The Gendered Performance at the Beijing Olympics: The Construction of Olympic Misses and Cheerleaders

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This article analyzes the gendered performance at the Beijing Olympics by looking at the elite cheerleaders and Olympic misses, including medal and country presenters at the Olympic and Paralympic opening and closing ceremonies. Drawing upon participant observation, unstructured interviews, media reports, and blogs, this article argues that the paradoxical construction of Chinese women stands for the broader context of Chinese modernity. The seeming paradoxes of tradition and modernity, and Oriental femininity and Occidental sexuality perpetuate old and produce new gender politics in China. The internally contradictory hybrid representation of gender in contemporary China contributes to feminist communication theory by illustrating not only uneven processes of modernity but also the continuing importance of gender in nationalist politics.

supposed to demonstrate “Oriental beauty,” Chinese femininity, and tradition to
domestic and foreign guests.

The cheerleaders and Olympic misses on the beach volleyball court were just
a small group of a large number of cheerleaders and Olympic misses for Beijing.
Determined to host the best Olympics ever in history, Beijing hired an unprecedented
number of cheerleaders and volunteers, with the scale and intensity of training and
preparations overshadowing all previous Olympics. Beijing trained more than 200,000
cheerleaders and recruited 1.5 million volunteers. The majority of cheerleaders were
employees at large-scale state-owned enterprises, retired civil servants, and young
college students. Wearing colorful uniforms, they were “core spectators,” whose
role was to lead regular spectators to cheer for games in a “civilized” manner.
Also, 428 elite cheerleaders were recruited, and they were either stationed in specific
game sites to perform during timeouts or supposed to travel to dance for specific
games (BOCOG, 2008, April 14). A total of 28 such stationed or mobile squads
were formed for 17 sports. All elite cheerleaders were young women, except a
male cheerleading team hired from a Beijing fitness club. Most elite cheerleaders
were college students or white-collar workers who worked part-time as cheerleaders.
Among the volunteers, there were also more than 1,400 elite Olympic ceremony
misses, who were selected through rounds of regional, provincial, and national
competitions, including hundreds of misses who worked as guest ushers, around
380 medal presenters, and more than 400 country presenters for the opening and
closing ceremonies. These women wore tight-fitting, elegant, long gowns, and were
supposed to represent Oriental beauty to the world. Thus, the first group embodied
the hybrid modernity of a global and cosmopolitan China while the second reiterated
essentialized notions of Chinese femininity familiar in “Oriental” tropes widely
circulated throughout the globe.

This article examines the gendered performance at the Beijing Olympics by
analyzing the elite cheerleaders and Olympic misses. Methods range from participant
observation and unstructured interviews to textual analyses of news coverage and
the blogs written by cheerleaders and Olympic misses. Research was conducted while
I worked as a flash quote reporter for the Olympic News Service (ONS) on the
Chaoyang Park Beach Volleyball Ground from June 16 to August 23, 2008 and as a
news editor for the Paralympic News Services (PNS) from September 5 to 17. Based
on interviews with three coaches as well as open-ended conversations with more
than 20 beach volleyball cheerleaders and several Olympic misses, I suggest that the
contrasting representations of the Chinese misses and cheerleaders invoke China’s
contradictory views toward women in particular and modernity in general in China’s
contemporary globalization process. Instead of challenging discriminatory gender
practices, the Beijing Olympics naturalized gender hierarchy, reinforced women’s
subordinate position, and legitimated the objectification of women as sex symbols.
Global cultural influence works with patriarchal forces of Chinese society to produce
a gender regime that caters to the nationalist agenda and simultaneously benefits the
global capitalist economy.
Studying Olympic cheerleaders and misses matters because they embody China’s effort to preserve a mythic national character while simultaneously joining the global regime. These women were widely reported in Chinese media before and during the Olympics and were considered by Beijing as the “image and face of China.” While the elite cheerleaders were supposed to represent a gradually globalized open China that is willing to embrace Western culture, the ceremony misses were intended to symbolize traditional femininity embedded in China’s modernity. The two contrasting representations dominated the coverage of nonathlete Chinese women who were playing supporting and cosmetic roles for the Beijing Olympics.

While gender has always been part of the Olympic culture, most studies focus on gender inequality in sport participation, gender bias, or marginalization of women athletes in media coverage that reinforces institutional discrimination (e.g., Billing & Eastman, 2002, 2003; Daddario, 1998; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003). Other research has rarely examined women who play supporting roles such as cheerleaders and Olympic misses. This study also provides important insight into how state and market forces work together to produce and utilize Chinese women’s bodies in the context of China’s market economy and its search for modernity. While feminist research has documented the incorporation of women and gender politics into nation building (e.g., Badran, 1995; Gao, 2006; Hershatter, 2007; Judge, 2008; Mayer, 1999; Nagel, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997), the Beijing Olympics offer an additional layer of paradoxes of tradition and modernity, composed by Oriental femininity and Occidental sexuality, that have perpetuated old and produced new gender politics with the endorsement of Chinese authorities, toward a goal that is both nationalist as well as intended to maximize audiences (and therefore profit).

The Chinese woman and China’s search for modernity

The Chinese woman has been inherently associated with China’s search for modernity and its nation building (Barlow, 1994, 2004; Brownell, 1999; Duara, 1998, 2000; Evans, 2000, 2008a,b; Gao, 2006; Judge, 2008; Liu, 1994; Wallis, 2006; Yang, 1999; Zhang, 2000), whether the purpose is for saving semicolonial China, building a strong socialist country, transforming China into a market economy, or the current integration with the capitalist world. She has often been identified as the problem, the embodiment of, and contributor to, a modern China since the late 19th century. For example, reformist scholars such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei stressed women’s education and the liberation of women from footbinding as a way to strengthen Chinese women and the Chinese nation (Hershatter, 2007; Judge, 2008; Ko, 2005; Ono, 1989; Zhang, 2000). During the May Fourth Movement, the “woman question” was predominantly explored by progressive male intellectuals through addressing “traditional patriarchal family and marriage system as the main barriers to women’s emancipation in China” (Evans, 2008a).

