

A Study of Chinese Elite Athletes' Education and Development

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Abstract: Being an elite athlete requires hard work and many years of dedication. Often however education suffers as a result and athletes are at a disadvantage after retiring at relatively young ages. This is particularly true in China as it has developed and changed over time. The various policies introduced have tried to address the problems associated with the dynamics of sports and the required education needed in order to survive post-sports. This paper will examine the various problems inherent with changing the way elite athletes train with both sports and education.

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1 Introduction

China's sporting success had largely been accredited to its state-driven elite sports system. Under the system, thousands of athletes are identified as having elite sport potential and moved to train in programs aimed at producing future Olympic champions. But it has come under intense criticism in recent years from academics and sports insiders concerned about the human cost of a system that has been accused of putting the interest of state ahead of the welfare of its athletes.

According to the human capital perspective, education does not merely influence an individual's income and quality of life; in addition, it still plays a momentous function during the employment aspect Mincer (1993).^[1] Hence examining the Chinese elite athletes' education situation will help to understand the athletes' development.

This paper carries out research on the integral issues

of the Chinese elite athletes' education prospect. Three key questions of the research are been asked: What is the Chinese elite athletes' education situation. What are the policies and their implementation in practice for the athletes' education prospects? How does the elite athletes' education level affect their life before and after their retiring? Human capital is the major theoretical background in this research. A qualitative research methodology has been considered and the specific methods of a semi-structured interview of 16 athletes and documentary approach were adopted for the data collection phase.

2 Results

Education influences an individual's income and quality of life, the major benefit of education in the labour market is the lower risk of unemployment (Mincer, 1974)^[2]. Under the Chinese elite sports system, both the sports departments and the elite athletes focus on sports training to achieve the significant result instead of an academic education. Hence, both the academic education quality and its length of time are not guaranteed. During the mandatory period background, the importance of academic education was not represented much because according to most athletes they would receive a job by government allocation. However, since the role of mandatory measures started reducing, the effect of education became more important than before.

Lack of academic education becomes one of the reasons for the athletes to remain unemployed or work in a low-level occupation after retiring. Under this situation, some colleges establish their own elite sports team within the campus. In this way, the elite athletes not only have to study in college as a normal student,

but also will be trained in a professional way as formal elite athletes. This new mode is in conflict with the traditional elite training form and competitive way, and it emphasizes the athletes' student identification initially. Therefore, the development of this mode was confronted by a difficult situation.

There were three main periods in relation to the policy making about the retirement and re-education of the elite athletes during the past seven decades. The first period was pre-1986 and is called the mandatory period. The suggestion of resettling athletes in higher education institutions already existed during the mandatory period. However, there was no corresponding policy ever issued and only very few athletes entered colleges to continue studying after they retired. The second period was the transition period from 1986 to 2001. In this time two policies of the elite athletes' re-education policies had been issued and more elite athletes could enter the third level educational institutions to continue study after they retired. The third period was the marketing measure period post-2002. The government issued both re-education and vocational training policies to enhance the elite athletes' education level.

3 Discussion

3.1 Chinese Elite Athletes' Education

Education is the most key investment issue of human capital, and it does not merely influence an individual's income and quality of life. The Chinese elite sports training system is divided into three layers, which are training in sports schools, in local provincial teams and in national teams. The elite athletes' academic education is deeply affected by the elite sports system which is represented by the three layers as described below.

Academic education in sports school

Athletes receive training from local sports schools when the training is carried out sometimes as part-time during studies and sometimes on a full-time scale. The comparatively secluded training system keeps the students from normal education. Many athletes enter sports training schools at a young age and attend few academic classes.

The academic education of the athletes in sports school is similar throughout all Chinese sports schools. The sports school arranges the academic class for; half of every day, the other half of every day including early mornings are for sports training. Because the athletes who train in sports school have the potential to be elite

athletes in the future, the training in sports schools are semi-professional.

