

« THE SPIRIT OF WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL REPRESENTS THE SPIRIT OF AN ERA – THE LOUDEST VOICE IN THE RISE OF CHINA. »

Review of the Movie *Leap*

AMANDA SHUMAN

« **T**he spirit of women's volleyball represents the spirit of an era – the loudest voice in the rise of China. »

This slogan opens the film *Leap*, directed by Hong Kong's Peter Chan and China's official submission to the Academy Awards in 2020, which recounts the story of Chinese women's volleyball over nearly four decades, from the late 1970s to 2016. Beginning in 1981, the Chinese women's volleyball team went on to win five consecutive world titles, including Olympic gold in 1984¹. These wins occurred at a crucial moment, during the early years of Deng Xiaoping's official policy of « Reform and Opening Up » (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) and the beginnings of market reforms. In China, from the Reform period to the present, there is no sports story more significant to the national historical narrative. The team came to symbolize the nation's post-Mao emergence onto the world stage, and members of the volleyball

team are still regarded as national heroes. Best known among them remains, without a doubt, Lang Ping. Star player from the early 1980s and known as the « Iron Hammer » for her forceful spikes as an outside hitter, she later went on to coach the national teams in China and the United States. *Leap* revolves around Lang and her involvement with Chinese women's volleyball, while also tracing her longstanding friendship with Chen Zhonghe, an assistant coach in the early 1980s who also later served as head coach of the Chinese national team.

The film is divided into three parts: the early Reform period (1978-1981); the 2008 Olympics in Beijing; and the years leading up to the 2016 Rio Olympics (2013-2016). The first and last comprise the bulk of the film. Each part ends with a dramatic reenactment of a close match from the respective period which China wins: the final match of the world championship against Japan, held in Osaka in 1981 (China

versus Japan); the 2008 match between the U.S. and China at the Beijing Olympics; and the quarterfinal between China and Brazil at the 2016 Rio Olympics. These action-filled scenes were filmed using elite volleyball players, including some of the original players from the 2008 and 2016 Olympic teams².

The first hour of the film recounts the journey that led to success in women's volleyball in the early 1980s. The story begins when a young Chen Zhonghe (Peng Yuchang) is called up by the Party to be an assistant coach for the women's national volleyball team. The team's head coach, Yuan Weimin (Wu Gang), is stubborn and his training style draconian. Women are pelted with volleyballs as they dive onto the floor, engage in numerous physically taxing exercises, and have little rest or respite - even at Chinese New Year³. Praise is non-existent and injuries are visible; the camera zooms in on bandaged and bloodied wrists and hands. The conditions are miserable: a shabby gym and facilities, where outdated equipment lingers in the shadows and slogans written in large red characters, reminiscent of a bygone era, grace the walls. The lighting in many of the scenes during this first hour is purposefully dark to convey difficult times⁴. In this atmosphere, assistant coach Chen quickly befriends a young Lang Ping (played by her own daughter, Lydia Lang Bai), who has recently been called up to the national team but is excluded from training until she can prove herself by lifting as much weight as the other women on the team. Lang does not speak much, but we quickly sense her growing impatience. Nevertheless, through persistent training, she manages to move into her role as the «Iron Hammer» in time for the world championships.

This first part is punctuated with political messages taken straight from the Party-approved official history as it is told today. Coach Yuan launches into a poignant monologue [28:30], for example, recounting how «*far behind*» China is materially and economically, noting that the

first time he went abroad in the 1970s he was «*in awe of the hotel room, refrigerator, color TV, air conditioner*». Moreover, he argues for the significance of sport to Reform and to China's international standing: «*The country is reforming and opening up, sports in China are a priority, we don't have the facilities of other countries, so we have to work harder to have any chance of winning. The Chinese people need to be world champions. We need to prove to everyone [that we] Chinese are great.*»⁵ The connection between politics, economy, and sport is made even clearer when the volleyball team plays at the world cup championship in 1981. The film switches between action on the court and large audiences across China sitting huddled together in the dark, watching the match live on black and white TVs (in a country where few people owned televisions at the time, it is significant that this event brought so many people together to watch a live sports event). At match point, the silence is palpable as the Chinese audiences wait in anticipation. When the team wins, the audiences at home erupt and crowds of ordinary people take to the streets, some with flags in hand, to celebrate.

