

**“The Olympic Decathlete Who Became a Shaman:
C. K. Yang and the Masculine Body in Modern Taiwan”**

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In the year 2000, the Taiwan media prepared for that summer’s blitz of Olympic coverage. Some reporters, hungry for an original angle, went to interview Taiwan’s first great Olympic sportsman, C. K. Yang (Yang Chuanguang 楊傳廣). Yang, an Ami Aborigine from Taidong County in eastern Taiwan, won a silver medal in the decathlon at the Rome Olympics in 1960. To this day, his epic battle there with close friend and UCLA track and field teammate Rafer Johnson is known as one of the most touching and memorable moments in Olympic history.¹

Forty years later, many of these reporters were shocked to find that the elderly Yang, the UCLA Bruin Hall of Famer once known around the world as “The Asian Iron Man,” was using his body in a different way. Yang now was serving as a Daoist oracle or shaman (Taiwanese *tang-ki* 童乩, Mandarin *jitong* 乩童) at the Temple of the Imperial Seal (*Yuxigong* 玉璽宮) in Taidong, a jarring fact which seemed curious at least and, too many, even shameful. The sense of pity for a fallen hero was soon heightened even further when, on January 1, 2001, Taiwan’s *Liberty Times* (*Ziyou shibao* 自由時報) announced that Yang was seriously ill and in need of a

¹ More than forty years later, two popular board games allow Olympic junkies to relive this legendary showdown. “Home Court Pro Basketball Board Game & Ten Events Men’s Decathlon Board Game,” <http://homecourtgames.bizland.com/Home.html>, accessed 3 August 2002; “Decathlon,” <http://www.boardgamegeek.com/viewitem.php3?gameid=1414>, accessed 4 August 2002.

liver transplant.²

This transformation over four decades – from *Sports Illustrated*'s “World's Best Athlete”³ to an ailing shaman – is amazing enough, but hardly describes the whole of the amazing career enjoyed by Yang since his Olympic silver-medal triumph. Yang set the world decathlon record in 1963,⁴ but was drugged by teammates working for the PRC government during the 1964 Olympics and finished a disappointing fifth place!⁵ Robbed of the superstardom that his sure gold medal would have won him, Yang worked for an alcohol distributor and his wife's family's food business in Los Angeles, and appeared in three Hollywood films⁶ before returning to Taiwan to coach Taiwan's national track and field team.

In the late 1970s, Yang consulted the “Golden Queen Mother” (*Jinmu niangniang* 金母娘娘, also popularly known as the “Queen Mother of the West,” *Xiwangmu* 西王母) in a Hualian temple. She told him to be more careful with his investments and to pursue a future career in some sort of teaching. Yang, who was considering investing in an athletic footwear company, took this advice to heart, but wanted to confirm it with a second opinion. Another god

² Yang's American son sent an urgent e-mail message to the *Taipei Times* “asking for assistance in obtaining the Taiwan government's help for his father,” as his American doctor refused to refer him to the UCLA Medical Center, where he could have been placed on a waiting list for a liver transplant. Francis Huang, “Taiwan's ‘iron man’ to return home to hospital,” *Taipei Times*, 4 January 2001, 1.

³ *Sports Illustrated* 19.26 (23 December 1963), front cover.

An earlier *SI* article evokes the surprise among Americans that this could be true, emphasizing that Yang was “the first truly great Chinese athlete of modern times.” Tex Maule, “Yang of China is World's Best Athlete,” *Sports Illustrated* 18.18 (6 May 1963), 66.

⁴ He pole-vaulted so high that the official decathlon tables did not even have a score for his feat; the International Amateur Athletic Federation was forced to change its scoring tables in order to record Yang's achievements.

⁵ Yang's disappointing finish puzzled the sporting world. He only learned of this plot in 1978 from a ROC intelligence agent. “Sports legend alleges foul play,” *The China Post*, 5 April 1997; Rafer Johnson with Philip Goldberg, *The Best That I Can Be: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 172.

