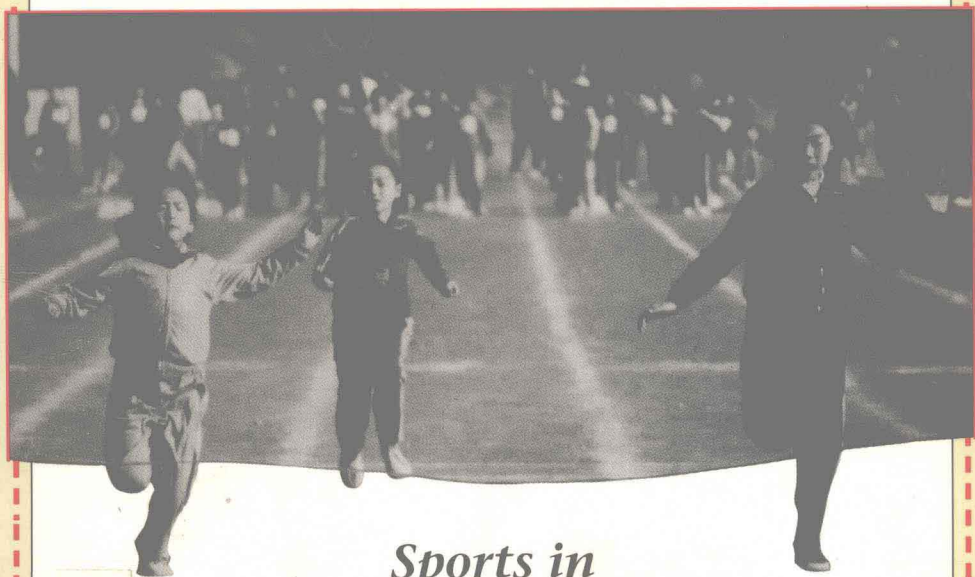


TRAINING THE BODY FOR CHINA



*Sports in
the Moral Order
of the People's Republic*

SUSAN BROWNELL

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TRAINING THE BODY FOR CHINA

This book is dedicated to my mother, Claudia Brownell,
because only a mother could read every draft of the dissertation,
and every draft of the book,
and after three years and a thousand pages
still have the energy to argue about every use of
the word “habitus.”

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Following the Chinese custom, let me state that this is a preliminary investigation. I hope that my readers will bring deficiencies and mistakes to my attention.

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PART •1•

Introduction

CHAPTER ONE

Winning Glory for Beijing

As I stood with my teammates behind the Beijing City flag, I suddenly felt overwhelmed by the gaze of fifty thousand pairs of eyes converging from around the bowl-shaped stadium onto those of us in the infield. I was one of two Americans (with my teammate James Thomas) among two thousand Chinese athletes lined up behind team flags in the infield of the Dalian city stadium. The shiny black hair of the spectators in the stands merged into a dark, encircling wall. Along one side of the stadium, a bank of ten thousand teenagers in dazzling white held placards over their heads that melded to form a huge bank of Chinese characters: "The Second National College Games Triumphantly Begin!"

I was in the middle of the opening ceremonies of the 1986 National College Games of the People's Republic of China. Twenty teammates and I had left our dorms three hours earlier dressed in our multicolored sweatsuits. We had sweltered under the August sun as we slowly wound our way from the parking lot, along the road, through the warm-up fields, and down to the gates leading into the stadium. There we stood pressed up against the iron bars with the rest of China's student representatives behind us. Finally, the gates were opened, right on schedule, and we were the first to

march in, leading the teams from the other twenty-eight provinces and municipalities. We represented the capital city. This was our chance to demonstrate our pride to the nation that, we had been told, would be watching us with interest on television. The large, bright green flag at our head proclaimed, "Beijing City." We moved off down the 100-meter straightaway of the track, passing the rostrum in the grandstand where the high officials sat. The highest among them was Li Peng, chairman of the presidium of the Games. (Two years later he would become premier of the PRC and then lead the crackdown on student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989.) I was conspicuously placed in the middle of the right-hand column of marchers so that the spectators could see that Beijing City had a foreigner on the team. I did my best for Li Peng. I cradled my plastic flowers in my left arm while my right arm snapped back and forth as we marched along. Nearing the reviewing stand, we began goose-stepping, shouting out slogans in time with our steps. Marchers in the center unfurled small banners inscribed with the slogans at the same time that we shouted them.

