionable consumption and social status, largely fueling women's consumer motives.

⁶⁵ Sun Guiyun zuijin zhi xiaoxi [Recent News About Sun Guiyun], *Liangyou* no.62 (1931): 45.

⁶⁶ Jianmei de nvxing dianying guanggao [Advertisement for the Film "The Healthy Woman"], *Shenbao* 6 December 1933.

⁶⁷ Jianmei yundong dianying guanggao [Advertisement for the Film "Physical Culture"], *Shenbao* 15 November 1934.

⁶⁸ Linghe. Yingpian "Jianmei yundong" ping [Review of the Film "Physical Culture"], *Tiyu pinglun*, no.79 (1934): 265.

⁶⁹ Anonymous. Yingyin vnshi zai 'Jianmei yundong' Zhong zaocao zhi yimu [A Scene from Ms. Yingyin's Morning Exercise in the "Fitness Movement"]. *Tuhua shibao*, no.1023 (1934): 1.

⁷⁰ Chengshi zhiguang peijue [Supporting Characters in *City Lights*]. *Ling Long* vol.1, no.10 (1931): 352.

Additionally, health and beauty products companies exploited the domestic women's blind admiration for Western "healthy beauty." Advertising slogans promoting "healthy beauty" were ubiquitous in their commercials, often accompanied by images of women in sports. ⁷¹The Shanghai Xinya Pharmaceutical Company's "Angelica Tonic" advertised as the "latest drug to enhance women's health and beauty"; Shanghai Wuzhou Pharmacy's "Yueyuehong" and "Nvjiebao" advertisements even had specialized articles titled "Healthy and Beautiful Women." Hualu Perfume utilized the then-popular athlete Yang Xiuqiong's influence, promoting with the slogan "star perfume, perfume star", prompting women to associate their bodies with consumption and class, thereby stimulating their desire to consume. Meanwhile, influenced by mass media, modern Chinese women unconsciously fell into the trap of Western consumerism and gender commodification. Imitating the consumption habits of Hollywood stars or athletes became a shortcut for urban women to enhance their identity and achieve class mobility.



Yang Xiuqiong and Perfume ⁷²

The development of publications addressing women's issues in modern China reflects a multi-faceted effort. These publications played a significant role in advocating for ideological emancipation, women's rights, cultural enlightenment, and knowledge dissemination, while also promoting the image of the new woman and fashion. They contributed positively to the elevation of women's status and societal progress. However, these publications also reflect and promote societal, especially male, gazes on women's bodies and the influence of consumerism, which have both positive and negative aspects. As Li Congna pointed out, on one hand, by emphasizing the emancipation of women's bodies, fashion, and health, women's publications enhanced women's subjectivity and self-awareness, leading to significant breakthroughs in social development and contemporary ideas. Yet, as Li Congna noted, in a male-dominated society, women's bodies were inevitably commodified and consumed. The movements for women's bodily transformation, whether active or passive, were deeply integrated into China's modernization process. Women's bodies embodied tendencies of national strength, liberation, and commodification, and became an important way for women to express subjectivity and self-awareness.⁷³ On the other hand, with the rise of modern consumer culture, publications addressing women's issues, through the societal gaze, particularly through media coverage of female athletes' appearances, body shapes, and clothing, reinforced the commodification and consumption of women's bodies. This gaze not only satisfied male consumer desires but also objectified women as consumer objects, turning physical fitness into a means of exploiting and consuming women's bodies. In this process, the concept of healthy beauty gradually transformed into superficial notions of sex appeal and physical attractiveness, reflecting consumer culture's control and definition of women's bodies.

THE IMPACT OF MODERN PUBLICATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S SPORTS

Modern publications played a significant role in the development of women's sports in modern China, influencing this development in various ways, both positively and with certain limitations.

