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# Deconstructing National and Transnational Hypermasculine Hegemony in Neoliberal China

THE DAY AFTER THE CHINESE HURDLER LIU XIANG WON his third championship in the Asian Games in Guangzhou in November 2010, Chinese media were dominated by stories about this Olympic gold medalist. During a live broadcast, the host of China Central Television's sports channel exclaimed, "Liu Xiang, you are the God!" Just two years earlier at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when Liu withdrew from the games because of a foot injury, thousands of people deserted the stadium, leaving almost the whole nation in shock and disappointment. A piece in the *Times* that ran with the headline "China Mourns as Liu Xiang Pulls Out of Hurdles" indicates that Liu's withdrawal smashed China's Olympic dream and that his failure, for the Chinese people, meant the failure of the Beijing Olympics.<sup>1</sup> These are only two telling examples among hundreds of Liu's unusual status in China. Liu's official website describes him as "the first Chinese man to win a gold medal in Olympic track and field, first Asian man to win an Olympic sprint competition, and first athlete not from North America or Europe to win an Olympic medal in the hurdles."<sup>2</sup> Since Liu won the gold medal in the 2004 Athens Olympics, he has been celebrated in Chinese mass media as a national icon,

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1. Rick Broadbent, "China Mourns as Liu Xiang Pulls Out of Hurdles," *Times*, Aug. 18, 2008.
  2. See Liu's personal website, <http://sports.qq.com/liuxiangnews.htm>.

and foreign mass media laud him as a pan-Asian hero. Liu's athleticism glorifies a hypermasculine potential not only for Chinese men, but also for Asian men in general, as his moniker "Asian Flying Man" implies. At the same time, Liu is not more popular than the NBA player Yao Ming—the best-known Chinese athlete in the United States. Interest in Liu's event, the 110-meter hurdle, is not comparable to the widespread appeal of women's volleyball in China. This presents a question: what distinguishes Liu from other famed Chinese athletes such as Yao Ming or the Chinese women's volleyball team, which also won gold medals at the Athens Olympics?

Chinese media tend to represent Liu as sunny, confident, and self-assured, but also as an aggressive and effusive figure who sometimes displays a flamboyant persona in front of the camera.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Liu's signature gesture of victory, in which his toned arms are outstretched, "flying," is probably one of the most widely circulated athletic images in China today and is continually referenced by other similar representations of his sporting virility. This showy physical posturing is a significant departure from the more stereotypical manner of Chinese sportsmen, who display humility and the reserved demeanor valued by Chinese tradition. Such values have been cultivated as a key component of the image of Chinese athletes and have been widely circulated both at home in China and abroad; to wit, rising NBA star Jeremy Lin, a second-generation immigrant from Taiwan, is frequently described as "humble" by US media. Liu, however, is portrayed as representative of the Western normative manhood that R. W. Connell calls "hegemonic masculin-

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3. Another example of a confident Chinese sporting figure is Li Na, the first Chinese or Asian tennis player to win the Grand Slam. Li's individualistic and self-assertive performance during the Australian Open in 2011 also attracted lots of media attention that differentiated her from other Chinese athletes. Her alternative performance of Chinese sportsmanship makes her very popular both within China and abroad. But when she was asked by media whether she would like to be another nationalistic icon of China like Liu, she answered that it was a title specially reserved for Liu. *Li Na Ju Dang Liu Xiang Di Er: Wo Bu Shi Zhong Guo Ti Yu Xin Dai Yan Ren Zhi Xiang Da Qiu* (Li Na refuses to be another Liu Xiang: I am not a new spokesperson of Chinese sports and only want to play tennis), <http://www.backchina.com/news/2011/02/08/126325.html>.

ity” through highlighting his displays of self-assertion and aggression.<sup>4</sup> Connell’s hegemonic masculinity is used to invoke an idealized Western manhood that he describes as “independent, competitive, physically dominant, indifferent to pain (external or internal), self-reliant, and non-emotional” and that has been associated with athletic virility since the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Connell’s use of hegemonic masculinity I explore how Liu, as the emblematic media hero indexing a new Chinese national identity, has been constructed through a Westernized lens. I expand this exploration by contextualizing it against contemporary Chinese socioeconomic upheavals.

Feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty have noted that Western hegemonic masculinity is being reproduced on a worldwide scale in the service of economic restructuring and globalization and have tried to dislodge the relationship between gender and globalization. On the one hand, they argue that feminism should engage with the gendered and racialized effects of globalization and investigate how this process negatively affects the daily lives of women and people of color in the global South. On the other, as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan suggest, feminists need to challenge totalizing understandings of globalization and must scrutinize how ideologies of globalization are reproduced at different geopolitical locations in variegated modes. Also, while some feminist scholarship has revealed how neoliberal globalization shapes and is shaped by local ethnic, gender, and intimate relationships, others call attention to investigating gender as an inherent mechanism to facilitate neoliberal globalization.<sup>6</sup> In this article, I will approach the masculinist

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4. See R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
  5. R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59. See also Gail Berderman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
  6. See Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 247. See also Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* (London: Zed Books, 1998); Rita Mae Kelly, Jane H. Bayes, Mary Hawkesworth, and Brigitte Young, eds., *Gender, Globalization, and Democratization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity,” in their *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University

media spectacle of Liu's athleticism not only as an example of the expansion of idealized Anglo-American manliness in a Chinese context, but also as a gendered lens through which to probe how the global hegemony of neoliberalism is being (re)produced in a specifically Chinese socio-cultural background. I will deconstruct the reproduction of the Western norm of masculinity as it appears in China from historical, political, economic, and symbolic perspectives. Focusing on the gendered representations of Liu by major Chinese national media, I seek to explore how Western hegemonic masculinity is enacted through Liu's athletic body and is appropriated and reconstructed to justify China's transition to a market economy and to explore the reconstitution of a unified Chinese national identity in its shift from Maoism to neoliberalism.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, instead of viewing neoliberalism as a new stage of capitalism, or a form of capitalism, I draw on the Foucauldian framework that conceptualizes neoliberalism as a set of governing practices centered on creating and sustaining market competition that can take various and contingent forms in different socioeconomic contexts.<sup>8</sup> Also, as Wendy Brown points out, in contrast to the Marxist canon that views

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of Minnesota Press, 1994); Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); and Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56, nos. 3–4 (2009): 97–117.