Normal school students are required to study at least 6–8 hours per day in China, and compared with them the study time in sports school is very short. Sometimes this small amount of education time has to be cancelled, and the quality of academic study is not guaranteed. One of the interviewee states:

I had trained in Guangzhou Weilun Sports School for six years, and although there was class work the main priority was sports training; study was never comprehensive and basically of little value. The training was semi-professional, and during competition we did not have to attend the class although at the end of our schooling, we passed our final exam like normal students. If we were taking part in National, City or Provincial Games, training could take from half a year to one year during which we did not attend class.

(Interviewee No.6, 2009)

Another 14-year-old interviewee is an artistic gymnastics athlete training in the Chengdu sports school. She mentioned:

I started sports training in this sports school from 9 years of age; we only have two mornings for academic study per week, and now that I have to train every day to prepare for the forthcoming National Games, no one is willing to help make up for the lost lessons.

(Interviewee No.16, 2009)

The above statements indicate the situation of academic study in most of the sports schools. Because of the limited learning time, the class subjects in sports school normally only cover Chinese, Mathematics, English and Politics. Some sports school only have Chinese and Mathematics (Changsha sports school), which is unlike normal school students who also have Music, Physics, Chemistry, Arts, History and Geography. It is obvious that academic progress is less of a priority than sporting progress.

Academic education in provincial teams

The academic education that the elite athletes receive in provincial teams has changed when compared with the sports school. In the Guangxi provincial team, 84.7% of elite athletes spend at least 6 hours on sports training per day. However, 82% of them only spend 1–2 hours on culture study, with 11.1% of elite athletes even not spending any time on study (Yu Yijie, 2007).^[3] In this research, some interviewees also claim that there are not

enough academic classes for athletes to learn in some of the provincial teams, such as Hubei, Hunan, Shandong, and Hebei. The education time is not only very limited in provincial teams, but also teaching quality is not high and the setting is very informal. As a gymnastics athlete said:

During the initial four observation years and subsequent years as a professional athlete, I rarely attended academic classes which happened every Tuesday and Thursday mornings as my time was generally spent with the doctor.

(Interviewee No.2, 2009)

A fencing athlete who joined the Fujian provincial team at the age of 16 stated:

In this team we trained all day and in the evening went to classes. The time for study was very limited. Unlike other normal schools, we only studied English, Chinese and Mathematics. The teachers tended to teach a lot of material very quickly and we were not able to keep up and understand. Due to this, some of the students did not attend the classes.

(Interviewee No. 7, 2009)

Meanwhile another weightlifter athlete reports:

After training many athletes are physically exhausted and found it very difficult to apply our minds to study. We are even often too tired to wash our training gear. Sometimes we want to sleep because we totally could not understand what the teacher said.

(Interviewee No.4, 2009)

The above information indicates that in some of the provincial sports teams; most of the energy and time of the elite athletes was spent on sports training and competition. The arrangement of academic education was not systematic and often even informal academic classes had been cancelled in some teams.

In recent years, some local colleges have been running undergraduate degrees for provincial teams. This allows active athletes to become registered in various colleges and the only criteria are in many cases that they compete for the college in a college level competition. This is, however, a good chance for elite athletes to train and study at the same time; they will also get a degree during their sports career. However, according to the interviewees' statements, this kind of learning is seen as conciliatory and the athletes don't gain any real knowledge from this study. For instance, one of the interviewees stated:

Currently I am a student at Guangzhou Sports College, I have never had to study there, but I submitted my thesis last week and they will let me graduate and get my degree. Also I am a student at Zhongshan University. However, in this case I have to study seriously in order to qualify from this university. I will give it up because I do not have time to learn anything and also it is too difficult for me to pass the exams.

(Interviewee No.6, 2009)

The above statement indicates that both the sports team and local colleges would like to co-operate together to provide opportunities for the elite athletes and enhance their education. The target of the elite sports, however, is still to focus on competition and this causes academic education to become informal. The elite athletes may receive a certificate of education, but as a weightlifting coach mentioned, this is a bad situation: it is actually harmful for the athletes. Maybe it is a kind of compensation for athletes to let them pass the exams and get the degree easily in college, but on the other hand, it is also connivance.

