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To cite this article: Lu Zhouxiang & Fan Hong (2019) China's Sports Heroes: Nationalism, Patriotism, and Gold Medal, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 36:7-8, 748-763, DOI: [10.1080/09523367.2019.1657839](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2019.1657839)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2019.1657839>



Published online: 30 Sep 2019.



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China's Sports Heroes: Nationalism, Patriotism, and Gold Medal

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ABSTRACT

Sport has been of great importance to the construction of Chinese national consciousness during the past century. This article examines how China's sport celebrities have played their part in nation building and identity construction. It points out that Chinese athletes' participation in international sporting events in the first half of the twentieth century demonstrated China's motivation to stay engaged with the world, and therefore led to their being regarded as national heroes. From the 1950s, China's status and relative strength among nations became measured by the country's success at international sporting events. The nation's appetite for gold medals resulted in the rapid development of elite sport, but has placed a heavy burden on star athletes.

KEYWORDS

China; hero; politics; nationalism; sports patriotism

In all human communities, according to Liam Ryan, 'sports and pastimes not only give pleasure and relaxation but, more importantly, provide opportunities for creativity, group identity and cohesion'.¹ Sport has been of great importance for the construction of Chinese nationalism and national consciousness during the past century. In the last 20 years, research has been conducted by historians, social scientists and political scientists to examine the relationship between sport and nationalism in China, with Andrew D. Morris's *Marrow of the Nation* and Lu Zhouxiang and Fan Hong's *Sport and Nationalism in China* the most comprehensive works of this kind.² The majority of these publications examine the issue from a historical perspective, highlighting the role of sport in China's identity construction, nation building and modernization in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the complexity and the nature of sports nationalism in China needs to be explored further. This article investigates the issue from a different perspective, by exploring the lives of the country's sporting celebrities. Unlike previous research that primarily focuses on the role of Chinese star athletes in relation to the globalization, commercialization and professionalization of sport,³ the aim here is to offer some insight into how China's top athletes have played their part in the construction and transformation of nationalism and patriotism, and how they have been turned into

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national heroes. This article also explains why the nation's appetite for gold medals has placed a heavy burden on celebrity athletes.

From the FECG to the Olympics

Since the 1910s, when modern sport and the Olympics were introduced to China, sport has been consistently interwoven with politics and nationalism. In the Republic of China era (1912–1949), against the background of imperialist expansion, foreign aggression and domestic unrest, and guided by a government policy based on self-strengthening, sport and physical education were promoted as a means of cultivating healthy citizens for a new China, consolidating national unity and promoting patriotism. International sporting events such as the Far Eastern Championship Games (FECG) and the Olympic Games came to be regarded as important vehicles for building up China's national image and enhancing international recognition. This gave rise to the first generation of Chinese sporting celebrities.⁴

The FECG were created by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to spread the idea of Christian morality in East Asia, build up international friendship, encourage masculinity and cultivate social morals through sport. The first FECG were held in the Philippines in 1913. Organized by the YMCA, 36 Chinese athletes participated. It was the first international sporting event Chinese athletes had ever taken part in. Chen Yan won the long jump gold medal, making him China's first international sports champion. Wei Huanzhang captured gold in the high jump and the 110-yard hurdles. Pan Wenbing won decathlon gold. The event must be credited for changing the Chinese people's worldview and mindset. By sending its national team to compete with athletes from other Asian countries, the newly established Republic confirmed its position as a modern and independent nation state.⁵

The second FECG were held in Shanghai in 1915. For China, this was another important move toward modern nationhood. Chinese athletes performed well at the Games and captured five gold medals in track and field, three gold medals in swimming, one gold medal in volleyball and one gold medal in football. The national team was crowned overall champion. Wang Zhengting,⁶ Chairman of the Games, commented that 'China's success is the result of the cooperation of all the Chinese athletes. This will cultivate the concept of nation state among the Chinese people ... the Games also promoted a sense of unity.'⁷ The FECG enlightened the Chinese people and made many of them aware of the political significance of international sporting events to their nation. The sports arena was regarded as a violence-free battlefield where the Chinese could build up their confidence and restore dignity by defeating foreign competitors. Between 1917 and 1933, eight FECG were held in Asia. Headed by champion swimmer Yang Xiuqiong and football star Li Huitang, China's sporting heroes brought pride and honour to the people and fostered national consciousness and patriotism.⁸

