

Chinese Sports History Studies [an Overview]

Research >
China

Over five thousand years of written history has left China with a large number of history books. Yet, apart from some articles on Cuju (ancient Chinese football), in the Han Dynasty (221 BC to AD 24), and the *Jiaoli ji* (the Records of Wrestling), in AD 960, there are very few documents about the history of sport – until, that is, the end of feudal China in 1911.

By Fang Hong

The beginnings of modern sports history studies can be dated back to the semi-capitalist China that existed after 1911. There then were twelve sports newspapers and nine sports journals and magazines, which occasionally published articles on the history of sport, most of which were introductions to, or descriptions of, the Olympic games. The first book, the *History of Sport in China*, was published in 1919 by Ge Shaoyu, a young student of physical education.

While the period between 1911 and 1949 observed a steadily increasing interest in sports history, the period after 1949 witnessed an unprecedented growth in the study as part of a wider strategy of both historical investigation and promotion of sport under the early Communist regime. In 1956, the Sports Ministry established the Sports Technology Committee in Beijing which was to research Chinese sports history. From 1957 to 1961, the Committee edited nine volumes of *Chinese Sports History Research Material*, which was published by the People's Sports Press – a profound achievement at the time. Due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, however, the budget was cut in 1960 and the Committee eventually dismantled.

As a result, research on sports history became a responsibility of the various physical education institutes around the country. The first sports history research centre was established at Chengdu Physical Education Institute in 1962. After four years of concentrated work,

the Research Centre published three volumes of *The Ancient Chinese Sports Material* (3 volumes), drafted *Modern Chinese Sports History*, and translated four books on world sports history from English and Japanese.

The 1966 Cultural Revolution disrupted the progress of the study of sports history; the Historical Research Centre in Chengdu, then considered a nest of elite intellectuals producing feudal and bourgeois rubbish, was disbanded, and it would not be until the 1980s that interest in the study of sports history would officially return to China. In 1982 the Ministry of Sport established the Sports History Working Committee. It soon formed a large umbrella network, with more than thirty physical education departments and institutes, and offices in thirty-one provincial and sixty-four local sports commissions. The aim of the Committee was to promote the systematic study of both sports history in general, and Chinese sports history in particular. An annual working conference has been held since 1982 to examine the Committee's progress.

The distinguished Research Centre of Sports History in Chengdu was restored in 1980 and expanded in 1986, and now offers both MA and PhD degrees. At the beginning of the 1990s three new research centres were established in China, all offering MA degrees in sports history: the Beijing Physical Education University, the South China Normal University in Guangzhou, and the Zhejiang University in Hangzhou. By 1995, sports history was being taught at fifteen

physical education institutes, and in 159 physical education departments of various universities and colleges.

From 1982 to 2001, more than one hundred books on sports history were published, including thirty-one books on general sports history, twenty-two books on major sports events, twenty-six books on regional and local sports history, twenty-four volumes of sports history material, and three sports history text books which are now used in the universities and colleges. A new bi-monthly, academic publication, the *Journal of Sports Culture and History*, was launched in 1983, and has since become essential reading for academics, coaches and sports administrators in China. Meanwhile, twenty-seven local and regional sports history journals have also appeared between 1984 and 2000.

In 1984, the Chinese Society for the History of Physical Education and Sport was established, and as of the end of 2001 it claims more than six hundred. The Society, in cooperation with the Sports History Working Committee, organizes annual conferences and supervises various research projects on sports culture and history in China. Meanwhile, since 1984, regional and local sports commissions have organized more than one hundred conferences, the major themes of which have been the regional and local sports history, the lives of local sports heroes and heroines, and the experiences of ordinary people.

An innovative intellectual movement has since grown out of the resurgent interest in the history of sport in the 1980s and 1990s. As its growth paralleled the major ideological, political, economic, social, and cultural transformations in modern Chinese society, it attracted a large number of able, ener-

getic intellectuals from the fields of history, literature, arts, and sports studies, into its domain. Not satisfied with being mere bookkeepers of athletic records, these individuals decided to take different aspects of sports history with them to their areas of expertise, to join the exciting social and cultural movement. Though their respective fields are different, the fundamental approach has been the same: to document large structural changes between society and sport; to explain the evolution of culture and sport; to construct a coherent analysis of social relationships in and through sport; to reconstruct the sporting experiences of both athletes and non-athletes alike; and to establish a unique empire in the field of social science. In doing so they have not only inherited traditional historical methods and subjects, but also created a new field, which has profoundly affected the historical consciousness by broadening both the subject matter and methods of history.