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party continued some of its gender policies in its revolutionary base and
aimed to provide women with equal opportunities in education, work, and political participations. All-China Women’s Federation was established in March 1949 to oversee women’s rights and promote gender equality. The official discourse was to promote gender sameness to achieve a broader agenda that could eventually eliminate class and socioeconomic differences and build a stronger China. Women’s and men’s fundamental responsibility was viewed as serving the collective and the nation (Brownell, 1999; Evans, 2000, 2008a, 2008b; Wallis, 2006; Yang, 1999). A common saying then was that “women can hold up half the sky,” and any consideration of gender differences was considered bourgeois. Women were dressed in the same androgynous way as men and eroticism was out of official discourse. High-achieving “iron girls” were profusely praised in official discourses (Evans, 2008a, 2008b; Hershatter, 2007). Despite its liberating potential, gender sameness often ignored gender hierarchy and women’s heavy household responsibilities (Evans, 2008a, 2008b). The subsuming of women’s liberation to the nationalist project meant that the “woman problem” was always secondary to more important state policies (Yang, 1999). Large discrepancies between official rhetoric and women’s daily experience created a feeling of alienation that influenced women’s attitudes and feelings toward China’s revolutionary efforts for gender equality (Croll, 1995).

Since the 1980s, China has witnessed huge backlashes against gender sameness, largely because of the rise of consumer culture and China’s open-door policies. The image of the Chinese woman has dramatically shifted, and her body’s association with pleasure can more easily be recruited toward consumerist practices (Evans, 2000, 2008a,b; Zhang, 2000). Feminized women are used to symbolize progress while iron girls are ridiculed (Evans, 2000; Hershatter, 2007). A discourse of nuren wei stressing femininity that can be literally translated as “the taste of womanliness” has emerged. As well, an explosion of feminine and erotic images in Chinese media has emerged (Barlow, 2004; Evans, 2000; Su, 2005). The refeminization of Chinese women has also been accompanied by a domestication of romance and a reassertion of women’s place at home accompanied by widened gaps between men and women in employment and salaries (Evans, 2000; Xu, 2010). Accordingly, Chinese women experience increased prejudice in employment and work and a growing tendency toward support of women’s traditional stereotypical role at home (Xu, 2010).

The emergence of a sexual culture in China has pushed women into becoming sex symbols while potentially experiencing sexual liberation. For younger generations in China, women’s fashions do not merely symbolize women’s bodies being exploited, but also represent a space for women to construct an identity different from their parents’ (Evans, 2000, 2008a). Much as in other capitalist consumer cultures, in China female beauty has become a hot commodity that is often said to be an asset to gain a man’s heart and achieve one’s career success. Predictably, young women began to appear in commerce and trade promotion shows in China dating back to the early 1990s, when the Yaxiya Department Store in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, used beautiful misses to perform during the flag-raising ceremony each morning, attracting enormous media attention nationwide (Xiao, 2002). Ceremony misses
appeared in China at the 1990 Asian Games for the first time (personal interview, 2008, August 1). Since then, beautiful Chinese women dressed in Cheongsan are commonly found at sport events, trade shows, official banquets, annual national congress meetings, restaurants, and other occasions to greet guests and serve tea and food. Such women are invariably tall, slim, young, and beautiful.

Modernity as a grand narrative and the dominant economic paradigm as China joins the global neoliberal regime has shaped popular discourse about Chinese women. Since the 1990s, an increasing number of women are said to eat the food of youth (chi qingchunfan), which refers to an “urban trend in which a range of new, highly paid positions have opened almost exclusively to young women, as bilingual secretaries, public relations girls, and fashion models” (Zhang, 2000, p. 93). Youth and beauty are often two of the most important criteria for such positions. This practice has generated the special term “beauty economy” (meinu jingji) to describe women’s corporeal contribution to the national and local economy. Various Chinese governments have promoted beauty pageants and modeling competitions and celebrated beauty economy as central to local economy. Chinese women’s sense of beauty has been greatly influenced by Western standards in the last three decades, attributing women’s economic success to her individual looks, undermining the collective agency that was such a cornerstone of the previous regime (Xu & Feiner, 2007). In the new gender regime, Chinese women thus confront two discourses simultaneously: the gender sameness and equality that is often associated with the outdated communist past, and the current official ideology of neoliberal market and the celebration of refeminization that is associated with consumer culture and conformity with global heterosexual normative standards.

In the following sections, I explore Chinese Olympic misses’ association with tradition drawing on Duara’s (2000) finding of “tradition within modernity.” As transnational gender scholars have persuasively illustrated, tradition coexists with modernity in complex and uneven ways (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Grewal, 1996, 2005; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Hegde, 1998a,b; Miller, Lawrence, McKay, & Rowe, 2001; Ong, 1999; Parameswaran, 2004; Shohat, 1998; Shohat & Stam, 1994; Shome, 2003, 2006; Shome & Hedge, 2002). In contemporary China, a woman has to be modern and beautiful in order to be useful in the local and global marketplace.
and contain China. The devastating earthquake in May 2008, just three months before the Olympics, and the united efforts, volunteerism, and donations from Chinese individuals and the government further produced a collective identity and pride. Indeed, in many mobilization meetings for Olympic volunteers and staff that I attended, the Sichuan earthquake was always mentioned to motivate people to work for China’s honor. Not surprisingly, China witnessed surging nationalism before the Olympics.