Positive Impacts of Modern Publications on Women's Sports Development

Firstly, modern publications disseminated new ideas about women's sports, challenging traditional views and norms. In modern times, these publications addressing women's issues played a crucial role in promoting a more progressive and inclusive understanding of women's physical activity, breaking down barriers and prejudices that had long restricted women's participation in sports. Through their writings, both female and male authors and journalists criticized outdated and oppressive beliefs about women's bodies and abilities, advocating for greater gender equality and empowerment, as seen in the earlier mentioned foot-binding movement and the advocacy for women's health and beauty. As a result, the emergence of modern women's sports in China was not only a reflection of changing social attitudes and values but also a catalyst for further social and cultural

⁷¹ Ao Du. Jianshen Xinshu [New Techniques in Fitness], Jiankang jiating [Healthy Family], no.3(1937): 26-28.

⁷² Shibao. 9 August 1936.

⁷³ Congna Li. jindai zhongguo baokan yu nvxing shenti yanjiu [A Study of Modern Chinese Publications and Women's Bodies]. (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2015): 67-68.

transformation.

Secondly, they provided scientific knowledge and explored women's sports issues. The dissemination of scientific knowledge about women's sports and the exploration of issues related to women's physical activity were crucial aspects of the modernization of women's sports in China. Through these print publications, experts and scholars shared their expertise on topics such as exercise physiology, nutrition, and training methods, providing women with valuable information and guidance on how to engage in sports safely and effectively.⁷⁴ Furthermore, discussions and debates about women's sports issues, such as the role of sports in promoting gender equality and the challenges faced by female athletes, played a critical role in shaping public opinion and policy regarding women's sports.⁷⁵ By engaging in these conversations, advocates raised awareness and mobilized support for their cause, leading to greater recognition and investment in women's sports at both grassroots and elite levels.

Thirdly, they reflected the state of women's sports and promoted women's sports activities. The media played a crucial role in reflecting the state of women's sports in modern times and promoting women's sports activities. Through journals and magazines, the public learned about the latest developments in women's sports, including new sports' emergence and female athletes' achievements. Moreover, the media served as a platform for promoting and publicizing women's sports events and activities, such as tournaments, competitions, and training programs.⁷⁶ By providing coverage and publicity for these events, the media helped to raise awareness and generate interest in women's sports among the general public and attract sponsors and supporters for women's sports initiatives. Overall, publications played an important role in shaping public perception and policy regarding women's sports in modern China, reflecting changing attitudes and values towards women's physical activity and promoting greater opportunities and recognition for female athletes.

Limitations Reflected in the Development of Women's Sports by Modern Publications

While publications addressing women's issues played an active role in promoting women's sports development, they also reflected significant limitations and challenges, especially under the conditions where women's liberation in modern China was newly introduced to the agenda, dominated by male-led movements, within a context of internal and external social pressures, and influenced by commercialism and consumerism.

Firstly, the development of women's sports was constrained by male-dominated ideologies. The narratives in modern publications addressing women's issues were often dominated by men, who described and constructed women's experiences while also projecting their views. This discourse carried the judgments of male intellectuals on consumer society, traditional values, and the clash between modernity and tradition, thus becoming a mirror reflecting the inner world of male intellectuals. Male-dominated ideologies typically imposed specific norms and aesthetic standards on female body images, demanding certain body types, appearance traits, and aesthetics, which limited women's freedom to express and showcase their bodies. This had a significant impact on women's sports, athletic attire, and modes of self-expression.⁷⁷ Moreover, these ideologies confined women to specific roles and behavior patterns, viewing women's bodies as serving the needs and expectations of men and society rather than as expressions of self and personal rights. This greatly restricted women's freedom to exhibit their bodies in the sports domain.