The FECG were not truly international, as their scope was limited to East Asia. Since the 1910s, the Olympic Games, a real international sporting event, had caught the attention of the Chinese. In 1932, China sent its first athlete, Liu Changchun, to participate in the Los Angeles Olympics. The initiative was prompted by Japan's

attempt to gain legitimacy for its invasion of northeastern China by sending a team from puppet state Manchukuo to Los Angeles.⁹ On June 17, 1932, Tianjin-based *Taidong Daily*, a Japanese-backed newspaper, announced that two athletes from northeastern China – the country's best sprinter, Liu Changchun, and top middle-distance runner, Yu Xiwei – would represent Manchukuo at the Los Angeles Olympics. Upon hearing the news, Liu Changchun issued a statement to the *Dagong Daily* and declared: 'As the offspring of the Yellow Emperor of the Chinese nation, as a Chinese, I will never represent the puppet Manchukuo at the 10th Olympic Games!'¹⁰ With the support of Zhang Xueliang, President of the Northeast University, and Hao Gengsheng, Dean of the College of Sport at the Northeast University, Liu and Yu decided to compete for the Republic of China in Los Angeles. However, Yu was not able to leave Manchuria.¹¹ A special ceremony was held at the dock of Shanghai Port on July 8, 1932 for the three-man national squad, which consisted of Liu Changchun, his coach Song Junfu and team leader Shen Siliang. More than 400 people attended. Hao Gensheng, Inspector for Physical Education in the Ministry of Education and Chairman of the China National Amateur Athletic Federation (CNAAF), explained that sending Liu to represent China at the Los Angeles games could 'stop the Japanese attempt to legalize the Manchurian puppet state ... tell the world about Japan's crime in China' and 'raise the Republic of China's national flag at the Olympics and set an example for future generations'.¹²

After three weeks at sea, the Chinese delegation finally arrived in Los Angeles on July 29, 1932. The next day, Liu Changchun attended the opening ceremony and marched with the Chinese national flag. On July 31, 1932, he competed in the men's 100-metre preliminaries but failed to qualify for the final. The Chinese delegation then attended the World Youth Debate Convention in Los Angeles, where Song Junfu took the opportunity to deliver a speech in English condemning the Japanese invasion of China.¹³

Although Liu Changchun did not perform well at the Olympics, back in China he was regarded as a national hero who competed for the country's pride and dignity. Thereafter, people began to pay attention to the role of sport in diplomatic gains, in winning recognition from the international community and building up national confidence.¹⁴ Four years later, China sent a large delegation to the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. In total, 69 Chinese athletes participated. Although they failed to win a single medal, the trip was considered to have been valuable from a political perspective. The government believed that the national squad's participation in the Berlin Olympics had further cultivated the people's sense of patriotism and national unity and enhanced China's international status. As team leader Shen Siliang explained: 'The achievement of international recognition alone is worth millions to us.'¹⁵

After 1936, drained by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the subsequent Civil War, the government's attention was drawn away from the Olympics. With limited funding and resources, the CNAAF still managed to send a team to the 1948 London Olympics, but this ill-prepared and poorly organized team failed to win a medal. Nevertheless, the athletes successfully demonstrated China's motivation to stay engaged with the world and to compete with foreign countries, and therefore were regarded as heroes of the Republic.¹⁶

People's Hero, China's Glory

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, sport and physical education continued to be promoted by the communist regime as efficient ways to train strong bodies for the country. At the same time, policy-makers saw elite sport as a vehicle for enhancing national self-esteem, and an elite sport system was established to produce high-performance athletes. The objective was to win medals at international sporting events and help the new China to achieve international recognition and domestic unity.¹⁷