There was also a deep sense of anxiety among Chinese officials and Olympic staff ready to “avoid any potential problems” and guarantee that the Olympics could be held without disruption. Pledge-taking meetings, called shishi dahui, which literally means a rally before going to war, were held 100 and 30 days prior to the Olympics at the People’s Hall of China, the prestigious meeting place for China’s National Congress and other important national meetings. Jia Qinglin, Politburo member and Chair of China’s Political Consultative Congress, and Xi Jinping, Vice President of China, delivered speeches at the meetings and pledged full support for the Olympics. Key politicians, Olympic officials, representatives of volunteers, sport officials, taxi drivers, and others attended the meetings and vowed to “win honor for the country and add brilliance to the Olympics.” Various similar oath-taking meetings were held for Chinese media workers, staff, and volunteers on other occasions and at game sites. President Hu Jintao repeatedly pledged full support for the Olympics. Just two months before the Olympics, a three-level wartime command system (zhanshi zhihui tixi) was established for the Olympics, which involved the full support of government agencies at all levels, with Xi Jinping as the general commander-in-chief. Furthermore, on Chaoyang Park Beach Volleyball Ground, for example, each department director was required to sign and submit a written pledge, promising that no incidents would occur in his/her territory. The Olympic misses and cheerleaders were invariably included in such oath ceremonies and in various information sessions. They were aware of the difficult situation that Beijing faced and were constantly told by Chinese media and the officials that they symbolized Beijing and China. In addition to special arrangements for their nutrition and health checkups, beach volleyball cheerleaders were constantly reminded at various meetings that they played a key role in guaranteeing the games’ top attendance rate, which was said to be top three among all sports in the United States.

The organizational structure, and the political, social, and cultural environment surrounding the Olympics, made it unlikely for the misses and cheerleaders to show open resistance. First of all, all misses and cheerleaders were chosen by rounds of regional and national competitions, making them the envy of their peers. Also, the misses and cheerleaders were endorsed by their work units, universities, and local governments during the provincial and national selection processes. All volunteers and staff underwent political screening and had been informed prior to the Olympics that their performance evaluations would be sent to their home institutes, making it highly likely that any dissident voices would be silenced.

In the three following sections, I will analyze the Olympic misses and cheerleaders based on Foucault’s (1972, 1976, 1995) discursive formations that coexist in three
sites: institutions, everyday lived experiences, and representations. Accordingly, I will first examine how the Olympic misses and cheerleaders are disciplined and produced by drawing on Foucault’s concept of docile body. Next I will look at their lived experiences and how they negotiate between the imposed identity and their own subjectivity, relating my analysis to Said’s (1979) concept of self-Orientalization, China’s consumer culture, and neoliberalism (Wang, 2003). The third section analyzes the discourse in Chinese media coverage about the Olympic misses and cheerleaders. The way in which the Beijing Olympics constructed the gendered performance of tradition and modernity, worked together with media representations of these women’s performances, and was abetted and partly resisted by the everyday lived experiences of the misses and cheerleaders. At all three discursive levels, the representations and meanings of the women’s bodies were necessarily full of contradictions and inconsistencies.

**Olympic misses and cheerleaders as docile bodies**

Critiquing the pervasiveness of power, Foucault (1995) pointed out that modern disciplinary technologies created, through coercion and subjection, docile bodies “that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). Such disciplinary technologies were developed in institutions such as schools, barracks, prisons, and hospitals and aim to achieve a “parallel increase in the usefulness and docility” of individuals and populations (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 135). Not only stringent criteria were applied in selecting the Olympic misses and cheerleaders, who were then intensively trained to represent particular tropes of Chinese female bodies, but these women were also requested to regularly showcase their performances in front of Olympic officials. The more tamed they became, the more they were viewed as beautiful and useful.

First of all, all these women, selected by the Beijing Organization Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG), were much taller than an average Chinese woman, whose height is 5 feet and 2 inches (Xu & Feiner, 2007) and ironically were supposed to represent standard Chinese women’s bodies. For example, an Olympic miss must be aged between 18 and 25, with height between 1.68 m (approximately 5 feet and 6 inches) and 1.78 m (approximately 5 feet and 10 inches). A country presenter must be at least 1.70 m high (approximately 5 feet and 7 inches) (Xinhuanet, 2007, November 21; Xinjing Daily, 2007, November 21). An Olympic miss must have a “standard body shape with good proportions” and guiding criteria were also reported in Chinese media for an applicant’s breast, hip, and waist (sanwei) (Xinhuanet, 2007, November 21; Xinjing Daily, 2007, November 21). The requirement for their weight was implicit as they must “be able to fit into the costumes provided” (Xinjing Daily, 2007, November 21). Shanghai was reported to list even stricter criteria, which caused public criticisms in China, and Shanghai later clarified that it would not officially submit the criteria to the BOCOG (Xinhuanet, 2008, February 19). The Olympic misses must speak English and have team spirit, a sense of discipline, and willingness
to endure hardships. Country presenters, especially the China and Greece presenters, at the opening ceremony experienced even closer scrutiny because of their symbolic meanings and more media attention on them (Tengxun Sports, 2008). The country presenters were also chosen from students at the Beijing Nationality University to represent ethnic diversity (Xinjing Daily, 2007).

Second, the training programs endorsed by the BOCOG paid tremendous attention to the details of the women’s bodies as if they were analyzable objects waiting for further molding. Foucault’s admonition (1995) that “[d]iscipline is a political anatomy of detail” (p. 139) was borne out by the practice of compartmentalizing every movement of the Olympic misses that was then practiced thousands of times. Wearing high-heeled shoes of at least 5 cm, a miss was required to stand upright for hours balancing a book on her head and a piece of paper between her thighs. Statistics of normative criteria about their movements were reported in Chinese media such as the distance between one’s upper arm and one’s side when holding trays, the distance between different medal presenters, and the angles when one bowed or turned.

Third, they were under constant gaze of their predominantly male coaches and the BOCOG officials. The various competitions and report performances (huibao yanchu) before officials prior to the Olympics put their bodies always under scrutiny. The ultimate gaze was the implicit male gaze during the Olympics, where these women’s bodies were examined by cameras, spectators, athletes, officials, and world media. Beijing requested the ceremony misses to demonstrate the best Chinese bodies, similar to “Miss America,” who “encompasses both gendered and nationalist representation” (Banet-Weiser, 1999, p. 2). It was a hierarchical system of observations and “normalizing judgment,” which became “a central technique of disciplinary power: the examination” (Foucault, 1995, p. 156).