⁶ Yang played an Olympic athlete in the Cary Grant film “Walk, Don't Run” (1966), and appeared in two westerns, “There Was a Crooked Man” (1970) and “One More Train to Rob” (1971).

who Yang consulted in northern Taiwan validated this first piece of advice, simply stating that what the Golden Queen Mother had told him was correct. Yang was so moved by this experience that he soon went on to found the aforementioned Temple of the Imperial Seal in his Taidong hometown.⁷

In the 1980s, Yang was elected to the national legislature and served one term for the ruling Guomintang, making for an amazing trifecta of simultaneous athletic, religious and political work. However, it became apparent in 1986 that he would not be renominated for the seat. That year, during his trip to the Asian Games in Seoul, where he was also serving as coach of the “Chinese Taipei” track and field team, Yang is said to have made arrangements to defect to the PRC! He was talked out of this plan, but later defected to the new Democratic Progressive Party (*Minjindang* 民進黨) in 1989, and made a failed bid for the Taidong County Magistrateship (*xianzhang* 縣長).⁸ Yang’s political career ended at this point, and afterward he was able to devote more time to his dual remaining careers: director of Taiwan’s Olympic Training Center at Zuoying, and resident shaman at the Temple of the Imperial Seal.

At his temple, Yang, clad in a special dragon-emblazoned Daoist robe of imperial yellow, serves as a medium between “The Imperial Sovereign of the East” (*Donghua dijun* 東華帝君, also known as “The God of the Immortals” *Dongwanggong* 東王公) and the mortal beings seeking his advice and judgment. The Imperial Sovereign waits for Yang to enter a trance, when he communicates his commands and wisdom to this exclusive earthly messenger. These words from above appear first as odd utterances from Yang’s mouth, and are finally “translated” into

⁷ “Yazhou tieren Yang Chuanguang jianren jitong 22 nian” [Iron Man Yang Chuanguang has also been a spirit medium for 22 years], *Shijie ribao* (*World Journal*), 14 November 1999, A7.

⁸ Yang was scorned during this campaign when, on the bad advice of local DPP functionaries, he decided to sell his 1960 Olympic silver medal to raise funds for the campaign!

intelligible Taiwanese or Mandarin language by Yang's special middle-aged female assistant. Yang proudly tells reporters of his (and the Imperial Sovereign's) record of successfully curing many people of illnesses by defeating the evil spirits that prey on them. As per proper *tang-ki* practice, however, Yang does not charge any fees for his medium service, but does accept grateful patrons' voluntary donations for regular temple supplies like incense and oil.⁹

Needless to say, this is not the work that one would expect the typical Olympic-medal decathlete to do. The story of C. K. Yang's life is fascinating and illuminating in many ways, and has the potential to teach us much about ethnicity, nationalism, the body and religion in late 20th century Taiwan. Yet, in part because of the suspect status with which academic studies of sport and physical culture are viewed in some circles, Western and Chinese, Yang's life never has been the subject of any serious historical or cultural inquiry.

Eventually, I hope to use Yang's life story to understand several different aspects of Taiwanese history and culture, including: interactions between Han Chinese and Taiwan Aborigines, views of sport and the masculine body in Taiwan during the Cold War, notions of celebrity and political power in Taiwan, and ideas of the body in contemporary Taiwanese religion. This present study will investigate the many unexplored intersections between discourses of ethnicity, the body, nationalism, celebrity and religion in modern Taiwan.

Typical sociological or historical studies examine one of these individual fields. Sometimes, as in recent work by Michael Stainton on Taiwan Aboriginal political movements, Leo Ching on Chinese culturalism and Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan, or Marc Moskowitz on the Taiwanese cult of aborted fetus ghost worship, authors will be able to discuss how two of

⁹ "Yazhou tieren Yang Chuanguang jianren jitong 22 nian," A7.

these above variables may intersect and interact.¹⁰ Rarely, however, do we find a case as ethnographically rich as the life of C. K. Yang, who during the last four decades has experienced and performed so many of these transformations and detours in modern Taiwanese culture, and where so many of these cultural-academic variables can be seen to overlap.

In the present essay, I want to concentrate on the jarring transformation noted above – namely, Yang’s move from one rational and modern culture of the body, athletics, to another body culture seen as irrational and pre-modern, *tang-ki* shamanism. In several obvious ways, these cultures could not be more different. Since Spencer, and in China, Yan Fu (嚴復), athletics have been associated with a true “physical education” providing modern capabilities and wisdom. (And Yang, no less, is a graduate of UCLA!) The Taiwanese *tang-ki*, on the other hand, is almost always supposed to be illiterate and provincial; only then are his spirit writing and Mandarin-language utterances assuredly coming from the god that possesses him.¹¹ Modern athletic training is scientific and meticulous, while the physical realm of the *tang-ki*, by definition, is one of abandon and unpredictable violence to the physical “self” during possession trances.