The elite sport system quickly bore fruit. In June 1956, weightlifter Chen Jingkai lifted 133 kg at a Sino-Soviet friendship match in Shanghai, breaking the men's 56 kg clean and jerk world record held by America's Charles Vinci. Qi Lieyun broke the men's 100 m breaststroke world record in Guangzhou in May 1957. In the same year, he won the silver medal in the men's 200 m breaststroke at the Sixth World Youth and Students Festival in Moscow. In November 1957, high jumper Zheng Fengrong broke the women's world record with a jump of 1.77 m at the National Athletic Championship in Beijing, making her the first Chinese woman to hold a sporting world record. The three athletes' successes were regarded as some of the PRC's most important achievements in socialist modernization. They were received by Premier Zhou Enlai and hailed by state media as role models for their hard work.¹⁸ Thereafter, sporting success was portrayed as a symbol of national revival and sports champions became national icons. At the 25th World Table Tennis Championships, held in West Germany in April 1959, Rong Guotuan won the gold medal in the men's singles table tennis event, making him the first world champion in Chinese history. In April 1961, China hosted the 26th World Table Tennis Championships. The national team won three gold medals and the men's team won the overall championship. After the event, national team members were honoured as 'People's Hero' and 'China's Glory'.¹⁹ China's conquest of Mount Everest in 1960 was seen as another major sporting victory. After the British successfully reached its summit in 1953, the Sports Ministry began to make plans to send a team to conquer the mountain.²⁰ The mission was launched on May 24, 1960. At an altitude of 6,000 m, the team suffered a heavy storm that meant only about ten people remained to complete the mission. One of them, Wang Fuzhou, recalled: 'It was a battle of life and death. Everyone believed that there was no way back. We must accomplish the mission, even at the cost of our lives!'²¹ Finally, on the morning of May 25, 1960, Wang Fuzhou, Gong Bu and Qu Yinhua (1935–2016) reached the peak. After returning to Beijing, the heroes were received by state leaders at Beijing Workers' Stadium and honoured with the title of 'Brave Peak Conquerors' by the Sports Ministry.²²

In 1952, the PRC sent its best athletes to participate in the Helsinki Olympics. Due to the political conflict between the PRC and the Nationalist China (ROC), known as the 'two Chinas' issue, the athletes missed most of the competitions and did not win any medals. Despite so, they were hailed by Premier Zhou Enlai for rising the PRC's national flag at the games. Due to the same political issue, the PRC did not participate in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, and in 1958 Beijing withdrew from the IOC and several international sports federations. It was not until 1984 that athletes

from mainland China returned to the Olympic arena after the ‘two Chinas’ issue was settled by the IOC.²³

The Fall of Sporting Heroes

Up until the mid-1960s, sport enjoyed steady development in China. However, when the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) began in 1966, the sport system descended into chaos. The aim of the Revolution was to get rid of anything regarded as revisionist, bourgeois or capitalist. It opposed elitism and advocated the rise of the proletariat. Therefore, elite sport was regarded as a facet of bourgeois ideology and mass sport as communist idealism. Winning medals at sports competitions came to be seen as a capitalist practice.²⁴

In May 1966, Red Guards and rebels began their offensive against ‘authorities’ and ‘experts’ in the Sports Ministry and its local commissions. Officials, world champions and celebrity coaches became targets. Table tennis world champion Xu Yinsheng recalled: ‘Top athletes and coaches were condemned as proponents of revisionism, chauvinism and championism, which went against the Maoist road. They [the rebels] said that the trophies and medals won by the national team were named after the bourgeoisie.’²⁵ The national table tennis team, which had been held up as a role model in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was attacked by the rebels. Leading team members, including Zhuang Zedong, Rong Guotuan, Fu Qifang, Xu Yinsheng, Li Furong and Zheng Minzhi, were condemned as the ‘seeds of revisionism’. They were mentally and physically abused by the Red Guards and were forced to self-criticize and admit that they had been on the wrong side of the Revolution. On April 16, 1968, Fu Qifang, head coach of the national men’s table tennis team, hanged himself in the Beijing Gymnasium. In May, Jiang Yongning, China’s first national table tennis champion and head coach of the national table tennis team, committed suicide as he could no longer endure the physical and mental abuse inflicted on him during the struggle sessions. One month later, on June 20, 1968, famous table tennis world champion Rong Guotuan hanged himself beside Dragon Lake in Beijing.²⁶