Two tropes of femininity that were already globally circulated were reproduced through the training programs and in Chinese media: The Olympic miss as the Oriental beauty and a cheerleader’s sexualized body that is associated with Western women. These two tropes reflect China’s simultaneous desire to maintain a pure Chinese identity and to embrace global influence. Often viewed as eaters of the food of youth, these women participate in China’s market economy by commodifying their youth, beauty, and femininity. They became “simultaneously the trope and implement of modernization and globalization with Chinese characteristics” (Zhang, 2000, p. 95).

The Olympic misses as Oriental beauties

The BOCOG officials and coaches viewed the Olympic misses, called Oriental beauties, as means to attract audiences, particularly males. Required to demonstrate the beauty of Chinese women in particular and to represent China as a civilized nation in general, the misses were trained by coaches whose concept of desirable demeanors varied greatly. For example, one female coach taught ballet to ceremony misses because she felt the Western art could make these women appear nobler, more modern, self-confident, elegant, and dignified (Xiao, 2008). Criticizing a tendency
of some girls to draw back their necks, which, according to her, made them look like “beggars,” she prompted them to “throw out their noble chests and lengthen their beautiful necks” like ballet dancers (Xiao, 2008). She stated, “China is so powerful now, why should we be so humble? We need to show a demeanor that combines modernity, amiability (qianhe) and dignity” and be “neither overbearing nor servile.” She thus trained Olympic misses simultaneously to learn ballet and traditional body gestures such as daowanfu, a greeting courtesy between Chinese women in ancient times; zouyunbu (cloud-walking) in Peking opera, a walking style stressing the body’s lightness; and nanfazhi (orchid-shaped finger gesture), a hand gesture that elevates women’s long, tender, and thin fingers. In contrast, a 69-year-old male coach responsible for training beach volleyball misses, with previous experience with aerobics dancing groups for the Asian Games in Beijing in 1990 and several other national sports and events, expressed very different ideas about Chinese femininity. He remarked that ballet dancers should not be medal presenters because Olympic misses must lower their jaws respectfully, walk in straight lines, and have their thighs pressed inward without swinging their upper bodies while walking. He added:

Western women are overt and sexy with big body movements and catwalks, but Chinese women are reserved with small body movements (xixiao). The Chinese female beauty is better than Western beauty. Chinese ceremony misses have to be different from foreigners. . . . The Oriental beauty is especially appreciated by foreigners. [Thus], China has to maintain the Chinese characteristics and we should not lose our national essence. (Personal interview, 2008, August 1)

Whereas the above female coach looked to Western ballet for performative behavior, the male coach looked inward to the essentialized attributes within his culture. Both of their approaches can be understood by Said’s (1979) concept of self-Orientalization and reliance on binaries, between the East and the West. These women were supposed to embody Chinese national essence and differences from the West on one hand and represent Chinese as a modern nation that enjoys material abundance on the other. The coaches’ Orientalizing approaches to feminine performativities motivated their instruction accordingly. While some coaches viewed the perfect smile for ceremony misses as the exposure of six to eight upper teeth and thus requested the misses to bite chopsticks for at least 20 minutes each time during training sessions (Zou, 2008, January 15), the female coach explicitly disagreed:

[The misses] should show their happiness, joy and pride from the bottom of their hearts. Such kind of smile is beautiful even without any teeth being exposed. I’ve told them that it is such a happy and proud thing that they can represent China to present medals at the first Olympics in China. They now feel that way. (Xiao, 2008, August 1)

Whereas the veteran coach on the beach volleyball court instructed the misses to walk in straight lines, the female coach insisted that they walk so their footprints
resembled a string of leaves. Differences among coaches allowed the misses some room to choose how to carry their bodies. Indeed, some did not expose six to eight teeth when they smiled.

Of course, the misses were also associated with material abundance and consumer culture. For example, the misses carrying country signs at opening and closing ceremonies wore sleeveless, lavishly embroidered, silk, red evening gowns in the cheongsam (qipao) style. Cheongsam was official clothing during the Manchurian reign in China (17th to early 20th century), and a tight-fitting version was created in Shanghai in the early 20th century for upper-class Chinese women. Nowadays a tight-fitting cheongsam is associated with traditional Chinese clothing. Flight attendants, restaurant waitresses, ceremony girls, and models of beauty pageants often wear cheongsam outfits. Medal presenters were provided with 15 sets of cheongsam-style gowns in five colors: Chinese scholar tree green, diamond blue, jade white, porcelain blue, and white and pink. Choices of colors and styles depended on sports and the functions of the events. For example, pink gowns were used for weightlifting, boxing, and wrestling so that the soft beauty of the ceremony misses could balance the masculinity of the sports. Hybrid costumes, which incorporated Chinese and Western elements, were chosen through a lengthy national selection process that attracted many entries from Chinese designers and were first released in July 2008 at 798, a contemporary arts center in suburban Beijing, attracting huge media attention. The tight-fitting costumes for medal ceremonies and opening ceremonies concealed as well as accentuated women’s bodies, especially their breasts. Rather than explicitly sexual, the subtle sexuality was deemed more charming in Chinese culture. Thus throughout the process of training and performance, the tensions between

![Figure 1](image_url) Olympic costumes released at a press conference for the Beijing Olympics on July 17, 2008.
Chineseness and Westernization remained constant. (See Figure 1 for costume for medal presenters.)