In the spirit of change, however, sports historians should begin to free themselves from historical tradition, and use the vast accumulation of social science description to generate their own theories and build sound explanatory frameworks. Sports history should not come to dominate history, but should have a much stronger impact on all aspects of history. ◀



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Cover of the *Sports History of the People's Republic of China 1949-1998*, edited by Wu Shaozu et al., published in 1999 by the Chinese Book Publishers [Zhongguo shuji chubanshe] in Beijing. Wu Shaozu was Sports Minister of the PR China from 1990 to 2001.



Image provided by Fang Hong

Contested Landscapes of Marine Sports

The Seto Inland Sea in Japan

Marine sports make use of a resource that seems to be abundant. However, in Japan, an economy where space is the most highly prized commodity, even the sea is subject to conflicting land use. The separation of specialized spaces for different sports, a general characteristic of modern sports, inhibits the participation in sports, because it imposes restrictions on the use of existing resources (like fishing harbours) and involves high costs. Marine sports in Japan can serve as an example that the separation of spaces for sports and spaces for other uses is not an ideal solution to the contest on landscape use in industrialized, densely inhabited areas, but that negotiations on common grounds might be more successful in providing spaces for sports open to a wider range of participants.

Research >
Japan

By Carolin Funck

Like other outdoor sports, marine sports, with the exception of fishing, were introduced to Japan by Western foreigners: sailing in the 1920s, surfing in the 1960s, and windsurfing in the 1970s. It was expected that, with growing prosperity, marine sports would follow the example of tennis and skiing and spread from an elite activity into a popular mass sport. Furthermore, a nation of almost 4,000 islands and with a 16,000 km coastline, Japan seems the ideal field for marine sports.

Participation rates in diving, sailing, and surfing, however, hover around the 1 per cent level. The number of pleasure boats per person is lower than in most other industrialized countries; it was not until 1996 that a Japanese team took a medal in an Olympic sailing contest. The abundance of natural spaces for marine sports has not been translated into an adequate level of activity. One obvious reason is the time budget available: marine sports require quite a long time frame to reach a usable shore and move out to the sea, but for the Japanese, that time is restricted due to long working hours and family duties. With time restricted, elements of space like access to the shore, availability of mooring facilities, and possibilities for stopover during cruising become a very decisive factor.

In sports geography, the development of modern sports has

been characterized by the separation of specific space earmarked for sports purposes and set in the context of a dislike for mixed use of space (Bale 1993:135). In marine sports, engine, wind, and waves support the movement of the body to create a wide activity radius difficult to confine. On the other hand, the sea in Japan – especially the Seto Inland Sea, which is the focus of this study – has been intensively used for transport, fishing, and land reclamation. What kind of spatial separation has occurred in this context and how does it influence participation? What are the interests in negotiating the landscapes of marine sports and who is involved in it?

From Yachts to Thunder Tribes

Participation in different marine sports shows a highly biased gender and age structure, which inhibits a wider spread as well as a common strategy of interest lobbying. Surfing is the domain of young men of around twenty; young women prefer diving, often combined with a trip abroad. On the other hand, surveys by the leading sailing magazine *Kaji* (Helm) show that compared to 1973, when 45 per cent of its readers were in their twenties, in 1999 40 per cent were in their fifties – and almost 100 per cent were male.

Marine sports operate in a continuum from leisure to sports, where the same actors share the same sites. The aspect

of competition has weakened in sailing, as membership of the Japan Sailing Federation, which is a requirement for races, has declined to 11,781 members in 2002. In contrast, an increase to 15,445 members in the Japan Surfing Federation in 2001 shows the popularity of board-based sports.

Another indicator for the structure of marine sports is the number of pleasure boats registered. Of the 439,369 boats nationwide (2001 figure), 73 per cent are motorboats used mainly for pleasure fishing. For all of these boats, only about 400 marinas are available. The number of pleasure boats per capita is above national average in the western part of Japan, especially around the Seto Inland Sea.

Sailing a yacht is said to occupy 'a particularly powerful position in both the signification of social status and the imagination of leisure' (Laurier 1999:196). As the number of yachts rose to 55,000 during the bubble economy (1988 figure), only to decline again to 27,000 in 2000, the connection to economic well-being seemed obvious. However, income data of the readers of *Kaji* suggest that yacht owners are not restricted to a particular upper class. Many keep their boats in ordinary fishing harbours where they pay bottles of sake or small amounts of money to the local fishing cooperative. When members of sailing clubs were interviewed about this difference between reality and image, their conclusion was that sailing is, after all, a three-K sport: *kitsui* (tough), *kiken* (dangerous), and *kitanai* (dirty). As long as racing is not the major purpose, costs can be reduced by avoiding places specialized for marine sports like marinas – it is the time factor that makes sailing in Japan a luxurious experience.

On the other end of the spectrum from elite to wild forms

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