Athletics are absolutely of this world, governed by historical rules and regulations, timed, measured, refereed by professional and impartial judges, and resulting in outcomes largely attributable to the pure will and determination of the competitor. With the possessed *tang-ki*, all bets on rational or accountable behavior are off, as the god in question does what he wants with

¹⁰ Michael Stainton, “The Politics of Taiwan Aboriginal Origins,” and “Aboriginal Self-Government: Taiwan’s Uncompleted Agenda,” in Murray A. Rubinstein, ed., *Taiwan: A New History* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 27-44, 419-435; Leo Ching, *Becoming “Japanese”:* *Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Marc L. Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001).

¹¹ Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 107; David K. Jordan, “How To Become a Chinese Spirit

the spirit medium's voice and flesh. Indeed, there is no such thing as free will for the shaman; he is, in Jordan's words, a "mouthpiece," "not a free man,"¹² in Shahaar's phrasing, "a helpless instrument."¹³ Yet C. K. Yang has moved very comfortably and independently between these two worlds for more than two decades. How did he accomplish this?

A Crisis of Nation and Masculinity

Many in the media found this transformation curious. Indeed, it does beg the question of what connections could possibly exist between the worlds of *Sports Illustrated* and the Olympics, and the "prick-ball," "knife ladder" and ritual mortification of the flesh? Others, however, were clearly and explicitly disappointed by this once-gallant modern hero's descent into 22 years' service of this "degrading" superstition; as the editor-in-chief of the *Taipei Times* beseeched, "Those who know him could only sigh ... How could a national treasure be reduced to this?"¹⁴

The *Taipei Times* article above was accompanied by a cartoon, drawn by an artist using the name "Mountain People." This cartoon, reproduced below, attempts to encapsulate dramatically this startling (and to some, saddening) transformation.¹⁵ The many stages of Yang's life flash before the viewer's eyes, but attention is quickly and ultimately drawn to the sad, even pathetic, seated figure. Yang here can only brood about the days when he ran faster and jumped

Medium," paper presented at the ASPC Meeting, Eugene, 4 June 1977, 9.

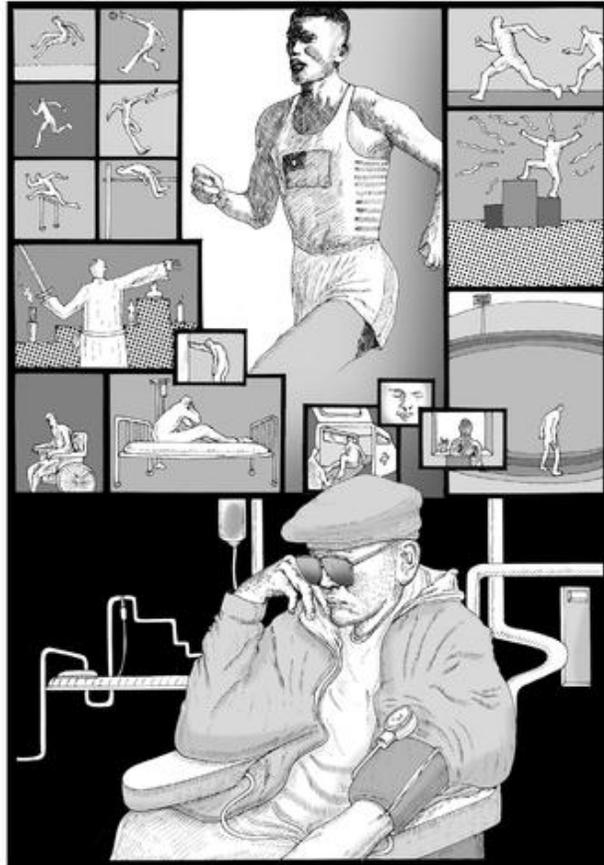
¹² David K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, & Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwanese Village*, third edition (San Diego: Department of Anthropology, UCSD, 1999), <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan>, chapter 4, accessed 16 April 2003.

¹³ Meir Shahaar, *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 178.

¹⁴ Rick Chu (Zhu Lixi), translated by Ethan Harkness, "Yang Chuan-kuang deserves better," *Taipei Times*, 10 January 2001, 9, <http://taipeitimes.com/news/2001/01/10/story/0000069188>, accessed 9 August 2002.

¹⁵ Mountain People, cartoon, *Taipei Times*, 10 January 2001, 9, <http://taipeitimes.com/news/2001/01/10/image/0000014229>, accessed 1 August 2002.

higher than almost any man alive, free of the tubes and cords that now bind him. That all of us lucky enough to enjoy long lives eventually have health problems and have to see doctors seems to come as a shock to the cartoonist. Instead, he leaves us with a clear statement – either touching or vulgar, depending on how one reads it – of the disbelief many felt when learning in this way of Yang’s mortality.



