

## **Significance Sells: The Athletic Body and the Marketing of Identity**

“Even the bodies of men are shown to be beautiful and good”

--Socrates (Xenophon *Memorabilia*, 3.VIII)

“Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.”

--The Red Queen (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*)

The nude “allows nothing to be superimposed on it,” Francois Jullien asserts, “not even ‘meaning’” (13). In *The Impossible Nude*, Jullien argues that nudity could not exist in ancient China’s philosophical and artistic milieu, but I would twist the meaning of his title and argue that the nude, in the sense of a body that evades or transcends contextual significance, is impossible in all contexts. Clothing may “define rather than hide,” as John Hay argues, but nakedness, too, is revealing (Zito 44). Bodily appearance and movement are shaped by practices linked to class, culture and individual identity. In this sense, the body itself is a form of dress. This paper explores how the body manifests moral values and generates desire through a focus on athletes and the Olympics in China and the United States. Few bodies are more regimented, shaped and controlled than that of an athlete, but the aesthetic of the athletic body varies. Grounded in the Greek ideal but adopted into many different contexts, the Olympics provide a useful means of exposing differences in athletic values. The extensive media and advertising attention surrounding the games, furthermore, makes the Olympics relevant to the question of how athletes are used to generate consumer demand.

Olympic rhetoric provides an interesting angle on the intersection between the body, beauty and virtue. Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Olympic revival, described his philosophy of Olympism as based “in part on the spirit of chivalry...and in part on an aesthetic idea, the cult of beauty and grace,” explicitly

linking virtue, aesthetics and athleticism (“To the ‘Trustees’ of the Olympic Idea” 1908).

This connection between virtue and appearance has roots in the Western tradition originates with Greek philosophy; Not to draw on too profound a source, however, a dispute between Better Argument and Weaker Argument in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* provides a nice, if somewhat crude, example. “Follow up on my suggestions,” Better Argument begins,

give them serious consideration,  
then you’ll be in proud possession  
of a chest that ripples, skin that gleams,  
shoulders humongous, tongue petite,  
buttocks of iron, prick discreet.  
But follow the path of modern boys  
and *this* is the look you’ll soon enjoy:  
shoulders narrow, pasty skin, sunken chest, tongue gigantic,  
buttocks tiny, prick titanic,  
motions long-winded. Listen to *him*,  
you’ll think what’s bad is good,  
what’s good is bad” (1010-1022).

The body’s shape reflects its owner’s moral worth.

A third component, however, mediates the relationship between the beautiful and the good: an aesthetic standard. In his essay *Of the Standard of Taste*, philosopher David Hume, ever skeptical of human perception, observes that “a thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object.” A standard of taste—an aesthetic philosophy—is the rule that assigns value to the sentiments provoked by sensory experiences: the sight of a flower, the feel of silk, the sound of a libretto. Aesthetics can be considered a corporeal kind of morality, a system of ethics rooted in the senses.

Frederich Schiller (channeling Plato) notes that taste has the ability to incite right action: “taste gives a direction to the soul which disposes it to virtue” (*The Moral Utility*

*of Aesthetic Manners*). We find the good beautiful if our preferences have been properly formed by education. Schiller maintains the existence of rational, objective good, but I will mercifully leave the question of moral absolutism for another time and simply observe that definitions of virtue vary in practice, regardless of whether or not a true standard is possible. To the extent that aesthetic sensibility is shaped by the cultural environment, “the beautiful is just political order lived out on the body” (Eagleton 37). How do different aesthetic ideals of athleticism in China and the West inform an understanding of underlying moral values, and what are the implications for the use of athletes in marketing, as objects of desire?

### *The Olympic Aesthetic and the Modern Sports Hero*

Coubertin’s Olympic ideal is individualistic, competitive and male. “The human springtime is expressed in the *young adult male*,” he writes, adding that the “true Olympic hero is, in my view, the *individual adult male*” (582, emphasis in the original). Coubertin is of course a very particular and somewhat quirky thinker, writing in a different time. Analyzing Vogue’s 2008 Shape Issue, however, I suggest that his conception of athletic contest is representative of the Western standard and explore the idea of the athletic body as the epitome of male beauty.