7. All materials for analysis in this article are from the three major national media outlets, namely the *People's Daily*, China Central Television, and *Xinhua News Agency*. All Chinese mass media have state mandated "double features" that effectively function as both the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and as independent media. In this regard, all Chinese media are controlled by the party-state to some extent.
8. See Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (London: Zed Books, 1999). See also Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978–1979* (New York: Picador, 2010); Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

ideology as determined by economic infrastructure, neoliberal ideology sometimes converges with, but more often than not diverges from, neoliberal governing practices.<sup>9</sup> Embodied features such as race and gender are important ideological and pedagogic resources for the justification of neoliberal practices.<sup>10</sup> From this vantage point, I suggest that gender becomes a crucial ideological site for legitimizing the contingent adoption of neoliberal practices in China, for reconstituting a Chinese statehood that has been reshaped by its neoliberal practices, and for constructing a neoliberal model alternative to the Western paradigm.

This paper consists of three parts: first, I offer a brief review of the gendered discourse of the state in Chinese history, China's procedural transition to a market economy, and the concomitant social splintering. I discuss the gendered foundation of Chinese statehood that provides a socio-historic background in which to understand the party-state's appropriation and manipulation of gender discourses in China's neoliberal conditions. Second, through a genealogical analysis of neoliberal thought, I argue that the Western norm of masculinity is recast in an Asian model that articulates China's contingent practices of fusing Western neoliberal hegemony with an authoritarian politico-ideological tradition. Finally, building on a deconstructive reading of Liu's hypermasculinity, I will explicate how the gendered discourse of the nation-state has congealed Liu into a homogenizing, masculinist, and nationalistic icon in order to address social tensions and to reunify the splintering Chinese society. Focusing on the masculinist manifestation of neoliberal hegemony in China, this project will contribute to the feminist critique of neoliberal globalization and provide a Chinese vantage for a transnational dialogue about the commonly, but differently, experienced social domination that arises from instituting the policies of neoliberal globalization. To deconstruct this masculinist and nationalistic icon, I will start with a brief review of the gendered discourse of Chinese statehood and China's recent contingent and exigent practices of neoliberalism.

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9. Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

10. See Henry A. Giroux, "Beyond the Biopolitics of Disposability: Rethinking Neoliberalism in the New Gilded Age," in *Social Identities* 14, no. 5 (2008): 587–620.

THE SOCIO-HISTORIC CONTEXT OF CHINA'S GENDERED  
MANIFESTATION OF NEOLIBERALISM

Gender provides “the language and categories through which family, state, and other social arrangements are articulated and justified” in Chinese history.<sup>11</sup> In premodern China, the discourses of gender relationships provided an effective repertoire to constitute and discipline the state’s political order. Within the domestic sphere, the gender norm of “three obediences” and “four virtues” elaborated by Confucian literati sought to justify women’s subordination to men in as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).<sup>12</sup> This doctrine was extrapolated to validate the submission of subjects to the monarch and configure the social and political hierarchy of the state. In the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), a group of thinkers helped transform Confucianism into neo-Confucianism in response to “the increasing popularity of Buddhist otherworldliness, on the one hand, and to the active interventionism of the early Song state, on the other.”<sup>13</sup> The resulting philosophical system depicts “the family as the microcosm of civic virtues and skills: one learned to govern the state by managing one’s own family.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, quotidian gender relationships provided male rulers with rationales and ideology to organize and regulate the political apparatus.

As the Chinese imperial order was increasingly challenged by Western modernity, the gendered discourses of the state were also intensified to re-vision a modernist Chinese statehood. From the sixteenth century on, the feudal state confronted a two-pronged influence emanating from Western colonial pressure and domestic resistance, which ultimately converged into a pressing project of building a modernist state in the late nineteenth century. The female body was reconstituted by nationalist discourses as a privileged signifier, and various struggles were waged

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11. Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White, introduction to their *Engendering China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.

12. In Confucian philosophy, the “three obediences” require that a woman should obey her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood. The four virtues include morality, proper speech, a modest manner, and diligent work.

13. Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 42.

14. *Ibid.*

to elaborate on a way out of China's sociopolitical crises. For example, as Lydia Liu suggests, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, two male literati, attributed China's sociopolitical crisis to "uneducated and backward" Chinese women and insisted that the only way to build a modern Chinese nation-state should be to enlighten and emancipate them.<sup>15</sup>

After the feudal system was overturned in the early twentieth century, Communist intelligentsia also focused on gender to articulate their political vision of building a modern Chinese state. For instance, the Communists defined the status of women "as equal citizens as a marker of China's arrival at modernity" in the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> Following the Engelian trajectory, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promoted gender egalitarianism (alongside the classless society) as a crucial distinction between socialism and capitalism and used women's liberation "as one of the key categories through which it justified its revolutionary promise."<sup>17</sup> Later, this gendered concept of the modernist state was translated into the Maoist idea of state feminism to validate the transition to socialism. Even "women," as a universalizing rubric, became a Maoist product for statist purposes. Women were encouraged to participate in public work en masse in an attempt to build both a socialist economy and ideology.<sup>18</sup> Compared with class, which the regime also heavily relied on

