

## “China in my eyes”: Physical Culture and the Pacific Century

By Alex Mobley

The long project of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific has long held China as the prized market for Anglo-American commodities and cultural exchange. As a critical sport studies scholar, I am particularly interested in the history of sporting practices such as introduced by the muscular Christianity movement that exported basketball and volleyball as well as the modern Olympic movement. As we are currently witnessing a media fascination with the torch controversy, it is useful to examine some of the racially –inflected historical divisions informing the portrayal of China’s Olympics and the possibility of cultural exchange beyond national identities.

CL Cole writes about the specter of the “sexually deviant” Communist athlete in the context of Eastern Europe and the Cold War and the introduction of sex-testing in elite sport in 1966. A similar stereotype of the “steroid cheater” became inscribed upon the bodies of Asian communist athletes during the drug scandal of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, in which the Chinese women’s swim team found itself occupying the vacancy left by the notorious and now-defunct East German women’s swim team of the 1970s with an added dimension of sinophobia – harsher penalties were recommended and the assumption of Asian horde similitude implied a collective guilt, indeed a racial character defect predisposed towards winning at all costs.

A similar process is at work in the lead up to the 2008 Beijing games in which the Chinese people are often portrayed as a monolith or an excessive populace that threatens to overthrow western dominance. Such anxieties have been played out on the bodies of NBA basketball Yao Ming as well as swimmer Zhang Yi. While I am the first in line to critique the excesses of the Olympic movement, there might in fact be a rare opportunity for reconciliation of some of the excesses of the drug narratives that have seen that the use of performance-enhancing drugs adheres to no national boundaries. In fact, there are within the media reports a few positive portrayals of China’s willingness to cooperate with international drug interdiction efforts (Jintropin) sprinkled among the overwhelmingly negative reportage of China’s Olympics. That is not to say that there have not been problems in terms of site safety, displacement of residents, and of course issues of politics and human rights. However, these have also been criticisms that others have directed at just about every modern Olympic edition. Might there still be something worth salvaging from the modern Olympic spectacle?

It seems to me that in order to engage in a transnational feminist politics one requires mobility and social exchange. A mega-event such as the Olympics exponentially increases the

possibilities of such exchanges within a truncated amount of time. I have been lucky to count a number of Chinese scholars among my graduate student colleagues at the University of Illinois. For example, my colleague Yang Yang looks at the intersection of traditional Tai Chi practice and studies of balance and gait within the kinesiological tradition. I have enjoyed discussions with my colleagues from Shanghai about the rise of the popularity of Yao Ming, NBA basketball and its longer nineteenth century missionary history. I have also drawn upon the solidarity of sharing racial epithets as a Filipino American where “chink,” “coolie,” and “slant-eyed” are lobbed indiscriminately but tend to fall under a sinophobic rubric that somehow binds all Asian identities to sinophobic ruptures. In the end, we have our method of mobility and movement that suggest other ways of being human that go beyond a national identity. It is naïve to assert as the uncomplicated past of a pre-steroid scandal, pre-professional, and pre-boycott Olympics. It would be refreshing to hear some of the pundits be outraged at the racialized nature of these attacks in regard to the particularity of China-bashing that is inflected by the refusal to see the Chinese as individuals. In using mobility as our method and sport as our quarry, we may yet achieve the Olympic ideal of greater understandings beyond national identities and racial stereotypes.