Academic Education in national team

In the Chinese national team, the elite athletes are selected from different provinces every year or every training season. The training center issues a new team number list. This is because some previous athletes have to go back to their local teams because of injury or because their sports ability drops down a level or for other reasons. Meanwhile the new potential elite athletes join in the national team. In the national team, the elite athletes have to spend time on as many hard training sessions as possible. According to the interviewee's statement, academic education is not part of a formal system.

The gymnastics athlete (interviewee No.1) mentioned she used to do training for one year in the national team when she was 13 years old. During this time she did very little academic studies, which were also very informal. The fencing athlete is still training in the national team, and he reported the same situation:

We did not have any classes to attend as part of the national team in the early years, and at the moment we have 2 hours English tuition every week, which is held in the coach's office and which is paid for by the sports foundation. However, we have to stop the study when we join the competitions, and sometimes when abroad for competitions will spend one or two months training, so we forget the knowledge we had learned before and

the teacher has to start from the beginning.

(Interviewee No.7, 2009)

A gymnastics coach confirmed:

Few of my athletes used classes in the national team, although they arranged for a few hours culture education but compared to their training time, it is nothing. The athletes cannot concentrate on the academic study after the hard training, and before important competition, so the culture study will be cancelled, so they cannot learn any real knowledge.

(Interviewee No.9, 2009)

Furthermore, a diving athlete stated:

When trained in a national team, we often spent 8 hours for sports training – all athletes of the same age but from different events study together, and sometimes when we come back from a competition, we could not understand the teaching, also the study time is a valuable chance to rest from hard training.

(Interviewee No.13, 2009)

The above interviews show that the training of elite athletes is paramount and academic classes, if there are any, are merely an exercise without content and are informal, which leads to the pervading illiteracy among athletes. The goal for them to stay in sports teams is to win the medal prize. According to many parents and coaches, an elite athlete's life provides security and support if he or she works hard and, hopefully, win the world championship afterwards. As a matter of fact, only a few of them can succeed in world competition. The elite training system makes some athletes literally crippled in academic knowledge after they retire from sports.

In summary, the time and quality of athletes' academic education cannot be guaranteed because of the overwhelming effort put in to sports training. According to the human capital theory, investment in education is the crucial issue of an individual's human capital which will influence the employment and economic return in the future. During the time to become elite athletes, more investment in the sports training will help them to acquire more achievement, although they may not realize the significance of the investment in education at the time. However, when the elite athletes have to leave the sports team and face the labor market with normal people whose investment in education is much more than theirs, they will be in a disadvantaged situation.

3.2 The problem of co-operation between sports

and education

In recent years, the dysfunction of the Chinese elite sports system with respect to the elite athletes' academic education has come to the attention of more and more people. Accordingly, some researchers claim that to 'combine elite sports and education together in college' would resolve this problem. However, the procedure of the concrete practice demonstrates that the above idea faces various difficulties. The next example will specifically illustrate the situation.

Tsinghua University is one of the most famous colleges in China and set up its own diving team in 1997. Coach Yu Fen, who used to train the national diving team, had accepted the invitation to join this team. The target of the Tsinghua diving team was not to win gold medals but to seek a new method of training the elite athletes in college. This meant cultivating a new generation of elite athlete who has both a high educational knowledge and an international competition level of sports skills.

The athletes in the Tsinghua diving team have consisted of three types. The first kind is the top international level elite athletes such as Fu Mingxian, who is the Olympic champion. The second kind is the normal elite athletes who used to train in the provincial or city's team. These athletes have been nearly eliminated because of their injuries or for other reasons, but they still have a strong possibility of a comeback to sports competition after adequate treatment, academic education and sports training. The third types of athletes are selected from the sports training school. These young age athletes are the main part of the team and all of them enter the Tsinghua University when attending primary school. They are the exploratory side of the diving team and the training of the high level elite athletes' mode is mainly reflected in them (Ren Hai, 2005).^[4]

These child athletes are at the crucial period of both diving training and academic education. Hence the Tsinghua diving team claims that the athletes' academic education has to be guaranteed first before accepting the sports training. They could become an undergraduate student in Tsinghua University on the condition of reaching both strands of education and sports results. The athletes whose academic education results are disqualified will be eliminated no matter how good their sports results.