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15. See Lydia Liu, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: The Field of Life and Death Revisited," in *Scattered Hegemonies*, 37–62. Other scholars have different interpretations of men's appropriations of women in the Chinese feudal society. For instance, Dorothy Ko argues that women were not just mere victims of male-dominated Confucian culture. Relying on their agency, women created their own space of survival and meanings. See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); and Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Foot Binding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
  16. Gilmartin, et al., *Engendering China*, 2.
  17. In his classic 1884 work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Friedrich Engels argues that the division of work between women and men within the domestic sphere is the earliest manifestation of class differentiation. In this account, patriarchy encapsulated through the monogamous family can only be overturned as long as the class division disappears. Engels's argument later set up the theoretical foundation for socialist feminism. See also Gilmartin, et al., *Engendering China*, 2.
  18. See Zheng Wang, "'State Feminism'? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China," *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 519–51; and Maria Mies's critique of Engels in her *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, 50. See also

for state-building purposes, gender, as Tani Barlow points out, was a safer category because gender inequalities were considered to be “non-antagonistic contradictions” and people would not use gender to analyze social injustice.<sup>19</sup> Thus we can see that, despite these discursive and social attempts to build gender equality, patriarchal relations were never significantly undermined in Maoist China.<sup>20</sup>

This brief review of the modern Chinese relationship between gender and the state supports Lynne Segal’s observation that “the metaphorical utilization [of gender] is always intensified in times of crisis, or in the consolidation of new regimes of power.”<sup>21</sup> Due to their relation to the body, categories such as race and gender are often used as naturalized parameters to concretize the otherwise ambiguous political discourses of the nation-state.<sup>22</sup> Thus gender’s intimate relationship with the state in Chinese history and its nonantagonistic social value in the Maoist era explain why gender becomes a convenient and perhaps even inevitable means of reconstituting Chinese national identity and justifying the politico-economic transition to neoliberalism. However, the question remains: why has the state co-opted and constructed a hyper-masculine figure imbued with modern Western values rather than other

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Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

19. Tani E. Barlow, “Theorizing Women: Funü, Guojia, Jiating (Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family),” in *Scattered Hegemonies*, 173–96.
20. See Phyllis Andors, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949–1980* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).
21. Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 43.
22. Feminist scholars have documented the relationship between nation building and gender in various sociocultural contexts. For the United States, see Berderman, *Manliness and Civilization*; for South Africa, see Anne McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Woman and Nationalism in South Africa,” *Transition* 51 (1991): 104–23; for Puerto Rico, see Eileen J. Suárez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870–1920* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); and for Japan, see Jason G. Karlin, “The Gender of Nationalism: Competing Masculinities in Meiji Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 28 (Winter 2002): 41–77.

articulations of gender, such as traditional Chinese manhood or womanhood, to mark a new Chineseness? To answer this question, we need to situate the macho exhibition of Liu's athleticism within the social upheavals of contemporary China.

Liu's success is embedded in China's transition to the market economy, which first started with the CCP leader Deng Xiaoping's twin policies of reform and of opening up that he initiated in 1978, initially in rural areas and then in urban areas as of 1984. Unlike in the Soviet Union, where wholesale economic transformation through an abrupt suspension of the state-planned economy and switch to a free market was accompanied by the collapse of the political regime, China's economic restructuring was initiated and gradually implemented by the CCP as a self-conscious strategy to address the politico-economic crisis entailed by Mao's stringent emphasis on "class struggle" in the Cultural Revolution, and it occurred without substantial political overhaul in the regime itself.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the party-state voluntarily adopted neoliberal strategies to launch the economic restructuring needed to cope with socioeconomic and political tumult. For this reason, as David Harvey points out, the Marxist base-superstructure theorization of political economy is not quite applicable for the case of China.<sup>24</sup>

Michel Foucault's critique of Marxism and theorization of neoliberal governmentality is of particular value to China's case. Different from the Marxist canon of social progression, Foucault argues that if there is a so-called logic of capital or capitalism, it just happens to fall into the historical moment we currently inhabit. Neoliberalism is neither a type nor a stage of capitalism, but a type of governmentality. Defining governmentality as the reasoned way of governing best, the calculation of governmental practices to maximize economic and political profits for state and society, Foucault suggests it is both historically contingent and necessarily malleable. In this articulation, the state is both the object and the product of governmentality. The essence of neoliberal governmentality is that the consolidation of a free market is the fundamental mechanism to best govern society and manage the state and that the creation and maintenance of a free market is the ultimate justification of the state

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23. See Rofel, *Desiring China*; and Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

24. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 122.

per se. Neoliberal governmentality centers on the idea that a free market is the fundamental arbiter of all social relations, and neoliberal states need to ensure that everyone can reach the basic level to participate in free market competition.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on this Foucauldian concept of governmentality, Aihwa Ong posits that the Chinese party-state introduced neoliberal governmentality first into rural areas as an “exception,” followed by the establishment of several “special economic zones” to experiment with the market mechanism, and finally it gradually expanded similar policies to other parts of China.<sup>26</sup> Lisa Rofel also suggests that “an experimental and gradual approach has defined the tenor of China’s reforms.”<sup>27</sup> To paraphrase one of Deng’s well-worn terms, this approach is like “crossing the river by feeling the cobbles.”

China’s self-conscious transition to the market economy has been ongoing for more than thirty years. Deng abandoned Mao’s policy of “class struggle” after coming to power after Mao’s death and the end of the Cultural Revolution era. Building on the experiences of Singapore, Deng sought to establish and implement the market mechanism for capital accumulation under the stricture of the state. As he explained, the market was not the core distinction between socialism and capitalism, but merely a means of organizing the economy and governing the society. He successfully translated the adoption of neoliberal governmentality into popular slogans such as “white cat, black cat, whichever catches mice is a good cat” and “focusing on the central task of economic construction,” providing justifications for the state-controlled process of marketization that is different from the Western market fundamentalism. In so doing, he adroitly tailored the adoption of neoliberalism to suit the authoritarian, bureaucratic party system in order to avoid causing drastic unrest. As opposed to the neoliberal practices in the United States and the United Kingdom, in which the market is viewed as the ultimate arbiter of social life, in Deng’s conception, to mitigate the market’s vicissitudes and uncertainties, the party-state had to function as an absolutist rational entity regulating the market.<sup>28</sup> This purportedly con-

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25. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

26. Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

27. Rofel, *Desiring China*, 8.

28. See Zheng Yongnian, *Will China Become Democratic?: Elite, Class and Regime Transition* (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 2004).

tingent practice of neoliberal governmentality was later dubbed “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” by Deng.

