

Revolutionary Transformations

The People's Republic of China in the 1950s

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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009304108

DOI: 10.1017/9781009304146

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First published 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Blanke, Anja, editor. | Strauss, Julia C., editor. | Mühlhahn, Klaus,
editor.

Title: Revolutionary transformations : the People's Republic of China in the
1950s / edited by Anja Blanke, Zeppelin Universität, Julia C. Strauss, School of
Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Klaus Mühlhahn, Zeppelin
Universität.

Description: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2023. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022062034 | ISBN 9781009304108 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781009304092 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009304146 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: China – History – 1949–1976. | China – Politics and
government – 1949–1976.

Classification: LCC DS777.55 .R463 2023 | DDC 951.05–dc23/eng/20230111

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022062034>

ISBN 978-1-009-30410-8 Hardback

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3 Producing Socialist Bodies

Transnational Sports Networks and Athletes in 1950s China

Amanda Shuman

“Bau auf, bau auf, bau auf, bau auf! Freie Deutsche Jugend, bau auf!
Für eine bessr’e Zukunft richten wir die Heimat auf . . . ”¹

Huang Hongjiu sings “Song of the Freie Deutsche Jugend [FDJ, Free
German Youth],” the youth movement of the German
Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany)

Sixty-six years after his participation at the 1951 World Festival of Youth and Students held in East Berlin, eighty-eight-year-old Huang Hongjiu, or “Oom Julius” (“Uncle Julius,” in Dutch), as he is known to his family these days, launches into a spontaneous rendition of the chorus to the Free German Youth song “Bau auf” during our interview. In the middle of the conversation, which took place in Amsterdam and in which he switched at times between four languages (English, Chinese, Dutch, and Indonesian), his sudden memory of this song caught me by surprise (not least because the German is also flawless).² My plan going into the interview was simply to ask him about his experiences as a PRC athlete in the 1950s – aside from locating his name in official publications like *Sports Yearbooks*, he is virtually unknown outside his personal affiliation to a famous swimmer named Wu Chuanyu. In fact, Huang was only brought to my attention by the president of the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF) in Florida, who contacted me after reading a short blog

¹ “Build up, build up, build up, build up! Free German Youth, build up! For a better future, we’ll focus on the homeland!” (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.)

² The interview took place on the morning of April 21, 2017, at Huang’s home in Amsterdam. Two of Huang’s family members were present at the time of the interview and helped fill in the family story in Indonesia as well as the later migration story following his departure from the PRC in 1972. I thank Huang deeply for this interview and for graciously welcoming me into his home. I also want to thank his family not only for meeting me at the tram station and helping interpret during the interview when he spoke Indonesian, but also for providing me with scans of all of Huang’s wonderful photographs. This chapter is dedicated to Huang, who passed away in February 2022, prior to final publication.

post I had previously written about Wu³ – Wu was posthumously inducted into the ISHOF in 2017.⁴ Huang attended the ceremony and provided the organization with information on Wu, but otherwise he remains fairly anonymous in his retirement community in Amsterdam.

Huang's responses to my questions constantly challenged my idea of what it meant to be an athlete for the PRC in these years – especially because it seemed to me that he displayed no obvious identification with the PRC. He identified, first and foremost, as a former swimmer and an ethnically Chinese Indonesian. I call him Huang Hongjiu because that is his name in the Chinese records, but in person at least, he does not identify with this name, preferring instead his Dutch or even Indonesian name (Oei Hong Kioe). His reluctance to discuss the PRC per se at any length (especially its politics) is likely a result of his treatment during the Cultural Revolution – when those who were, or had connections to, overseas Chinese were often targeted as alleged spies, counterrevolutionaries, revisionists, or traitors⁵ – but I began to wonder whether there was something more to it. Huang constantly brought up the international connections he had in the 1950s, especially his friendships with swimmers and coaches in the socialist bloc. He fondly remembered his training days as part of the first national swimming team in the PRC, after being recruited by sports leaders from an Indonesian sports delegation. But within those memories,

³ Amanda Shuman, "A Champion for Socialist China," in *Afro-Asian Visions: New Perspectives on Decolonisation, the Cold War, and Asian-African Connections*, *Medium*, June 6, 2016, at <https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/a-champion-for-china-d22b771111ab>, accessed January 31, 2020. I thank Bruce Wigo, ISOHF president, not only for bringing Huang's story to my attention but for also putting me in contact with Huang's family through email.

⁴ "Honorees: Wu Chuanyu (CHN) 2017 Honor Pioneer Swimmer," ISHOF honorees, International Swimming Hall of Fame, at <https://ishof.org/wu-chuanyu.html>, accessed January 31, 2020.

⁵ Michael Godley, "The Sojourners: Returned Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China," *Pacific Affairs* 62, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 330. The best-known case in the world of sport is that of three famous table tennis players and coaches from Hong Kong – Fu Qifang, Jiang Yongning, and Rong Guotuan (the 1959 world champion for the PRC) – who were apparently attacked as "traitorous spies" and committed suicide consecutively over three months in 1968. Some biographies, books, and memoirs of former athletes mention persecution specifically. For example, Lin Huiqing, an Indonesian-born PRC table tennis player in the 1960s and 1970s, was likewise persecuted as a "revisionist seedling." Liang Yingming, *Pingbo yu fengxian: Yindunixiya guiqiao Lin Huiqing de ping-pangqiu rensheng* (Beijing: Overseas Chinese publishing house, 2015), 28. Those who had family living overseas, such as former basketball player Kai Chen, whose relatives included former Guomindang (Nationalist Party) members in Taiwan, consistently ran into trouble or encountered persecution for their so-called "black" family backgrounds. Kai Chen, *One in a Billion: Journey toward Freedom* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2007).

competing for the PRC as such holds little importance – so long as he could do what he loved to do, not much else mattered.

This chapter seeks to understand such athletes and the networks within which they were embedded, and the relationship of both to the Chinese party-state's national project of the early 1950s. In these years, the new state began to invest in an unprecedented project: to remake the physical fitness of the nation as a whole, down to the individual body of each citizen, while establishing China as an active contender in international athletic competition. The production of the socialist body politic and individual socialist bodies through *tiyu* (translated variously as “sports and physical culture,” “body culture,” “physical education,” or simply “sport”) became a nationwide project embedded in transnational sports networks and central to the Communist Party's legitimization of its rule. National sports development over these years vacillated in its focus between transforming the masses into active socialist subjects and building an elite cadre of internationally competitive athletes. Athletes like Huang were part of and invested in these networks.

Through the example of sport, this chapter also argues that to understand the national project within the early PRC we need to bring in a transnational perspective – that is, a refocus on “researching and writing a history with nations that is not a history of nations.”⁶ Current histories of PRC sport (and, I would contend, other social realms) tend to erase the complexity of this period in favor of reifying the nation-state. A linear, pro-Olympic narrative dominates much of this work.⁷ I have argued elsewhere that the institutionalization of sport in the early 1950s required the involvement of Communist cadres (such as Rong Gaotang), Republican-period experts (such as Ma Yuehan), and Soviet and socialist bloc expertise.⁸ But it goes beyond this, especially when one traces the athletic networks or athletes, who tend to leave behind fewer written sources. As I will show below, I am not arguing that we ignore the nation; indeed, these athletic networks can sometimes only be traced through official sources produced within specific national contexts. But in creating

⁶ Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 8.

⁷ One prominent example in English is Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dreams* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), unsurprisingly released the same year as the Beijing Olympics. Most sports histories in English and Chinese (体育史) even more starkly follow a pro-PRC and pro-Olympic linear narrative of progression. In Chinese, for example, Xiong Xiaozheng, *Zhong Bingshu, xin zhongguo tiyu 60 nian* (60 Years of Sports in New China) (Beijing: Beijing tiyu chubanshe, 2010) or Wu Shaozu, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tiyu shi (1949–1998), zhonghe juan* (The History of Sports of the People's Republic of China (1949–1998), Comprehensive Volume) (Beijing: Zhongguo shuji chubanshe, 1999).

⁸ Amanda Shuman, “The Politics of Socialist Athletics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1966” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2014), Chapter 1.

a history of the nation, the vast majority of sports histories of China have in turn marginalized anything that does not neatly fit or support a national narrative. Competitive athletes, for example, tend to appear in the media or in secondary publications (including academic scholarship) only when they are or have been exceptional at national and/or international levels.⁹ In short, these sports narratives focus almost exclusively on athletic achievement and promote an international image of the nation.

A transnational perspective can help us trace the movements and connections between athletes, coaches, and other (state, substate, non-state) actors in order to map out a history that has mostly been rendered “invisible or at best peripheral” because it existed “between, across and through politics and societies.”¹⁰ This is essential when one considers that, in addition to regular state-to-state delegation visits, the socialist bloc also sponsored numerous non-Olympic international sports events, including competitions held during the World Festivals of Youth and Students (WFYS). Yet present histories on such events are few and far between, drowned out by the Olympic movement and its affiliates. Thus this is not an easy task, and this chapter provides just one glimpse into the complexities present. I rely on a diverse set of sources that encompasses archives, official media, oral history, and personal collections; some of these sources are in Chinese and some are not.¹¹

⁹ Nevertheless, the names of many athletic participants are often given in *Sports Yearbooks*, but without context. I have found this useful in tracing the movements of individual athletes internationally, though it is nearly impossible to pinpoint an athlete’s origins within or beyond China.