In one of his many excellent studies of Indian wrestling and masculinity, Joseph Alter cites the case of Malwa Pahalwan, India’s only Asian Games gold medallist, whose story elicited “a sense of national pity” when he was found to have become an “all-but-forgotten, marginalized” pushcart vegetable vendor.¹⁶

¹⁶ Joseph S. Alter, “Nervous Masculinity: Consumption and the Production of Embodied Gender in Indian Wrestling,” in Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, eds., *Everyday Life in South Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana

The discovery of C. K. Yang's "fall" to shamanism evoked a similar reaction in Taiwan, for two main reasons. The first relates to the obviously faulty assumption of a timeless masculinity possessed by Olympic athletes like Yang, who once represented the nation so well. We all know that the human body at age 70 is unlikely to be as agile or powerful as it was at age 30, but this awareness of the biological clock seems to be easily suspended when it comes to iconic figures like Yang. If his every dash, jump and throw reflected so well on the Republic of China, what could this "fall" mean? Even if the recent difficulties experienced by Taiwan on the international stage have had nothing to do with Yang's personal "decline," the latter still may seem too painful a metonymic reminder of the former.

The second factor here is a related apprehension about what kind of society Taiwan has become by the turn of the 21st century. The news of Yang's illness, indeed, reported on the first day of this new century, seemed to dramatize this question. Had Taiwan, through the efforts of proud individuals like Yang, become a modern nation whose citizens could perform and master the international gestures and movements embodied by the Olympics? Or did Yang's "fall" signify that at heart, temporary and superficial adoption of international forms aside, the soul of Taiwan was one locked into embarrassingly pre-modern forms like *tang-ki* shamanism? (Or to put it another way, was Taiwan hopelessly "possessed" by inescapable forces of traditionalism and superstition?)

Here, I would like to try to make use of this crisis to provide a cultural/historical account for the feasibility, even ease, of this transformation performed by C. K. Yang over the last several decades. There are two dialectical aspects of this accounting. There is the question of Yang as the subject of this narrative, and the (unexpected) intersections between the two forms in which

he has excelled for the last half-century, sports and shamanism. Attention to this not only recognizes Yang's own agency in performing this transformation, but also can illuminate the ways in which "tradition" and "modernity" can become so intertwined, especially in a place like Taiwan, as to become meaningless categories. Then, there are the ways in which the greater society in Taiwan understands these two cultural realms of sports and shamanism, another approach which can explain how the typical cultural categories used to describe "traditional" and "modern" Taiwan culture are also historical and entangled.

Sports and Shamanism

The Republic of China Yearbook – Taiwan 2002 contains 25 main chapters. Chapter 23, "Sports and Recreation," begins with a photograph of an "extreme" motocross cyclist airborne against a blue sky, a striking image of (American-style?) progress, bravado, and independence. Chapter 25, "Religion," features a photo of a large Buddhist statue, to which dozens of monks, nuns and laypeople, out of focus and on the bottom margin of the picture, are praying. This image clearly reproduces Orientalist portrayals of Buddhism and Asian religions in general. Although the chapter discusses Taiwanese religion as an active realm in which citizens make "concerted efforts to help humanity,"¹⁷ this sphere is clearly self-Orientalized as one where tradition, custom, icons, duty, worship, etc., and not the modern free will exhibited by "extreme athletes," are the main operating variables.

Decades of muscular Christianity and public end zone prayers have made sporting endeavor a logical progressive counterpart to American and Western religion – witness the iconic nature of Notre Dame's "Touchdown Jesus" mural. However, Daoism, Buddhism and other

¹⁷ *Republic of China Yearbook – Taiwan 2002* (Taipei: Government Information Office, 2002), pp. 397,

Asian folk religions, even in Asian settings, are still almost always represented as remnants of a more stagnant and cyclical ahistory. This naturalized dichotomy, then, is one reason for the jarring nature of C. K. Yang's famous transformation from Olympic athlete to shaman.

This seemingly obvious dichotomy, however, is in many ways a false one, inherited from Western sports' assumption of the role of unquestioned progress and rationality, or vigorous individual training and teamwork as the solution to the many weaknesses bred by pre-modern forms of social organization. In fact, the classical sporting narrative (the most obvious and familiar examples being the genre films like *Bad News Bears* or *A League of Their Own*) would predict that it was less modern and rational souls (perhaps even shamans!) who, after exposure to the movements and gestures of sport, become enlightened athletes – not vice versa! The present case of C. K. Yang would appear to be an anomaly, if it were not for the fact that the Taiwanese realms of sports and shamanism – and the role of the masculine body in each – can actually be seen to share many points in common.

