Title: Sport and feminism in China: On the possibilities of conceiving roller derby as a feminist intervention

Abstract

The spread of contemporary roller derby presents an opportunity to examine the ways sport can act as a form of feminist intervention. This article draws on a qualitative case study of a roller derby league in China, made up predominately of expatriate workers, to explore some of the possibilities roller derby presents in activating glocal forms of feminist participatory action. The globalization of sport has often been associated with colonialism and the loss of local physical cultures, together with commercialization. Roller derby provides a very different case, where, together with the spread of the game, comes a focus on gender diversity, female strength, and a particular derby style of DIY (Do It Yourself) governance that may support forms of participatory action. As an exploratory study, this paper points towards the potential of roller derby, and possibly other sport cultures, to support human rights activism in the Asia Pacific.

Keywords: China, feminism, gender, roller derby, sport

Acknowledgements: Thanks first and foremost to the women involved in roller derby who have always been so generous with their time and shared insight. Thanks also to Professor Barbara Pini for critical feedback in the final stages of the manuscripts preparation. This research was made possible by the Peking-University and Griffith University Collaborative Grant Scheme.

This article draws on a qualitative case study of a roller derby league in China, made up predominately of expatriate workers, to explore the possibilities for feminist change the sport presents in a country where feminist activism is often curtailed or sanctioned. Roller derby is a particularly appropriate leisure pursuit to examine as a potential site of feminist intervention for a range of reasons. It is a sport where female physical strength and aggression is celebrated (Peluso, 2011) and where women make up the majority of leadership positions (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014). Furthermore, it is a sport where feminist notions of gender fluidity, empowerment, governance and leadership are widely circulated and normative notions of femininity challenged (Beaver, 2012; Pavlidis, 2012). At the same time the relationship between roller-derby and feminism, and indeed, all sport and feminism is complex. In their research on Australian women roller derby players Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) report that it was a desire for involvement in a full contact sport rather than feminist political sensibilities which motivated many participants. Meanwhile, Heywood (2008: 63) argues that a lack of explicit identification with feminist ideology by sportswomen cannot necessarily be read as sport having no feminist consequences. Drawing on data from a case study of surfing she argues that ‘contemporary surf culture and young women’s place in it is an exemplar of what might be called a “stealth feminism” that is expressed through sport’ (2008: 63). Although the female surfer supports the neoliberal myth of ‘advancement through hard work’, she also enables the expression and appreciation of femininity that ‘signifies more than domesticity or second-class status based on gender’ (Heywood, 2008: 79).

The notion that sport can be utilised to address feminist agendas has been afforded veracity from historical work by Schulz (2010) which has detailed how physical activity played a vital role within the US women’s suffrage movement. However there remain questions as to the ethics and politics of using ‘sport’ for feminist aims, such as: what kind of

feminism is being advanced; can sport bring about social change; and, is this kind of intervention wanted by those it would most impact?

This research provides a unique perspective in examining the extent to which roller derby – a volunteer operated, evolving, full contact sport played and organised predominately by women in the Global North – can be used as a feminist intervention in the Global South. Divisions between “West” and “non-West”, “North” and “South” are of course problematic, however in this article we use the terms heuristically, as a way of writing about the moving of feminist ideas around the Globe through sport. In doing so we argue that, firstly, roller derby provides opportunities for feminist interventions in both the Global North and Global South, and secondly, that the desires of expatriate workers in China to use roller derby as a feminist intervention brings with it a range of challenges and potential risks that should be considered. Below we provide a brief overview of roller derby before moving onto the key literatures that frame the argument.

Roller derby and feminism

As noted in the introduction, roller derby has been analysed as a feminist cultural practice in the emerging literature (Pavlidis, 2012). As a do-it-yourself (DIY) sport, roller derby has a strong emphasis on women carving out ‘social spaces that they control while also creating bonds between participants’ (Beaver, 2012: 31). As a sport *and* cultural leisure practice roller derby straddles a unique position as a full contact, physically demanding team competition, with a DIY ethos, strong links to music cultures and a resistance to traditional sport management structures. Although roller derby is not immune to territorialisation or normalisation, it is, in most accounts, a multiplicity of feminist affects (Breeze, 2015; Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2014). The revival of roller derby in the early 2000s in the USA was led by women who emphasised the playful and ‘tough’ elements, through themed team

costumes (for example, ‘maids’, ‘cowgirls’, ‘schoolgirls’) (Beaver, 2016), derby ‘monikers’ (names chosen to express a type of alter-ego in derby) (Carlson, 2010), and, as mentioned, a DIY ethos that emphasised resistance to ‘outside’ ownership and control (Beaver, 2012). Played on quad-skates rather than blades, the contemporary version of roller derby is both new and old at once.

