Sport in the modern world is a major social phenomenon with political, cultural, economic, spiritual and aesthetic dimensions (Mangan, 1991). Its significance has been clearly demonstrated by sociologists, anthropologists, historians and educationalists (Hobsbawm, 1988).

The study of women in sport in history has attracted increasing attention over the past few decades. The relationship between modern sport and Western female emancipation has been closely traced by academics in Britain and Americans (Fletcher, 1990). They have argued that sport for women has served as a means of self-realisation and liberation (McCrone, 1987). These studies of women and sport have brought new arguments, evidence and perspectives to studies of modern Western culture, values and society.

However, there has yet to be a comprehensive study of the development of women's sport and its relationship to their emancipation within Chinese society. To date there has not been a single work which has included a serious discussion of Chinese women's sport in its social, cultural and political settings. Therefore, a study of women's emancipation and women's sport is both necessary and long overdue if there is to be a full understanding of modern China in an era of gender reconstruction. Fortunately, some developments in the social sciences and humanities in recent years such as in feminist theory, now provide a solid conceptual foundation for any such study. This inquiry will generally consist of a description of the relationship between modern sport and female emancipation in China, and an exploration of the impact of women's sport on Chinese society and on the status of Chinese women.

Although a number of researchers are restoring Chinese women to history (Croll, 1978) none of them has explored women's sport as a window into social practices and, more particularly, female emancipation. This research is a first step towards setting Chinese women's sport in its social, cultural and political context using various sociological theories, in addition to a system's approach, such as structural functionalism, conflict theory and critical theory. Arguably, all these theories are useful in describing the subject matter of this social phenomenon: how individuals define their social existence and the meaning they attach to their social activity (Polama, 1979). In the context of sport, this means a research focus on individuals, teams, groups and sub-cultures with emphasis more on qualitative methodologies, such as ethnographies,
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participant observation, life histories and case studies, than on theories which only inform these methods, such as phenomenology, symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology (McPherson, 1989).

In general, Chinese women’s sport has developed under very complex and unique social, cultural and political circumstances, which constitute an interesting and important historical phenomenon in the context of social studies. In China, women through their participation in sport have not only challenged traditional male authority and definitions of women, but have also helped women expand their vision of self-realisation. For Chinese women, to a great extent, sport has served as a means of liberation. At the same time, women’s entry into sport has brought new vigour to an old culture and society. Women in sport have been a progressive force which has helped and helps shape new human, cultural and social values.

Women’s sport in modern China then is both complex and unique. As modern Chinese history amply illustrates, women’s sport has come to constitute a major social phenomenon of this century (Zhang, 1990). However, there has yet to be a comprehensive study of the evolution of women’s sport and its relationship to their emancipation within Chinese society. The question should be addressed as to why such an important aspect of modern society has been so inexcusably neglected. Professional myopia has lasted too long to be tolerated any longer.

This short-sightedness is probably due to the contradictions between the perceived insignificance and the actual significance of women’s sport. It is these contradictions that makes the subject especially fascinating and deserving of attention. Undoubtedly the time is right now to develop an understanding of this significant phenomenon and it is necessary not only to know what it is, but how it came into being (Mason, 1988). Therefore, both sociological and historical theories and perspectives will be adopted as the cornerstones of this research. They do not, however, have much of a history of application to women’s studies nor to women’s attempts to achieve emancipation in modern Chinese society, either as key variables or as empirical sources.

Cultural Studies is a field of study in which different disciplines intersect in an analysis of cultural aspects of society (Luschen, 1981). It draws heavily upon sociology, politics, philosophy, history, literary and communication studies for its study of cultural forms, practices and institutions (Hollandis, 1984). It lends insight and inspiration to those studies of sport which embrace all these disciplines. Cultural Studies grew out of changes in the social and cultural environment of post war British society in the mid-1950s (Baorn, 1985). It is closely linked to British working class historiography and literary criticism (Baorn, 1985). Cultural Studies focus on the ways in which culture and ideology are relatively autonomous in relation to economic and political processes, and the mediating role of human agency in the making of culture. Its