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## A Study on the Historical Development of China's Sports Dream

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### Abstract

China's sports dream was profoundly influenced by traditional Chinese culture in ancient China. At that time, the primary purpose of sports was bodybuilding, health preserving and entertainment. The ruling class never advocated even suppressed the phenomenon of emphasizing literacy and military force for the need of their ruling. In semi-colonial and semi-feudal old China, with the foreign invasion and inside corruption, modern sports were introduced to China and the China's sports dream had a strong sense of survival and participation. However, sports level as a whole was not high. At present, with the rejuvenation of Chinese nation's "Chinese Dream", combining with Chinese excellent traditional culture, China plays a vital role in realizing China's sports dream, promoting Chinese sports soft power, shaping China's international sporting image, eliminating alienation in modern sports and establishing new international sports order.

**Key words:** China's sports dream; Historical development; Traditional cultural concept; Sports power; Sports culture

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### INTRODUCTION

Chinese President Xi Jinping (2012) put forward and expounded the Chinese nation's "Chinese Dream"—the dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the greatest dream in the Chinese nation in modern times. The earliest sports dream can be dated back to the famous "three Olympic questions" published on Tianjin's Chinese and foreign newspaper in 1908. The questions covered three issues: When will China's delegates participate in the Olympics? When will China win this tournament? And when will the Olympics take place in China. According to the account of the declaration of the Herald of Chinese sports meeting, the "three Olympic questions" are the direct cause of the 1910's first national games. "Sports dream" is the value orientation and judgment choice in different social and historical stages and also the embodiment of the national spirit of people's pursuit and eagerness for peace, health, justice, competition and struggle for success. A value judgment and orientation of a nation are inseparable from its historical development process. China's "sports dream" cannot exceed and break away from the history of its formation. Combining the era background, the paper concludes and explores the different social forms and real demands of China's sports dreams at different times. It also provides reference for the realization of China's "sports power" in the post-Olympic period.

### 1. THE EMPHASIS OF "LITERACY AND MILITARY FORCE" IN ANCIENT CHINA

The sports culture has a long development with the civilization of the Chinese nation. In ancient China, under the influence of feudal ruling and the Confucianism, the sports values mainly expressed the ideology of "harmony between man and nature", "health preserving", and

“entertainment”. According to the animals’ expression, Doctor Hua Tuo invented “the Five-animal Exercises”, which were the earliest “gymnastics” to strengthen human bodies. Based on ancient bodybuilding and self-defense, martial arts gradually became a sports focusing both on fight and health. The most representative of martial arts was Tai Ji created by Zhang Sanfeng from Wu Dang Mountain in the early Ming Dynasty. Martial arts were the collective practice and wisdom of Chinese ancient sports.

Although Confucianism contained “six arts” emphasizing sport skill, the feudal ruling class tended to adopt literacy to govern people in order to rule the country easily. In the late Tang and Five dynasties, there existed the emphasis of literacy and the exclusion of military force, which was documented in national laws and regulations in Song Dynasty. Zhao Kuangyin, the first emperor in Song Dynasty, relieved all his generals’ control to the army and advocated scholars to aid the governing of the country and all the generals were forbidden to involve in the national affairs. And in the Spring and Autumn Period, the characteristics of China’s sports community system were obvious, which promoted the popularity and prosperity of China’s sports to some extent. However, we should see that in a transitional society from slavery society dominated by a decentralized natural economy to the feudal society, sports were difficult to obtain an independent and important position because of the lack of active participation of state administrative power and mainly relying on the loose spontaneous organization of the social group. During this period, the competitive sports stimulated by the warlords’ fighting, continuous war, and military war could not find unity and independence, and the culture ideology of nation, universality and hero worship as a point. At that time, China’s competitive sports were on the decline with the outburst of wars. The traditional cultural concept is allowed of no existence of competition and advocated aesthetic, ethical and health preserving aspect. Therefore, it was also difficult to form a large-scale, even nationwide, regular and normal sports exchange situation, and difficult to hold sporting events which can produce a huge impetus and cohesion to the whole society.

As Tan Hua in the book entitled *Sports History* pointed out,

the philosophical characteristics of Chinese traditional sports and the survival environment determine its characteristics in terms of running: In the social aspect, it reflects a strong patriarchal clan system and in the nature aspect, it shows distinctive regional and seasonal characteristics. Thus, traditional sports activities demonstrate a strong folk custom aspect.

To sum up, the ancient Chinese sports culture mainly embodies the ideologies of “harmony between human and nature” and “peaceful coexistence”. With the appearance of wars and martial arts, ancient Chinese sports are multifunctional, such as bodybuilding, health

preserving and entertainment. From the nation level, the establishment of the feudal dynasty decreases the breakout of wars, thus degrading the value of sports armament role. The ruling class tends to adopt literacy and scholars to govern the country instead of emphasizing the military force to maintain the stability of the regime.

## 2. THE STRONG SENSE OF SURVIVAL AND PARTICIPATION OF CHINA’S MODERN SPORTS

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the background of foreign invasion and inside corruption, the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society was introduced to modern sports. The national physique was weak with the low combat effectiveness of the army. The whole nation was called “the Sick Man of East Asia”. Many people with lofty ideals coming from Germany and Japan realized that sports, the best choice to save the country and people, were supposed to improve people’s physical fitness and build human body. For example, in 1908, Xu Yibing, a famous athlete in our country, proposed the school motto—strengthening the physique of the Chinese nation and clearing ourselves of “the Sick Man of East Asia” when he established the earliest modern sports school of Chinese gymnastics. Zhang Boling, China’s modern educator put forward the slogan of “to strengthen our nation, we should strengthen our people first; to strengthen our people, we should strengthen our body first.” In 1917, young Mao Zedong published a paper on the study of sports to call for sports for the purpose of physical fitness.