The adoption and adaptation of neoliberalism in China was never a smooth process. As I will discuss later, it had a polarizing and splintering effect on Chinese society in which there were heated debates among Chinese intellectuals between what Mark Leonard has called the “New Right” and the “New Left.”<sup>29</sup> As for the emerging social problems, Weiyang Zhang, a renowned economist and leading scholar in the “New Right” camp, has called for further liberalization, stressing that only complete privatization of state-controlled sectors and full abdication of the state welfare responsibilities would bring freedom and prosperity to China.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, Hui Wang, the leading “New Left” scholar, criticizes the economic restructuring for being oblivious to social justice and equality.<sup>31</sup> As a participant in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, Wang points out that these demonstrations were the earliest massive social resistance to neoliberalism in China as well as a prelude to the global struggle with neoliberal control that included protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, and against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC, in 2000.<sup>32</sup>

Class and gender inequalities were ironically the major catalysts for China’s transformation. Far from achieving gender equality and a classless society, there were enormous class and gender gaps in the Maoist era. The registration system — *hukou*— created a graded institution of citizenship that differentiated between urban and rural residents, excluding the latter from basic social benefits and rights such as healthcare and education.<sup>33</sup> It also resulted in a hierarchical class structure in which state-employed workers with tenured jobs occupied the highest status and vil-

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29. Mark Leonard, *What Does China Think?* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

30. Weiyang Zhang, “China’s Anti-Keynesian Insurgent,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 12, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444032404578010552215377098>.

31. Hui Wang, *China’s New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, ed. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

32. *Ibid.* See also Hui Wang, *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2009).

33. *Hukou* is a resident permit given by the Chinese government on a family basis. It creates de facto inequality of social and political rights for urban and rural residents, despite their equal de jure citizenship rights.

lage labor forces employed in rural factories were hardly acknowledged.<sup>34</sup> The party-state also placed effective restrictions on the movement of labor within this system. Moreover, although Mao's policies increased women's opportunities to work outside the home, little official attention was given to unpacking gender inequality and patriarchy: "Women took on nontraditional tasks in the workplace, but their duties at home were not altered, and they were exhorted to shoulder cheerfully the burdens of the double day in the name of socialism."<sup>35</sup> After 1978, Deng mobilized these structured class and gender inequalities to create a huge pool of exploitable "surplus labor" that became China's major source of competitiveness in the globalized economy. For instance, the one-child policy, in effect since the late 1970s, together with the disruption of state welfare in the 1990s, exacerbated sexist discrimination against women. With a still traditional culture that valued sons as the primary source of nursing and care for aging parents, the stringent policy of one child per family accompanied by the removal of state-sponsored medical care and housing resulted in a high incidence of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion. In this way, the one-child policy reinforced the sexist idea of women as less than human beings, and hence justified the superexploitation of women by (trans)national capital. Another example of Deng's reconstitution of class and gender inequalities to create exploitable labor is the economic restructuring of urban areas since 1984 that heavily "favored coastal over inland areas with state investment and privileged access to international capital and markets."<sup>36</sup> In response to the increasing demands for a labor force in these areas, the party-state increasingly relented on migration policies, but maintained the resulting migrant workers "as floaters, as impermanent outsiders for whom the state was not responsible, in order to serve the state's own fiscal and (neoliberal) modernization needs."<sup>37</sup>

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34. See Martin King Whyte, "The Changing Role of Workers," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 173–96.

35. Honig and Hershatter, *Personal Voices*, 4.

36. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, "Introduction: Reform and Resistance in Contemporary China," in their *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

37. Dorothy J. Solinger, "China's Floating Population," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, 225.

China's neoliberal transition is also entwined with its part-voluntary and part-coerced integration with neoliberal globalization, as enacted through Deng's twin policies of reform and opening up. With three years of suspension after the Tiananmen protests, the party-state resumed marketization in 1992, and the opening up of the Pudong area in Shanghai marked the unreserved embrace of the market economy by China. The access to the WTO in 2001 further strengthened China's integration with the world economy. The changes in China's political economic structure, as well as in its contact with the West, carved out a broad space for a multitude of gender articulations. While the relatively stable and monolithic genderscape under the autarkic Maoist regime was somewhat destabilized by the heterogeneity of gender discourses, the dominant Engelsian idea of gender egalitarianism gave way to a *mélange* of present-day gender discourses. For instance, media representations of female masculinity, metrosexuality, transgender identity, domesticized femininity, and of course athletic masculinity, to name a few, all compete for public attention in the market. Despite their success in the capital and attention markets, none of these gender discourses found their way into the signifying economy of national identity, and some of them even incurred draconian control by the state. This has made Liu's athletic manhood par excellence more intriguing and significant as a central site for further inquiry.