¹⁰ Saunier, *Transnational History*, 3.

¹¹ Although I have previously worked in the archives of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Lausanne, Switzerland, and in Chinese archives, this chapter includes few sources from these institutions because of the difficulties described in pursuing a topic that does not follow the mainstream, nation-based, Olympic-centered narrative in international sport. Archival materials on the World Festival of Youth and Students that I use in this chapter primarily come from the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam and are publicly accessible. I am enormously grateful to Bruce Wigo, the ISOHF president, for reaching out to me, and to Huang Hongjiu, who graciously shared not only stories, but also his personal collection of photographs. The Chinese-language materials I use in this chapter include newspapers, magazines, and yearbooks, many of which I found in major libraries outside China or purchased myself (yearbooks can sometimes be found in the ChinaMaxx database, but sports periodicals from the Mao era have not been digitized and are not available online). In 2010–2011, I spent several months in the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives (before it mysteriously closed in 2013 and then reopened with most materials reclassified) and the Beijing Municipal Archives broadly researching “sports and physical culture” (*tiyu*) under Mao; that is how I obtained a few documents related to the Olympic committee from the early 1950s that are discussed in this chapter. However, to date, the Chinese State Sports Commission’s archives were not and have never been made publicly accessible, even during the decade prior to Xi Jinping – what is now considered to be a time in which most archives were relatively “open.” Since then, the situation has deteriorated

Finally, a transnational perspective also helps to provide a voice to, and sketch out an understanding of, an oft-forgotten group in early PRC history: ethnically Chinese athletes who, in official language, had “returned” to the motherland (*hui guo*) to help build a new China. The CCP, like the Guomindang (GMD), had been interested in and forged links with the overseas Chinese community in the decades prior to 1949, in part through the “united front” policy.¹² After 1949, the early PRC government strengthened the united front policy into an institution that included handling domestic overseas Chinese.¹³ In late 1953, the government began to officially give overseas Chinese preferential treatment and privileges, in the hope that they would invest and participate in the larger project to transform China into a socialist state.¹⁴ In the case of athletes, as this chapter will show, preferential treatment began earlier for those with crucial skills that the new government needed for this project.

The choice given to overseas Chinese to return (i.e., migrate to mainland China) must be put in the context of the post-Civil War and early Cold War moment in which, as Taomo Zhou notes, overseas Chinese were “at the center of a global battle for hearts and minds fought between the Chinese Communists and Nationalists.”¹⁵ Recent scholarship has looked at how this rivalry played out among ethnic Chinese communities located in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Mexico, and the United States.¹⁶ In Indonesia, the Sukarno government forged diplomatic relations with the PRC following its own independence, even while the local

and it is likely that, since early 2020, some or all of the documents I previously accessed at the Foreign Ministry archives have been reclassified. This makes it incredibly difficult to research the inner workings of state-sponsored sports institutions at the central level.

¹² Originally adopted by the CCP in the 1920s and then in the 1930s for the purposes of allying with the GMD to defeat Japan, this policy, Glen Peterson notes, was one of the major ways prior to 1949 in which the CCP interacted with overseas Chinese communities, especially in Hong Kong. Glen Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China* (London: Routledge, 2012), 18, 19.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the pre-1949 history of the united front policy and its transformation in the transition to socialism, see Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism and Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁴ Glen Peterson notes that this included, among other things, exclusive investment opportunities and access to consumer goods unavailable to the public, and that it protected them from larger “social and economic transformations” at the time. Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China*, 55–56.

¹⁵ Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 12.

¹⁶ This topic has proliferated in the last decade. For politics in Indonesia, see Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution*. For other countries, see, for example, Kung Chien-Wen, “In the Name of Anticommunism: Chinese Practices of Ideological Accommodation in the Early Cold War Philippines,” *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 5 (2019): 1543–1573; Fujio Hara, *Malayan Chinese and China* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2003); Fredy Gonzalez, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics among Chinese Immigrants in*

Chinese population continued to experience discrimination; internally, the local ethnic Chinese community also split into pro-Beijing and pro-Taipei contingents. For those who decided to migrate to mainland China, I agree with Zhou's assessment that they displayed agency and autonomy in their decisions to do so during a rare time of fluid identities, contested citizenships, and wavering political loyalties.¹⁷ This chapter is the first attempt to investigate the lives, agency, and autonomy of the overseas Chinese athletes that the early PRC government recruited for their strong sports skills. It attempts to answer a series of basic questions: who were these athletes and what kind of athletic work did they engage in? Why did the new state recruit them, and why did they want to go to the PRC? What kinds of training did they receive and what kind of networks did they help build? How did these experiences change their lives and, conversely, how did their athletic work change sport in China?

I start by outlining the broader historical context within which these athletes were situated. First, the participation of overseas Chinese representing China at the 1948 London Olympics helps lay groundwork for continuities and discontinuities between the Republican wartime pre-1949 and the post-1949 early PRC period. I then discuss the early PRC project to invest in sport, focusing on reasons behind the agenda to join the socialist bloc in sport and China's interest in the 1951 World Festival of Youth and Students. Using Huang Hongjiu and his now-famous teammate, Wu Chuanyu, as examples, I show how such "returned" Chinese helped build transnational networks and competitive water sport programs in the early PRC. PRC sports leaders were not the first to recruit such ethnically Chinese athletes from elsewhere to represent China on the world stage, but the PRC government was the first to label them "returned" Chinese athletes and provide them with training and amenities, all under a patriotic rubric of creating state-sponsored sports programs as part of building a "new" China. Above all, PRC sports leaders hoped that such athletes would serve at least two immediate goals: building China's elite sports programs and raising the international image of China and Chinese sport, especially within the socialist bloc but also more broadly. This was accomplished through providing these recruited athletes with everyday, on-the-ground training (and, especially later in the 1950s and into the 1960s, coaching), and in having them

Mexico (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); Meredith Oyen, *The Diplomacy of Migration: Transnational Lives and the Making of U.S.-Chinese Relations in the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); and Charlotte Brooks, *Between Mao and McCarthy: Chinese American Politics in the Cold War Years* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution*, 4.

represent China in the bustling socialist bloc sports network, which included large-scale international events like the biannual World Festival of Youth and Students. Such events had both symbolic importance for the new socialist nation – to be recognized internationally as a member of the socialist bloc – as well as a concrete purpose in connecting these athletes with those in the socialist bloc to exchange technical sports skills.

Overseas Chinese Athletes at the 1948 London Olympics

There is a history of overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) representing China at international sports events prior to the establishment of the PRC. It was quite easy, in fact, for many ethnic Chinese to participate in such events because of the 1909 Nationality Law. The law, based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, stated that “any person born of a Chinese father, or of a Chinese mother where the nationality of the father was unknown or indeterminate, was a Chinese citizen, regardless of place of birth.”¹⁸ Those in charge of the Republic of China’s representation at sporting events clearly took advantage of this law as needed; the delegation sent to the 1948 London Olympics is a prominent example.

At least one contemporary observer considered China’s participation in the 1948 London Olympics to be a feat in itself.¹⁹ The country was in the midst of a Civil War following the end of the war against Japan, and personnel and resources for sports programs were in short supply. Moreover, international sport was hardly the top priority either of the fledgling Nationalist government (in which some officials were already fleeing to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other countries) or of a Communist Party focused on its own guerilla warfare tactics and land reform efforts in the countryside. It thus seems unsurprising that, as Andrew Morris has noted, China’s participation at the London Olympics was an epic failure. In addition to winning no medals, as had previously happened at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the underfunded delegation attempted to save money by bringing its own food along and there were insufficient funds to buy return tickets home, leaving the delegation to sell its remaining food and ask for small donations.²⁰

In spite of this failure, however, the delegation itself was quite unique. It was not, as the same contemporary observer noted, “athletes from all over

¹⁸ Stephen Fitzgerald, *China and the Overseas Chinese: A Study of Peking’s Changing Policy, 1949–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 6.

¹⁹ Hsieh Chang-an, “Development of Physical Education in China,” *China Weekly Review*, June 19, 1948.