After hearing of the ongoing deaths of top athletes and coaches, and especially shocked by the death of Rong Guotuan, Premier Zhou Enlai instructed in late June 1968 that elite athletes must be protected. Subsequently, training sessions slowly began to take place again in early 1970.²⁷ At the same time, the elite sport system was revived to meet Beijing’s need to conduct diplomacy through sports exchanges and competitions, a sea change triggered by the well-known Ping-Pong Diplomacy of 1971 which eased hostilities between China and the United States.²⁸

Gold Medal Fever – The Burden of Heroes

After the Cultural Revolution ended, China launched its reform and opening-up policy to achieve the goal of modernization and to catch up with the Western capitalist world. Sport played an important part in stimulating the nation’s enthusiasm and in motivating the Chinese people towards modernization. From the early 1980s, China’s status and relative strength among nations came to be measured

by the country's success at international sporting events. Sports arenas became places where Chinese people could witness the glory of their country, feel proud to be Chinese and experience a sense of national unity. The determination to revive China gave rise to 'gold medal fever'.²⁹ The Chinese women's volleyball team is the best example. The team won its first world championship in Japan in 1981. This success coincided with China's reform and opening-up and was a perfect occasion for Chinese people to regain confidence and express their patriotism. After defeating Japan at the World Cup on November 16, 1981, tens of thousands of students and other citizens gathered in Tiananmen Square in Beijing to celebrate for the whole night, shouting 'Long live China! Long live China's women's volleyball team!'³⁰ The following day, the victory was the top headline in almost every newspaper in China. An editorial titled 'Learn from the Women's Volleyball Team, Restore the Chinese Nation – China Wins' was published in the state-run *People's Daily* to propagate the spirit of the volleyball team and link it to modernization and national revival.³¹ In total, the women's volleyball team won five world titles between 1981 and 1986. This became known as the 'Five Successive Championships', seen as bringing hope and glory to the Chinese people. Many believed that the team represented the Chinese spirit. Thereafter, the 'women's volleyball spirit' was disseminated throughout the country as ideological indoctrination, a model to be emulated by people from all walks of life.³²

However, nationalism and patriotism could turn sporting heroes into losers overnight. Li Ning, an outstanding Chinese gymnast, is a prime example. Li won three gold medals at the 1984 Olympics, becoming known as the 'Prince of Gymnastics' by the Chinese media. The Sports Ministry honoured him as one of its 'Top Ten Athletes' in 1985, 1986 and 1987. The Communist Youth League also named him a 'Pace-setter of the New Long March' in 1984, making him a role model for the Chinese people. Li Ning decided to retire after the 1984 Olympics, due to injury. However, the national team needed him to stay on. He agreed for the sake of the team, despite knowing he might not be able to defend his world titles at the next Olympic Games. In 1988, he did compete at the Seoul Olympics, but failed to finish either the rings or the vault events. After falling in the latter event, he smiled to his team mates to encourage them.³³ Li Ning's failure and his smile led to trouble. Some people condemned him for the 'shameless smile', as they believed he should have felt sad.³⁴ A letter from Liaoning Province with a plastic rope enclosed read: 'Li Ning, you are the death prince of gymnastics, please hang yourself!'³⁵ He was condemned for letting his country and people down. After coming back from Seoul, Li didn't dare leave his home, as he feared people would humiliate him on the street.³⁶ In the face of this criticism and pressure, Li retired from the national team. 20 years later, he recalled: 'The Chinese people in the 1980s wanted gold medals rather than sport. The Sports Ministry wanted champions rather than athletes.'³⁷