In the Shape Issue, Robert Sullivan portrays the “world’s best bodies” in a series of five couples composed of a male athlete and a female model (available online [here](#); see disc for images). That the function of the best body is so clearly delineated along gender lines is itself an interesting point, mirroring Coubertin’s specifically male Olympic hero

and suggesting an underlying theme in Western conceptions of the athletic body. Setting aside the question of gender and sport for now, I will focus on the descriptions and images of the men (LeBron James, Michael Phelps, Apolo Ohno, Jared Rome and Shaun White) as examples of idealized athletic bodies.

As in the rhetoric of Olympism, competition is emphasized and excellence is expressed in individual terms. Sullivan notes the number of titles, world records and Olympic medals each man holds, and although all the athletes are American, this fact is not stressed. Athletic achievement is personal: “I just have this burning desire to be the best I can be,” speed skater Apolo Ohno tells *Vogue*. (*Vogue*’s decision to use only American athletes, however, is significant—the athletic ideal may be individualistic, but sports do maintain a national component).

The variety among the athletes’ bodies is obvious but significant. On one level, this variation is unsurprising given the specialized function of an athletes’ body. Michael Phelps notes that he has the perfect body for a swimmer, a body with “long arms, a long torso, and stubby legs” and White emphasizes the sport-specific nature of his body by comparing himself to an NFL player: “he’s like six feet seven or something,” White says. “There’s no way I could ever do [what he does]...but you know, there’s no way he can do what I do!” Given the article’s interest in the “best,” however, it might be expected that the archetypal body would converge toward a specific form. The female models, for example, are extremely uniform in body type. The fact that skinny Shaun White, gigantic LeBron James and barrel-chested Jared Rome are presented as equally ideal suggests that the standard of athletic beauty is only partially linked to physical form. “Just as height is not everything in fashion modeling,” Rome observes, “being a world-champion discus

thrower requires skills other than beefy strength.” Beauty represents more than physical perfection.

This invisible component of the idealized physical aesthetic indicates the athletic body’s moral significance. Gisele Bundchen, for example, acknowledges that sports have shaped her character. “What sports teaches you is not only respect for your body,” she says, “but that you have to be aware of your body, that you have to work with other people.” Sullivan’s description of James similarly stresses qualities beyond his physical abilities, particularly his mental discipline. After missing several shots, James “pauses, just for a millisecond, as if hitting the reboot button. Next shot, and all the ones following—dead on.” The athletic form epitomizes Western male beauty in part because of the values it reflects; self-awareness, discipline, individuality, victory. The athlete embodies virtue.

### *The Olympic Aesthetic in China*

If conceptions of virtue differ, then, the Olympic ideal in China must change to fit a different bodily aesthetic. Coubertin’s athletic archetype is in tension with conceptions of the physical strength, morality and the social function of sports. “All bodies, ancient and modern,” Charlotte Furth observes, “are haunted by languages of culture through which they are known, and must in a sense be prisoners of discourse” (25). Although she points out that contrasts between a cosmic Eastern body and “a Western body bifurcated between body and soul” are simplistic and potentially Orientalizing—Jullien’s *Impossible Nude*, for example, is a bit too enthusiastically dichotomous—I would argue that different

conceptions of the body do inform different conceptions of the athlete (11). Bodily power in texts like *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Cannon*, for example, comes more from the manipulation of *qi* than from muscular strength. Echoes of this mindset appear in contemporary martial arts films like “Kung Fu Hustle,” where the characters’ fighting abilities are largely independent of their sex and physical build—the most powerful character is an unassuming old woman. The contrast to Western films like “300,” where physical ability is correlated with hyperbolically muscular masculinity, is striking.