The roller derby popular in the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s was played on a banked track, with paid skaters who would incorporate elements of faux fighting. The revived version is predominantly played on a *flat* track, and riles against the staged fights so popular in the previous incarnations of the game. Another point of difference between the roller derby of the past and the current revival is the development of the sport – where originally derby was a professional sport, with large audience and little to no grassroots participation, contemporary flat track roller derby is predominately a grassroots sport. There are moves towards professionalization, however at the time of writing these advances are still in their infancy.

Practically, roller derby is played by two teams of five players who race around an oval shaped track, attempting to score points by knocking down opposing players or passing opposing players. Each game consists of two halves, with each half made up of multiple two-minute ‘jams’, which is when points are scored. The game and rules are consistently being revised as a balance between safety, control, and fan appreciation is negotiated.

Sport and feminism across time and place

The issue of sport and feminism is a complex one. How the question of how women’s involvement is understood will differ according to one’s feminist perspective, historical context and geographical location. Hargreaves seminal 1990 article, ‘Gender on the sport agenda’ provided one of the first systematic overviews of these issues and discussed, for example, the ways a liberal feminist paradigm emphasised equal opportunities as a goal,

whereas radical feminist perspectives have argued strongly for separatism in sport. More recently, poststructural feminist approaches, exemplified in the work of Heywood (2008) and Bruce (2016) have focused on difference and power relations, with analysis emphasising women's agency and voice in their choices to participate.

Women who play sport occupy a tenuous position. They are positioned as what Harris calls, 'can-do' girls (Harris, 2004) who eat well, exercise, and stay fit and healthy for their busy and fulfilling lives as students, employees, wives and mothers. Yet, if they are too strong, or too competitive, women are demeaned and insulted; often women who are strong and good at sport are labelled 'mannish', or 'dyke', regardless of their personal identification and gender presentation (for example, Griffin, 1992). Women who play sport are often considered less 'female', and current research has demonstrated the pressures of young female athletes to assimilate a boy's body shape (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2015). Yet recent work, such as Bruce (2016) suggests that with the increasing visibility of 'strong, tough and beautiful female athletes' comes the 'emergence of a potentially new form of femininity that refuses to cede physical strength and sporting excellence to men and thus represents an important rupture in the articulation of sport and masculinity' (372).

This is particularly relevant in the Chinese context as women's sport also presents a range of contradictions. Prior to the Chinese Communist Party winning power in 1949 Confucian beliefs were thought to impede women's participation in leisure (Hong, 1997). As explained by Hong (2003), 'the Confucian doctrine of obedience to father before marriage, to husband during marriage, and to son(s) after the death of the husband defined women's behaviour and provided the opportunity for men to exercise their power over them' (224). Practices such as foot binding restricted women's movement (Hong, 1997), and much like Western cultures, women were socially excluded from sport (McCrone, 2014).

With the formation of the People's Republic of China (PCR) came a new sports culture and a policy of 'mass participation' (Xu, 2006, 92), including compulsory physical education in schools for boys and girls (Hong, 2003). Women and girls were seen as an important force in the 'reconstruction and defence' (Hong, 2003: 225) of the PRC, hence their bodies – their health and fitness – was politicised, and regulated through policy. Hong (2003) writes, 'sport women became visible human beings and entered onto the stage of New China' (227).

This changed from the late 1950s as leaders saw the potential of sport to function for the purposes of 'nation building and international prestige' (Xu, 2006: 92; see also Hong, 2003). Driven by nationalistic interests from the 1950s and particularly prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, funding was directed at elite sport to bolster Chinese women's success at international sports (Dong & Mangan, 2009), and women's leisure and physical activity were underfunded, with very little access to space (Hong, 2003: 234-235). While more elite sportswomen have succeeded in China than their male counterparts (Brownell, 2005), and their success has allowed them to challenge beliefs about women's physical and psychological abilities, they have also submitted to gruelling training regimes, beatings by coaches and extraordinary pressure to win, often making drug use irresistible (Hong, 2003: 233-234). Simultaneously, women's achievements in sport have not been reflected in other sectors as women take lower-paid jobs and occupy a small minority of leadership positions (Hong, 2003: 233).

Xiong (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of women's sport in contemporary China, highlighting three key issues of importance to this paper. Firstly, she notes that since the Beijing Olympics China has adopted a focus on sport for all which, she argues, created an upsurge in interest for women to engage in physical activity as part of their daily lives (Xiong, 2011). Secondly, Xiong (2011) notes that sports associations receive very little Government funding (Xiong, 2011), and thirdly, that inequalities and institutional

discrimination continue to influence the provision of women's sport (Xiong, 2014). Xiong (2014) makes no comment on girls and women's engagements with sports such as skateboarding, roller derby, or surfing – those sports often grouped together as 'subcultural', or 'alternative' sports (Atkinson & Young, 2008). Indeed, a search of the literature reveals that although 'extreme sports' have entered China and are developing quickly (Jiang-xia, 2008) there has been no focus specifically on girls and women, nor on feminism or femininities in relation to these types of sports. Thorpe's (2014) work on transnationalism and sport in China finds a connection between the growth of the middle class and global youth culture. Yet her primary focus is on sport tourists (Thorpe, 2014), rather than on residents (Chinese or otherwise).