²⁰ Andrew Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 236–237.

the country,”²¹ but rather a group of ethnically Chinese athletes cobbled together from “Greater China” (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore), the Philippines, Indonesia, and even the Netherlands. In contrast to the delegation of more than 200 athletes that had attended the 1936 Berlin Olympics, only twenty-six athletes from mainland China went to London.²² The football team was primarily Hong Kong players, hailing from clubs like Sing Tao SC and Kowloon Motor Bus. Only one of the three in athletics came from mainland China (“deaf and mute” Lou Wenao);²³ the other two came from Taiwan (Chen Ying-long or Chen Yinglang) and Singapore/Malaysia (Ng Liang-Chiang). Howard Wing was a half-Chinese Dutch cyclist who had never even been to China when he first competed for the country at Berlin in 1936. The basketball team, which did include a few mainland Chinese players, such as Wu Chengzhang and Li Zhenzhong,²⁴ also included players from the Philippines (Edward Lee and Jose Yee) and Wee Tian-Siak – a Singaporean player who went on to compete for the Republic of China at the Helsinki Olympics in 1952 and then for Singapore at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956.²⁵ And then there’s one of the main subjects of this

²¹ Hsieh, “Development of Physical Education in China.”

²² Some sources cite a delegation of thirty-one, but according to Olympic documents five of these were in the arts competition and did not compete in sport; twenty-six were listed as “competitors.” Organising Committee for the XIV Olympiad, *The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the XIV Olympiad* (London: Organising Committee for the XIV Olympiad, 1948), 546, at <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll8/id/5717/>, accessed February 25, 2020.

²³ Lou’s case is somewhat tragic in that he seems to have been taken advantage of by a former teammate Wang Zhenglin and then ultimately ended up as a janitor in Hong Kong for the rest of his life, passing away possibly sometime in the 1960s – but this is according to online sources of questionable repute. I have been unable to find any trace of him after 1949 in reputable secondary sources.

²⁴ “1948 Chinese Basketball Player Revisits London,” *BBC News*, August 4, 2012, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-19117763>; and “64 Years Later, a Chance to Relive London Memories,” *China Daily*, August 8, 2012, at http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/europe/2012-08/08/content_15652624.htm. Li Zhenzhong remained on the mainland, where he is remembered for his significant contributions to basketball. Du Chenglin, “Li Zhenzhong de lanqiu shengya ji qi dui wo guo lanqiu yungong de gongjian,” *Lantai shijie*, December 2014, 121–122. Later a professor at Shanghai Normal University, he celebrated his 100th birthday in 2015 on the campus and Yao Ming apparently made an appearance. “Professor Li Zhenzhong’s 100th Birthday Celebrated by 100 people, Yao Ming Included,” *Shanghai Normal University*, at http://host.shnu.edu.cn/Default.aspx?tabid=5169&ctl=Details&mid=10176&ItemID=157492&SkinSrc=%5BL%5DSkins/english_2_news/english_2_news.

²⁵ This is somewhat surprising and speaks volumes about the state of sports programs in China at the time because basketball was clearly one of the sports in which China had significant experience and long-standing programs for both men and women. See Morris, *Marrow of the Nation*; and Gao Yunxiang, *Sporting Gender: Women Athletes and Celebrity-Making during China's National Crisis, 1931-45* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013). It is

chapter – whom I will discuss in further detail below – Indonesian swimmer Go Tjoan-Giok, known also by his Chinese name, Wu Chuanyu.²⁶

In short, being an ethnically Chinese athlete in 1948 meant that one could, at least from a technical standpoint, fluidly change national identity in order to compete. The more pressing issue had to do with money and long-term training: who, or which nation, would pay for someone to pursue a career in sport and compete internationally?

China Joins the Socialist World of Sport

Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the new leadership worked hard to establish its control nationwide, while also rebuilding a country devastated by years of war and still sending off soldiers to fight in the campaign to “Resist America/Aid Korea.” An oft-told story about PRC sport in the early 1950s concerns the battle with the Republic of China (Taiwan) for sole recognition by the International Olympic Committee (IOC).²⁷ This is an important story, to be sure, but as far as the PRC leadership was concerned, competitive sport in these years was less about the Olympics and much more about strengthening the new socialist state’s legitimacy domestically, while also reaffirming political solidarities with its allies.²⁸ The state-sponsored sports system was still

unclear exactly why mainland China had trouble finding athletes and coaches at the time – was it a question of organization or were these people unavailable (in areas heavily affected by the Civil War, or where families had already fled, and so on)? Further research will be required to determine what happened to those involved in these earlier programs, but we know about a few from memoirs and oral histories. Former basketball player and coach Tang Mingxin, for example, was in Taiwan already and remained there following the Communist takeover. Chang Chi-hsiung, Pan Kwang-che, and Wang Ching-ling, *Tang Mingxin xiansheng fangwen jilu* (The Reminiscences of Mr. Tang Ming-hsin) (Taipei: The Institute of Modern Chinese History Academia Sinica, 2005), 275.

²⁶ The 1948 London games program lists him under his Indonesian name, while histories of Chinese sport list him as Wu Chuanyu. Organising Committee for the XIV Olympiad, *The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the XIV Olympiad*. Tang Mingxin, *Wo guo canjia aoyunhui congshi (shang bian)* (The History of Our Country’s Participation in the Olympics 1949–1996 (Part 1)) (Taipei: Zhonghua taibei aolinpike weiyuanhui, 2000), 393.

²⁷ During these years the PRC’s policy in sport was to refuse joining any international sports organization that also recognized the Republic of China (Taiwan) (the so-called “two-Chinas” issue). Given the battle for PRC recognition in the International Olympic Committee, which remained unresolved in the first half of the 1950s, this essentially meant that PRC participation in sport outside the socialist bloc was quite limited. Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), especially Chapter 5, “The ‘Two Chinas’ Question”; and Susan Brownell, “Sports and Politics Don’t Mix’: China’s Relationship with the IOC during the Cold War,” in Stephen Wagg and David Andrews, eds., *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

²⁸ In fact, as I have shown elsewhere, deference to the Soviet Union’s position on sport was common in these early years. When PRC leaders received an invitation in February 1951

under development, and sports interactions with the socialist bloc offered crucial opportunities not only to compete but also both to learn from existing socialist models and to solidify China's place in a Soviet-led socialist world.

The PRC leadership was focused on adopting mass sports programs based on Soviet models, while also interested in understanding Soviet competitive programs and the country's athletic ranking system. One of the most prominent examples of this was the "Ready for Labor and Defense" *tiyu* system. This system (abbreviated as the GTO in Russian and as the *laoweizhi* in Chinese) aimed to extend sports participation and raise the level of all-around physical fitness among ordinary citizens. The system's main goal was ostensibly to cultivate physically fit individuals who in their spare time voluntarily engaged in regular exercise. To accomplish this, participants trained regularly in order to pass fitness tests and receive badges at various levels. But it was more than just fitness: the system included the development of paramilitary skills, as well as courses on hygiene, health, and first aid.²⁹ Although the system's core offered a general fitness program that aimed to connect all-around bodily training to national labor and defense goals, its various levels also provided a way to build a nationally ranked system of competitive athletes.³⁰ By the 1950s, the "Ready for Labor and Defense" *tiyu* system had become a de facto marker of sports and physical culture in the socialist bloc. Chinese sports leaders had high hopes for adopting this model not only to show reverence for learning from the Soviet Union but also in

sent by the Helsinki organizing committee for the upcoming 1952 Olympics, the All-China Sports Federation decided that, although they believed the PRC should participate, the decision hinged on whether or not the Soviet Union would also participate. Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives (CFMA) 113-00097-01: Guanyu woguo shifou canjia shiwujie aolinpike yundonghui (zai Fenlan) de youguan wenjian (Related Documents Concerning Whether or Not Our Nation Participates in the 15th Olympic Games (in Finland)). Most likely this response was made because the Soviet Union, which had not yet officially participated in any Olympic Games, was not yet an IOC member. In late April 1951, Soviet leaders, perhaps because of the IOC's decision to consider allowing "two Germanies" to join, finally decided they would participate in 1952 and sent a telegram to the IOC; in May the IOC voted to recognize their Olympic Committee. Jenifer Parks, "Red Sport, Red Tape: The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War, 1952-1980" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2009), 51-53. In order to remain in solidarity with their "Soviet elder brother" in the face of the IOC, it seems that PRC leaders waited for the outcome of these events. See Shuman, "The Politics of Socialist Athletics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1966," 84-89.

²⁹ James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 128-129.

³⁰ Xu Yingchao, "Sulian tiyu de jidian jieshao" (Some Introduction to Soviet *tiyu*), *Xin tiyu*, January 1951, 14.

order to join the rest of the Soviet-led socialist bloc on the same playing field.

Sports competitions with socialist bloc countries – or “friendly” learning experiences, as they were sometimes called – were also considered vital to bettering China’s position in the international socialist movement as they emphasized the unilateral nature of the Sino-Soviet relationship. The point of these early exchanges was explicitly to study Soviet sports models and the training methods of socialist bloc athletes, and to begin to use sports activities as a way to foster stronger relations with other countries. Chinese sports leaders also claimed that working with their Soviet comrades in international sport matters further helped relations between the countries. This attitude extended to athletes and leaders in the rest of the Soviet-led world, whom Chinese publications portrayed as comrades-in-arms seeking to achieve worldwide peace together through international socialism.