The same thing happened to the celebrated Chinese women's volleyball team. After its five straight championships, the squad was defeated by the Soviet Union and Peru and only won bronze at the 1988 Olympics. The result disappointed the Chinese enormously. Wang Chong, a journalist who worked for the *Nanguo Daily*, recalled:

The Chinese women's volleyball team used to be icons. They represented the spirit of never giving up. They were 'the light of the Chinese nation'. When they were defeated at the Olympic Games, people refused to accept this reality and kept asking, 'How can they lose?' Suddenly, people began to criticise and curse the players. Some people were so angry that they even sent funeral telegrams to the head coach.³⁸

To sum up, in the 1980s, having just ended the ten-year Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people desperately needed to restore their confidence. Many believed that the nation could not afford to lose anymore, including in sport. Celebrity athletes shouldered all the burdens of the nation.³⁹ As Gao Min, an outstanding Chinese diver who won gold in the women's springboard event at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, commented: 'I felt like every gold medal was a heavy burden on my shoulders. Sometimes I hoped I would lose, even though I knew that I could not afford to. I wish the Chinese people could understand that Gao Min is not a god. She is an ordinary person and it is normal for her to lose.'⁴⁰

In the late 1980s, against the background of a strong call from academia and policy-makers for thorough political and economic reforms – which eventually led to the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 – the Chinese people began to question the country's sport system and the obsession with gold medals. In April 1988, sports journalist Zhao Yu published an article, 'The Dream to Be a Strong Country', in *The Contemporary Age*, one of China's most popular literary journals. The piece harshly criticized the sports system and people's inordinate expectations for gold medals, and suggested that the government should pay more attention to mass sport rather than elite sport.⁴¹ It received positive responses from the media, the general public and some state leaders. The state-run *Gangming Daily*, *Literature Daily* and *Wenhui Daily* praised the article as a breakthrough.⁴² The *People's Daily* commented: 'Mass sport has been neglected for a long time. Sport in China has focussed on competitions and gold medals. We should not ignore this problem and should begin sports reform. Zhao Yu's criticism and warnings have inspired many. It is an expression of honesty and real patriotism.'⁴³ The criticism of gold medal fever stimulated a reform of China's sport system. After the establishment of the socialist market economy system in 1993, the government set out a framework for the future development of sport. It issued three decrees in June 1995: the 'Olympic Strategy', the 'National Fitness for All Programme' and the 'Development of Sport Industry and Commerce Outline'.⁴⁴ These decrees were designed to complement each other and to form new sports policy and practice. Since their implementation, mass sport and the sports industry have experienced rapid growth.⁴⁵

Although more attention was now being given to mass sport and the sports industry, elite sport still dominated and received strong support from the government. Sporting success continued to be linked with the goal of modernization and the rise of China. After the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, President Jiang Zemin called for the promotion of Chinese athletes' 'five spirits': 'the mother country first', 'solidarity and struggle', 'professional dedication', 'scientific integrity' and 'hard work'. People from all walks of life were encouraged to study the 'five spirits' and use them to aid the great cause of modernization.⁴⁶ The national squad's success continued at the 2000 and 2004 Olympics, as did the cultivation of the 'five spirits'. In 2008, the Chinese team finished top of the gold medal table at the Beijing Olympics. Hosting

the Olympic Games was also seen by most Chinese people as a means of national revival, of supporting the construction of national identity, economic prosperity and international recognition. They believed that the Beijing Olympics coincided with China's economic development and was evidence of the revival of China.⁴⁷