Further work by Xiong (2014) provides more recent insight into the state of women's sport in China, where she found that since the 1980s women's voluntary sports associations have been formed around women's interests, but still supervised by local associations for sport and culture (Xiong, 2014). Xiong (2014) contends that women's sport participation in the voluntary sector is rising, continuing to be mainly self-organized activities such as Tai Chi, and aerobics and other keep fit activities that, as Xiong (2014) argues, 'reinforce stereotypical ideas concerning what women want' (1634). Xiong's (2014) final claim which is of interest to this paper is that alongside the rise of community sport a changing market economy and increasing Western commercialization has seen young Chinese women becoming more 'sports conscious' (1624), spending more on sportswear, equipment, facilities and training, with participation in sports positioned as a consumer activity and expression of a lifestyle.

Being a 'feminist' in China is an identity to be taken up carefully and sometimes with consequence. For instance, Wang Zheng (2015) described the situation where, two days before International Women's Day, Chinese police arrested five young women in Beijing,

known now as the feminist five. The incident is reported to have arisen from their activism protesting sexual harassment on public transport. This situation, in a time of global communications, saw feminists and human rights activists around the world rally to have these women released. More recently in 2017, *The New York Times* (Tatlow, 2017) reported that the leading feminist organisation in China has had its social media account suspended, again in the lead up to planned marches on International Women's Day. As Fincher (2016) writes, events such as 'very small-scale forms of performance-art-as-protest can incite police harassment' (2).

It is important to note that very few Chinese women identify themselves as feminists (Fincher, 2016) and for those that do, their acts of protest are constrained by what Fincher (2016) describes as 'the Chinese state's elaborate "stability maintenance" system set up to absorb all expressions of political opposition' (1). As a global movement, feminism often has different local manifestations. Yet, in a globalized world, these local manifestations are influenced and imbued with the concerns, strategies and goals of other places. However, regardless of the risks, a complex interplay of micro and macro processes are occurring as some women in China are embracing, adapting and modifying global processes such as roller derby and feminism as forms of 'new' social movements with local contexts and meanings.

Methodology

A qualitative case study methodology was used for this study. Specifically, it is what Stake (2005) calls 'an intrinsic case study', 'undertaken because, first and last, one wants better understanding of this particular case' (445). The entrée of roller derby into the sports-landscape has thrown up a range of questions and insights into female orientated sport cultures, providing new 'rules' and ways of seeing (for example, Bruce, 2016: 368). The first author has been researching roller derby in Australia and online since 2010, documenting and

analysing the sport's potential to support social and personal transformation (Pavlidis, 2012; Pavlidis, 2013; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2012; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2015). The sport's entrée into China adds to the complexity and intrinsic value of research focused on roller derby.

The research included what is often called a 'brief ethnographic visit' (Wheaton, 2014) with a roller derby league in China. During this eight-day period 10 unstructured in-depth interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005: 705) were conducted with league members (Table 1). These 10 women made up the majority of the league, and while limited, the findings are representative of the league at this point in time and its impact in the area. During the visit, the first author attended a league committee meeting, shared meals with members, and accompanied skaters to a local skate park for recreational skating. The women involved with the league came from varied background and nations. Several were from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, with only three members of the league Chinese nationals. At least half of those involved spoke Mandarin fluently, with the other half only knowing some words. Interviews for this article were conducted at an American themed dinner in Beijing, with each interview lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. Recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service and read by each author. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, however two participants responded to the questions in Chinese and the recordings were later translated and transcribed.

Analysis was informed by post-structuralist inspired feminist approaches, where power and agency are conceptualized as the capacity to recognise the multiple discourses at play. As Davis (2004) writes, "agency is never autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside social structure and process. Autonomy instead becomes the recognition that power and force presume counter-power and counter-force, which in turn create new life-forms ... capable of disrupting hegemonic forms' (4). Hence the analysis below recognizes that as researchers we do not stand outside looking in, but instead acknowledge that by presenting

both the potentiality and the challenges of roller derby in China we can counter hegemonic forms of knowledge about sport and gender.

In many ways a poststructuralist approach adheres with contemporary Chinese feminism, where the focus is less on oppositional politics than femininity and gender (Yu, 2015). Our poststructural analysis, informed by contemporary sport feminisms, in particular Heywood (2008) and Bruce (2016), acknowledges women's historical exclusion and oppression, while also being open to new and potentially generative models of sport that enable women to move from a position of subversion to power. This framework for analysis embraces what Spakowski (2011) describes as 'a pluralist and complex feminism in China, which does not fit the formula of "difference within commonality" put forth by international feminism' (47). As with Western feminisms, Chinese feminism is also plural, with a range of goals. This approach can account for the multiple purposes roller derby has for the participants involved in this study.