The Soviet-led socialist world of sport in the 1950s was very transnational. Translations of various materials – sports news, technical handbooks, and articles about (or written by) famous coaches and athletes – circulated throughout the Eastern bloc and China. *Xin tiyu* (New Sport) magazine often translated articles directly from Russian on topics ranging from political theory to mass sport in the Soviet Union and elite athletic achievements and international success. Articles on technical skills or movements within specific sports often taught readers through precise descriptions and depictions. In August 1953, *Xin tiyu* covered the training of elite Soviet athletes in track and field, accompanied by photographs or hand drawings illustrating proper technique. One article depicts the Soviet national record holder for the women’s eighty-meter hurdles in thirteen still shots.³¹ A reader could put these skills into practice without much further guidance. Each issue of the magazine also included a section called “International Sports News in Brief” that highlighted recent elite athletic events in the Soviet Union and notable socialist bloc sports achievements worldwide. This section appeared in nearly every issue of *Xin tiyu*; some months a reader would be hard-pressed to find any article in the magazine that did not mention the USSR.

In issues of *Xin tiyu* in the early 1950s, Soviet experts, techniques, theories, and models saturated the entire realm of sports and physical culture. Soviet documentaries and books were translated, and an official directive from the Ministry of Higher Education in April 1953 called for the recruitment and hiring of Soviet specialists. The Beijing Sports and

³¹ Ge Wu, “Ye-lin-na.Ge-ji-hao-li ba shi gongchi dilan de jishu” (Elena Gokieli’s Technique in the 80-Meter Hurdles), *Xin tiyu*, August 1953, 24–25.

Physical Culture Research Institute, also established in 1953, hired a Soviet theorist in sports and physical culture, as well as experts in physiology, athletics, football, gymnastics, swimming, anatomy, and hygiene.³² These experts helped build what would become the nation's central training institute for athletes, coaches, and sports leaders.

Media coverage of athletes and officials from other countries in the socialist bloc reached its apex during this period. Such exceptional athletes as the great Czechoslovakian distance runner Emil Zátopek merited extensive coverage. Zátopek won three gold medals in track and field at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics,³³ setting the Olympic record in the 5,000-meter and 10,000-meter races. He then decided to enter the marathon, having never run one in his life, and beat the reigning British champion while setting a new Olympic record.³⁴ He was frequently referenced in Chinese articles on running, including two prominent pieces in the January 1953 issue of *Xin tiyu*. One of these included a photograph of him in running gear and a detailed description of his innovative interval training methods.³⁵ Ironically, a hand drawing of proper running technique accompanying the article does not seem to resemble Zátopek's style at all,³⁶ which was notorious in the running world for being sloppy and labored.³⁷

Zátopek was also held up as a model athlete for readers to follow because of his dedication to the army and devotion to communism. Accompanied by a photo of Zátopek in his military uniform, another article in the same issue of *Xin tiyu* profiled his army background and noted his loyalty.³⁸ The CCP also considered the PLA an important part of its continued success and it often encouraged youth to join. Many Chinese competitive athletes in the 1950s came from the army,³⁹ a trend not unusual for socialist bloc

³² Beijing tiyu xueyuan xiaozhi, comp., *Beijing tiyu xueyuan zhi* (Beijing Tiyu Research Institute Records) (Beijing: Beijing tiyu xueyuan xiaozhi bianxiezu, 1994), 176–177.

³³ "Shijie wenming de changpao jianjiang Za-tuo-pei-ke" (World-Famous Long-Distance Runner Zatopek), *Xin tiyu*, January 1953, 18.

³⁴ Tim Noakes, *Lore of Running*, 4th ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2003), 382–385.

³⁵ A. Bu-jia-qie-fu-si-jii, "Za-tuo-pei-ke de changpao lianxifa" (Zátopek's Long-Distance Training Methods), *Xin tiyu*, January 1953, 20–21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁷ Allison Danzig, "Going the Distance," *New York Times*, July 27, 1952. Danzig wrote, "his little phenomenon of almost super-human endurance and with the most agonizing running style within memory sped 26 miles, 385 yards 6 minutes and 16 seconds faster than an Olympic marathon had ever been traversed before."

³⁸ Ma-he Ya-luo-mi-er, "Yi ge yisheng xinmu zhong de Za-tuo-pei-ke" (Zátopek in the Eyes of a Doctor), *Xin tiyu*, January 1953, 18–19.

³⁹ Two athletes from the army who became well known for their international achievements in the mid- to late 1950s were weightlifter Chen Jingkai and female high jumper Zheng

sport. Articles like these on Zátópek thus forged a close link for readers between his athletic duties and obligations to the army, nation, and communist party.

China received official sports delegations at home and sent their own abroad. As I have described in detail elsewhere, smaller events and goodwill tours made up the majority of these exchanges, which aimed simultaneously to exchange sports skills, link athletes and coaches within the socialist bloc, and build on existing political solidarities. Famous teams and athletes from socialist bloc countries, ubiquitous in the Chinese press, made their rounds to China. Most of the gold-medal-winning Soviet gymnastics squad from the Helsinki 1952 Olympics toured China in 1953, an event highlighted in a subsequent Chinese-narrated newsreel showcasing each athlete in action and listing their achievements. A Hungarian football contingent visited in 1954, just a few months before the country sent its “Magical Magyars” to the World Cup final, and toured the country with Chinese “study” teams in tow.⁴⁰ Zátópek himself visited China on more than one occasion, including in 1958 when he watched the first official Chinese marathoners surpass his own Olympic marathon time.⁴¹

Larger sports competitions outside the Olympics also took place in these years. Perhaps the most attended and diverse were those sponsored by the WFYS. Following World War II, the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the International Union of Students founded these mega-events. In the first decade, these events took place every two years in the Soviet-led socialist bloc – Prague 1947, Budapest 1949, Berlin 1951, Bucharest 1953, Warsaw 1955, Moscow 1957 – and included the participation of thousands of athletes. Given the sponsorship and locales, they are generally understood to have been fronts for Soviet interests. They were a common feature of the international socialist landscape, and propaganda surrounding the events touted them as promoting friendship, unity, peace, and similar ideals (Figure 3.1).

Festival organizers strove hard to draw as many people as possible to the two-week events, to make these events high-profile, and to attract media

Fengrong. However, even in the early 1950s, the army was the source of athletes for many sports. For example, of fourteen top track and field athletes profiled in a *New Sport* article in November 1953, eight came from the army, three were students, and three were workers. Diao Yi and Li Youkun, “Chuangzao quanguo zuigao jilu de yundongyuanmen” (Athletes Creating the Highest National Records), *Xin tiyu*, November 1953, 10–11.

⁴⁰ Amanda Shuman, “Learning from the Soviet Big Brother: The Early Years of Sport in the People's Republic of China,” in Robert Edelman and Chris Young, eds., *The Whole World Was Watching: Sport In The Cold War* (Stanford University Press, December 2019).

⁴¹ Bo Dawei, “‘Da yundongliang’ shi fengshou zhi lu,” *Xin tiyu*, November 21, 1958; “Zatópek’s Mark Cut,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1958.



Figure 3.1 The front of a Soviet postcard from a WFYS event (undated)
Source: personal collection

attention worldwide. The general and somewhat vague political message of “peace” was often forthright in festival materials. A slogan on the front cover of a brochure promoting the 1951 festival in Berlin stated in all capitals, “Youth unite in the struggle for peace against the danger of a new war.”⁴² The socialist bloc and Soviet-leaning nations like China often sent large delegations, and by the 1950s more than 100 countries were represented at the festivals. Every other year, these mega-events became sites for the circulations of and interactions between young people not only from the Eastern bloc and socialist-leaning countries, but also from Western Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia.⁴³ Political and academic meetings,

⁴² International Institute for Social History Amsterdam (IISH), World Festival of Youth and Students Collection (ARCH01667), folder “III. Berlin,” brochure titled “Third World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace! Berlin 5–19 August 1951.”