**Sexualized Westernized bodies of cheerleaders**

Cheerleading culture appeared in China at the turn of the century with the first college student cheerleading competition in Jinan University, Guangzhou, in 2001 (Sina, 2001, October 27; Sohu, 2007, December 4). In 2002, the Chinese Basketball Association replaced the schoolgirls who performed aerobics with professional cheerleaders during breaks (Chang, 2008, March 5). From the very beginning, Chinese cheerleading culture has been under the influence of South Korea and the United States (Sohu, 2007, December 4). Chinese cheerleaders attended various competitions and events in Korea, Japan, and the United States. To prepare for the Olympics, Beijing invited the National Football League (NFL) and New England Patriots cheerleaders to share their experience with Chinese dancers. Soojin Dance Troupe in Beijing, coached and founded by a South Korean woman, has attended various events in South Korea. International connections and exchanges have boosted and legitimated the development of Chinese cheerleading culture.

Compared with the Olympic misses, the image of the cheerleaders was more sexual. The crassest example was the cheerleading culture for beach volleyball, which had 32 Chinese women and six Spanish dancers. All Chinese women were part-time professional cheerleaders from Soojin Dance, X-Team, and Fashion Dance. The Spanish dancers were recruited from the Personal Plus Company (PPC), which signed a contract with the International Federation of Volleyball (FIVB) to provide cheerleading dance for beach volleyball since the 2004 Athens Olympics. The FIVB pressed the BOCOG to accept its cheerleaders for fear that the sport would appear too Chinese. The beach volleyball cheerleaders were divided into three Chinese teams and an international team consisting of six Spanish and six Chinese women, who were mainly coached by a Spanish woman hired by the PPC. Beach volleyball cheerleaders were called *shatan baobei* in Chinese, which can be translated as beach babies or treasures, suggesting their simultaneous infantilization and commodification. Wearing bikinis, and sometimes using hats, pompoms, fans, ribbons, or hula hoops, they clapped, jumped, yelled, and swung, receiving excited and/or cold and puzzled responses from Chinese audiences (see Figure 2 for beach volleyball dancers).

The construction and meanings of the cheerleaders embodied tensions and contradictions. First, the production of desirable Westernized bodies confronted issues of Chineseness and Chinese culture. Even though many of these part-time professional cheerleaders had worn skimpy outfits in public before, they had never danced in bikinis. A big obstacle for the coaches and supervisors was to help the Chinese girls overcome their embarrassment for wearing bikinis. Several girls I interviewed found wearing bikinis “too embarrassing (*xiu sile*)” or “too ugly (*nankan sile*).” The coaches had to reduce their clothing gradually, starting from minishirts, to minipants, and finally to bikinis. The two male Chinese coaches did not like girls
wearing so little, but the Spanish coach insisted on bikinis, and her veteran status for global cheerleading culture with the FIVB and the Olympics enabled her opinion to prevail. Interestingly, the only female Chinese coach strategically framed the clothing choice as pioneering and beautiful: “It is beautiful to wear bikinis, which represents both courage and charm (fengqing).” She added that cheerleading could change foreigners’ image of China as “inscrutable” and “serious” (keban) (personal interview, 2008). After weeks of training, the girls gradually got used to bikinis and the coaches unanimously praised beach dancers for “having overcome their initial shyness.” A remark Chinese coaches often made was that Chinese girls were more used to dancing on stage and were not as good as foreign dancers in making eye contact and interacting with audiences. They were not as adept as foreigners in expressing sexual charm. In preparation, Chinese coaches watched foreign video tapes of cheerleading groups.

The cheerleaders also experienced conflicting feelings between their devotion to the nation and their own sense of beauty. Chinese women value lighter skin and thinness as beautiful, but tanned skin is considered healthy and appropriate for a beach volleyball cheerleader. Thus, the first requirement from the Spanish coach was to ask the Chinese girls to get suntanned. She even asked them to wear little and get suntanned on the street, which attracted much unwanted attention from passersby. The Chinese girls were unhappy and requested to go to a more private place. They were also worried that their thighs would become muscular after dancing on sand. A group leader stated to me, “I cannot help crying when I think about my suntanned skin and my thickened and muscular thighs,” but eventually she accepted it as a necessary self-sacrifice to the nation. Along the lines of economic sacrifice, many cheerleaders with full-time jobs had to give up three months of income. In a short survey with more than 20 beach volleyball cheerleaders, many stated that they worked for the honor of the country. A typical answer was: “The Olympics is a grand event attracting global attention. . . . I would like to contribute my part to the
ancestor’s country and realize my own value.” Even wearing bikinis was thought by some cheerleaders as serving the country. For example, a cheerleading group leader stated: “All of us felt uncomfortable wearing so little, and many of us quit our jobs to be cheerleaders. We came here for the nation and for the Olympics” (personal interview, 2008).

The Lived experience of the Olympic misses and cheerleaders

Foucault’s notion of horizontal power, wherein discourse functions laterally with individuals and groups disciplining and policing each other and the self, can be applied to an analysis of the women’s agency and their own experiences. All women voluntarily participated and took great pride in working for the first and only Olympics held in China. These women were aware of what their behaviors meant and thus consciously presented “their personal best to the world” while simultaneously experiencing some discomfort with certain elements of their performance. Viewing the Olympics as a platform to perform their exuberant youthfulness, they used blogs and mobile phones to share their personal experience and pictures with friends and families. Some cheerleaders were not shy about posting their scantily dressed individual and group pictures in their blogs. Several dancing teams and companies also created collective blogs as branding efforts. While Olympic misses were recruited on an individual basis, cheerleaders were selected as teams, which meant that they danced with friends that they already knew. Cheerleaders always commented on their friendship with other dancers and how they enjoyed experiencing glamorous dancing moments together. Some stated that they danced as cheerleaders because they wanted to collect great memories to cherish in their old age. Despite the fact that cheerleaders complained that the training was too hard and the sand was too hot, many cheerleaders used words such as pleasant, joyful, and fun to describe their experiences.

The cheerleaders expressed tremendous joy and pride in dancing passionately and cheering for Chinese teams. One dancer blogged that she felt especially high when two Chinese teams were competing against each other and when Chinese music “singing for the ancestor’s land” was played in contrast with the usual Western popular music. She continued: “We showed such a passion and great smiles and we were full of tears... I cried and cried while I was dancing. All Chinese stood up to sing together with us. My heart felt so warm. As a Chinese, my pride was fully displayed... I believe many people felt the same way. The entire world saw our achievement, our heart, our unity, and our cohesion. The whole world has witnessed our efforts and they were cheering for us.”