Secondly, women's sports development was significantly influenced by the political environment and nationalist limitations under China's political backdrop of internal strife. Nationalist ideologies often emphasized social norms, confining women's roles to specific gender roles. This hindered the pursuit of body liberation and autonomy, subjecting women to social and familial pressures, placing personal liberation secondary to national and familial interests. The interplay between national identity and gender norms shaped state policies, which often restricted women's freedom to express and exhibit their bodies. Female body liberation was sometimes viewed as contrary to national image and moral standards, leading the state to impose restrictive measures on women's public expressions to uphold national image and morals, such as the New Life Movement's decrees on women.⁷⁸ Additionally, national image and international competitiveness were crucial for nationalism. In this context, the state often emphasized an ideal female image as a means of demonstrating national strength on the international stage, adding pressure and constraints on female athletes.⁷⁹

Thirdly, women's sports development was limited by consumerism, entertainment, and the male gaze. In modern China, the commercialization and entertainment-driven nature of society significantly propelled sports development but also imposed limitations on women's sports. Consumerist society's aesthetic standards and preferences for body images affected women's sports. To cater to male aesthetic standards and consumer preferences, some commercialized media overly emphasized women's appearance and looks (such as sexy bodies, beautiful faces, fashionable outfits), reducing female athletes' images and privacy to entertainment value rather than recognizing their achievements or health pursuits.⁸⁰ This media portrayal negatively impacted

⁷⁴ Pingxia. *Funv tiyu yundong de xuanze wenti*. *Nv qingnian yuekan* vol. 13, no.6 (1934): 27-28; Xie Siyan. *Nvzi tiyu wenti* [Issues in Women's Sports] vol.9, no.7 (1923): 5.

⁷⁵ Zhuzhong nvzi tiyu duiyu nvquan fazhan de guanxi [The Relationship Between Women's Sports and the Development of Women's Rights]. *Renyang zhouban* no.7 (1928): 6. Chao. *Zenyang caipei zuoyige jianquan de nvzi* [How to Become a Well-Rounded Woman] *Nvzi yuekan*, vol.2, no.12 (1934): 3280-3282.

⁷⁶ Li Sen. *Mingren shenghuo huiyilu: Wode tiyu shenghuo* [Celebrity Life Memoirs: My Life in Sports]. *Liangyou* no.110 (1935): 13.

⁷⁷ Li Yuying. *Lixiang de airen* [Ideal Partner]. *Nvzi Yuekan*, no.6 (1936): 144-147.

⁷⁸ Jiang weiyuan zhang qudi funv qizhuang yifu [Chairman Chiang's Ban on Women's Eccentric Clothing], *Nvzi yuekan* vol.2, no.7 (1934): 2614-2615. Biekai shengmian de jinliang [A Unique Ban], *Ling Long*, vol.4, no.26 (1934): 1651-1653; Linjun. *Qudi Funv Luotui* [Banning Bare Legs for Women], *Ling Long*, vol.4, no.27 (1934):1715.

⁷⁹ Lin Jiao, 'Experiencing Nationalism in International Sport: The Shanghai Liangjiang Women's Basketball Tour of Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, 1931-1935', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35, no. 12-13 (2018): 1369-89.

⁸⁰ Tanzi. *Yundongyuan de sishenghuo: Qian Xingsu shengli qibianhua* [The Private Lives of Athletes: Qian Xingsu's Physiological Changes], *Yule* [Entertainment], no.1 (1935): 4; Hanqing. *Sun guiyun zuijin zhi xiaoxi* (Recent News about Sun Guiyun), *Liangyou*, no. 62 (1933): 45.

women's sports development to some extent.

The above only outlines some positive and negative impacts of modern publications addressing women's issues on the development of women's sports. The complex relationships merit further exploration by domestic and international scholars. When researching modern publications addressing women's issues and sports history, scholars need to critically evaluate the content of these publications, recognizing their limitations. Additionally, a broader social, cultural, and gender perspective should be applied to discuss the development of women's sports, promoting a comprehensive understanding and recognition of women's sports history.