However, after the Beijing Olympics an increasing number of scholars and critics urged the government to focus more on ordinary people's health and fitness instead of gold medals.⁴⁸ Criticism of the elite sport system and its fixation on gold medals was further triggered by the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games. Chinese athletes put on a dazzling display, dominating the Games with 199 gold medals and topping the gold medal table for the eighth consecutive time.⁴⁹ During the Games, Yang Ming, a journalist from the state-run Xinhua News Agency, published an editorial entitled 'No More Challengers' to criticise China's macabre gold medal fever. He observed:

The motto of the Asian Games is 'Friendship, Harmony and Development'. It is a festival which brings all the Asian countries together. The gold medal is not the most important thing... China's elite sport has been heavily influenced by gold medal fever. In recent years, we have over-emphasized gold medals and neglected the nature of sport. Sport belongs to the people. It should be used to improve people's health and physique.⁵⁰

Yang's article triggered a nationwide debate on the government's sport policy. It also provoked a discussion on the relationship between sport and patriotism and stimulated a new way of thinking – to free sport from politics and have it serve the all-round development of the society. In March 2010, a news report entitled 'Officials in the Sports Ministry Criticize the Winter Olympic Champion' was published in China's leading right-wing newspaper, *South China Weekly*. According to the report, the vice-minister of the Sports Ministry, Yu Zaiqing, criticized China's Winter Olympics champion Zhou Yang because she only thanked her parents in front of the media after winning the gold medal in the women's 1,500-metre speed skating race at the 2010 Winter Olympics. Yu argued that the state had put a lot of effort and resources into cultivating and training the athletes, who should not forget the support they received from the state and should be grateful.⁵¹ The report sparked nationwide criticism of sports patriotism. Many journalists and commentators published articles to support Zhou Yang. They criticized Yu Zaiqing and called for the abolition of blind patriotism in sport. Bai Yansong, a famous news commentator on state-run Chinese Central Television, stated:

In the past, sporting success was closely linked to patriotism and the general public was in favour of it. But now, as we Chinese have become more confident than before, there is no need to advocate patriotism at every occasion and on every day... I want to tell Zhou Yang and other athletes: there is nothing wrong with competing for your parents and yourself. It is your right to say whatever you want!⁵²

Many Internet users showed their support for Zhou Yang by posting comments on blogs and forums. One stated, 'Only a machine doesn't know how to thank its parents.'⁵³ Another argued, 'In order to change the fate of her family, Zhou Yang trained hard and won two gold medals for China. Yu Zaiqing's criticism is the shame of the country!'⁵⁴ Some attacked Yu personally and urged him to resign.⁵⁵

Tennis Queen Li Na

One year after this public criticism of sports patriotism, a news report on tennis player Li Na provoked another debate. Li Na was born in Wuhan in 1982. She joined China's national tennis team in 1997 and turned professional. She won 52 singles matches on the ITF tennis circuit in 2000 and captured her first world title at the 2001 Summer World University Games. By 2007 she was ranked 16th in the world, making her the best Chinese tennis player in history. After a change in the rules governing the national tennis team in 2009, Li Na quit the team and began to manage her own career as a 'freelance' player.⁵⁶ In January 2011, Li beat world number one Caroline Wozniacki in the Australian Open semi-final and became the first Asian woman to reach a Grand Slam final. On June 4, 2011, she won the French Open, making her the first Asian Grand Slam singles champion. Her success at the French Open was praised by the Chinese media as a landmark victory, and her photo appeared on the front page of almost every leading Chinese newspaper. The *People's Daily* hailed her as the 'Legend of Asia'.⁵⁷ However, this good news was soon overshadowed by a debate sparked by Li Na's speech after her victory in which she thanked her sponsor, the organizers, her support team and the fans, but did not mention China. At a press conference, Li told journalists: 'Don't always say that I won honour for the country. Actually, I am competing for myself.'⁵⁸ Two different public voices were generated by Li Na's words. Many commentators and journalists supported her. Her success was portrayed as a victory for the commercialization and professionalization of sport against the old state-sponsored sport system. Her speech was interpreted as a symbol of individualism and liberalism. Tencent, China's leading Internet portal, published an editorial entitled 'The Country Should Thank Li Na'. The editor observed:

