

On the Road to Maturity: Sport, Nationalism and the Building of the Modern Chinese Nation State (1912-1949)

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The Republic of China Era (1912-1949) saw the transformation of the modern Chinese nation state from its infancy to maturity. Sport played an important part in this process of change, supporting and facilitating the rise of a Republic from the ashes of the Qing Empire. During this period, sport contributed to the shaping of national consciousness among the Chinese people and greatly consolidated the unity of the newly established nation state. It became an essential part of Chinese nationalists, politicians and educationalists' strategy to achieve national salvation and revival.

The year 1912 was a landmark in modern Chinese history. It saw the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the end of the feudal power which ruled China for more than two thousand years. A Republic was established by the nationalists who overthrew the Manchu regime in the 1911 revolution and a modern nation state, which was firmly believed by the enlightenment thinkers, politicians, nationalists and revolutionaries as the only way out for the Chinese nation, eventually took shape. The Republic of China Era (1912-1949) began.

Survival of the Fittest: the Government's Sports Policy between 1912 and 1949

Fueled by modern Chinese nationalism which focused on anti-imperialism, national unity and national revival, educationalists and politicians used sport and physical education to strengthen the nation state in the early years of the Republic (1912-1927). Government decrees and policies were issued to serve this goal.¹ In the 1910s, the government trumpeted military citizenship education as the guiding philosophy of the educational system which resulted in the official promotion of militaristic and Social

Darwinist forms of sport and physical education. However, from the mid-1910s onwards, educationalists started to question militarism in sport and physical education due to the end of the First World War and initiated a nation-wide debate. Through the debates, people reached a deeper understanding of the value of modern sport and physical education in cultivating the spirit of cooperation, equality and national unity. They began to become aware that sport and physical education could serve the creation of a civilised nation which was defined by both the human need for community and individual rights and freedoms.² The government changed its sports policy accordingly and sport ‘became a physically experienced link between citizens’ dual responsibilities – to keep healthy and fit in body and mind and to work and unite with their fellow Chinese’.³ Thus, modern sports activities began to served the construction of the young nation state through a new approach.⁴

The government’s sports policy changed again when the the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) defeated the provincial warlords in the Northern Expedition (1926-1927) and established a centralised government in Nanjing. The KMT saw sport and physical education as a means of developing a national spirit of unity, and introduced legislation to promote them. Soon after the foundation of the Nanjing government, the National Physical Education and Sports Committee was established under the Ministry of Education in late 1927. ‘It was the first time that the Chinese had a national governmental body to supervise exercise throughout the country.’⁵ Two years later, a policy document entitled ‘The Principle of Education and the Action Plan’ was established by the National Government in January 1929 to promote education around the country. Military training in schools was highlighted in this decree. Different from the military drills and gymnastics in the 1910s, military training was part of the physical education curriculum which consists of academic subjects and physical/technical subjects. The decree endowed sport and physical education with political significance. Build up the strength of the nation was set as the goal. It declared:

Schools at all levels and social education sectors should attach importance to sport and physical education. Students in secondary schools and higher education sectors should be trained with military physical exercises. The objective of promoting sport and physical education is to build up the physical strength of the nation.⁶

Three months later, the National Government established the 'National Physical Education Law'. The law consolidated the importance of physical education and military training. Article six of the law stated,

Schools at the upper middle school level and above must all set physical education as a compulsory subject and must, at the same time, comply with the previously announced military education programme. Student who does not have the score for physical education and military education programme will not be allowed to graduate.⁷

The 'Work Plan for National Physical Education' was issued by the Ministry of Education in September 1932 to explain and implement the 'National Physical Education Law'. This plan clearly defined its political and nationalist objective as follows:

- 1 Offer an opportunity for all the citizens to cultivate themselves through sport and physical education
- 2 Train people's body and help them to adapt new environment
- 3 Cultivate collectivism and fight against foreign aggressions** (highlighted by the author)
- 4 Cultivate the habit of hard-working and industrious, promote the national spirit** (highlighted by the author)
- 5 Cultivate the habit of practicing sports activities⁸

Also in 1932, the government organised a national conference which highlighted the relationship between physical education and national survival. The conference declared, 'The rise and fall of every nation in the world depends on its citizens' physical status. That is why this government strongly pushes for our citizens' physical education in order to improve the overall health of our citizens and further revive our national spirit.'⁹

The government revised the 'National Physical Education Law' in 1941 and made nationalism its guideline. The goal of using physical education to serve national defence was highlighted in the first article of the decree: 'The national physical education should suit the outline of national education. The objective is to build up