Despite having secured China's rapid economic growth over decades, utilitarian and ameliorative state intervention in the economy has failed in its purported goal of mitigating the unruly market. Instead, China's neoliberal governmentality has moved China "from the ranks of the world's most egalitarian societies to one of the most unequal in its distribution of income, wealth, and opportunity."<sup>38</sup> As Foucault notes, maintaining social equality is antithetical to the *raison d'être* of neoliberal governmentality. After the horrifying crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests belied the state's not-too-old revolutionary promise of creating and maintaining social equality for Chinese people, the fetishistic goal of achieving higher and higher GDP growth became a primary objective of the state. Social inequality has, in conjunction, grown rapidly in China. As a result, the Gini coefficient—a measure of income

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38. Perry and Selden, "Introduction: Reform and Resistance," 5.

inequality commonly used by economists and institutions—grew to 0.61 in 2010, rising far above the internationally acknowledged alarm level of 0.40.<sup>39</sup> Among all social classes, workers and farmers (over a billion people in China are rural, more than 75 percent of China's total population) and particularly female workers and farmers, bear the primary brunt of neoliberal transition. Despite being described in China's constitution as the "masters of the country," female and male rural workers have ironically dropped to the bottom of the social ladder. According to the World Bank, as of 2005, 474 million Chinese people, 36.3 percent of the total population, still live on less than two dollars a day. This figure is 55.6 percent among the one billion rural inhabitants and 15.6 percent among the urban population.<sup>40</sup>

The increasing class gap gave rise to various forms of resistance in China, ranging from strikes, to suicide protests, to acts of violence. According to the data released by the government, the number of social disturbances was more than 90,000 in 2006.<sup>41</sup> Thereafter, this number has continued to rise, as suggested by the report of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>42</sup> In this regard, the state had to exponentially increase the cost of maintaining stability (through police and urban management personnel used to suppress oppositional activities) to such an extent that it surpassed state expenditures for national defense in 2011. Since the traditional ideological foundation—the revolutionary claim to build a classless society—has been increasingly downplayed,

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39. "Bao Gao Cheng Zhong Guo Jia Ting Ji Ni Xi Shu Da 0.61 Shou Ru Cha Ju Shi Suo Shao Jian" (Reports show China's Gini coefficient reaches a rare 0.61), *Beijing Times*, Dec. 10, 2012, <http://business.sohu.com/20121210/n359957132.shtml>.

40. See the website of the World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/gstable2.pdf>.

41. Chuanhe Zhang, "Wo Guo Qun Ti Shi Jian De Zui Xin Fa Zhan, Cheng Yin Ji Dui Ce Yan Jiu" (On the new tendencies and contributing factors of collective disturbances and policy changes), *Chinareformnet*, Jul. 2, 2010, <http://www.chinareform.net/2010/0702/18613.html>. "Collective disturbance" is defined as an oppositional event with at least five participants. See Jianrong Yu, "On the Major Types and Characteristics of Social Disturbances in Contemporary China," *Journal of CUPIL* 6 (2009): 115.

42. Hong Chang, "She Hui Lan Pi Shu: Mei Nian Ge Zhong Qun Ti Shi Jian Duo Da Shu Wan Qi" (Social blue book: Collective disturbances amount to hundreds of thousands every year), *Peoplenet*, Dec. 18, 2012, <http://society.people.com.cn/n/2012/1218/c1008-19933666.html>.

nationalism becomes a new source to legitimize the party-state.<sup>43</sup> Nationalism has been invoked by the party-state to bargain with Western sovereignties in the context of global market competition.<sup>44</sup> As Giorgio Agamben argues, more often than not, patriotism and nationalism are the last haven for oppressive practices.<sup>45</sup>

As in other countries, sports are an important site of constructing nationalism in China. Through a historic review of sports in China, Xu Guoqi argues that “sports have represented the broad Chinese determination to achieve national independence and rejuvenation.”<sup>46</sup> He further generalizes that this derives from Chinese people’s wish to strengthen the nation with the “warlike spirits” of sports.<sup>47</sup> The state-sponsored nationwide frenzy that surrounded the Chinese women’s volleyball team in the 1980s is a good example. Chinese people’s enthusiasm for recuperating the nation from the traumatizing experience of the Cultural Revolution was encapsulated in and channeled through the female volleyball players’ “fighting spirits.” Although neither the gendered rhetoric of statehood nor a nationalist discourse of sports is new to China, they have come together to take on a masculinist form at this particular historical moment, a moment in which China is promoting itself as an exceptional model of prosperity as compared with capitalist economies plagued by structural problems of the market. At the same time it is also confronting the unsettling impact from social resistance. To clarify this, we need to explore the symbolic linkage between Western hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal ideology.

#### MASCULINIST MANIFESTATION OF CONTINGENT NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY IN CHINA

The hegemonic masculinity encapsulated in white, middle-class manhood is cast as the quintessential signifier of the neoliberal subject in

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43. See Zheng Yongnian, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State and Society in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

44. Wang, *China’s New Order*.

45. See Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

46. Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.

47. *Ibid.*, 12.

Western societies.<sup>48</sup> To unpack the gendered hegemony of neoliberal ideology, we need to understand how neoliberalism takes its conceptual origin from the ideas of instrumental reason of Western philosophies. As Max Horkheimer notes, the shift from critical reason to instrumental reason during the European Enlightenment established an epistemic ground mandating that the only criterion of reason is to see whether a person can achieve the intended goal or not. Simply put, the Enlightenment project establishes instrumental reason as the universal means to subject nature and people to self-interest. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno further argue that the Enlightenment project creates a metanarrative that lauds knowing subjects with instrumental reason as the center of natural and social worlds.<sup>49</sup> As I see it, these insightful observations anticipate what has been happening under current neoliberal conditions.

The primary tenet of neoliberal economic theory hinges on the idea of *homo economicus* (economic human) or individuals as independent self-interested entities who freely compete with each other in a free market. According to this ideology, people have to mobilize their reasoning ability to fulfill their intended goals and maximize their interests. The Enlightenment notion of a disembodied universal subject with instrumental reason is at the core of this understanding. However, our daily world often identifies “masculinity with reason and femininity