Practically, transcripts were read by both authors and analysed in conjunction with ongoing reference to the literature on globalization, feminism, and sport (broadly defined), and the broader research question in mind. The results are presented in the following section outlining, a) the ways roller derby supported forms of feminist activism and b) the challenges and limits of roller derby's potential to support participatory feminist action in China.

[Table 1: Interview participants]

Findings and analysis

Roller derby as a feminist intervention

Feminist issues of gender equality, and collective empowerment were an underpinning philosophy that expatriates who ran the Chinese roller derby league espoused. Feminist

issues, feminism and gender equality were common themes in this case study, and expatriates were vocal in their desire to import Western feminism into China. These women, and one man, were professionals working in schools, consulate offices, and development agencies. They were university educated, from varied ethnicities, and most were bilingual. Roller derby seemed to be a way for these women to share their feminist sensibilities.

Heath, who was the past-president of the league, discussed how feminism was a central pillar of the league and one that they were continuing to uphold:

Even though women play a great role here in China, raising families, earning money and stuff, society structure remains largely patriarchal, and gender and equality issues are often overlooked and underplayed. One example, is that there is still no law on domestic violence, which leaves women, children and men, unprotected and exposed to physical and mental abuse at home. Every time someone interviews our team, we try to stress that it is a place for women, men and transgender people.

Pushing for the recognition of diverse sexualities, appropriate laws to protect women (and children and the elderly) from domestic violence, and supporting women's freedom to be in public without being sexually harassed (as often happens on public transport for example) are goals of contemporary feminism in China, particularly via Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) such as UN Women in Asia and local NGOs (Fincher, 2016). Unlike countries such as the UK, Australia and the USA, where legal protections are afforded to women (although cultural norms often perpetuate sexism), the Chinese government has been slower to recognise and protect women and girls (Fincher, 2016; Zhang, 2014). The expatriate women in this roller derby league expressed their conscious decision to bring these issues to the fore and use roller derby as a platform to attempt in small ways to transform gendered relations. As outsiders to Chinese culture, expatriate members of the league worked to raise local member's awareness of gender inequality and injustice in China.

All of the women interviewed, both expatriate and local, spoke about the sport as a space of empowerment for women, where gendered stereotypes of passivity could be

challenged. Rachelle, a league member who also worked for an international non-profit organization with a focus on women's rights, spoke explicitly of a desire to challenge gender stereotypes in China, along with Chinese women's role in society, through roller derby.

I'd like to see the league take hold in China and become an avenue to empower Chinese women and challenge a lot of the stereotypes that are here... In China it has its own set of stereotypes and you can talk to the Chinese players more about this but like you're not supposed to be strong and if you are a large woman you're not fitting the mould here and you're supposed to be light skinned, you're not supposed to have darker skin tones so you shouldn't be outside exercising. There's a lot of issues around women's proper place.

As noted by Mak (2010), a key determinant of female beauty among Chinese women is white facial skin colour and this limits the kinds of activities women are willing to do. Rachelle's response above also alludes to a later comment where she mentioned the term, 'left over women'. Highly educated Chinese women of marriage age who are unmarried have been denigrated as 'leftover women' (To, 2013). To (2013) notes that the Chinese Ministry of Education attributes these women's unmarried status to 'overly high expectations for marriage partners' (in To, 2013: 1). To (2013) explains the patriarchal cultural of Chinese society, which, as she puts it, 'still advocates the "male as superior" pattern of marriage partner choice, rendering competent women to be discriminated against in the marriage market' (1). As Rachelle suggests in her response above, women's 'proper' place in China is still as subordinate to men's, and she sees roller derby as a potential feminist intervention and way to challenge stereotypes.

In this case study roller derby is being used formally *and* informally by expatriates, to promote gender equality and Western notions of feminist 'empowerment', and provide a 'safe' space for feminist activism for Chinese feminists. For example, in May 2016 the Beijing Roller Derby League, with support from other Asian leagues, hosted what was labelled an 'invitational', sponsored by UN Women in China, to promote recent domestic

violence laws that protect women, children and older people. This formal use of roller derby to advance UN-based international feminism is not without issue. In her article on Chinese feminisms engagements with international feminisms Xu (2009) writes, ‘the spectre of the probing West always lurks in the background of such conceptions, because ultimately the debates that arise from such a conception are about how a developing country (such as China) comes to terms with the West’ (197). Although the support of UN Women provides resources and exposure, it also comes with limitations on what, ‘constitutes legitimate knowledge about Chinese women’ (Xu, 2009, 197) and constricts opportunities for Chinese women to use roller derby to transform gender relations on their own terms

Simultaneously, while formally using roller derby as a vehicle for the promotion of gender equity, expatriate women also saw the DIY aspect of roller derby central to its potential as a feminist intervention. As mentioned above, the DIY ethos, expressed by the ‘for the skater, by the skater’ mantra, has been fundamental to the revival of contemporary roller derby. Duncombe (1997), in his work on the ongoing value of subcultures, defines the DIY ethic as, ‘make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you’ (2). Penny, a young woman with Chinese heritage who had completed her schooling in Australia, spoke clearly about the importance of this DIY ethic in derby, stating,

The DIY aspect of roller derby really encourages women to work together to build something bigger than the individual. And I think that the result of that, building something bigger and better than I could make on my own, and pushing myself to contribute as much as I can to promoting roller derby in China, is definitely empowering (Penny).

