



Queen of Sports

Dir. Yu Sun | China | 1934 | N/C U | Chinese intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 29m

Performing live: Meg Morley (piano), Frank Bockius (percussion)

3pm on Sunday 24 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of the China Film Archive

Presented in partnership with the Confucius Institute for Scotland at the University of Edinburgh

What type of character appealed most to audiences on Chinese screens in the 1930s? Athletes, especially sportswomen, were greatly admired by many. The term *tiyu* (sports), introduced from Japan into Chinese in the late nineteenth century, combines the meanings of “body” and “cultivation.” Far more than just signifying physical fitness, this new term embodied a broader vision of nation-building and empowerment through personal growth.

Queen of Sports stands as one of the pioneering films to spotlight this emerging modern athletic culture in China. As director Sun Yu articulates, “in our study and promotion of sports (*tiyu*), beyond the condition of strengthening the body, we must also cultivate a new spirit: purity, sincerity, perseverance, struggle, courage, progressiveness, practicality, fairness, and most importantly, the spirit of unity which we are most in need of.”

Made during a wave of national enthusiasm for sports, *Queen of Sports* tells a coming-of-age story of a young woman who finds her strength and purpose in athleticism. She aspires to use her talents to contribute to the strengthening of China through sports. Premiering on April 14, 1934, its release coincided with the real Far Eastern Qualifying Trials in Shanghai, embedding the film in the real-life excitement of athletic competition. The opening credits pay homage to “the warriors striving for the true spirit of sports,” setting the tone for a film that not only entertained but also engaged with the actual sports event.

The portrayal of a women’s sports academy adds another layer of attraction to the film. *Queen of Sports* offers contemporary audiences a unique and somewhat voyeuristic look

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into this novel institution. One of the most remarkable sequences is a montage that vividly displays the daily routines of young female students in the dormitory as they change, bathe and exercise. Their lives are depicted as highly disciplined, with their days beginning at the sound of the wake-up bell, followed by orderly routines of washing up, brushing their teeth, and taking classes. These activities collectively portray an energetic, vibrant, and militarized “New Life”. Such portrayal carries a palpable political message, reflecting the principles of the New Life Movement launched by the Nationalist government earlier that year. This campaign aimed to imbue society with Confucian ethics and a modern sense of hygiene through militarism and sports, in defiance of external threats.

Li Lili, the leading actress and a rising star in the early 1930s, certainly held a strong appeal for audiences. In contrast to the slender, fragile beauties of her time, Li brought something fresh to the screen with her robust, healthy and athletic physique. She was exceptionally adept at fitness and took part in various sports events, leading audiences to often mistake her for a real athlete. Her genuine personality and radiant confidence added to her appeal, making her a favorite in the media. Li was particularly famous for her legs. In *Queen of Sports*, she was often strategically framed to accentuate her strong, well-defined legs, which



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the press praised as “the great jade pillars.” This combination of physical fitness, genuine charm, and patriotic fervor established her as an ideal representation of modern womanhood.

Nevertheless, Sun Yu, the film director, was not so skilled in sports. In his memoir, Sun shares an episode from middle school, where he stepped in for a classmate in a 400-meter relay race. Unfortunately, he didn’t make it to the finish line—he collapsed and vomited. This somewhat embarrassing experience, rather than deterring him, fueled his lasting interest in sports.

Queen of Sports achieved tremendous success and sparked a wave of sports enthusiasm in 1930s Chinese society. The film also altered how people viewed the gender of athletes, inspiring women to enter the traditionally male-dominated arena. Sportswomen frequently graced the pages of popular magazines and athletic talent remained a sought-after characteristic for celebrities. This lasting trend found expression in later film productions such as *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* directed by Xie Jin in 1957, and a Hong Kong film also titled “Queen of Sports” in 1961. Both films highlight the resilience and skill of female athletes, showing their enduring allure on screens.

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