We are familiar with, inured to, the century-old phenomenon of sports as an acceptable arena for the expression of nationalistic feelings. This mode operates similarly in Taiwan, the most famous examples being the glory won for the Chiang regimes by the efforts of both C. K. Yang and the Little League baseball teams that dominated world competition during the 1970s and 1980s. (These teams almost always included several players of Aborigine descent, a fact which made the seemingly simple equations of sports and nationalism much more layered and complex.¹⁸) The project of sporting nationalism has become even more complicated in Taiwan since 1981, when the official “Olympic formula” dictated that Taiwanese athletes were

451-452.

¹⁸ For more on Taiwanese baseball and nationalism, see Andrew Morris, “Baseball, History, the Local and the Global in Taiwan,” in David K. Jordan, Andrew Morris, and Marc L. Moskowitz, eds., *The Minor Arts*

competing not for the glory of Taiwan, or of the Republic of China. Now they compete in the name of the meaningless entity “Chinese Taipei” (*Zhonghua Taibei* 中華台北). The Taiwan/ROC national flag and anthem are forbidden at the Olympics or virtually any other international sporting competition (even at events held in Taiwan!¹⁹), but this international arena remains an important site for the performance of a vigorous Taiwanese identity. This is perhaps one reason why C. K. Yang was able to move so easily to the work of the *tang-ki*.

Several scholars have shown the *tang-ki* to be far from the pre-modern throwback he is usually assumed to be, but rather a recent historical relic that is a direct function of Taiwanese nationalism. Kleinman explains that at the time of his 1970s fieldwork, there were more shamans in Taiwan than ever before, attributing this fact to an “upsurge of folk religion as the only tolerated expression of Taiwanese nationalism.”²⁰ Yet while Kleinman sees the *tang-ki* as an agent of real (if not totally scientifically-defined) healing, Kagan and Wasescha say that his healing is actually “psychic ... [via] a strong defense of Taiwanese culture.” These authors described the *tang-ki* as “community healer and protector,” and directly pose this “subversive” role against the “occupying forces [who] utilized allopathic (e.g., drugs and surgery) methods” of healing. The unqualified use of the term “occupying forces” to describe the Guomindang regime hints at the politics of this piece, which defines the *tang-ki* totally by his position “outside the domain of the KMT and its mythology,” and his healing capabilities no more than a “political

of Daily Life: Popular Culture in Taiwan (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, forthcoming 2004).

¹⁹ Fans attending the 14th Asian Women's Football Championship, held in Taipei in 2001, were instructed not to wave the Taiwan/ROC flag and to refrain from chanting “Taiwan.” Gavin Phipps, “Women’s football coming home to Asia,” *Taipei Times*, 5 December 2001, 16, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/news/2001/12/05/story/0000114535>, accessed 16 April 2003.

²⁰ Arthur Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland Between Anthropology, Medicine, and Psychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 211.

tool.”²¹ More recently, Nickerson’s piece in *Positions* has taken a more nuanced, but related, approach, seeing the *tang-ki*’s role as a “question of popular cultural autonomy.”²²

What all of these authors describe is the historical nature of the *tang-ki* – the shaman not as a “remnant” of the pre-modern past, but instead as an artifact of modernization in Taiwan. Whether it is an ambiguous realm of cultural autonomy, or a more pointed political resistance, it seems to be accepted among scholars that the *tang-ki* can be understood as an alternative performer of Taiwanese nationalism. In this sense, perhaps it makes perfect sense for C. K. Yang to have made this transition to the world of shamanism. Trained for decades that his physical skills could be useful only as a representative of “Chinese” progress and strength, it is likely that this connection between bodily performance and nationalism remains important to Yang.

In a May 1963 *New York Times* article entitled “C. K. Yang: A Continent Rests on His Shoulders,” Yang’s UCLA coach described the obligations that the “Asian Iron Man” felt to represent the Chinese people: “He’s got millions of people to drive him on. He carries a load nobody knows about, and for people who don’t know about sports.”²³ Indeed, just before the 1964 Olympics where Yang was drugged, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) informed Yang that he had to win a gold medal for the sake of the pride of the Republic of China.²⁴ And even in 1960, after Yang broke the previous Olympic decathlon record in winning the Olympic silver medal, he somehow felt obliged to compose a classically inflected (but politically ham-

²¹ Richard C. Kagan and Anna Wasescha, “The Taiwanese *tang-ki*: The Shaman as Community Healer and Protector,” in Sydney L. Greenblatt, Richard W. Wilson and Amy Auerbacher Wilson, eds., *Social Interaction in Chinese Society* (Praeger Scientific, 1982), 113-114, 130, 132.