Chinese athletics similarly reveal an underlying conception of the body different from that of the West. Chinese track uniforms from the Athens 2004 games, for example, are not skintight like American ones (compare Liu Xiang and Justin Gatlin on disc). Liu Xiang and Justin Gatlin both represent powerful bodies, but these bodies display power differently. A statement by Chinese boxer Zou Shiming is also suggestive of differences in Chinese and Western conceptions of the body and body movement. Considered overly Western and violent, boxing was banned during the Communist period until 1986, and Zou must address this tension. “I think I’ve combined martial arts and boxing,” he argues. “Martial arts have a soft and flexible side, and boxing is more direct. Putting them together is a specialty of Chinese boxing” (Osno 2008). By implicitly identifying and attempting to reconcile two different conceptions of sport and bodily movement, Zou indicates that the Chinese athlete moves and trains under a specific aesthetic.

Mao Zedong’s 1917 article *A Study of Physical Education*, written to address perceived failings in Chinese athletics, provides an informative perspective on China’s adaptation of the Western athletic ideal. The Olympic revival coincided with the fall of the Qing and the rise of the New Culture Movement (Mangan and Hong 201, Brownell

52). Modernized Chinese sport was based explicitly on the Olympic model, and Mao references the discomfort Chinese felt with Western-style exercise. In the traditional mindset, “flowing garments, a slow gait, a grave, calm gaze — these constitute a fine deportment, respected by society... why should one suddenly extend an arm or expose a leg, stretch and bend down? Is this not strange?”

*A Study of Physical Education* incorporates discomfort with Western-style exercise into a larger debate over Chinese identity. Mao urges that the Chinese no longer consider exercise shameful. “If our bodies are not strong we will be afraid as soon as we see enemy soldiers, and then how can we attain our goals and make ourselves respected?” Struggling to both embrace Western culture and simultaneously define a unique Chinese character, Mao employs language similar to that of the Olympic movement but alters the underlying meaning. He mirrors Coubertin’s rhetoric linking body, character and intellect, for example, emphasizing that “physical education complements education in virtue and knowledge,” and explicitly connects the body to virtue: “those whose senses are imperfect or whose limbs are defective are often enslaved by excessive passion, and reason is incapable of saving them. Hence it may be called an invariable law that when the body is perfect and healthy, the sentiments are also correct.” Mao’s correct sentiments, however, are not Coubertin’s individualistic, competitive ideals.

The virtuous athlete, the perfect body with correct sentiments, is a public servant. “Our nation is wanting in strength,” Mao explains, offering modernized sports as an antidote to China’s collective malaise. The Law for Sports for Citizens, issued in 1929, proclaims “the aim of physical education and sport is to develop men’s and women’s bodies for the good of the country” (Mangan and Hong 201). Any national program will

naturally adopt patriotic justifications, but this conception of athletics is not limited to official policy. Susan Brownell, for example, relates an episode from her time as a member of the national Chinese track team that suggests the extent to which Olympism is transformed in the Chinese context. One of her teammates, injured while competing, is required to write a letter of self-criticism: “I was very incautious,” the athlete apologizes, “and as a result injured myself and am no longer able to represent my team” (Brownell 159). Athletic injury is described as a personal failing that damages the team. Coubertin’s Olympism, in contrast, extols individual contest to such an extent that it questions even the place of teams in Olympic sport: “Should sports teams, therefore, be excluded?” he muses. “This is not absolutely essential,” he reluctantly concedes, though team sports should be honored “on a secondary level” (582, 583).

Contemporary Chinese athletes are often portrayed as national symbols. Liu Xiang stressed the national and racial significance of his victory in the 110-meter hurdles at the 2004 Olympic games in Athens: “I believe I achieved a modest miracle for the yellow-skinned Chinese people and the Asian people” (Osno 2008). Xiang’s sponsor Nike quickly followed with an ad campaign drawing on national and racial pride, running a television spot that flashed phrases like “Asians lack muscle?” and “Asians lack the will to win?” over video of the track star outpacing his competition. “Stereotypes are made to be broken,” the ad concludes (Forney 2004, video available [here](#)). Chinese legal policy lays claim to athletes in a way foreign to the American concept of individual rights; writing for Western businesses interested in marketing in China, Rebecca Ordish warns that the government’s advertising policy considers athletes’ names and images property of the



state, retaining hold over the copyright on an athlete's name and portrait rights (Ordish 2007).