Illustrating the complicated elements in this nationalistic performance, many cheerleaders took great pleasure in their sexualized femininity. Large crowds of Chinese spectators often gathered to watch them on the practicing ground, ranging from paid staff, volunteers, security guards to janitors, largely because of the novelty of seeing women in bikinis dancing in public. Their semi-celebrity status gave them much media exposure in newspapers, commentaries, the Internet, and blogs. Staff
members, visitors, and sometimes journalists asked cheerleaders to take pictures with them. After a TV station from Australia instructed a group of Chinese cheerleaders in bikinis to pose for the camera and state: “Hello, Australia, welcome to Beijing,” a crew from Austria immediately followed suit. Some Chinese cheerleaders also approached beach volleyball players, mostly males, for group pictures. On several occasions, Western male athletes laughed loudly when asked by bikini-clad cheerleaders to take pictures with them on the training ground. Chinese cheerleaders assumed inviting poses, which could be possibly read as a way of self-objectification into symbols of a sexualized Orient or as a way of performing a job that was required of them (Figure 3).

Nonetheless, the choice to display Chinese nationalism through the foreign practice of cheerleading was inextricably problematic. Despite efforts to mix Chinese elements such as hand-wave dancing, fans, and minority culture dances with cheerleading moves, cheerleading, as a quintessential American activity, was still foreign to China. Conversely, some Chinese cheerleaders even expressed displeasure with the inclusion of Chinese elements in cheerleading. The only Chinese female coach on the beach volleyball ground cited above stated:

I personally think that we should not include Chinese culture in such an open environment. [The sport] is not Oriental. We should do things that suit the situation. Culture is only an accessory after all (dianzhui eryi). Cheerleading itself does not originate in Chinese culture. We learned it from the West and it is always Western in form. (Personal interview, 2008, August 5)

There was also inconsistency in how the misses and cheerleaders wished to be portrayed in the media. While popular discourse about Olympic misses was always about their beautiful appearance, elegant figures, and gestures, they themselves often stressed the hardships in training and their endurance over their appearance. For example, a ceremony miss stated, “only through strict training can good images be
produced. Last summer was really hot and without air conditioning or fans. We were wet with sweat and some fainted but no one gave up” (Du, 2008, June 13). Anticipating that they might be called “flower vases” and dismissed as cosmetic elements, one miss from Guangzhou countered that “their knowledge is equally important.” Indeed, their training sessions included not only physique, but also knowledge about other countries and Olympic history. While cheerleaders demonstrated sexy poses for cameras, they did not wish to be reported as sexual. Rather, they hoped to be reported as “youthful” and “stunningly beautiful” (qingchun liangli). They worried that journalists or bloggers might publish or post images of any “wardrobe malfunction” (zouguang). Several stated that “some journalists have no sense of shame.” Cheerleaders negotiated with managers to make sure that their underwear had enough material to protect their privacy. However, an FIVB representative stated to me, “sex sells,” indicating that commercial imperatives might trump the cheerleaders’ efforts to protect and preserve their modesty.

Anticipating that people may criticize cheerleading, one cheerleader used the signature, “when facing other’s sneers, I raise my head and continue my steps,” suggesting her defiant status in fighting against social norms. What boosted the legitimacy of cheerleading culture was that they were paid well when performing for commercial events and that the exchanges with foreign cheerleaders made them more aware of the prospect of cheerleading in other countries. One dancer stated, “cheerleading is not yet valued in China, but everyone in the United States wants to be a cheerleader,” reflecting an overblown assessment of cheerleading’s standing in U.S. culture. The inconsistencies and tensions among cheerleaders and coaches and between them and the public highlight the complexities and contradictions with China’s effort to perform modernity.

Despite the fact that all misses and cheerleaders worked as volunteers, they were provided with over a dozen free Olympic uniforms, Samsung cell phones, cell phone cards, and other benefits. For many of them, attending the Beijing Olympics was a great opportunity to prove their own worth and raise their individual recognition in China’s state capitalism where the government still plays a big role in allocating social and economic resources. The Chinese and foreign media attention on them created opportunities for them to realize their future market value. One coach also concurred, stating, “working for the Olympics increased their shenjia,” which literally means body price and figuratively means market price (personal interview, 2008, August 1). Indeed, the Olympic misses were reported to have garnered opportunities to cash in on their experience in post-Olympic China. For example, China Southern Airline announced before the Olympics it would recruit 100 flight attendants from the Olympic misses (CCTV, 2008). Additionally Olympic misses were reported to be highly demanded after the Olympics as receptionists and sales assistants with monthly salaries of up to 10,000 Yuan, while millions of college graduates face enormous difficulties in finding jobs paying 1–2,000 Yuan a month if employed (Beijing Evening News, 2008, August 28). At least one Olympic miss was later recruited to become a miss for the 2010 Shanghai Expo and one for 2010 Asian Games in
Guangzhou. Olympic misses also became anchors, film stars, models, and advertising spokeswomen after the Olympics. Utilizing her fame, a miss opened an online store and auctioned her items collected during the Olympics. For cheerleaders, they used the opportunity to brand themselves and their teams. Olympics Cheerleaders were reported to earn large amounts of presence fees at various sports events after the Olympics. Thus, these women benefitted from their Olympic experience and demonstrated some agency in the post-Olympic marketplace.