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48. As R. W. Connell suggests, reason and science were constructed as opposed to the natural world and emotion, and Western civilization was defined as the bearer of reason to a benighted world during the Enlightenment era. Almost during the same time, the modern Western version of hegemonic masculinity was first constituted as a character structure to signify rationality and reason. See Connell, “The History of Masculinity,” in *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, ed. Rachel Adams and David Savran (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 246. As Connell argues, this version of hegemonic masculinity is widely associated with white, middle-class, heterosexual men in Western societies. The rational and self-reliant subject is later constructed as the essential symbol of “*homo economicus*,” or the neoliberal subjectivity. See also Connell, *Masculinities*.
49. See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1947); Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983* (New York: Picador, 2011); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); and Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

with sentiment, desire, and the needs of body,” and implies that only white people can be capable, knowing, and reasoning subjects.<sup>50</sup> Feminist scholarship has unveiled how this myth of the Eurocentric, male, neoliberal subject is actually shored up by the creation and exclusion of other less-than-qualified subjects, such as women and people of color.<sup>51</sup> By othering and excluding these groups, white male Anglo-American descendants are naturalized as the group naturally-endowed with the instrumental reason to succeed and survive in market competition. Anglo-American masculinity is thus reified as the quintessential signifier of the normative neoliberal subject. It is in this context that Western hegemonic masculinity gains appeal and circulates through neoliberal policies. In China’s case, neoliberal hegemony is not only translated into policies that (re)create and maintain poor male and female workers as lesser human beings to be exploited by (trans)national capital, but it is also promoted through the reification of Liu’s athletic and macho performances.

As mentioned earlier, Liu’s self-assertive posturing easily distinguishes him from other more reserved Chinese athletes disciplined by the state-controlled sporting system. One example of this posturing took place during the awards ceremony of the 2004 Olympics where Liu made a flamboyant gesture never practiced by Chinese athletes before: he jumped rather than stepped up onto the champion’s podium. This individualistic grandstanding might be common for Western athletes, but it is quite unusual for Chinese athletes who have been indoctrinated since childhood to be self-effacing in the face of national glory and interests. China’s state-sponsored sports system is different from Western ones in that most Chinese athletes are funded and trained by the government.<sup>52</sup> Growing up under the close watch of state power, Chinese

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50. Iris Marion Young, “Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,” *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 253. See also Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Knowledge: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

51. See Smith, *Decolonizing Knowledge*. See also Vivyan Adair, “Branded with Infamy: Inscriptions of Poverty and Class in United States,” *Signs* 27, no. 2 (2002): 452–71; and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

52. Prior to the mid-1990s, sport in China was completely government funded. Although commercialization was introduced into some sectors, such as football and basketball, China still maintains a statist system in most sports

athletes often absorb what are construed as patriotic values such as obedience and vigilance into their daily regime of self-regulation, which are deemed especially important at moments such as Olympic awards ceremonies. Liu is an exception. He always seems ready to showcase his flamboyant and confident persona in front of the camera. Another example of Liu's behavior antithetical to the more traditional Chinese athletes is that he does not cry while listening to the national anthem or watching the raising of the national flag, which is common among most Chinese athletes. In other words, Liu espouses the kind of Western normative manhood that shuns public expressions of emotions.

Liu's athletic prowess further associates him with Western hegemonic masculinity. In the early twentieth century, athletic virility became an important site for the constitution of manliness in the United States. As Michael Messner suggests, in modern Western cultures, the violent sports field functions as the primary scene to perform hegemonic masculinity and the symbolic domain of its production as a spectacle.<sup>53</sup> This is in contrast with Chinese culture, where, as Kam Louie suggests, men pursuing a literary career and assuming a delicate, "feminine" style were historically highly valued: "Unlike the Anglo-American image that until recently has been singularly dominated by the macho man," soft men were considered equally, if not more, sexually attractive and desirable as tough men.<sup>54</sup> Premodern Chinese masculinity is characterized by a culturally valued soft, literary style of manhood.<sup>55</sup> Liu's athletic macho performance obviously does not fit into this tradition.

Chinese media engagements with Liu's masculinity bear the burden of confronting Western racial stereotypes. In the United States, common notions of Asian men's physical fragility and inferiority result in what

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and assumes state responsibility to provide all necessities of producing capable athletes, including dorms, wages, training facilities, healthcare, etc. Hence, Chinese athletes are viewed as state-owned properties.

53. Berderman, *Manliness and Civilization*; Michael Messner, "When Bodies are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 25, no. 3 (1990): 204.
54. Kam Louie, "Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities, in Asian Masculinities," in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, ed. Kam Louie and Morris Low (London: Routledge, 2003), 6.
55. Song Geng, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 2.

David Eng has termed “racial castration.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, Asian males are racially deprived of the symbolic privilege of athletic masculinity. This racialized gender ideology is further translated into sports arenas, where Asian men are considered not capable of competing with other racial groups in such events as track and field, particularly sprinting, which has been reified as a showcase arena for men’s physical power. In response to this stereotype of Asian men as lacking sporting virility, the Chinese media emphatically relates Liu’s success to his skills, emphasizing his physiological disadvantages in relation to athletes of other races. The Chinese media often represent Liu’s success as the accumulated result of stringent daily self-regimentation, scientific training, and hurdle techniques, rather than as racially innate — as is suggested in the case of black athletes. They thereby reproduce Western racial ideologies of phenotypical/genotypical differences. As the media often highlight, proper and reasonable engineering of the self secures Liu’s athletic success, which is further translated into huge market profits. According to *Forbes* magazine, Liu’s market value amounted to around 23 million renminbi (about 3.5 million dollars) in 2005. This discourse clearly resonates with the neoliberal idea of meritocracy.

Liu’s value transcends the athletic arena and the market. As a national icon, he is highly politicized. Although it is not uncommon to see sportsmanship idolized in China, Liu is laden with unparalleled political weight, which can be illustrated in two instances. After he won the gold medal in the Asian Games in 2010, the news was highlighted on the front page of *Xinhua News Agency’s* website (China’s official state news agency) juxtaposed with the major national news of Chinese vice president and diplomatic pronouncements. Since 2004, *Xinhua’s* website has had a column dedicated to news about Liu. This editorial layout is noteworthy because, as a sanctioned mouthpiece for the party-state, *Xinhua’s* primary task is to disseminate “political propaganda.” Moreover, despite Liu’s failure in the Beijing Olympics, *Xinhua* strongly defended his iconic status as a national hero, in stark contrast to the massive criticism of him on the Internet. As the ethnonational hero and symbol of a new Chineseness, no other athletes have been elevated to such a level of

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56. David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

national significance, with the exception perhaps of the Chinese women's volleyball team in the 1980s.