²² Peter Nickerson, “A Poetics and Politics of Possession: Taiwanese Spirit-Medium Cults and Autonomous Popular Cultural Space,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9.1 (2001), 188.

²³ Frank Litsky, “C. K. Yang: A Continent Rests on His Shoulders,” *New York Times*, 16 May 1963, 45; Yang Chuanguang, transcribed by Wang Daoping, *Wo de yundong shengya* [My athletic career] (Taipei: Zonghe yuekan she, 1969), 18.

fisted) telegram to Chiang, in which he apologized, “I [Chuanguang] was not able to achieve first place, a fact which is both very moving and very shameful. The only fortunate thing is that the Soviet [bronze medallist Vassily Kuznyetsov] finished behind me; the communist bandits have been repudiated.”²⁵

For the man whose every motion was interpreted as a signal of the strength or weakness of “Free China,” – indeed, ROC Olympic Committee chief Hao Gengsheng called him “the model of the ‘modern Chinese man’”²⁶ – the role of shaman, defined as we have here, was perhaps the most logical way to continue working in this somatic-nationalist vein. The fact that his *tang-ki* work now reflects a Taiwanese, not “Chinese,” nationalism is also in keeping with Yang’s late-1980s political switch to the Democratic Progressive Party, which he continued to support publicly up through President Chen Shui-bian’s (陳水扁) election in 2000.²⁷ This new mode of nationalistic performance seems to be appreciated more by liberal Western scholars than by the Taiwanese public, many of whom see this transformation as a degrading fall from modern grace. Still, the fact that the role of the modern shaman can be understood as a modern complement to, and not a “traditional” opposite of, the Olympic athlete allows us to see Yang’s startling transformation differently.

There is, however, another way in which Yang’s *tang-ki* work can be described with a narrative of tradition. Boretz has written on the important role of violence in Chinese popular

²⁴ Johnson, *The Best That I Can Be*, 172.

²⁵ Gong Shusen, *Tieren Yang Chuanguang* [Iron Man C. K. Yang] (Taipei: Zhongwai tushu chubanshe, 1977), 68. This clumsy political posturing for Chiang’s benefit is directly opposed to the very public and (assumedly) sincere Olympic sportsmanship exhibited between Johnson, Yang and Kuznyetsov in Rome.

²⁶ Gong, *Tieren Yang Chuanguang*, 74.

²⁷ Yang worked hard to round up typically rare Aborigine support for Chen and the DPP. Martin Williams, “Who used whom?” *Taipei Times*, 13 January 2001, 8, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/edit/archives/2001/01/13/69606>, accessed 18 February 2003.

religion, and the personification of this martial role, the “man of prowess.”²⁸ Boretz discusses this native category – now filled in Taiwan by spirit mediums who undergo possession in ways similar to Yang – as combining notions of the martial, efficacious method, and supernatural power for the benefit of protecting the community. In this way, this element of the spirit-medium role can be seen as “traditional,” despite the evidence mentioned earlier that the *tang-ki* is a historical artifact of modern Taiwan. This approach of placing the *tang-ki* within an older Chinese tradition does allow the conventional notion, described above, that Yang has regressed from a “modern” athletic role to a pre-modern understanding of the role of the body in local society. However, the fact that the martial “man of prowess” has so long been a crucial member and representative of the Chinese community should make us reconsider the notion of the Olympic athlete as a uniquely modern representation of nationalism. All clichés about Chinese bookish and non-physical culture aside, this fact means that any serious treatment of Yang’s life and/or contemporary Taiwan has to consider the important continuities between “traditional” and “modern” ways, and “traditional” and “modern” ways of seeing the masculine body.

Indeed, the more one observes the activities and ideologies of the *tang-ki*, the more the *tang-ki*’s world begins to sound like some Bizarro form of modern sport. The very name of the *tang-ki* (or *jitong*), “divining youth,” points to the demographic group that, just as in our traditional notion of the sporting world, is expected to provide the community spectacle of public shamanism.²⁹ Elliott and Jordan have both described the important fact that the *tang-ki* cannot perform his shaman’s work for material gain. Elliott’s account that the shaman must be an

²⁸ Avron A. Boretz, “Martial Gods and Magic Swords: Identity, Myth, and Violence in Chinese Popular Religion,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 29.1 (Summer 1995), 94.