As a freelancer, there is no need for Li Na to thank the country. On the contrary, the country should thank Li Na. The Chinese people should change their way of thinking. We should not link everything to politics and the country... We don't like the athletes who only know how to say, 'I thank the [Communist] Party, I thank the government and I thank the Chinese people.' We love Li Na not because she represents China, but because she is real and she says whatever she wants to say, for example 'I play for money' and 'I don't like my husband's snoring'.⁵⁹

Others criticized Li Na for not showing gratitude to her former coaches and for ignoring the support she had received from the state. They argued that, like Li Na, an increasing number of Chinese athletes were being corrupted by money. In a newspaper article entitled 'Thank the Sponsor First? How about Thank the Parents First?' the author argued:

I can remember that during the finals, a Chinese TV reporter asked another tennis player what the major difference between the Grand Slam and other tennis tournaments was, and the answer was: 'The Grand Slam has more bonus money.' I suddenly realized that Li Na will not be the only Chinese athlete to thank the 'money' first... it will become a problem for our society if everyone in this country accepts this 'value' and blindly links money with success.⁶⁰

The debate between the two sides continued in the following months and was intensified by Li Na's words at a press conference in the United States in March

2012. Asked by a journalist why she was so straightforward and what the difference between her and other Chinese athletes was, she replied, 'I am only a tennis player. I am not playing tennis for the country. I am just doing my job.'⁶¹ This time, many people changed their position and criticized Li Na. One blogger addressed a letter to Li Na. 'I thought you were a straightforward person and admired you. But this time, when you said that you have nothing to do with this country, that is ugly... We cared about you and we are proud of you because you are Chinese.'⁶² The debate on sports patriotism has changed many people's way of thinking. However, people remain very concerned about the continuation of the country's sporting success. Despite the growing number of remarks decrying China's pursuit of gold medals, the inordinate expectation to win gold has not faded away. The pressure on sports stars is nothing new.

Flying Man Liu Xiang

Four years after the Beijing Olympics, the 2012 London Olympics again saw the powerful effect of gold medal fever on the Chinese people. Their disproportionate reaction to the failure of former Olympic champion Liu Xiang demonstrated that Chinese sport continued to be influenced by nationalism and patriotism.

Liu Xiang was one of China's best 110-metre hurdlers and won China's first men's track and field Olympic gold at the 2004 Athens Olympics. This was regarded as a breakthrough, as it proved that the Chinese could compete in a 'truly global event' that had traditionally been dominated by African, American and European athletes.⁶³ After the Games, Liu became a national hero and a symbol of China's, and even Asia's, global aspirations. However, in 2008 he dramatically pulled out of the Beijing Olympics at the last minute due to a hamstring injury. This put a dampener on China's celebration of hosting the Olympics and disappointed many.⁶⁴ It also spawned a slew of criticism from the general public. People began to blame Liu, using words like 'coward' and 'cheater' to denounce him. Nicknames such as 'Escaping Liu' and 'Actor Liu' were invented to insult this former national icon.⁶⁵ Despite being brought to his knees by the injury and the criticism, Liu did not give up. He underwent surgery and trained hard to recover. He returned to competition in 2009 and won gold at the 2010 Asian Games with a new Asian record of 13.09 seconds. He returned to world-class level in 2011 by winning the Shanghai Golden Grand Prix, and later came second at the 2012 IAAF World Indoor Championships. He also won the Prefontaine Classic with an amazing time of 12.87 seconds, equalling the world record.⁶⁶