The second part of the film jumps forward to 2008, when a middle-aged Lang Ping (Gong Li) is head coach of Team USA at the Beijing Olympics. Prior to the match, she meets her old friend Chen (Huang Bo), who is now head coach of the Chinese team. As they drive together through a well-lit Beijing, passing modern skyscrapers and flashy billboard advertisements, Lang comments on how much China has changed⁶. The dark and desolate surroundings of the 1980s have completely disappeared. Lang tells Chen that the Chinese team is in better shape overall than the American team, but, in the end, it is Team USA that wins. As the American players celebrate, Lang leaves the court quietly with her head down - a suggestion to the local audience, perhaps, that she would have preferred the Chinese team to win, and maybe implying they could have done so under

her guidance. But this is only a supposition: Lang and the film's narration is silent on the matter, although we learn that she resigned as Team USA's head coach.

The final part covers the years leading up to the 2016 Rio Olympics. In 2013, Lang is living in California, but she does not seem settled there. As family members complain about the disappointing Chinese team, she makes no comment. In a dramatic scene, she returns to China for the funeral of a former 1980s teammate, who on her deathbed begs Lang to come back to coach the Chinese team. Lang agrees on the condition that certain changes are made. She presents a list of demands to the State Sports Commission officials, which include updating an outdated sports system to international standards - such as, increasing the squad size and hiring foreign coaches. The officials are reluctant but concede; in the following scenes, Lang scouts and recruits a myriad of players, who rigorously train in state-of-the-art, brightly lit facilities. The team initially performs poorly, and Lang is criticized but sticks to her guns. This part of the film is at its most exciting when we see and hear from the Chinese volleyball players, many of whom play themselves in the film. Here, too, Lang and Chen's continuing friendship helps sustain Lang as she pushes through difficulties with a team that lacks the mental «spirit» of the 1980s. Nostalgic flashbacks, interspersed with monologues from Lang and Chen, encourage the team to regain this spirit, which eventually culminates in the team's dramatic quarter-final win in Rio against Brazil. The film ends with the medal ceremony at Rio where the Chinese flag is raised and the anthem played. Lang calls Chen, who is watching the ceremony on TV. She says nothing when he answers but holds up her phone so he can hear the national anthem. This enduring friendship and their joint leadership have thus helped the «spirit» return - of volleyball and, by extension, the

nation. It is probably no coincidence that the timeline highlighted here mirrors Xi Jinping's rise, which also began in 2013.

Leap's overall message is predictable: this is a story explicitly about how women's volleyball helped unify people in China and build the domestic «spirit» needed to jumpstart or «leap» into market reform. Moreover, volleyball, and Lang Ping in particular, are upheld as mirrors and models of China's rapid success from the Reform era to the present⁷. The stark economic differences between the 1980s and 2008, and later in 2013 with the changes Lang introduces to the sports system are also «leaps». Notably absent from the second half of the film, however, are both the clear political messages and the euphoric reaction of the Chinese audiences watching the volleyball matches, crucial features of the first part. Instead, we witness the continuing strength of the friendship between Lang and Chen - a thread that could be read along generational lines as sacrifice and resilience in the name of China's reforms and subsequent rise. There is also Lang's firm commitment to the well-being of the athletes in the years leading up to Rio. In stark contrast to the treatment of the athletes under Coach Yuan during the Reform period, the film highlights how Lang even seeks to understand the needs and life stories of athletes. Moreover, we see her encouraging the athletes a degree of autonomy. There should be no forcing of any individual to play volleyball at the expense of sacrificing their personal desires. This is exemplified by a scene in which Lang presses the team on their reasons for playing volleyball (which initially leaves them confused): one of the athletes voluntarily leaves, stating that she plans instead to apply for university. What might this say about the importance of the individual within the collective in the Xi era? Given this example and how the film ends, the message seems to me that, while national success is still of utmost importance, individual choice must be taken into consideration. The reasons for the team's success at Rio are thus

embodied by a similar yet distinct « spirit » from that of the 1980s.