**Chinese media coverage of the Olympic misses and cheerleaders**

Chinese media, including newspapers, TV, and the Internet, covered the Olympic misses and cheerleaders with a great interest. The following analysis includes media reports from China Knowledge Integrated Database (www.cnki.net), the largest database of Chinese newspapers and magazines; reports from official Chinese news sites such as the Xinhua News, and the People’s Daily; and coverage in 2007–2008 from the first 100 hits about the Olympic misses and cheerleaders through Google searches between September 22 and October 1, 2010. The searches yielded 45 articles about the misses and 26 about the cheerleaders, another 21 stories on beach volleyball cheerleaders from August 2–22, 2008, as well as TV programs broadcast by China Central TV (CCTV), Beijing TV, Beijing TV, Shanghai TV, Shenzhen TV, and other stations.

As stated before, one major theme for the Beijing Olympic misses was the strict criteria for the selection, the beauty of the selected, and the harsh training they underwent to become more beautiful. A second major theme was to describe the devotion and sacrifice of the misses. They were quoted as showing their excitement and expectation for the Olympics. A third theme discussed the 15 sets of cheongsam-style costumes for the misses, their incorporation of Chinese cultural elements, and the tight-fitting top showcasing a woman’s beautiful curvy body. A fourth theme linked the training of the misses to a two-year official media campaign about developing etiquette and civilized behaviors in China prior to the Olympics that aimed to educate Chinese people about appropriate manners, rituals, behaviors, and courtesy. Media reports used the misses as exemplars that showed proper posture in carrying oneself and dealing with foreign guests. Beijing compiled training materials detailing principles and specifics about how to communicate and receive people of other countries so that China could show itself to the world as “a country of rituals.”

A fifth major theme during and right after the Olympics described the misses as a “beautiful scenery for the Beijing Olympics,” said to have left a deep impression on athletes, spectators, and guests. The interests expressed by foreign journalists and media were cited in Chinese media reports, and the Chinese translations were sometimes published. For instance, a well-known Chinese image designer for the Beijing Olympics stated, “[the misses] are stunningly beautiful and their beauty shocked the world” (Liao, 2008).
As a native cultural icon to the United States that is closely associated with football, cheerleading is often perceived with two contrasting views: On one hand, cheerleaders are considered representing “youthful prestige, wholesome attractiveness, peer leadership, and popularity,” and on the other hand they are viewed as “mindless enthusiasm, shallow boosterism, objectified sexuality, and promiscuous availability” (Hanson, 1996, p. 2). The Beijing Olympics as an institution enthusiastically embraced cheerleading, and Chinese media gave very positive coverage. Generally speaking, Chinese media stressed the importance of cheerleading to produce an entertaining atmosphere for the Olympics and emphasized their tough training and self-sacrifice for China. Cheerleaders were quoted as stating that they were extremely proud to cheer for China. Chinese media often published short news reports with images that described cheerleaders as “a beautiful scenery” on Olympic sport venues. Beach volleyball cheerleaders had the highest media exposure among all cheerleaders. They were reported as beautiful fashionable babes who danced with gusto during timeouts and brought tremendous pleasure to the audiences.

Chinese media reports stressed cheerleading as combining Chineseness and foreignness, including the dancing style, the use of foreign and Chinese music, and performers from China and foreign countries. Chinese characteristics were also mentioned, such as the inclusion of dancing cultural elements from Chinese minorities, Chinese fans, long sleeve dancing, Peking Opera costume, and so on. The international beach volleyball team attracted the most media attention right after it arrived at Beijing prior to and during the Olympics. Out of all 21 media reports from August 2–22 on beach volleyball dancers, 18 reports showed images of the international team, with a total number of 33 images about foreign babes and seven images about the Chinese dancers, indicating Chinese media’s tremendous interest in stressing the harmonious combination of Chinese and foreign cheerleaders in celebrating China’s Olympics.

All Chinese media reports about the misses and cheerleaders were positive, and no reports questioned the necessity of the training. This was not surprising as Chinese media were constantly admonished to report the Olympics in a positive light. Furthermore, All-China Women’s Federation was silent about cheerleaders or the misses. Some Chinese Internet users, however, left comments on media reports expressing their dislike for the fake smiles of the misses, the mechanical training processes, the BOCOG’s “selling of women’s sex appeal,” and the crass sexual poses of cheerleaders. While most comments still followed the official line, some stated that they themselves or Chinese officials would love to have sexual intercourse with the ceremony misses or cheerleaders, indicating very negative impact of commodified images on Chinese women.

The construction of the Olympic misses had a huge influence in China. The 2010 Shanghai Expo and the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou used similar processes to recruit and train ceremony misses. For the Asian Games, beach volleyball cheerleaders wore bikini uniforms, similar to the Olympic cheerleaders, suggesting that the Beijing Olympics has influenced other sport organizers to follow a particular form of gender performance and representation. However, China has an ambivalent attitude toward
Westernized modern women. Sexy images of women can be viewed, on one hand, as representing “diversity, plurality, and new opportunities,” but they can also be viewed as a Western influence embodied with “the individualistic, self-seeking, and ultimately immoral interests of the self-interested consumers” (Evans, 2000, p. 228), especially if we take into account that throughout the Republic era, “the image of the modern Westernized woman was associated at different levels of society with promiscuity and impurity” (Duara, 2000, pp. 346–347). During China’s May Fourth Movement, “the West represented science and material culture, and East Asian civilization represented the hope for the spiritual and moral regeneration of the world” (Duara, 2000, p. 342). Such an ambivalent attitude still resonates with contemporary China. The association of Western women with impurity and native women with higher morality is also a public discourse about women in postcolonial India and Indian beauty queens (Parameswaran, 2004). The same attitude was underscored in a Xinhua media report that noted: “Forget about the Chinese cheerleaders. Foreigners are impressed by Chinese medal presenters” (Xinhuanet, 2008, August 19), suggesting a preference for the local standard of beauty and decorum over the sexualized and Westernized bodies.