When the 2012 Olympic Games were staged in London, Liu Xiang, now 29, became one of China's best hopes for a gold medal in track and field events. For the Chinese, this 'real gold' is far more meaningful than any of the other 'less important' gold medals for events such as table tennis, badminton, diving or weightlifting.⁶⁷ Although Liu's coach and officials from the Chinese Sports Ministry had indicated that Liu was still suffering from his old leg injury and his chances of winning were not high, their voices were ignored. Most Chinese spectators had high hopes for Liu. Internet blogs and forums were flooded with millions of posts talking about his

return.⁶⁸ Despite the great expectations, the competition ended in disaster for Liu Xiang. He fell at the first hurdle in the qualifiers. He moved off to the side at first, but then turned to hop to the finish line and kissed the final hurdle on the track.⁶⁹ It was later revealed that he had ruptured his Achilles' tendon when he fell. He underwent surgery in London and returned to China five days after the race.⁷⁰

Back in China, Liu's cruel exit from the Games stunned many, and his fall dominated the front pages of newspapers and websites.⁷¹ Most reports praised him for his sportsmanship. One report argued, 'What Liu Xiang did today reflects the true Olympic spirit... Winning is not so important, participation is what matters.'⁷² A good number of bloggers and netizens showed their support for Liu by posting comments online. One said, 'I think he was under too much pressure. I just hope he recovers soon.'⁷³ Another stated, 'When we saw him hopping off the track on one leg, we all thought that he's already a great guy and he has done what he should.'⁷⁴ However, these supporters' voices were soon drowned out by complaints from the angry masses. They blamed Liu and accused him of cheating the audience: 'He pretended that he was injured. The truth is that he dared not compete. It is an international scandal!', 'The actor and his sponsors have fooled us again', 'He is a shame on the country', 'Liu wasted the taxpayers' money'. A piece of doggerel began being circulated by Internet users in China: '[He] earned money from the sponsors for eight continuous years, cheated at two Olympics. See you at the Paralympic Games!'⁷⁵ A public poll conducted by leading web portal 163.com showed that only 35 percent of voters had sympathy for him.⁷⁶ Two weeks later, Liu was interviewed on television and displayed his 20 cm-long scar to the audience.⁷⁷ In response to the criticism, he stated, 'I tried, and I don't feel regret. I know people wanted me to win. I want to say sorry to everyone.'⁷⁸ Liu Xiang was brave enough to continue his career after the Beijing Olympics. He was desperate to challenge and prove himself, but underestimated the power of gold medal fever. As one commentator concluded:

He was turned into a 'flying man' and a 'superhero' by the patriotic fans. They hoped that he could win honour for the country at the Olympics, and the expectations were too high... both his body and his mind were brought down by the great pressure... Patriotism is a double-edged sword. It can generate power but can also cause damage. The Chinese people should calm down and rethink this.⁷⁹

Coping with Sports Patriotism

The early twentieth century saw the transformation of China from a culturally bound empire into a modern nation state. Against the background of the two world wars and imperialist expansion in Asia, and fanned by nationalism and patriotism, Chinese people believed that sport could help the country to recover its strength and win international recognition. In this period, international sporting events functioned as important vehicles for nation building and identity construction, giving birth to the first generation of Chinese sports heroes who competed for the country's honour and dignity in sports arenas. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, both mass sport and elite sport were promoted by the government to train healthy and strong citizens. Sporting success became a symbol of achievements in socialist

modernization. An elite sport system was established and produced China's first world champions. However, during the Cultural Revolution, elite sport came to be seen as a capitalist practice and sports stars were attacked by the rebels for being on the wrong side of the revolution. It was not until the early 1970s that the sport system was revived to meet Beijing's need to conduct diplomatic exchanges. From the 1980s on, in the context of reform and opening-up and the launch of the 'four modernizations', China's status and relative strength among nations began to be measured by the country's success at international sporting events. The nation's appetite for gold medals resulted in the rapid development of the elite sport system, but placed a heavy burden on star athletes. From the late 1980s, the Chinese began to question the country's sport system and the obsession with gold medals. Today, an increasing number of Chinese people have moved away from extreme sports patriotism and the obsession with gold medals. However, as long as athletes compete under their national flags, it will be impossible to free them from politics. A better solution, therefore, would be to guide sports patriotism in a positive direction that is less violent and more tolerant, humane and mature.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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