But under the social historical conditions at that time, in order to defend the nation, sports value reflected strong instrumental social needs of “strengthening the nation and people”. And through the education of martial spirit and military training, all students and people were possessed the quality of soldiers and good physique in order to defend and strengthen the nation and people. From the nation level, the sports effect indicated the goal of survival and saving the country and people. After the Sino-Japanese war, in 1896, the first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens, and this was the major sports event in modern sports history. At that time, the Olympic organizing committee sent the invitation to China for the participation of the games, but the closed and backward China did not know what a sport was, and they did not give the reply, thus losing the chance to join the international sports family. During this period, China participated in the four sessions of the Far East games, and the competing countries were only confined to the Philippines, China and Japan. These sports events were in a low level and had small influence. And China only achieved the first-place in the second session of sports meeting and scored badly in other sports games. China lost the chance to participate in the major international events and failed to

achieve the first step of the sports dream. Although the old China was in the disaster of “foreign invasion and inside corruption”, Chinese people still demonstrated a strong sense of participation in modern sports. In 1908, “three Olympic (the whole nation’s sports meeting) questions” published on Tianjin’s newspaper covered three issues: When will China’s delegates participate in the Olympics, when will China win the tournament, and when will the Olympics be held in China. The ideas seemed unpractical at that time, but they all reflected people’s enthusiasm for sports events. The same year, the first session of national sports meeting was held by the Qing Dynasty, which showed Chinese people’s great sports participation in modern sports. In 1932, Zhang Xueliang, the northeastern warlord, sent Liu Changchun to attend the 10th Olympic Games in Los Angeles, USA. Because of the tiring trip and fatigue, Liu Changchun had no ideal achievements in the sports meeting. However, the bumpy trip was not the decisive reason of his failure; the fundamental one was the backward development of sports in the whole country at that time.

To sum up, China’s modern sports started late and developed slowly, but China’s sports dream had a strong sense of “survival and participation”. In this stage, with the national weakness, Chinese people attached great importance to the physical fitness and actively advocated sports, which promoted the development of sports in modern China. On the one hand, under the background of foreign invasion and inside corruption, the values of modern sports demonstrated more about military ideologies of “strengthening the nation and people” and nation’s survival sense of “saving the country”. On the other hand, even with the national disaster, Chinese people still had a strong sense of participation and enthusiasm in world sports under the influence of the introduction and development of modern sports. China also tried to join the world national system, but the weak China did not get proper position in the international political system.

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### **3. THE INFLUENTIAL AND LEADING ROLE OF CHINA’S SPORTS IN THE WORLD AT PRESENT**

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At the initial stage of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the pursuit and desire for developing sports and improving national physique are increasingly high. In February 1983, National Sports Committee submitted to China Central Government and the State Council on further creating a new sports situation and setting a goal of making China’s sports enter the world sports power. In order to achieve the strategic goal, China carried out the plan of “striving for the Olympic glory”. The core of this plan is to stimulate the athletes’ patriotism of fighting for the honor of our country. China is experiencing rapid development after the reform and

opening policy, and national strength is greatly increasing. The national system of competitive sports has made great progress and China has played a significant role in world sports circle. The successful host of the 29<sup>th</sup> Beijing Olympic Games has shown the ideologies of “Green” and “Humanity” to the world. “One World, One Dream” has reflected the ideology of harmony to people all over the world. After the 2008 Olympic Games, China enters the post-Olympic period and is struggling for the realization of the dream of “sports power”.

Modern sports originated from the Western world. It should be noted that the alienation of modern sports is increasingly serious. For example, sports alienation leads to utilitarianism, malformation of value orientation and narrow viewpoint of nationality. And the excessive highlight of struggling causes positive deviation behavior and the lack of sports humanistic sense. On the contrary, traditional Chinese sports culture emphasizes “the harmony between nature and people”, “modesty and comity”, “righteousness outweighing benefits”, “peace and cooperation”, “humanistic spirit” and so on. All these are the right remedy for modern sports alienation.

At present, the primary targets of China’s sports is to enhance China’s sports soft power, cultivate China’s humanistic sports culture, speed up the globalization of traditional Chinese sports culture, foster advanced professional and versatile talents required by international sports organization, actively participate in the formulation and modification of international sports rules and regulations, hold large-scale international sports events, shape China’s international new image and voice of sports power in the world.

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### **CONCLUSION**

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China’s “sports dream” has a long history. The ideologies of “harmony between nature and people” and “peace and coexistence” had a profound impact on the sports aims of “bodybuilding”, “health preserving” and “entertainment” in ancient China. Especially in the Spring and Autumn Period, people advocated the philosophical ideologies of “the success of ancient laws and regulations lying in the satisfaction of people”, “keeping cool and you will win through”, and “the unseen strength being in humble”. Therefore, the sports ideologies of “ignoring competition, stressing etiquettes and health preserving” were formed and laid a solid foundation for the development of Chinese traditional sports. In modern times, with the social condition of foreign invasion and inside corruption and also the social culture trend of western learning, modern Western sports almost dominated China’s sports and replaced traditional Chinese sports. And China’s modern sports took the responsibility of “saving the country” and “strengthening the nation and people”. Therefore, there was no development for China’s modern sports, although China’s occasional participation in international sports

embodied strong sense of enthusiasm for sports events. However, it showed more about survival and instrumental aspects. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially under the background of “China’s Dream”, China’s sports outlook also faces multi-values and sports alienation like the Western world. Nowadays, China’s sports’ development roots from the social reality, sticks to the core values of “China’s Dream”, advocates “people-oriented” ideology, explore the essence of traditional Chinese culture and shoulder the right responsibility of China’s “Sports Dream”.

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