Penny’s response was similar to many (n = 5) of the participants in this case study, and indeed, in research on roller derby in Australia (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014), the USA (Beaver, 2012), and the UK (Breeze, 2015), where the DIY aspect was shown to be the central rationale for league decisions as well as a key attraction to the sport. There is, however, an

uneasy relationship between the DIY ethos in roller derby and a feminist approach that would support a diverse range of women. The DIY ethos, with its rejection of what is often positioned as ‘inauthentic’ mass-produced consumer culture in favour of an ‘authentic’ culture seemed to have little resonance with the Chinese nationals who participated in this study.

For example, Casey, a Chinese young woman who was enthusiastic about the sport, indicated that she became involved with roller derby to ‘challenge’ herself and ‘challenge’ her ‘limits’. Both Casey and Sue, another Chinese young woman in the league, indicated that roller derby was a space for women’s empowerment and equality. Casey said she saw roller derby as a way to gain ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ along with promoting ‘gender equality’. Casey’s reference to ‘gender equality’ might also reflect how feminists in China are taking a state discourse and using it in ‘multiple [and] innovative ways’ (Zheng & Zhang, 2010: 49).

For Casey it was the movement of a Western phenomenon into the more traditional Chinese culture that was appealing:

I love sports, roller skating is a new sport in China, not a traditional one. Besides, Roller Derby is a sport that comes from Western countries, it represents Western culture. It is new in China, so I love it.

Casey’s comment illustrates how at an individual level roller derby, as a Western sport, offered the potential to connect more directly with Western culture and ideas. It allowed Casey to engage in a non-traditional sport, and as such reflected the rise in the range of sports that were challenging male dominated traditions (Xiong, 2014). Xiong (2011) also points out that middle class women in China have also used sport in small ways to challenge gendered constraints, at the same time as their activities are still dictated by a range of patriarchal restrictions.

Chinese-American participant Bonnie also commented on the ways playing roller derby could be viewed as subversive when she commented, ‘I love Roller Derby because the

idea of a woman being athletic is strange, but the idea of a woman being athletic hitting another woman is out of this world'. Bonnie had been involved with the league in China since its inception and the past-president (Heath, above) was an important part of her feminist-becoming. Bonnie described Heath as gender fluid, and noted that she was currently in transition from female to male. For Bonnie, one of the key feminist concepts of roller derby was gender fluidity. She commented,

A lot of times somebody who met me who was Chinese said, 'oh I thought you were a lesbian', and I was going, 'no I'm just a tomboy', and she said, 'well tomboy means lesbian', and I was like, 'that's interesting'.

Conceptions of gender and sexuality in twenty-first century China have been said to essentialise notions of gender (Hanser, 2005: 584). Hanser, in her ethnographic work into the sexual politics of service work in urban China argues that essentialised notions of women – as beautiful, youthful, demure, well-disciplined, vivacious – 'portrays newly sexualized gender relations as a return to the natural and inevitable. With Mao-era gender neutrality now viewed as unnatural and ludicrous, this naturalized understanding of gender and sexuality is powerfully associated with everything socialism was not' (Hanser, 2005: 584). Young women involved with roller derby in China, such as Bonnie, were challenging essentialised notions of gender and sexuality through their participation in roller derby as a type of feminist transnational network.

Penny's extended quote below exemplifies the hopes expressed by most (n = 9) of the expatriate members in this case study, that roller derby will continue to grow with local support:

I can definitely see roller derby taking off in China. Right now, we are trying to lay down a framework for that. We see attracting local Chinese skaters as a key component of building the sport in China. We are talking to WFTDA about working together to translate an official version of the rules into Chinese. We are writing bilingual promotional content and promoting ourselves on local media platforms. We've started getting press coverage in Chinese media.

The efforts of this league to promote roller derby and its feminist ethos beyond the expatriate members were extensive and took up a large amount of time and effort. Their hopes were that local Chinese women would take on the leadership of the sport, but this was not a simple nor risk free endeavour.

Challenges in conceiving roller derby as a feminist intervention in China

The lack of funding (Xiong, 2011) and entrenched gender inequalities in relation to the provision of facilities for women to engage in sport outside of schools or elite competition created a significant barrier for local sustainability. Tanya related an incident that captured these difficulties. It occurred at a skate rink where the space was being shared with other skaters. A male Chinese national became very rude and antagonistic towards the women as he felt that foreigners should not be using the rink. Tanya said that in response the women ‘threw attitude back at him’. To which he responded (in Chinese) ‘this place is for Chinese people you can’t be here’. One of the league members became very angry and responded heatedly; ‘I’m Chinese what about that’. Tanya indicated that they all felt it was a strange occurrence, as the male’s argument made no sense. However, the incident suggests a degree of hostility towards Westerners and Western women in that space.