The distinction between Western and Chinese conceptions of sport and the ideal athlete, however, seems to be dissolving as China moves toward a market-based economy, implying a link between modernity and the aesthetic of the athletic body. The Chinese Olympic Committee (COC) describes sport as a “tool of socialist modernization,” used to mediate the transition between communist and capitalist values. The committee's 1995 “Outline of the National Fitness Programme of China” (available [here](#)), for example, employs a structure similar to Mao's *Study of Physical Education* in that it extols athletics as a means of strengthening the Chinese nation. Like Mao, the COC links fitness and virtue: “In the past, many Chinese people tended to ignore the importance of a nation's physical qualities, which they now understand are the material base of its moral and cultural qualities.” In an interesting shift, however, the virtue of athletics is associated with economic development: physical fitness is needed because “our country's economic construction and social development are making new, higher demands on our people's overall attributes.”

As Chinese and Western economies converge on a capitalist structure, the (previously Western) sports hero emerges as the unified athletic ideal. The athlete has a particular significance in a capitalist economy. “In my time, people called for you to sacrifice unselfishly,” volleyball star Sun Jinfang remembers of the 1980's. “It's impossible to have the same idea nowadays” (Fan 2008). Capitalist values of competition favor a more individualistic interpretation of the athlete. These [short clips](#) from Nike's Chinese campaign, for example, emphasize anti-institutional aspects of athletics. Here,

competition is internal and the pursuit of excellence is individual. A 2006 advertisement from Nike with basketball star Yi Jianlian (available [here](#)) stands in sharp contrast to the company's 2004 Liu Xiang campaign, which used competition in a unifying way, portraying the athlete as a symbol of national pride. The Jianlian commercial opens with a basketball team cooperatively passing around the perimeter to the tune of music that recalls the Cultural Revolution. Jianlian enters, accompanied by aggressive rap music, proceeding to dribble around his opponents, dunk several baskets and dominate the game unassisted. The advertisement extolls an individual physicality.

It is important to note that Nike is an international company attempting to address an unfamiliar local market (the banned "Chamber of Fear" commercial, available [here](#), is a notable misreading of the Chinese audience). Part of Nike's success as a brand depends on its ability to create demand for Western-style sports culture in a Chinese context. Yet the company's individualistic, competitive and physical persona finds a receptive audience in China. As social values shift along with the country's economic and political structure, Nike is able to capitalize on the image of a Chinese sports hero.

Athletes are becoming increasingly popular figures and increasingly significant tools in marketing. Rebecca Ordish observes the "increasing popularity of sports among Chinese consumers" (Ordish 2007). Danwei.org, a website devoted to Chinese media and marketing, similarly asserts that "in China, before 2000, athletes seldom appeared in advertising. Most advertisers preferred using movie stars and entertainment celebrities to endorse their products" (Wednesday 2004). Now, however, sports stars are used to market products from automobiles to milk (see disc if you're curious). Charlie Denson, brand president at Nike, explicitly equates Chinese athletes like Xiang with Western

sports heroes: “When I think of Liu Xiang, I think of Michael Jordan in the mid 80s, I think of what Tiger Woods and LeBron James mean to Nike in the United States or what Ronaldinho in Europe and in the world of football” (Rovell 2007). The individualistic, competitive and dominant athlete has become a powerful symbol of desire.

### *The Athletic Body and Marketing*

This correlation between transition to a market-based economy and increased prevalence of athletic bodies is interesting, if not conclusive. Marketing campaigns generate demand and shape consumer culture, but a successful advertisement must also reflect consumers’ underlying psychology; sports figures are useful as marketing symbols only given a pre-existing desire for athletes among consumers. Why is the athletic body so appealing in a capitalist system?