At the beginning of the establishment of this diving team, the athletes had the same registered qualification as any other provincial team, which guaranteed the

athletes a chance of joining the international and national sports competition. Meanwhile, the athletes could also register in their own hometown team, which means they could represent their province to attend the National Games and National City Games. This double registration situation provides the chance that the Tsinghua University and the local province co-operate together in training the athletes whilst on the campus. Meanwhile, the relevant local provincial team will also invest an amount of training fee with the university, which would help bolster the college's financial fund; this is a win-win situation for all concerned. After several years of development, the Tsinghua University diving team has cultivated a lot of international champions, and as the coach Yu Fen stated: "In China, there is no other diving team that could train elite athletes at such an international level in such a short time" (Tang Lei, 2005).^[5]

However, in 2001, the Chinese Sports Ministry issued a policy that the elite athletes could not double register, which meant that the elite athletes could not represent both Tsinghua University and local provinces in order to enter sports competition. Hence, the elite athletes who choose to register in Tsinghua University are not able to join any other national competitions. For a university team it is difficult to enter international competition. Sometimes the Chinese Sports Ministry calls for the athletes of the Tsinghua University diving team to train in the national team but this request has been refused. This is because the long-term intensive sports training in the national team would have affected the athletes' academic education. In this situation, some athletes choose to leave the college diving team and join the local provincial teams in order to have a chance to enter various competitions. According to the coach Yu Fen's statement there were 17 elite athletes who left the Tsinghua University diving team between 2003 and 2005. Some of them even secretly left without informing the coach or teachers. In the Beijing Olympics, five diving elite athletes used to train as a team. However, only four young athletes remained with the diving team after 2008. Hence this team which once flourished is in a dilemma mostly because of the registration factors causing the athletes to leave. Although the diving team tried to complain to the relevant sports administration department they never received any reasonable responses (Ren Hai, 2005).^[6]

The elite athletes training model of the Tsinghua University diving team was used to encourage a

number of Chinese colleges to establish a high level sports team in their college according to the original idea of being able to supply and bring further new ideas into the traditional elite sports training system. The elite athletes trained under the first level of academic background: coaches and facilities not merely had a high competition pedigree but also had very good academic qualifications. However, the model did not develop very well under the new relevant government policies. Liang Xiaolong, a head of the Politics and Law department in Sports Ministry explained: It is impossible to practice the art of Tsinghua University's training model in Chinese colleges, because not all of the colleges have ability to establish a first class elite sports team. Hence the final result is possibly to cause China to lose its gold medal power in the international sports stage (Liang Xiaolong, 2009).^[7]

Because the Chinese elite sport system characteristic did not change, the government is still the main investor, and the administration and competition system are still led by the government. Therefore, those elite athletes who trained under the 'sports corporate education' training system, which was mainly invested in by the college, still have to go back and face the whole of China's previous competition system. According to the structural functional theory when one part of the system changes the other parts should change as well in order to create equilibrium. In the selection, only the training part gets changed but there are other factors that have not adjusted according to the change and still only fit in with the traditional training system. Hence the whole elite sports system does not produce a new structural adjustment, and does not realize the new dynamic equilibrium. Also, when the above contradiction happened, the government did not want to adopt any measures to support the new college's elite sports training model. On the contrary, the issued relevant policy is an attempt to restrict the new training model and protect the traditional elite sports training system. For this reason, the new college training model could not develop under the original ideal plan.

3.3 Education and the Development of Elite Athlete in China

There were three main periods in relation to the policy making about the retirement and re-employment of the elite athletes during the past seven decades. The first period was pre-1986 and is called the mandatory period. During this time, the government was responsible for ensuring that retiring athletes were able

to find employment with the government's mandatory arrangement that it had with potential employers. This policy was based on the planned economy that had been in operation since the 1950s. Consequently, the re-employment situation of the retired elite athletes was optimistic but the employers did not have much opportunity to employ whomever they wanted as they were directed by the government.