THE HISTORICAL VALUE AND REFLECTION ON PUBLICATIONS ADDRESSING WOMEN'S ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF WOMEN'S SPORTS

Publications addressing women's issues provided a wealth of historical materials, including journalistic, literary, and visual resources, which are of significant importance for studying the history of women's sports in modern China. As Xiaohong Xia pointed out, women face complex and diverse challenges in society, often more intricate than those faced by men. Studying modern women's sports helps reveal the development of modern Chinese society and deepens our understanding of women's sports on a deeper level.⁸¹ Li Xiaojiang also emphasized that the study of women's history should be diversified, covering a range of subjects, perspectives, theories, and methods.⁸² Hall and Patricia Vertinsky stressed the importance of integrating feminist thought, postmodern theory, and critical theory into sports research, particularly in sociology and history.⁸³ This interdisciplinary shift has expanded the methodologies used in the field, moving beyond national experiences to include global and transnational perspectives. These perspectives enrich our understanding of the complex intersections between gender, culture, and sport.

By critically analyzing publications addressing women's issues, the scholars can explore how gender construction, cultural expression, and political dynamics have shaped women's sports. Such publications provide valuable insights into the role of sports in women's liberation, the gender biases and inequalities faced by women in sports, and how women's sports have been represented as a cultural phenomenon. These publications would also allow scholars to examine not only the historical evolution of women's sports but also the social forces that have influenced them, such as political and economic pressures, as well as the distribution of power and opportunities for women in sports.

Publications addressing women's issues are crucial for interdisciplinary research. They combine theories and methods from history, sociology, cultural studies, and gender studies, thereby enriching research across multiple fields. For example, from a gender studies perspective, examining gender roles, identity, and equality issues in these publications can shed light on how these factors have impacted women's participation in and recognition within sports. From a cultural studies perspective, investigating the cultural significance and social values of women's sports can reveal how women's sports are perceived and constructed in modern society. From a historical perspective, these publications help trace the development and challenges of women's sports over time, while a sociological lens allows for a deeper exploration of the interplay between power, globalization, and social constructions of the female body in sports.

Furthermore, the trend toward global and transnational history encourages comparative studies. These studies reveal both similarities and differences in the development of women's sports across various cultural and historical contexts. These comparisons help us understand the mutual influences between different regions and the unique challenges and opportunities that women in sports face in different societies. By integrating these diverse perspectives, the study of women's sports can continue to evolve, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how women's sports have shaped and been shaped by modern Chinese society.

CONCLUSION

In summary, integrating perspectives from journalism, gender studies, cultural studies, sociology, and history with publications addressing women's issues allows for a multi-faceted study of modern women's sports in China. These interdisciplinary approaches provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how women's sports have influenced social change. By critically analyzing the role of modern publications, scholars can uncover the complexities of gender construction, cultural expression, and political dynamics that have shaped women's sports and contributed to broader societal transformations. The value of these publications as crucial historical sources lies not only in their documentation of women's liberation and the development of their physicality but also in their reflection of the challenges and opportunities women faced in sports. This interdisciplinary exploration, supported by modern historiography, cultural history, and social history perspectives, would deepen our appreciation of the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped modern Chinese society. Ultimately, these publications provide vital insights into the impact of women's sports in the ongoing narrative of social and cultural change, warranting further scholarly attention.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Xiaohong Xia. *Wanqing nvxing yu jindai zhongguo* [Women in Late Qing and Modern China]. Beijing: Beijign daxue chubanshe,2004:4.

⁸² Xiaojiang Li. *Lishi, shixue yu xingbie* [History, Historiography, and Gender]. Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe,2002:11.

⁸³ Patricia Vertinsky, "Gender Relations, Physical Education and Sport History: Is It Time for a Collaborative Research Agenda," In *Gender & Sport from European Perspectives* (Copenhagen: CESH, 1999), 1-27.

⁸⁴ Gertrud Pfister and Susan J Bandy, "Gender and Sport " In *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Sport* (London: Routledge, 2015), 220-230.