Train the body! [*duanlian shenti!*—This was the chorus.]

Study diligently!

Train the body!

Bravely scale the peaks!

Train the body!

Carry out the Four Modernizations!

Train the body!

Defend the Nation!

Having passed the rostrum, we furled our banners, down-keyed our goose-stepping into marching, and continued around the curve and into the infield. There we stood for an interminable hour listening to speeches. Those who sat down or got out of line were exhorted by the officials to behave. We were hot, uncomfortable, and did a lot of grumbling. It was at this point that I looked around and wondered if I had actually become Bao Sushan, "the American girl who wants to win glory for Beijing" (as one newspaper headline described me).

Bao Sushan is the Chinese version of my name, which I had assumed on arriving at Beijing University in the fall of 1985 to study Chinese. Shortly after my arrival, I sought out the head coach of the track team, Coach Gong, to inquire about joining the team. I had been a nationally ranked athlete in the United States in the heptathlon and I was hoping

to make friends and practice Chinese. I was also testing the first stages of my plan to write a Ph.D. dissertation on sports in China.

Coach Gong was a middle-aged former long-distance runner whose career had been cut short by hepatitis, a not uncommon occurrence in the past. He welcomed me to join the team, so the next day I showed up behind Gymnasium #1. Gymnasium #1 was a beautiful white building with a sloping, gray-tiled roof—a wonderful example, I thought, of “traditional” Chinese architecture. The inside felt very familiar because it reminded me of the old Memorial Gymnasium at the University of Virginia, my alma mater. I was soon told that in fact it had been built by Americans in the 1920s as part of the U.S.-run Yanjing University which originally occupied the site. As a Christian American school, Yanjing had promoted sports, bequeathing to Beijing University two gymnasiums and two dirt tracks—more than most Chinese universities had—but these facilities hadn’t seen much repair in the three-quarters of a century since then.

“Where’s the track?” I asked Coach Gong, eyeing the cement blocks, dirt, and pipes piled beside a five-foot deep chasm along the rear wall of the gymnasium. Faded characters painted on the wall proclaimed, “Long Live Invincible Mao Zedong Thought!”

“This is it,” he said. “There is construction going on just now. But we can run on the backstretch.” Slightly distressed, I discovered that even the backstretch was riddled with potholes and chunks of brick from the construction. The rock-hard earth was covered with several inches of red cinder shipped in from a distant volcanic site. “It cost more per *jin* than rice,” Coach Gong commented. “Do you believe that?” That fall turned out to be a low point in the life of the sports facilities at the university, but as was true all over China, restoration and revival were in the air. Eventually, the trench was filled in, the weeds in the infield burned off, the cinder raked. And finally a new facility was built in preparation for hosting the city collegiate meet in 1989.

“The door opens, she stands before us: tall of stature, deep-set eyes, prominent nose. Right, it’s really her. ‘Hello, Bao Sushan! . . .’” That is what I looked like to a freshman reporter for the November 1985 issue of the Beijing University school newspaper. I had attracted some attention at the fall freshman intramural track meet. The image of Bao Sushan took on a life of its own. Over time, articles about me appeared in *Xin tiyu* (New Sports), *Zhongguo qingnian bao* (China Youth News), *Beijing ribao* (Beijing Daily), and *Tiyu bolan* (Sports Vision). I had been in China

only one month at the time of the first few interviews and my Mandarin was far from fluent. Interviews often consisted of the reporter asking me a detailed question and my answering briefly, not always understanding the entire question. My simple Mandarin received elaborate interpretation.