There is an unexplained absence in the film's timeline: the « missing » years between the early 1980s and 2008. Lang Ping's first stint as China's head coach was not, in fact, in the 2010s but rather in the 1990s⁸. The film also portrays Lang as conflicted and perhaps unhappy in the United States, even though her family is there and she coached the US team successfully - her heart, it suggests, remains in China. Lang's own daughter, Lydia Bai, plays the younger version of her mother in the film (ingenious casting choice), but their relationship is left unexplored. Bai was born and raised in the United States. She spent the summers with her family in Beijing and is bilingual. She is also a former Stanford volleyball player and bears a striking resemblance to her mother. Prior to preparing for this film, she had little

acting experience and had never seen much footage of or watched documentaries on her mother. Bai emphasizes that participating in this film project was a deeply personal experience that allowed her to understand and become closer to her mother. During the 1981 world cup ceremony scene, her crying was not fake: she had grasped the magnitude of the event and what it must have felt like at the time, stating, « *I was proud of my mom.* »⁹ Her portrayal of her mother is undeniably convincing and moving - one can sense its emotional depth. Although none of the above is the focus of *Leap*, a forthcoming English-language documentary about Lang Ping seems to suggest more complexity and nuances to her personal story¹⁰, which should nicely complement this Hollywood-esque feature film.

Leap (夺冠 *Duoguan*. China, 2020. Director: Peter Chan. 2h15min)

Pour aller plus loin, scannez le code QR suivant avec votre smartphone :



LEAP | 夺冠 (Official Trailer) - In Cinemas 22 October 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ejQWvtjbQ8>

Biography: Amanda Shuman is a Lecturer and Researcher at the Institute of Chinese Studies at the University of Freiburg (Germany). She has widely published on the history of sport in the People's Republic of China under Mao. She is Academic Editor (Asia) for the International Journal of the History of Sport and co-edits (with Philippe Vonnard) the « RERIS studies in International Sports Relations » book series (De Gruyter).

Notes

- ¹The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics were the first summer Olympics China participated in since the 1950s. Between 1958 and 1979 the People's Republic of China was not a member of the IOC.
- ²My heart was racing as if watching the matches live for the first time. Original footage of these matches, which was clearly consulted for the film, can still be found on YouTube, e.g.: 1981 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCSk4OLCtpY>, 2008 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBtQb7DMHtl>, and 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCSk4OLCtpY&t=6694s>.
- ³One might even say they train like soldiers, and for that there is a historical precedent dating to the 1960s and imported methods from the Japanese women's volleyball team. Coach Yuan's background, though unexplored in the film, is important here: as a volleyball player in the 1960s, he participated in training with the infamous Japanese women's volleyball coach, Hirofumi Daimatsu. Daimatsu was a former POW-turned-coach who trained women like soldiers; under him, the team trained until late at night and practiced a rolling judo-like dive as they were pelted with volleyballs, much like in this film. For more on Daimatsu in China, see Chapter 6 of my dissertation here: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1xn0s4rg>
- ⁴This cinematic technique has often been used in historical Chinese films to depict earlier periods of time negatively. During the Mao era, for example, scenes from the pre-1949 (« pre-Liberation ») period, such as in the 1957 classic directed by Xie Jin, *Women Basketball Player No. 5* (女篮五号), are often dark and desolate, while the Mao era scenes are bright and hopeful. The irony is that *Leap* strives to show that things were still desolate in the early Reform era and suggests that the situation has only really improved in the twenty-first century.
- ⁵Yuan represents the mindset of a generation that feels they need to make up for the chances they «lost» due to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976): «*Everyone was confident in 1966 that we could reach the top. Who knew we would stop playing for the next ten years. There's been a dagger in my heart ever since.*»
- ⁶Indeed, the fact that they are driving themselves is significant because private car ownership in China is a twenty-first century phenomenon.
- ⁷In 2022, two years after this film debuted, Lang Ping retired following China's less-than-stellar performance in women's volleyball at the Tokyo Olympics. It is unclear how future narratives of her career will discuss this, but I think it's fair to say that this film encompasses the highlights.
- ⁸In fact, the Chinese team won the silver medal at the 1996 Olympics held in Atlanta. A good summary of Lang's career can be found here: <https://thechinaproject.com/2020/10/26/lang-ping-the-iron-hammer-the-national-hero-with-the-golden-touch/>
- ⁹Personal communication with Lydia Bai over Zoom, May 2023.
- ¹⁰Lang's personal life is often discussed in Chinese-language documentaries and biographies. The English-language documentary, «*The Iron Hammer*», for unknown reasons, has still not been released for public viewing. A trailer is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MH6xdOzxno&t=13s>