“Gentlemen,” Coubertin observed before an audience of the Parnassus society at Athens in 1894, “even a most cursory study of the history of this century is surprising for the kind of moral disorder that the discoveries of industrial science seem to cause. Life as been turned upside down. People feel the earth on which they stand trembling at regular intervals beneath their feet. They no longer know what to hold on to, because everything around them is moving and changing” (535). Coubertin describes Olympism as a reaction against “extreme compartmentalization,” and his revival of an ancient Greek tradition can be read as a reaction against a loss of identity that accompanies industrialization, a manifestation of nostalgia for a fixed and ethically certain past (547). The Olympic athlete, with his morally charged body, assuages modern man’s existential anxiety.

At the risk now of drawing on *too* profound a philosophy, I suggest that Walter Benjamin, Wim Wenders and Karl Marx may help illuminate the problem of identity in a technologically advanced, capitalist society. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin suggests that as technology advances and reproduction becomes easier, the meaning of a work of art is divorced from its traditional function in ritual, “the location of its original use value.” Significance becomes relational: reproduction “substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence,” yielding a medium like film in which “the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones.” The more generalized existential implication is that technology grants greater flexibility and power, but simultaneously threatens the way we establish our identity. In Wim Wender’s documentary “A Notebook on Cities and Clothes,” for example, Yoji Yamamoto describes how in the past people dressed in a way “clearly representing their business and life.” Constrained by tangible realities, clothing had a practical, definite significance that it no longer does in the shifting, fantastical realm of fashion. Greater freedom threatens the traditional foundations of identity. Modern man must define himself against subjective others, just as the images in a film define themselves against one another.

A capitalist structure further compounds the “far-reaching liquidation” of traditional value in the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1935). Money itself, Karl Marx argues in *The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society*, undermines the nature of identity:

“As money has the property of being able to buy anything, to take possession of all objects, it is therefore the preeminent object worth having. The extent of my power is as great as the power of the money I possess... What I am and what I can do is therefore not determined by my individuality in the slightest. I am ugly, but I can buy myself the most

beautiful of women. Hence I am not ugly, since the effect of ugliness, its discouraging power, is annulled by money.”

With the capacity to transform everything, even physical reality, money becomes the only source of meaning, “the supreme good” (Marx 1844). The senses are devalued when the authority of the natural world is undermined. Power, not aesthetics, expresses the system of morality.

I would argue that the body assumes greater importance in the existentially and ethically challenging modern environment as a site of tangible identity. “The only calamity that can befall a man is not to have a body. What else is there to worry about?” (Mao 1917). Contemporary obsession with bodily appearance can be seen as a struggle to ground identity in the objective, and the athlete becomes a particularly powerful symbol because the athlete *is* a body—his function, success and livelihood are firmly connected to physical ability (and the same could be said of models, to refer once again to the interesting gender divide in Vogue’s Shape Issue). Moral force is grounded in the athlete’s ethically-infused form. By idealizing the aesthetic of athletic virtue, significance is once more made corporeal.

The irony is that this desire for identity drives the very system that fragments identity in the first place. Marketing both creates and reflects demand; production and consumption spur economic exchange and technological innovation. As Johann Fichte observes in *Science of Knowledge*, some “find themselves only in the presentation of things...their image is reflected back at them by things, as by a mirror; if these were taken from them, their self would be lost as well” (15). Existential anxiety fuels an endless cycle of consumption; for the sake of the self, we must remain defined against the ever-shifting backdrop of the modern market economy.

## **Hyperlinks (in order of appearance)**

Vogue Shape Issue

<http://www.style.com/vogue/feature/032508>

Liu Xiang Nike Hurdles 2004

[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/asr/v008/videos/8.1li\\_nike\\_hurdles.mpg](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/asr/v008/videos/8.1li_nike_hurdles.mpg)

National Fitness Programme Outline

[http://en.olympic.cn/sport\\_for/outline\\_of\\_nfp/2005-06-08/121888.html](http://en.olympic.cn/sport_for/outline_of_nfp/2005-06-08/121888.html)

Nike China Short Clips

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmdOiaPLous&feature=related>

Yi Jianlian Nike Ad

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tleJXe8fMy4>

Chamber of Fear Commercial

<http://www.lebronjameslive.com/video/commercials/nike-chamber-of-fear/>

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