⁴³ Of course, not all governments approved, so some people had to make their own travel arrangements and pay their own way. For example, in the McCarthy era it is unsurprising that the USA was notorious for making it difficult for people to travel to such events. Battles between Americans asserting their travel rights also made headlines in the *New York Times* when the event was held in Moscow in 1957. It didn’t help that some of these Americans were invited to China and then traveled there afterwards. A quick Google search of some of those who attended pulls up US congressional record hearings from the Committee on Un-American Activities on Google books related to their WFYS-related experience. For a more thorough account of the WFYS as a phenomenon and all

cultural events, sports, and sightseeing were all on the agenda; festival guides and maps in multiple languages were distributed to attendees. And – as indicated by event programs and the high numbers of athletes listed on delegation rosters – the sports events and competitions were a significant component of each festival.⁴⁴

The WFYS gave the PRC's top athletes a way to compete internationally when their Olympic participation increasingly seemed like a pipe dream. PRC involvement in *tiyu* outside the socialist bloc was in a state of flux during these first few years and primarily followed whatever was best for their position vis-à-vis the Soviets. For example, when PRC leaders received an invitation in February 1951 sent by the Helsinki organizing committee for the upcoming 1952 Olympics, the All-China Sports Federation decided that, although they believed that the PRC should participate, the decision hinged on whether or not the Soviet Union would also participate.⁴⁵ Once the Soviets had decided to join, however, Chinese leaders followed suit – but they faced their own battle with the IOC, in what became known as the so-called “two-Chinas” issue. IOC rules technically stated that each nation could have only one national olympic committee, but the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan each claimed to be “China.”⁴⁶ Just a few days before the opening

the resistance it met, see the plethora of information from numerous archives gathered in Nick Rutter, “Enacting Communism: The World Youth Festival, 1945–1975” (unpublished PhD diss., Yale University, 2013). I should note that the IISH archival files also contain numerous “reports” made by anglophone festival visitors (or spies, perhaps, in some cases) that contain a strong anticommunist/anti-Soviet tone.

⁴⁴ By 1955, every festival participant, whether athlete or not, could also earn a sports badge by completing certain sports activities. The sports badge was thus reminiscent of the Soviet-inspired “Ready for Labor and Defense” system discussed earlier in this chapter. For example, a “My Festival Diary” produced for the 1955 event in Warsaw included the section titled “Everybody to the Contests for the Festival Sports Badge.” The introductory paragraph professed to participants that winning a badge would “testify to your physical efficiency” and “be one more souvenir from the Festival.” The section included a table with three groups of activities in which personal results from sports events (e.g., “60 m. run,” “High jump,” “Throwing the ball” and so forth) could be penciled in, with specific standards for either a “silver” or “gold” badge. To be awarded a badge, participants had to complete “one standard in each of the three groups of exercises.” A list of locations on where to compete for a “Festival Sports Badge” included school stadiums and kindergartens, open every day during the festival from nine in the morning to one in the afternoon. IISH, World Festival of Youth and Students Collection (ARCH01667), folder “V. Warsaw.”

⁴⁵ Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives (CFMA) 113-00097-01: Guanyu woguo shifou canjia shiwujie aolinpike yundonghui (zai fenlan) de youguan wenjian (Related Documents Concerning Whether or Not Our Nation Participates in the 15th Olympic Games (in Finland)).

⁴⁶ Christopher Hill, *Olympic Politics* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 44–45. For the specifics on what happened in these early years, see Shuman, “The Politics of Socialist Athletics,” 92–96.

ceremonies at Helsinki, the IOC decided to allow both PRC and ROC delegations to attend as “China.”⁴⁷ Neither accepted this decision, but when the ROC withdrew in protest, the PRC decided to send a delegation. However, the decision had been made so late that it arrived six days after the start of the Games and only one swimmer (none other than Wu Chuanyu; see below) was able to officially compete. Even after the IOC changed its rules in 1954 to allow territories under the control of a national olympic committee to receive the same recognition as nations, official PRC policy during this period continued to dictate that the PRC would refuse to participate in any event that also recognized the ROC as China.⁴⁸ For this reason, the PRC missed out on many events in these years held under the auspices of international federations.⁴⁹

Participation in events like the WFYS thus provided a much more fruitful space for those in the Chinese sports world to forge new connections. Soviet and socialist bloc athletes, among the best in the world, attended these festivals. China had apparently sent a men’s basketball team to the Budapest World Student Games in August 1949 (held in conjunction with the WFYS), where the team placed sixth out of nine participants.⁵⁰ But two years after the official establishment of the PRC, China sent a slightly larger delegation, which included men’s basketball and volleyball teams, to the event in Berlin.⁵¹ The brochure for the 1951 Berlin WFYS boasted the attendance of world-class athletes and boldly stated that the festival was “the only international event where every aspect of the culture and sport of all the peoples of the world finds its highest expression.”⁵² Outside the Olympic Games – in which it should be remembered that the Soviet Union did not take part until 1952 – this was the premier venue for sports competition. And even after socialist bloc athletes like Soviet gymnast Nina Bocharova and Czechoslovakian Emil Zátopek won gold in Helsinki, they still competed at the WFYS.⁵³

⁴⁷ Morris, *Marrow of the Nation*, 238–239.

⁴⁸ Liang Lijuan, *He Zhenliang and China’s Olympic Dream* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2007), 46–47.

⁴⁹ The exception, of course, is table tennis. For a detailed explanation of why, see Nicholas Griffin, *Ping-Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History behind the Game That Changed the World* (New York: Scribner, 2014).

⁵⁰ *Tiyu nianjian 1949–1962*, 891. All nations, except for France, were firmly in the socialist bloc. In order of finishing place, the participants were: the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, France, North Korea, China/PRC, Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania.

⁵¹ *Tiyu nianjian 1949–1962*, 34. Approximately 26,000 participants were at the Berlin WFYS.

⁵² IISH, “Third World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace! Berlin 5–19 August 1951.”

⁵³ Bocharova and Zátopek are also famous for having later visited China at various times, where they were hailed as model athletes. Elsewhere, using primarily Chinese archival sources, I discuss the visits of star gymnasts from the Soviet Union and top football players from Hungary to China in the early 1950s. See Shuman, “Learning from the

Thus for the new PRC leadership, the appeal of participation in the WFYS included fostering “friendly” relations with new political allies and promoting a positive national image, while also offering the Chinese sports world more opportunities to connect with top athletes and coaches.

Transnational “Returned” Chinese Athletes

Chinese sports leaders, in their efforts to build elite competitive sports programs for this new and growing world of international sport, also scrambled to tap into all potential resources available. One of those resource bases was the overseas Chinese population. Over the course of the 1950s, recruitment efforts to bring ethnically Chinese athletes “back” to China existed in at least several sports. Unlike during the Republican and wartime periods, these athletes were brought to the mainland for training (and, it seems, some received more benefits and resources than other “returned” Chinese at the time).⁵⁴ Table tennis is the best-known case – Rong Guotuan, China’s first World Champion in 1959, was originally from Hong Kong, as were two prominent coaches.⁵⁵ At least one famous woman table tennis player recruited in the late 1950s, Lin Huiqing, was from Indonesia.⁵⁶

One venue in which Chinese sports leaders scouted and recruited such athletes was the World Festivals of Youth and Students. In fact, also at the 1951 WFYS in Berlin were Huang Hongjiu and his teammate Wu Chuanyu, both competing as part of the delegation for the newly independent Indonesian nation and under their Indonesian names of Oei Hong Kioe and Go Tjoan Giok. The team had traveled for forty days from Indonesia,⁵⁷ and, according to Huang (Oei), spent about two months in Germany training prior to the event (Figure 3.2). *Neues Deutschland*, mouthpiece of the East German government, published

Soviet Big Brother.” (The full citation information is already in footnote 40, hence this is the second instance of the reference and only the short citation is needed.)

⁵⁴ This is an issue I am still investigating, based on Glen Peterson’s excellent work on the subject of “returned” Chinese and the evidence I have on a few athletes. See Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People’s Republic of China*.

⁵⁵ Griffin, *Ping-Pong Diplomacy*, Chapter 15, “Reconnaissance,” describes the process of recruitment.

⁵⁶ Liang Yingming, *Pinbo yu fengxian: Yindunixiya guiqiao linhuiqing de pingpang qiu rensheng* (Hard Work and Dedication: The Table Tennis Life of Lin Huiqing, a Returned Overseas Chinese from Indonesia) (Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, 2015). Badminton is another case I am currently exploring.

⁵⁷ “Go Tjoan Giok (Indonesien): ‘Ich werde unsere Jugend aufrufen, den Freiheitskampf zu verstaerken,’” *Neues Deutschland*, August 18, 1951, 6.



Figure 3.2 Huang (left) and Wu (right) with a German coach in East Berlin, 1951

Source: Photograph courtesy of Huang Hongjiu

a greeting in German signed by the Indonesian swimmers using their Indonesian names, which thanked the Free German Youth for a “warm, brotherly welcome” and ended with “Long live peace!” (Figure 3.3).

Wu attracted further media attention when he surprised many with his silver medal win in the 100-meter backstroke and a bronze medal in the 100-meter butterfly.⁵⁸ An article in *Neues Deutschland* mentioned these wins and included a photograph of Wu with his handwritten greeting, stating, “Hereby I’m greeting the readers of Neues Deutschland and wishing them good wishes in their fight for an ever lasting Peace! Es lebe Wilhelm Pieck!”⁵⁹ The publication of this piece, with its message of peace and support of the German Democratic Republic and (allegedly) delivered by an athlete hailing from a recently decolonized and socialist-leaning nation, was clearly an intentional message from the East German government that political solidarities ran deep.

⁵⁸ Huang claims that the only reason Wu did not do better in the butterfly is because he did not know the new technique in fashion, the use of a dolphin kick.