A revised version of the freshman reporter's article appeared in *Xin tiyu* (New Sports) magazine, the *Sports Illustrated* of China. In that article, there appeared a statement that I knew I was incapable of formulating:

There are also people [in America] who like to race cars, climb frozen waterfalls, and do other novel and strange adventure sports. I feel that you shouldn't always use words such as fanaticism, empty pursuit, and thrillseeker to describe them . . . In striving to "die nine deaths in one lifetime," they have cultivated a persistent and dauntless moral character, and they will even more warmly love life and strengthen their will in order to tenaciously continue living amongst the grueling competition of a society with a high rate of unemployment. (Zhang Yan 1986)

Both articles concluded with my saying that in the National College Games, I hoped to "win glory for Beijing University!"

Thus was I assigned the role of critic of my own society, and in places of Chinese sports as well. One reporter wrote an article entitled "The Bystander Sees Clearly," in which I delivered a scathing critique of the Chinese sports system, comparing it negatively with the American system, which (I reportedly said) paid much more attention to sport for the masses and less to elite sports. Fortunately, he let me see a rough draft and I asked that he not publish it. His commitment to journalistic accuracy was evident in the fact that in his handwritten rough draft, he had first put words into my mouth as direct quotes then crossed them out and written different versions above them.

THE SMALL WORLD OF THE BODY IN THE UNIVERSE OF IDEAS

If at first I didn't say "win glory for Beijing" (*wei Beijing zheng guang*), I soon learned to do so. The world of an athlete is different from that of an anthropologist. The horizons of an athlete's world can never stray far beyond her body. The course of an athletic career entails development of the ability to focus increasingly greater amounts of awareness on increasingly specific parts of the body. In putting the shot, an action

that takes about five seconds, I eventually developed the ability to monitor ten different body parts, beginning with the ball of my right foot and ending with the tip of the middle finger on my right hand. The horizons of an intellectual's world lie at the edge of an ever-expanding cosmos of ideas that seems to recede further and further from the body. Athletes are very much *in* their bodies and, as a consequence, are usually very much within the systems that sustain those bodies. Intellectuals are forever trying to escape beyond bodies and the systems that sustain them so that they can gain enough distance to look back and comment on them. Athletes are stereotypically team players; intellectuals, especially anthropologists, are stereotypically rebels.

In the course of the two-month training camp for the National College Games, my world had progressively shrunk until the moment in the infield of the Dalian stadium when I suddenly seemed to realize that I was really there, in my body, in the stadium with two thousand Chinese athletes. The reason my body was there was that I was to win glory for Beijing. The opening ceremonies induced this feeling. After all, the ceremonies were designed to do just that: to place us before the gaze of thousands of eyes and to remind us that our bodies were objects in the service of the people. In the United States, I had never participated in such a formal ceremony before so many people. That night, I found myself lying in bed thinking, "Here I am on the other side of the world, and all I can think about is running faster, jumping higher, throwing farther, beating people." It was with some self-disgust that I realized I had come halfway around the world only to discover I had never left my athlete's body.

In the end, I fulfilled my duty. I won the heptathlon, setting a national college record. In the last event, the 800 meters, I ran alone out front, hearing only the sound of my own footsteps and one singular yell from the stands: "Add gas, foreigner!" I ran on two silver-medal relay teams. Beijing's women placed second overall. I was given a spirit award. A magazine article captured my double identity well when it quoted me as responding, "To use the American formula, I want to say, 'Thank you.' To use the Chinese formula, I want to say I still haven't done enough!" (Chu Zi 1987: 27).

I offer this introduction by way of placing myself in what follows. This book is not about me and it is not about the small world of the athlete's body. Rather, it is about the place of the small world of the Chinese athlete's body within the larger universe of ideas. In a sense, it represents my own attempt to reconcile my two worlds—athlete and