²⁹ This can easily be problematized by seeing that past the age of 70, Yang and other senior *tang-ki* like him are referred to as “youths.” As Jordan explains, “The *tang-ki* is a man whose natural life is thought to be short ... and who has been granted an extension, as it were, in order that he may serve his god.”

“honest man of upright character” performing in a pure state of mind, and Jordan’s judgment that “holding down another job is ... a badge of honesty on the part of the *tang-ki*” both echo perfectly of the amateur ideal that still informs the modern conception of the true sportsman.³⁰

Then, de Groot’s description of the *tang-kis*’ “curious practice of inflicting wounds upon themselves” also provides for another type of comparison with the sporting world. De Groot explains that this “curious auto-phlebotomy” is “a means of accelerating the descent of the spirit into them, or to intensify their animation,” and that sometimes the shamans will “intensify the awe, which they inspire, to the very utmost by climbing a ladder of swords in the square before the temple.” As he continues, the ceremony “is deemed of cardinal importance if the epidemic is violent and of long duration.”³¹ This physical competition that he describes – who can bleed the most, who can climb the most intimidating and terrifying knife ladder (*to kiô* 刀橋), whose trance can last longer and inspire the most awe – also seems like nothing else than a differently oriented version of “faster, higher, stronger.” And the unconscious “trance” so crucial to this realm, a different application of the unconscious performance that in athletics is referred to as “muscle memory.”

Through these dramatic routines, the *tang-ki* becomes a public “spectacle,” to use Jordan’s term,³² in local society. He is a figure who, like the modern athlete, publicly trains, employs and exhausts his physical gifts, in return for material gain (although for both types it is supposedly never “about the money”) and the respect of his community. Ahern has written on

Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, & Ancestors*, chapter 4.

³⁰ Jordan, “How To Become a Chinese Spirit Medium,” 9; Alan J. A. Elliott, *Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults in Singapore* (London School of Economics and Political Science, 1955), 47.

³¹ J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China vol. VI* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1910), 1290-1291.

³² Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, & Ancestors*, chapter 4.

the *tang-ki* who moves seamlessly between our *iong* (*yang* 陽) world and the *im* (*yin* 陰) underworld, to which he leads regular excursions for paying customers.³³ This liminality, this ability to move between different worlds, is one more quality that must be mastered by the modern athlete, who is both the public spectacle and private citizen. This is not even to mention C. K. Yang's own special ability to move so effortlessly between Taiwanese and American, religious, athletic and political societies and settings during his public career. In these ways, then, it seems somewhat natural that C. K. Yang would turn to *tang-ki* shamanism to find an alternative realm of youthful hyper-masculinized amateur competition. Indeed, as Kleinman puts it, "Achievement orientation, then, is a prerequisite for shamans."³⁴

A final relevant aspect of *tang-ki* medium practice is its gendered nature, which has been outlined most famously by Margery Wolf, in her landmark 1990 piece "The Woman Who Didn't Become a Shaman." In 1960, in a village in the Taibei basin, a 30-year-old mother named Mrs. Tan began to "'dance' like a *tang-ki*, speak in a strange language, and make oracle-like statements." As a generation of anthropologists has learned, Mrs. Tan did not become a shaman, but was just judged to be "crazy," for several reasons, not least of which was her gender.³⁵ There are spaces in Taiwanese or Fujianese medium culture where women's participation is normal and accepted. Comber has described the female mediums he observed (*wenmipo* 問迷婆, *wenwangpo* 問亡婆, *wenxingpo* 問醒婆) who are more modest, do not claim to be possessed by any famous deity, and perform mostly in private homes for people who want to make contact

³³ Emily M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 228-234.

³⁴ Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*, 215.

³⁵ Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale*, 93-116.

with their deceased loved ones.³⁶

However, despite rare inroads by women who become possessed by masculine deities, the public *tang-ki* culture of which C. K. Yang is now part is an almost exclusively male and masculine realm.³⁷ This is perhaps not a surprise, given the description of the public, protective, competitive, martial role of the *tang-ki* described above, and the fact that these categories can all fit squarely into the traditional masculine-gendered “public” sphere in Chinese culture. Modern athletics, likewise, trumpets its own inclusion of women and girls in its own once-exclusive male realm, but even the most casual observer would understand the present situation hardly to be one of real equality across gender lines. *Tang-ki* culture, given what we know about its historical nature, can also be thought of as a fellow holdout from the modern commitment to gender equity. The Taiwanese *tang-ki* occupies a space which is not necessarily “traditionally” masculine, but which constantly reproduces itself as a site where the masculine presence is necessary for the good of the community. In this final way, then, attention must also be paid here to the real continuities between “traditional” and “modern” ways in contemporary Taiwan.