⁵⁹ “Long live Wilhelm Pieck!” Pieck was the first president of the GDR. “Indonesische Schwimmer verliessen Berlin,” *Neues Deutschland*, September 18, 1951.

Ein Gruß der indonesischen Schwimmer

Kami pemberebang 2 Indonesia dalam XIth Summer Games di Berlin member slamet dan bahagia pada para pembatja „N. D“.

Kami sangat gembira dapat ambil bagian dalam pertandingan internasional dan merasa sangat ber-bina kasih pada F. D. J. untuk penerimaan kami yang hangat dan dalam suasana persaudaraan.

Damai.

Berlin, 16/8-51

„Wir indonesischen Schwimmer, die wir an den XI. Akademischen Sommerspielen in Berlin teilgenommen haben, grüßen die Leser des ‚ND‘. Wir sind glücklich, daß wir bei diesen freundschaftlichen internationalen Wettkämpfen dabei sein konnten, und danken besonders der Freien Deutschen Jugend für den herzlichen, brüderlichen Empfang. Es lebe der Friede!“

Berlin, den 18. August 1951.

Tan Kong Sing

Oei Hong Kioe

Go Tjoan Giok“

Figure 3.3 “A greeting from the Indonesian swimmers”

Source: *Neues Deutschland*, August 18, 1951

Wu’s second-place win in Berlin also quickly garnered the attention of a new set of Chinese sports leaders. According to Huang Hongjiu, one of these leaders knew that the Indonesian delegation “were not Indonesian” and invited them to visit Beijing immediately. So the delegation made the train trek to China via Poland and Moscow and across Siberia (eleven days on a train, says Huang). After they arrived in Beijing in October 1951, the Indonesians were given the option to join the newly established national swim team in the PRC (Figure 3.4).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ According to an online piece by the International Swimming Hall of Fame, which inaugurated Wu Chuanyu in summer 2017, the other two were Chen Gongcheng and a coach named Guo Deguang. See www.ishof.org/wu-chuanyu.html, accessed February 17, 2020.



Figure 3.4 The Indonesian delegation in Beijing, October 1951. In the back row are Huang Hongjiu (left) and Wu Chuanyu (right)
Source: Photograph courtesy of Huang Hongjiu

According to Huang, it was an easy decision for him and Wu to join the new PRC team because they loved to swim. The two had grown up together in Salatiga (Java) and studied the swimming techniques of swimmer-turned-Hollywood actor Johnny Weissmuller of Tarzan fame. Indonesia did not have a national team training program – “Johnny Weissmuller was our coach,” joked Huang in his interview with me – and the Indonesian delegation’s travel expenses were mostly self-paid through family and private donations. The official line in the Chinese press was, as it was for many overseas Chinese who came to the PRC in the early 1950s, that athletes like Huang and Wu had “returned to the motherland” (*hui dao zuguo*).⁶¹ In short, and in contrast to the earlier government, the PRC openly claimed these athletes and willingly funded them. Huang stated that the Indonesian side was discontent, noting that “my brother sent me a[n Indonesian] newspaper [that said] Wu Chuanyu, Huang Hongjiu, and Chen

⁶¹ Wu Chuanyu, “Wo wei zuguo yingde le yi ke jinzhi jiangzhang” (I Won a Gold Medal for the Motherland), *Xin tiyu*, October 1953, 26.

Gongcheng is [*sic*] a traitor.” Official sources in China have usually claimed (and sometimes still claim) that overseas Chinese “returned” for patriotic reasons, but the way Huang describes it, it just seemed like an opportunity too good to turn down – a professional swimming career suddenly seemed feasible.

Huang, Wu, and the others were sent to the Peking University campus for training. None of them could speak much Chinese when they arrived; Wu communicated through an interpreter using English⁶² and, according to Huang, they all took language and politics-related classes at Peking University. Though the lack of Chinese likely made communicating with locals in Beijing difficult, the use of English (and some German) was clearly an asset when dealing with Eastern bloc interpreters, coaches, and athletes.

PRC sports leaders had thus observed and recruited Wu, Huang, and their teammates into the nascent state-sponsored sports system. As previously noted, the PRC was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union, its sports leaders, and its sports model. In stark contrast to the preceding Nationalist government, in which sport was often not state-sponsored and donations or private funds often paid for elite athletes to participate in international competition,⁶³ the new government clearly professed early interest in investing in a robust state-sponsored sports system that cultivated athletes. It sought out athletes like Wu and Huang specifically to help build up this new system.

Over the next few years, a Chinese national swimming team took shape (Figure 3.5). Although Wu was the only representative of the Chinese delegation to participate officially in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics,⁶⁴ Chinese swimmers received training from Hungarian and Soviet coaches in Beijing. Moreover, in June 1953 in the lead-up to the WFYS in Bucharest, Wu was sent to the Soviet Union as part of a larger delegation, where he received

⁶² Wu Chuanyu, “Wo wei zuguo yingde le yi ke jinzhi jiangzhang,” 26; and Li Lingxiu and Zhou Mingong, “Tiyu zhizi Rong Gaotang” (*Tiyu’s Son Rong Gaotang*), *Tiyu wenhua daokan*, February 2003, 67.

⁶³ Morris, *Marrow of the Nation*. See, for example, the sections describing China’s participation in the 1932 and 1936 Olympic Games in the chapter “Elite Competitive Sport in the 1930s,” at 141–184. Among other things, stadiums were paid for by private firms (149) and China’s first visit to the Olympics – a story now documented in the film *The One Man Olympics* (2008) – was funded by warlord Zhang Xueliang. *Ibid.*, 169. The exception was for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, in which the Chinese National Amateur Athletic Federation – the affiliate required to choose athletes to send to the Olympics – agreed to pay transportation, room, and board for athletes, though it also allowed “confident competitors able to pay their own way plus five hundred yuan” for training costs. *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁴ *The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the Games of the the XV Olympiad* (Helsinki: The Organising Committee for the XV Olympiad, 1952), 574, at <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll8/id/4746/rec/1>, accessed February 17, 2020.

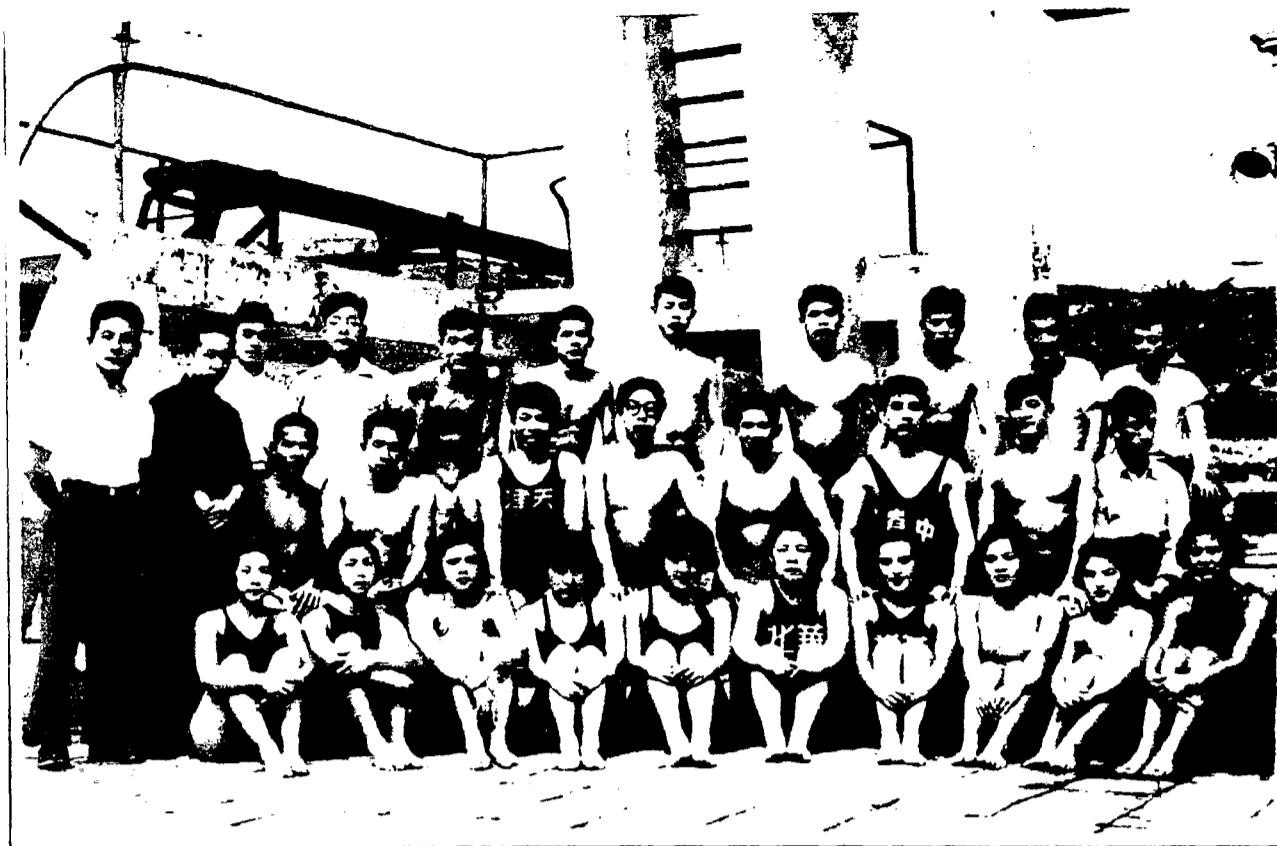


Figure 3.5 Photographs of the Chinese national swim team in 1953. Wu is sitting in the second row, second from left, and Huang is in the second row, fourth from right