This masculinist national identity registers a rhetoric of confidence, ascendancy, and velocity that underwrites the triumphant official discourse of China's economic vibrancy and vigorous prosperity. As an idealized neoliberal subject, the adulation of Liu's embodied hegemonic masculinity is a means to vindicate China's timely transition to the market economy. The mass media, as a powerful "ideological state apparatus," plays a crucial role in (re)creating and promulgating this neoliberal ideological figure through an incessant display of his hypermasculinity.<sup>57</sup> As his moniker "Asian Flying Man" suggests, the Chinese media hail Liu as transcending the nation-state boundaries to excel as a pan-Asian hero. Such pan-Asianism, however, serves the distinct purpose of advancing China's own regional ambitions. If we search online, we will find that "Asian Flying Man" is seldom used as a reference to Liu by the media of other Asian economies.<sup>58</sup> It is not surprising to see that China's attempt to represent this "Asian" model is not warmly welcomed by its Asian competitors. The state-controlled media meticulously crafts and upholds this masculinist icon, hoping to mitigate domestic social antagonism through its gendered discourse of national identity. In the next section I will elaborate on how gender has replaced class as the primary site to recreate Chineseness in neoliberal times.

#### THE HOMOGENIZING MASCULINIST NATIONAL IDENTITY

Gender has become the pivotal point to reconstitute the triangulated power structure of class, gender, and state as China has transitioned from Maoism to neoliberalism. In Maoist thought, class (as classless society), gender (as gender equality), and state (as the socialist state) formed a triangulated structure of power to guarantee the social order. As suggested earlier, China's neoliberal practices largely transformed

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57. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126.

58. Although Liu's moniker *Ya Zhou Fei Ren* (meaning "Asian Flying Man" in Chinese) is widely circulated in China and Chinese media, its English version is hardly used by media reports, as Google search results indicate. Instead, "Flying Man" or "China's Flying Man" are used by other Asian media such as *The Indian Express* and the Singapore-based *AsiaOne*.

class relationships, and social antagonism intensified to such an extent that public discussion of class inequality and social injustice in the media has become a suppressed issue.<sup>59</sup> In addition, the party seeks to maintain the regime's legacy by casting itself as still a socialist apparatus with "Chinese characteristics." In such circumstances, the Maoist rhetoric of gender equality needs to be revamped to recreate and sustain the power balance embedded in the triangulated relationship of class, gender, and state.

As discussed earlier, the increasing use of repressive state apparatuses such as police and army forces secures, through oppression, social and political stability.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, mass media, led by *Xinhua*, function as an important ideological state apparatus, using stories and images of Liu to recreate and reinvigorate the unsettled, imagined community through the iconification of Liu's nationalistic hypermasculine body. Consider the image of Liu celebrating his championship victory at the 2004 Athens Olympics, widely circulated throughout the Chinese media (figure 1).



FIGURE 1.

In this picture, Liu's athletic body is almost fully covered by the red and yellow of the Chinese national flag; Liu's national identity is framed through a gender prism.<sup>61</sup> It is interesting to compare this new icon of Chineseness with earlier visual registers that were "primarily derived from Soviet socialist realism which is often centered on the depiction of

59. For example, *Dwelling Narrowness*, a TV soap opera that focuses on housing issues in China, triggered a lot of debate about prohibitive housing prices and widening social inequality and was subsequently banned by Chinese authorities.

60. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," 101.

61. See Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood, *Citizenship and Identity* (London: Sage, 1999).

workers as paragons of strength, placed in exaggerated heroic postures.”<sup>62</sup> The Maoist nationalist image hinged on the depiction of working-class strength that was usually highlighted by juxtaposing and conflating workers with machines to empower the former through connection with the latter and to anthropomorphize the latter through association with the former.<sup>63</sup> The new nationalist icon, however, is gendered rather than classed; no traces of identities such as class or ethnicity remain other than the obscured number on Liu’s chest, signaling his sportsmanship. With his unruly hair and expressive countenance, he projects an image of a confident, virile, and bold hero. With his right hand raised in a fist and his left hand fixing the national flag onto his chest, he takes on the stance of a valiant archer. With his mouth slightly open and resolute eyes staring into the distance, he assumes the look of a general in command. In this picture, it is through unifying the classed, ethnic, regional, and religious differences undergirding the Chinese society into one athletic manly body that the imagination of a unified nation-state is enabled and recreated. The sweat, tears, and even blood of poor migrant female and male workers for the benefit of the neoliberal state are subsumed in this glamorous figure. Considering that not so very long ago, images such as those of the so-called iron girls — smiling peasant women engaging in military and agricultural labor — were used as the symbol of the Maoist state to demonstrate the elimination of the class difference between women and men, Liu’s class-free symbolism suggests that gender has become a key means to reconfigure Chinese national identity in neoliberal conditions.<sup>64</sup>

To see how the economy of signifying works through a gendered lens, we need to break it down. Symbolic codes work at different levels and in variable ways to constitute a specific signifying process. Certain ways of seeing are prescribed by the image creator.<sup>65</sup> These preconditioned ways of seeing are still culturally contingent and varied; certain

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62. Li Jie, “Wang Bing’s West of the Tracks — Salvaging the Rubble of Utopia,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 50 (Spring 2008), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/WestofTracks/text.html>.