Conclusion

This question of the role of the masculine Taiwanese body in both “traditional” religious and “modern” sporting contexts actually receives an absurd answer in the form of the current effort, undertaken in Taiwan, for the “sport” of firerunning to be accepted as an Olympic sport. Known by many as “the most dangerous sport on the planet,” firerunning (*benhuo* 奔火) makes

³⁶ Leon Comber, *Chinese Temples in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1958), 9.

³⁷ Heinze and Shahar relate their observations of rare women who are possessed by figures like Gantian Shangdi and Jigong. Ruth-Inge Heinze, *Trance and Healing in Southeast Asia Today* (Bangkok: White Lotus Co., Ltd., 1988), 145; Shahar, *Crazy Ji*, 177.

“sport” out of a 19th-century Tainan-area ritual in which fireworks are shot at participants to exorcise demons thought at the time to cause cholera. Here, the hyper-masochism of frontier religious ritual gets repackaged, with the help of tight, padded uniforms and a television contract, into the latest and most “extreme” of “alternative” sports. (For example, one rule states that a player is out if “he or she falls, steps out of bounds, or is killed.”) At the same time, the campaign predictably takes advantage of the recent craze for “authentic” and uniquely Taiwanese culture; the basis of the firerunning marketing scheme is its role as “the blueprint of a new sport, made in Taiwan.”³⁸

How, then, does one classify a “traditional” yet savvy Taiwanese hip-capitalist project like firerunning? A similar and related question can be posed of the culture of the Taiwanese *tang-ki*, a supposedly “traditional” but historically created manifestation of local martial/masculine culture in Taiwan. Any attention to the *tang-ki* demonstrates the necessity of placing this figure into historical context where one can see much real continuity in the role of the masculine body between “traditional” and “modern” Taiwan.

And this again is where Olympic decathlete C. K. Yang comes in. His seemingly unlikely transmutation from world-renowned sports hero into the earthly voice of The Imperial Sovereign of the East has recently been the cause of a minor crisis in Taiwanese media and physical culture circles. Many cringed at the thought of Taiwan’s “Iron Man” being “reduced” not only to a state of physical weakness and vulnerability, but even worse, to a role that seemed to betray the modern values of athletics for embarrassing superstition and provincialism.

Some reports tried to “save face” for Yang, and indeed, for Taiwan; the National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports published a report in March 2001 that:

³⁸ Jules Quartly, “More bangs for your buck,” *Taipei Times*, 1 April 2002, 15,

[His recent hospital stay] did not prevent Mr. Yang from finding the time to explain to the national [baseball] team's athletes methods for putting into practice training for weight, speed and muscle strength. He also gave advice on how to raise physical and mental conditions during competition, and how to increase confidence. All the athletes benefited from Mr. Yang's penetrating analysis of his wealth of experience competing in various Olympic and international sports events.³⁹

It was perhaps reassuring to some that his two decades in shamanistic service had not dulled Yang's confident, competitive and athletic edge.

This solution to the crisis of masculinity engendered by Yang's case, however, tends to naturalize the dichotomy between the traditional and modern masculine body in Taiwan, which again is a largely artificial one. Yang's life trajectory demonstrates many of the connections between modernity, sports, tradition, religion, the masculine body and celebrity in modern and contemporary Taiwan. The important continuities that exist between these forms thus allow us to question more critically the "modern" nature of modernity, the "traditional" nature of religious tradition, and the supposedly traumatic and jarring "break" which is typically assumed to lie between the two. C. K. Yang should not be able to serve concurrently as resident shaman at the local Temple of the Imperial Seal, and as technical/inspirational advisor to Taiwan's baseball and track and field teams. He should not be able, in the course of days or even hours, both to consult The Imperial Sovereign of the East and to provide relevant advice on the high jump and discus throw. He does, though. This is a fact which is hard for many to accept, but which we can also use to understand more fully the social possibilities and structure of contemporary Taiwan.

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/news/2002/04/01/story/0000130114>, accessed 30 April 2003.

³⁹ "Striving for Excellence in the Asian Baseball Championship - Taiwan National Team Trains Aggressively," *National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Newsletter* (March 2001), <http://163.29.141.191/spo/english/4-6-4.htm>, accessed 27 May 2003.

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