Source: Photograph courtesy of Huang Hongjiu

several weeks of daily training from the very best Soviet swimming coach at the time. The hopes were high for Wu; after just eight days of training, the Chinese side reported, he had already improved his swim times.⁶⁵

The PRC leadership did not have to wait long for its investment to pay off. China sent a delegation of eighty athletes, including members of the swim team, to the fourth WFYS in Bucharest in August 1953.⁶⁶ Chinese athletes competed in men's and women's basketball, volleyball, track and field, and swimming, but the highlight of the trip was when twenty-five-year-old Wu won the only gold medal for China in the men's 100-meter backstroke. Following this win, he became a media sensation in China. *Xin tiyu*, which rarely had the opportunity to highlight the international successes of any Chinese athlete in these years, included his victory as part of the "International Sports News Brief" in September 1953.⁶⁷ In October, the magazine included an article that also described his background and

⁶⁵ Li and Zhou, "Tiyu zhizi Rong Gaotang," 68.

⁶⁶ The overall festival attracted approximately 30,000 participants.

⁶⁷ "Wo guo huo yi bai gongchi yangyong diyi" (Our Nation Wins First Place in the 100-Meter Backstroke), *Xin tiyu*, September 1953, 40.



Figure 3.6 Wu Chuanyu, model athlete, arguably the most famous Chinese athlete of the early 1950s, the “Flying Fish” (*feiyu*)
Source: Front cover of *Xin tiyu*, October 1953

experience,⁶⁸ while a huge color photograph of the athlete adorned the front cover (Figure 3.6).⁶⁹ And when the Hungarian football team delegation’s reporter visited Shanghai in early 1954, the Shanghai sports committee set up an interview for Wu with him.⁷⁰ By the time Wu was sent with a delegation of swimming athletes to Hungary that March, the Foreign Ministry no longer even listed his birthplace in official documentation as Indonesia but had changed it to Fujian province (the source of his family ancestry).⁷¹

⁶⁸ Wu Chuanyu, “Wo wei zuguo yingde le yi ke jinzhi jiangzhang,” 26–27.

⁶⁹ *Xin tiyu*, October 1953, cover. The other side of the front cover includes several athletes carrying the flag as part of the athletes’ parade.

⁷⁰ SMA B126-1-86: Zhaodai Xiongyali zuqiudui lai Hu fangwen gongzuo jianbao: di si hao.

⁷¹ CFMA 118-00278-05: Guanyu Zhongguo qingnian zuqiudui, youyongdui fu Xiongyali xuexi de shenpan ji ru guojing qianzheng shi, March 15–19, 1954.

Wu, as he became known, also became a Communist Party member, and the first model athlete that Mao himself extolled. “Do you know who Wu Chuanyu is?” Mao asked Wuhan swimmers during a meeting with them some four years later. “Is there anyone now who can do better than him? [You] should learn from Wu Chuanyu and surpass [him]!”⁷² Wu also set a precedent for future athletes when his international success won him official roles beyond sport: he was named a representative to the First National People’s Congress in September 1954 as the only athlete on the list.⁷³ Just a month later, at the age of twenty-six, he tragically died in a plane crash while traveling to Hungary to resume training.⁷⁴ Sports yearbooks and official publications in China have nevertheless continued to cite Wu’s gold medal in Bucharest as “the first time that the five-star flag was hung.”⁷⁵

Huang, unlike Wu, saw far less success on the international stage, but he did help forge sports networks and build China’s national programs in both swimming and water polo. In the late 1950s, following his own athletic retirement, Huang became a water polo coach at the provincial level in Fujian. The Chinese government has often provided former national-level athletes with sports-related positions following athletic retirement.⁷⁶ When the State Sports Commission ramped up its efforts to build competitive sports programs in the mid-1950s, and especially in 1957 in preparation for the 1959 National Games, it constantly lacked qualified personnel.⁷⁷ Water polo was a new sport in China at the time, but it was already an extremely popular sport in the socialist bloc with deep political implications, as the infamous “blood in the water” match

⁷² CCTV International, “‘Chuanqi aoyun’: jiangshu aoyun chuanqi: Zhongguo de jiao’ao – Wu Chuanyu” (Legends of the Olympic Games: About the Olympic Legend: China’s Pride – Wu Chuanyu), December 17, 2007, at <http://news.cctv.com/china/20071211/107404.shtml>, accessed February 17, 2020.

⁷³ “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo di yi jie quanguo renmin daibiao dahui daibiao mingdan” (First National People’s Congress of the PRC Name List), *Renmin ribao*, September 4, 1954. The only other representatives named from the world of *tiyu* were Rong Gaotang, and Ma Yuehan, who were much older sports leaders at the time. See also Li and Zhou, “Tiyu zhizi Rong Gaotang,” 67.

⁷⁴ “Wo guo youxiu yundongyuan Wu Chuanyu shishi” (The Death of Our Nation’s Elite Athlete Wu Chuanyu), *Renmin ribao*, December 25, 1954.

⁷⁵ “Da shiji,” in *Zhongguo tiyu nianjian 1949–1991*, 6.

⁷⁶ This is most obvious when looking at coaches or trainers in almost any sport, although some former athletes have gone on to administrator positions. Well-known examples include table tennis players Rong Guotuan, Zhuang Zedong, and Qiu Zhonghui, as well as former Mao-era volleyball player Yuan Weimin, who went on to coach the women’s volleyball team to Olympic gold in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Yuan also later was made vice minister and then head of the State Sports Commission. At the provincial level, this also appears to have been the case; one can choose almost any sport in any province and find a pedigree of former athletes in leading positions.

⁷⁷ Shuman, “The Politics of Socialist Athletics,” 184.

between Hungary and the Soviet Union at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics attested.⁷⁸ It thus seems unsurprising that Huang, a top-notch athlete with international experience (though not well known outside swimming circles), was given a head coaching position for the nascent water polo team in Fujian in 1957.⁷⁹ The team fared well over the next few years, including third place at the inaugural National Games in 1959.⁸⁰

Unfortunately, when I interviewed him, Huang preferred not to speak at length about this period of time – perhaps because of personal issues, or perhaps because of his treatment during political campaigns in subsequent years.⁸¹ Huang did not speak of political persecution at any length, but like many overseas Chinese on the mainland during the 1960s, he ran into serious trouble during the Cultural Revolution (although not, apparently, in earlier political campaigns). He spoke about being “sent down” to labor in the early Cultural Revolution, first to a fishing village near the Taiwan Strait until, according to him, authorities worried that he would try to swim across; he was then transferred to a rubber plant inland. He states that he wrote Zhou Enlai five letters about his situation but doubts that his letters ever made it to the premier. Finally, in 1972, he was given the option to leave and join his family in Hong Kong.⁸² A few years later he made his way to the Netherlands, where the rest of his family lived and still reside.

And yet, despite these tumultuous events, it is the photographs and memories of the 1950s that he has carried with him throughout the decades. Huang fondly remembers his friend and teammate Wu, and has visited Wu’s grave to pay his respects on many occasions (including just a few years ago).⁸³ During my interview with him, it was also clear

⁷⁸ There have been numerous news media articles published and two feature-length documentary films produced about this event. For an overview, see Kirsty Reid, “Blood in the Water: Hungary’s 1956 Water Polo Gold,” *BBC News*, August 20, 2011, at www.bbc.com/news/world-14575260, accessed February 11, 2020.

⁷⁹ Fujian sheng difangzhi bianzun weiyuanhui bian, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo difangzhi Fujian shengzhi tiyu zhi* (Fujian: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), 136.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸¹ During our interview, a family member interjected at one point to ask about his “first wife” in the PRC, but he clearly expressed that he did not want to discuss this and I did not press.

⁸² Who exactly gave him this option and how is unclear. The policy on overseas Chinese was apparently relaxed at this time and others left as well. According to Glen Peterson, this was related to the impending visit of President Nixon. Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People’s Republic of China*, 137. Huang insisted it was probably Zhou Enlai who ordered it, which seems plausible, but it is likely also related to the return of Liao Chengzhi, chairman of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, who had been purged in 1967. Fitzgerald, *China and the Overseas Chinese*, 173–179. I have yet to locate any official document from 1972 outlining this policy.

