

Bending the Body for China: The Uses of Acrobatics in Sino-US Diplomacy during the Cold War

Tracy Zhang

Research Associate

Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University



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This presentation examines negotiations over the value and meanings of the acrobatic body in Sino-US cultural diplomacy during the Cold War era. Since the 1950s, Chinese communist leaders identified acrobatics as a tool of propaganda. However, the extent to which acrobatics could be used to glorify the proletariat and Red Guards was disputed at the peak of the Cultural Revolution. As a result, many acrobatic troupes were closed down. Nonetheless, an agreement on reviving “traditional acrobatics” was reached after President Nixon watched an acrobatic performance in Shanghai, and in 1972 a state-run acrobatic troupe went to the United States to promote Sino-US friendship. Drawing on oral history interviews and archival data, this research reveals how acrobats’ embodied practices, on and off, the stage constituted multiple sites and politics of cultural diplomacy at a delicate moment of the Cold War.

Presented by the Department of Geography, Planning, and Environment