Rachelle also expressed apprehension that the sport may not be able to maintain its DIY ethos in the face of interference from the Chinese government.

Because the Chinese government is very good at mobilizing. If they said okay we want to promote derby, they’ll promote it but they’ll promote it in their way and maybe at odds with the DIY nature of this sport so we’ll see how that goes. But it’s not at that stage yet.

This comment was reinforced when the first author accompanied skaters to a large indoor skate park as part of her ethnographic visit. The skate park was built by Woodward, a large

American skate facility organization. The facility was an international competition venue and was built outside of the main city area and was supported by the Chinese government. The first author also attended meetings with the Vice-President and Dean of a nearby university. The professor was excited to hear about roller derby, and without finding out much about the sport asked whether they might start a team at their university. These faculty and management staff members were keen to introduce something 'new' to their program, in the hope of being the 'first' in China and developing a strong competitive team.

In China, a country where communist ideals still influence policy and politics and where government policy and laws dictate the most intimate parts of human life (for example, population management policies), roller derby, as an explicitly feminist and DIY sport, presents a range of challenges. The women interviewed were aware of these challenges, and despite their efforts to counter and account for the barriers to growth, were sometimes despondent about their hopes for the future of the sport. Sian, a member of the Black Roller Derby Network and the league's current coach commented on this. One of the strategies of the league to help support the growth of derby in China was to ensure Chinese skaters were represented on the committee. However, as Sian states, 'We have a Chinese skater on the booking committee, but we rarely hear from her. She's on the committee but she's silent'. Tanya, thought that roller derby's relevance for Chinese was also an issue that had to be overcome, it wasn't simply a matter of translation, 'Chinese people, they don't really know what derby is yet, and that's the main struggle that we have'. The incorporation of Western, and in the case of roller derby American, culture in China has been very different to countries such as Japan where diverse and spectacular cultures are more clearly visible (Clarke, 2012).

At the league committee meeting attended by the first author the issue of translation was raised and it was deemed important for skaters to ensure that their chosen derby name translated into Mandarin in a coherent and respectful way. The roller derby practice of

exploring other feminine subjectivities and to ‘parody hetero-normative gender relations’ (Pavlidis, 2012: 170) was perhaps not as appropriate, or did not translate as clearly in Chinese culture. The issue of translation came up several times throughout the committee meeting, and later in one-on-one interviews, as a key challenge in growing roller derby in China. As with many sport committees, there were various sub-committees, including a Translations Committee. Their job was to translate all league material – including news, notices, and, most importantly rules, from English to Chinese. This was a slow and difficult process, undertaken by members in their limited spare time. These language barriers were not only in written material but also impacted skaters at training as articulated by this response by Tanya, a Canadian, long term league member and fluent Mandarin speaker:

We have a translations committee... that’s another issue we have with recruiting Chinese skaters is that all the materials are in English and they don’t really fully understand it so they don’t really understand what the sport is anyway ... You know it’s a lot of weird words for them and like our Chinese skaters that we do have, they do speak English and their English is definitely well enough to carry a conversation but during practice they often just have this totally dazed and confused look and one of us will be like so did you hear what the coach said, we’re going to do this drill and we’re going to do this, this and this. Like one of us will repeat it in Chinese for them because it’s hard to keep up.

Communication, including digital communication, was an ongoing challenge for league members. Even the use of social media, central to the growth of roller derby in the Global North (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2012) was also impeded by government blocks on sites such as Facebook and twitter.

Roller derby’s potentialities for transforming or challenging the practices that prevent Chinese women’s participation were hindered substantially by micro and macro factors. As Chinese feminist have noted, direct importation of Western concepts often does not ‘fit’ local contexts, and can cut off ‘indigenous creativity, traditions, and resources (Spakowski, 2011: 46).

Conclusion

As an exploratory study, we have pointed towards the potential of roller derby to support the spread and enactment of contemporary feminist ideas. In turn, we argue that feminist sport cultures can support glocal forms of feminist activism in potentially powerful ways. The possibilities of roller derby to support alternative femininities has been consistently reinforced in research around the globe (for example, Breeze, 2015; Pavlidis, 2012; Finley, 2010). Yet the potential of roller derby to support gender equality or have a long-term influence has been less well understood. As Finley (2010: 383-4) wrote in one of the first articles on the topic: ‘Women can now kick ass [in derby], but it might not bring the society any closer to societal support of child care or equal pay, or sports that do not glorify bruises’. What this current article has served to demonstrate is that in China, expatriates and locals have a desire for roller derby to be *more than a* space for the enactment of alternative femininities. Their support and active involvement in the UN Women sponsored event, and their consistent invocation of feminism when discussing the sport, are evidence of this.