⁸³ Huang also claims that during the Cultural Revolution the photograph of Wu displayed on the grave “disappeared” temporarily, but that at the direct order of Zhou Enlai it suddenly reappeared within a week.

that the friendships he'd made in the socialist bloc continue to linger with him as positive memories, and that he takes pride in the transnational nature that was this experience. It is thus fitting that one photograph he readily shared with me is that of his "friend Erich Jolig" – a swimming coach who worked in Leipzig. Dated February 15, 1957, on the back of the photograph is a short message to Huang written in a mix of German, Chinese, and English (Figure 3.7).

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to understand the lives and role of transnational "returned" Chinese athletes in 1950s China, in the context of the early PRC government's socialist state-building project. This project aimed to transform the masses into socialist subjects through sports and physical culture, while also developing internationally competitive athletic

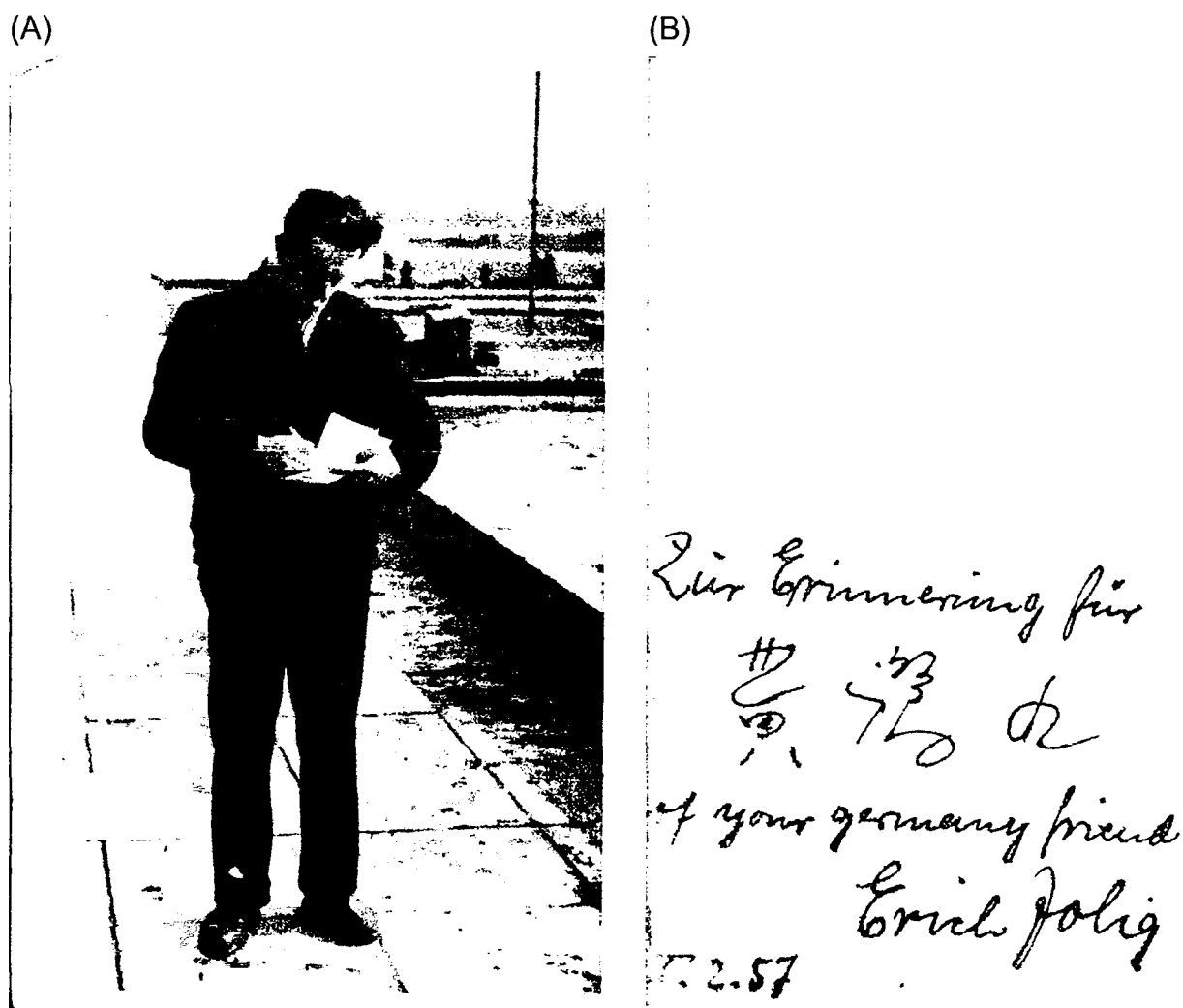


Figure 3.7 Photograph of Erich Jolig next to a swimming pool (A) with a message on the back (B): "A souvenir for Huang Hongjiu of [sic] your Germany friend, Erich Jolig"

Source: courtesy of Huang Hongjiu

programs. A transnational approach is fundamental in understanding this period in early PRC history. Nation-centered histories of the PRC, which have tended to focus on the Olympics, are insufficient in looking at the complexity of a moment in which athletes and other sportspeople frequently moved across the socialist bloc, often for the purpose of exchanging skills, training together, or participating in large-scale, non-Olympic competitions like those at the WFYS . Moreover, as this chapter has specifically demonstrated, nation-centered histories fail to capture the complicated, transnational experiences of ethnically Chinese athletes – recruited from the overseas Chinese population by the PRC government – at a very unique moment in time, to compete for the new socialist state and help build its athletic programs.

Reflecting on Wu Chuanyu's life in hindsight, one can easily see how and why he was claimed by the PRC government as a Chinese athlete and then, following his successes, made into a hero through PRC propaganda. He was a champion swimmer, regardless of national origin or ethnicity; he competed with the very best in the world at the time and he even won. It was his luck that no ethnically Chinese athlete had yet been so successful internationally. In official narratives on Chinese sport, Wu's success at the 1953 WFYS and subsequent fame as a model athlete quickly outweigh any discussion of his background. His election to the National People's Congress seems something of an anomaly given the likelihood that his Chinese may not have been great and it's questionable how much he understood or cared about the politics of the country. (Although he was taking classes at Peking University, he traveled somewhat frequently to compete and his training included both non-Chinese-speaking teammates and coaches.) But we don't know how he felt at the time, and all we have available are the few sources cited in this chapter and the recollections of his teammate and friend, Huang Hongjiu. What we can perhaps conclude, though, is that Wu was actually more than a model *Chinese* athlete: like Huang and others at the time, he was a truly *transnational* athlete.

Moreover, by tracing the lives of "returned" Chinese athletes like Wu and Huang, it is apparent that undergirding China's national project to build a new sports system in the 1950s were the complex motivations of individual athletes – some of whom seem to have professed little to no affinity for "China." Yet these athletes became the very bodies through which the early PRC leadership sought to establish a state-sponsored system and produce the very first representatives of this new socialist state in the international arena. As this chapter has attempted to suggest, the early PRC was thus a fertile time for athletes like Wu and Huang to negotiate their Chineseness and become bona fide PRC athletes. Wu,

Huang, and others helped build programs by gathering knowledge and participating in what at the time were new, transnational sports networks centered on the socialist bloc. Moreover, through these networks, such athletes helped forge important connections for the PRC with its new socialist bloc allies. In this respect, they served as a kind of athlete-diplomat for the new socialist state, helping shore up support for the new leadership and solidify the nation's position within the Soviet-led socialist bloc – in sport, to be sure, but also more broadly.

The early 1950s saw the first instances in which such overseas Chinese athletes were recruited to compete for the new PRC, but not the last. By the late 1950s, PRC sports leaders had recruited top athletes and coaches in table tennis and badminton from Hong Kong and Indonesia – and there are likely also other cases in other sports. The rewards of diversifying and taking a transnational approach in examining these athletes make visible new questions and narratives. For example, elite competitive athletes drawn from the overseas Chinese population received unique benefits and preferential treatment that others did not. Moreover, recruitment seemed to occur on an ad hoc basis and not according to any official timelines. Most of them, including both famous table tennis players like Rong Guotuan and less famous former athletes like Huang, were able to make careers out of their sports skills based on continued government support (until, that is, the early years of the Cultural Revolution). In short, these athletes remained in the sports world after their athletic retirement, thereby providing the backbone of PRC sports leadership in the Mao era – an under-researched issue that this chapter has provided only a glimpse of. This chapter also leads to numerous other questions. What does all this say about the centrality of sport to the building of a new socialist state, or about the extent of the party-state's financial investment to realize a "new" China? To what degree did transnational athletes provide the legwork for the PRC to reach its goals in elite competitive sport? Why, by the 1960s, did the PRC government no longer actively seek out the participation of overseas Chinese sportspeople? And, finally, to open this up more broadly: to what extent did overseas Chinese play a crucial role in these early years in other realms outside sport?