Conclusion

The Olympics are expected to incorporate both universal elements and national culture as they are global events that celebrate nationalism (Espy, 1981; Larson & Park, 1993). On one hand, traditional Oriental Chinese women function as symbols of “tradition within modernity” (Duara, 2000) that aim to produce “positive” national images. Such representations constitute what Foucault called “games of truth” that defined women as pure, authentic, and timeless (Duara, 1998). On the other hand, the beach babes represent Beijing’s effort to sexualize Chinese women and amend the myth that Chinese in general are too serious and women in particular are different from the West, reflecting a gesture for Beijing to embrace global culture, although ambivalently. Representing women as responsive females ready to care for foreign and domestic guests reflects a long tradition of viewing Chinese women as a source of nurturing, giving, and virtue. Conversely, representing sexualized Chinese women as overly flirtatious celebrates a Westernized performance of the feminized body. These two coexisting performances of femininity by Chinese women demonstrate an uneven and ambivalent approach to gender and nationalism on behalf of Chinese society in its globalization process. Both include a “naturalized view of gender hierarchy” (Evans, 1997, p. 220). Both types of women embody China’s recent economic success through their excessive consumerism in their costumes and performances. Given that the feminine beauty becomes a central icon of China’s desire for recognition as a leader on the world stage (Evans, 2000, p. 236) and that “[n]ationalists and cultural essentialists tended to depict women as embodying the eternal Chinese civilizational virtues of self-sacrifice and loyalty and to elevate them as national exemplars” (Duara, 1998, p. 287), Chinese female misses and cheerleaders in the Olympics were recruited
to serve a national project that was internally contradictory and deeply complex. The two roles assigned to them indicate simultaneous desires of Chinese nationalists and leadership to integrate with the capitalist world as well as to defy the global order by stressing distinctive Chinese femininity. This strategy is not original as many nations, including India, bear out a dual tendency to celebrate their stride toward modernity as well as their focus on distinctive tradition to defy the current world order (Chatterjee, 1995). Indeed, the paradoxical representations of Chinese women reflect contradictory ways of viewing Chinese modernity: between the embrace of Western modernity by creating a Chinese version and the maintenance of a unique Chinese culture within the Westernization of China. Both representations offer women the reiteration of sexualized stereotypes as well as providing possibilities for destabilizing them. Moreover, both roles offer a particular set of women employment opportunities in the present and future while simultaneously delegating them to the beauty economy.

Instead of challenging discriminatory gender practices, the Beijing Olympics’ approach to female supporting roles reinforces women’s subordinate position, potentially legitimizes the objectification of women as sexual symbols, and reproduces barriers for Chinese women to achieve gender equality. While Chinese economic reforms in the past few decades have opened up new opportunities for women, they have “simultaneously exacerbated gender differences in power, income, and status” (Tan Shen, cited in Evans, 2000, p. 224). Chinese femininity is thus produced in concert with hegemonic forces of global capital and patriarchal forces of Chinese society, resulting in the exacerbation of women’s decorative status and reinforcement of male privilege as the implicit producers and hegemonic audience. Global cultural influence in the gender system works through selectively subscribing to international practices that can reinforce those found in China’s own traditions. In turn, in the current neoliberal and postsocialist world order, China, and other such countries, has an economic incentive to discard the previous regime’s beneficial practices toward gender equality.

Not surprisingly, meanings of Chinese women’s bodies and signifying practices are full of tensions and contradictions. While various structural forces imposed meanings on their bodies, the Olympic misses and cheerleaders interpreted their own experiences in their own ways. It remains to be seen whether their relatively small amount of agency exerted any long-term influence or intervention into the official gender practices during the Beijing Olympics that serve to perpetuate gender differences and exacerbate gender inequality.

If gender is not something people are or possess, but rather what individuals do and perform (Butler, 2006), “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 34). The performative nature of gender means that the public display of Orientalized and sexualized bodies can not only function as regulatory practices that dictate the gender attributes, but also provide subversive mechanisms to change meanings of gender. Banet-Weiser (1999) argues that U.S. beauty pageants function
as a site where meanings and cultural identities are constantly ascribed and negotiated, meaning different things to different audiences. In this sense, the Olympic misses and cheerleaders as well as Chinese audiences negotiated institutional imperatives while entertaining new possibilities of gender performances. It remains to be seen whether this passage into modernity was accomplished at the expense of the reiteration of a hybrid of feminine stereotypes from China and the West, or whether the misses and cheerleaders have opened a space for agency and slightly progressive sexual politics. In terms of communication theory, we scholars have to remain vigilant of the many ways in which discursive formations of gender and the global are performed in situations of global spectacle such as the Olympics. Theories of transnational flows of gender transgression and local and multiple possibilities of performativity and spectatorship have to be informed by the ambivalent and contradictory efforts of global players to enter modernity while maintaining difference and tradition. Gendered interventions continue to be the element of choice in this global effort. Theorizing this gendered intervention remains central in the field of communication.

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Notes

1 Earlier drafts were presented at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania in 2008, at ICA in 2009, and at the annual conference of the Historical Society for Twentieth-Century China in 2010.
2 In comparison, the 2004 Athens Games only hired cheerleaders for basketball and beach volleyball games.
3 The cheerleading boys wore loose long-sleeve Chinese gowns and performed Chinese martial arts and aerobics at timeouts for basketball competitions, but they attracted very little media attention.
4 Although a team of male cheerleaders, called beach boys (shatan lanhai), appeared in the “Good Luck Beijing” Olympic beach volleyball testing events in 2007, they did not participate in the Beijing Olympics largely because some Chinese officials thought it was inappropriate for boys to dance before cameras and also because the Spanish coach did not want to include boys. While the two male coaches I interviewed stated that it did not look good (bu hao kan) to have male dancers, the only female coach felt that including boys would be cool.
5 Chinese coaches in specific and Chinese organizers in general tended to yield to foreign practices in cases where things did not involve sensitive and politic topics in a narrow
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sense. Indeed, the BOCOG copied the administrative structure of Athens in many ways, largely because Chinese organizers did not want to deviate much from past practices and wanted to use this opportunity to integrate more with the world.

6 In contrast, cheerleading in Athens caused complaints from at least one women’s team (Associated Press, 2004, August 17).

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