Rowe and Gilmour (2009) wrote, ‘global sports culture is shown to be constrained by historical inheritance, yet engaged in the process of making new, multifaceted cultural histories’ (172). Roller derby is a prime exemplar of the constraints of historical inheritance, and the creation of new, multifaceted cultural histories. It is a highly complex and necessarily slow process as contemporary roller derby – a sport where women take centre stage as athletes and managers – enters China in the twenty first century.

In the case of roller derby in China there are a range of feminist ideas that can be deployed to understand its present and influence its future. At times the participants involved espoused a type of liberal feminism, yet they were mostly more open, alluding to the potential of roller derby to provide a space for the expression of gender fluidity and difference.

The growth of roller derby in China will take time and any inflexible approach is likely to limit the possibilities inherent. Roller derby in China, according to the women who participated in this research, is already strongly aligned with feminist ideas from both second and third wave perspectives. Participants discussed concepts such as ‘gender fluidity’, as well as derby as an advocacy organization. A more open and fluid approach to derby (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014) would better support the goals and challenges facing the sport as the dynamics of globalization create a push/pull effect on the growth and impact of derby in China.

So, does roller derby in China have the potential to act as a form of feminist intervention? The findings of this case study indicate that it does. In some ways, and for some league members, derby acts as a type of stealth feminist (Heywood, 2008) NGO, advocating for gender equality and freedoms. However, as with other feminist NGOs in China, there remains ambiguity and uncertainty as to its development (Li, 2014). If roller derby was successful in China and provided an avenue to challenge gender norms, the governmental response is unpredictable. With current league members made up of professional, highly educated women from the Global North, the risks for these women are low. However, as articulated by Heath, as ‘an expat heavy sport we all tend to go away eventually’. The expatriates involved in this case study were aware that the sport’s ‘success’ in China relied on involvement and ‘ownership’ of derby by local Chinese women. Yet the unintended consequences of ‘success’ in China remain unknown. As with the growth of roller derby in other countries the development of the sport depends on the sport administration systems already in place. For example, in the USA, most sports are ‘for profit’ organisations and receive very little government support, while in Australia sport organisation are usually run as ‘not for profit’, relying on volunteers and small amounts of government funding. These macro level considerations in turn influence gender subjectivities and the potential of roller

derby to act as a feminist intervention. Further research at the intersection of macro (sport policy) and micro (feminism and gender identities) levels is needed to understand this dynamic over time.

This case study speaks to the potential of action sports, such as roller derby, to support feminist participatory action. Although the study was based on a relatively small sample, and the ethnographic component was limited, the findings are significant in beginning to conceptualise the global spread of feminist sport cultures, such as roller derby. Future ethnographic work for longer periods, seeking out both Chinese and expatriate girls and women involved with a whole range of subcultural or alternative sports, would be worthwhile, providing greater insights into the ways Chinese women take up or contest these practices. As the meanings of sport and feminism change across time and space, it is important to acknowledge perspectives from the Global South that give actors agency to act and negotiate multiple discourses at this nexus.

References

- Atkinson, M., & Young, K. (2008). *Tribal Play: Subcultural Journeys Through Sport*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Beaver, T. D. (2012). 'By the Skaters, for the Skaters' The DIY Ethos of the Roller Derby Revival. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 36(1): 25-49. doi:10.1177/0193723511433862
- Beaver, T. D. (2016). Roller derby uniforms: The pleasures and dilemmas of sexualized attire. *International review for the sociology of sport*, 51(6), 639-657.
- Breeze, M. (2015). *Seriousness and Women's Roller Derby. Gender, Organization and Ambivalence*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bruce, T. (2016). New rules for new times: Sportswomen and media representation in the third wave. *Sex Roles*, 74(7-8), 361-376.
- Carlson, J. (2010). The female significant in all-women's amateur roller derby. *Sociology of sport journal*, 27(4), 428-440.
- Davies, B. (2004). 'Introduction: Poststructuralist lines of flight in Australia'. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 17 (1): 1-9.
- Dong, J., & Mangan J.A. (2009), 'Olympic aspirations: Chinese women on top – considerations and consequences'. In J. A. Mangan, & J. Dong (Eds.), *Beijing 2008: Preparing for glory* (29—56). London: Routledge.
- Duncombe, S. (1997). *Notes from Underground. Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, Nueva York & Londres: Verso.
- Fan, H. (1997). *Footbinding, feminism, and freedom: the liberation of women's bodies in modern China* (Vol. 1). Psychology Press.
- Fincher, L. H. (2016). Feminism, Chinese. In Naples, N. A. (ed.) *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*.
- Finley, N.J. (2010). 'Skating femininity: Gender maneuvering in women's roller derby'. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39(4): 359 – 387.
- Fontana, A. & Frey, J. H. (2005), 'The interview: from neutral stance to political involvement', in Denzin & Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition, London: Sage.
- Griffin, P. (1992). 'Changing the game: Homophobia, sexism, and lesbians in sport'. *Quest*, 44(2): 251—265.
- Hanser, A. (2005). 'The Gendered Rice Bowl. The Sexual Politics of Service Work in Urban China'. *Gender & Society*, 19(5): 581-600.