63. Ibid.

64. Honig and Hershatter, *Personal Voices*; Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

65. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin, 1972).

ways of seeing presuppose specific groups of audiences. For instance, for those US audiences that are conditioned by individualism, the images of Liu might likely be interpreted as an individualistic celebration of victory more than of nationalistic pride. However, for Chinese audiences, the meaning would be different. This picture was taken by a *Xinhua* photographer at the 2004 Olympics and was widely circulated by *Xinhua*, whose primary function is to disseminate “political propaganda” to domestic audiences, so the target audience of this picture is the Chinese populace. The image of Liu draped in a Chinese flag thus presupposes a target audience group with a necessary degree of cultural consensus and incorporates a bricolage of symbols imbued with cross-referencing connotative meanings such as the national flag, the redness and yellowness, and even Liu himself as a preconstituted symbol of nationalism. The connection of Liu’s body with the nation-state is further consolidated by cross-referencing this photographic trope with other media discourses. After Liu won the gold medal, images of Liu brandishing the Chinese national flag in a proud winner’s posture and jubilantly circling the arena were repeatedly broadcast on China Central Television (CCTV) into millions of Chinese households. Liu’s emblematic status is further buttressed through the invocation by CCTV and in the *People’s Daily* of the historically coined term *zhonghua minzu*, which roughly translates as the “Chinese race” and which includes many “Chinese” ethnicities both within and outside of mainland China. As a broad, unifying, nationalistic concept, *zhonghua minzu* encompasses all ethnic minorities in China, the Chinese diaspora, and even peoples from the contested state of Taiwan, despite the fact that Taiwan has its own athletes who compete against Chinese athletes at international sporting competitions.<sup>66</sup> When all of these codes are channeled into cross-referencing circuits, viewers’ attention will generally invoke habituated interpretations. In this regard, Liu, as a hypermasculine emblem of Chineseness, is crystallized and congealed through repetitive televisual, photographic, and

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66. Interestingly, the recent success of the NBA player Jeremy Lin triggered a debate over his Chineseness/Taiwanese-ness. As a second-generation immigrant from Taiwan, the controversy over Lin’s national identity reveals two competing Chinese nationalisms between mainland China and Taiwan. See Allen Chun, “Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity,” *Boundary 2*, no. 23 (1996): 111–38.

rhetorical association of his athletic body with other symbols already invested with rich nationalistic meanings, such as the national flag and the colors red and yellow.

After Liu won the championship in the Asian Games in 2010, a similar signifying economy was employed again. The man standing beside Liu in Figure 2 is the silver medalist Shi Dongpeng, another famed Chinese hurdler. The picture shows Shi somewhat timidly holding on to a tiny corner of the large national flag, which is being wielded victoriously by Liu, in such a way as to suggest that Shi is not simply supporting but is also subordinating himself to Liu's effusive expression of national pride emblazoned by the flag. The national flag is only allowed to frame Liu's emblematic, nationalistic body, even though Shi's body is equally athletic and virile. This symbolic trope is applied not only to this image but also to many other pictures of Liu and Shi during the Asian Games that were taken and disseminated by *Xinhua*. By juxtaposing and contrasting these two athletic bodies, Liu's exclusive, iconic manhood is reinforced and enhanced through his victory in the "masculinity competition" between the two athletes, which is further indicated through Shi's downcast arm and somewhat flustered look as opposed to Liu's poise and signature outstretched "flying" arms posturing. This flying posture is also corroborating and corroborated by Liu's given name, Xiang (which means "soaring" in Chinese) and his moniker "Asian Flying Man."

As Shawn Michelle Smith suggests, "visual culture is not a mere reflection of a national community but one of the sites through which narratives of national belonging are imagined," and, additionally, "photographic images not only represent but also produce the nation."<sup>67</sup> Thus, it is through the cross-referencing of variable symbols of layered nationalistic meanings, such as the national flag, Liu's signature posturing, and even Liu himself, that the nationalistic aura seamlessly infuses and pervades Liu's hypermasculinity. Furthermore, it is through this homogenizing masculine figure that a reunified imagined community is recast and recreated, while at the same time, gender is evoked as the primary site in which to rearticulate the Chinese national identity and mitigate widening social inequality. Gender thus becomes a pivotal point to

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67. Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 158.



FIGURE 2.

reproduce and reinvigorate the triangulated structure of class, gender, and state.

On occasion, Liu would resist this appropriation and manipulation of his masculinity by disclosing to journalists that he frequented beauty spas to have his acne treated or showing up to social events with a well-groomed appearance. For instance, at the 2010 CCTV Sports Personality Annual Awards ceremony, he appeared dressed in a punk style with heavy makeup. This purposeful dandyesque fashion sense has created controversy because his presentation is antithetical to the athletic hypermasculine image that has been created and fostered around him — an implicit resistance to the state-controlled camera as well as the ideological co-optation of his gender identity. More often than not, his symbolic defiance has been omitted from the carefully framed nationalistic images, as indicated by the earlier discussions.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explored why and how Liu Xiang, the Westernized hypermasculine athlete, takes center stage in the discursive space of a new Chineseness crafted in the service of China's neoliberal endeavors. This hypermasculine figure serves as a linking point of the triangulated

power structure of class, gender, and state that has been transformed by China's neoliberal practices. The ruling sovereignty in China, composed of national and transnational entities, has not met without some resistance, of which Liu's symbolic defiance is one example. Indeed around the world, one can see instances of resistance to neoliberal policies — from Southern China to London to the United States.<sup>68</sup> Understanding how neoliberal practices and ideologies are reproduced in different forms and at different locations can help provide a conceptual fulcrum that can help build coalitions among oppressed groups across national boundaries. Progressive scholars and activists can thereby create a common ground for substantive challenges to the neoliberal social order, and I offer this analysis of the Chinese state's attempt to reconfigure Chinese masculinity as part of that conversation.

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68. For instance, in 2011, protests across the world highlighted the complexity between political power and capital. To name a few, in March demonstrations were held protesting massive government public sector spending cuts in London, in September the Occupy Wall Street movement erupted to protest unregulated financial capital in New York, and in November there were protests against corruption by public officials in Wukan, a village in Southern China.