Hargreaves, J.A. (1990). 'Gender on the sports agenda'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 25(4): 287—307.

Harris, A. (2004). *Future girl: Young women in the twenty-first century*. London: Routledge.

Heywood, L. (2008). 'Third-wave feminism, the global economy, and women's surfing: sport as stealth feminism in girls' surf culture'. In A. Harris (Ed.), *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, subcultures, activism* (63-82). New York and London: Routledge.

Hong, F. (1997). *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom*. London: Frank Cass & Co.

Hong, F. (2003). Women's sport in the People's Republic of China. In Hartmann-Tews, I., & Pfister, G. (eds). *Sport and women: Social issues in international perspective*. Psychology Press, 224- 237.

Jiang-xia, L. I. (2008). On the Development of Extreme Sports in China [J]. *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 6, 026.

Li, J. (2014). The growth and dilemma of women's NGOs in China: A case study of the Beijing Zhongze legal consulting service center for women. In *Social Issues in China* (pp. 85-105). Springer New York.

Mak, A. K. Y. (2007). 'Advertising whiteness: An assessment of skin colour preferences among urban Chinese'. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 14(3): 144-157.

McCrone, K. (2014). *Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women (RLE Sports Studies): 1870-1914*. London: Routledge.

McMahon, J., & Barker-Ruchti, N. (2015). Assimilating to a boy's body shape for the sake of performance: three female athletes' body experiences in a sporting culture. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-18.

Pavlidis, A. (2012). From Riot Grrrls to roller derby? Exploring the relations between gender, music and sport. *Leisure Studies*, 31(2), 165-176.

Pavlidis, A. (2013). Writing resistance in roller derby: Making the case for auto/ethnographic writing in feminist leisure research. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 45(5), 661.

Pavlidis, A., & Fullagar, S. (2013). Narrating the multiplicity of 'derby grrrl': Exploring intersectionality and the dynamics of affect in roller derby. *Leisure Sciences*, 35(5), 422-437.

Pavlidis, A., & Fullagar, S. (2014), *Sport, Gender and Power: The Rise of Roller Derby*, London: Routledge.

Pavlidis, A., & Fullagar, S. (2015). The pain and pleasure of roller derby: Thinking through affect and subjectification. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(5), 483-499.

Peluso, N. M. (2011). “‘Cruisin’ for a bruising’: women’s flat track roller derby’. In C. Bobel & S. SKwan (Eds.), *Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules* (37-47). Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press.

Rowe, D., & Gilmour, C. (2009). ‘Global sport: Where Wembley way meets Bollywood boulevard’. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23(2): 171—182.

Schultz, J. (2010). ‘The physical is political: Women’s suffrage, pilgrim hikes and the public sphere’. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27(7): 1133—1153.

Spakowski, N. (2011). “Gender” Trouble: Feminism in China under the Impact of Western Theory and the Spatialization of Identity. *positions*, 19(1), 31-54.

Stake, R. E., (2005), ‘Qualitative case studies’, in Denzin & Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition, London: Sage.

Tatlow, D. K. (2017, February 22). Chinese feminist group’s social media account suspended. *The New York Times*, pp. Accessed online February 25 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/world/asia/china-feminist-weibo.html?_r=2011>.

Thorpe, H. (2014). *Transnational Mobilities in Action Sport Cultures*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

To, S. (2013). ‘Understanding sheng nu (“leftover women”): The phenomenon of late marriage among Chinese professional women’. *Symbolic Interaction*, 36(1): 1-20.

Wheaton, B. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sport*. London and New York: Routledge.

Xiong H (2011) ‘Stratification of women’s sport in contemporary China’. *The International Journal of History of Sport* 28 (7), 990-1015.

Xiong, H. (2014). Transformation of Women’s Mass Sport in the Process of Urbanisation in Contemporary China. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31(13), 1617-1638.

Xu, F. (2009). Chinese feminisms encounter international feminisms: Identity, power and knowledge production. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11(2), 196-215.

Xu, X. (2006). Modernizing China in the Olympic spotlight: China’s national identity and the 2008 Beijing Olympiad. *The Sociological Review*, 54(s2), 90-107.

Yu, Z. (2015). *Translating feminism in China: Gender, sexuality and censorship*. Routledge.

Zhang, H. (2014). Domestic violence and its official reactions in China. In Cao, L., Sun, I. Y. & Heberton, B. (eds), *The Routledge handbook of Chinese criminology*, London: Routledge, 224-237.

Zheng, W. (2015). 'Detention of the Feminist Five in China'. *Feminist studies*, 41(2), 476—482.

Zheng W and Zhang Y (2010), 'Global concepts, local practices: Chinese feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on women.' *Feminist Studies* 36 (1): 40-70.