The second period was the transition period from 1986 to 2001. During this time, the economic background of the mandatory measures was transformed gradually from a planned to a marketing one. Meanwhile, the right of employment of staff was shifted from the government to the enterprises and institutes in the labor market. For those elite athletes who do not have high

level education it was very difficult to be hired after retirement. In the transition period the number of elite athletes re-employed under the government allocation was much less, and a lot of elite athletes had to live in the difficult situation after retiring. Therefore, the re-employment situation was in a dilemma.

Table 1 is the re-employment situation of retired elite athletes in Hubei province from 1999 to 2002. The number of retired athletes who waited for re-employment went from 108 in 1999 to 231 in 2002. The government offered 45 elite retired athlete's re-employment under mandatory measures in 1999 but this reduced gradually to 0 in 2002. The re-employment rate was reduced from 42.13% in 1999 to 3.99% in 2002 (Li Li, 2006).^[8]

Table 1: The re-employment situation of elite retired athletes in Hubei province from 1999 to 2002

Year	Active	Waiting for re-employment	Retired	Arranged by government	Re-education	Self-employed	Others	%
1999	615	108	70	45	13	13	4	42.13
2000	629	105	80	9	16	6	10	22.16
2001	627	143	95	5	15	4	7	13.03
2002	563	231	45	0	0	3	8	3.99

Source cited in: Li Li, 2006.

The same situation was also found in the Liaonin province. Table 2 illustrates that from 1998 to 2001, the general re-employment rate of elite retired athletes

was dropping. Meanwhile, the number of elite retired athletes who gained job opportunities created by the government had reduced (Liu Rensheng, 2008).^[9]

Table 2: The re-employment situation of retired elite athletes in Liaoning province from 1998 to 2001

Years	Retired athletes	Mandatory arrangement	%	Self-employed	%	Waiting re-employment	%
1998	233	32	13.8	83	35.6	118	50.6
1999	47	11	23.4	3	6.4	33	70.2
2000	90	0	0	15	16.7	75	83.3
2001	29	1	3.4	0	0	28	96.6

Source cited in: Liu Rensheng, 2008.

'The policy about elite athletes back to education' was issued on January 3, 1987 by the Sports Ministry and the State Education Committee. The policy specified the range of enrolment, the process of application and the extra tutorials etc. After this, the Sports Ministry issued another policy named 'About the Retiring Athletes Educational Enrolment in the Sports Colleges Directly' in 1999. This policy only applied to six sports colleges directly affiliated to the Sports Ministry. The range of applicants who were eligible to enter without exams was enlarged to include those who won top three in National Games, National Championships, and Olympic Games, or gold medal winners in non-Olympic Games;

also those who won top six in Asian Games, Asian Cups, and Asian Championships; and those who won top eight in the Olympic Games, World Cup and World Championships; and those who are elites in field and track games, martial arts and other international sports items. It is obvious that the range is much wider than the one issued in 1987, so that more elite athletes could enter the third level educational institutions to continue study after they retired.

The third period was the marketing measure period post-2002. The policy in this procedure claimed that elite athletes should select their occupation by themselves according to the 'market' situation. The

‘Suggestions for the Facilitation of the Re-employment of Retired Elite Athletes’ issued in 2002 stated that the retiring elite athletes should be encouraged to enrol themselves in a third level educational institution so that they could have a chance to gain re-employment after graduation. The regulation also claimed that some elite athletes could enter college without taking exams, and that these athletes should include the top three in the national competitions, the top six in the Asian competitions, the top eight in the international competitions, and the elite athletes who reach the ‘master of sports’ level in collective ball and athletic events, or the athletes who get the ‘international master of sports’ certificate. Various levels of college were able to organize the entrance exam along with or launch the preparatory study in order to recruit the elite athletes. In addition to the above measures, vocational training policy was also addressed in order to help the athletes’ development. In the ‘Suggestions for the Facilitation of the Re-employment of Retired Elite Athletes’ issued in 2002, the document specified that it was necessary to build up a vocational education system for retiring elite athletes and vocational skill training should be further enhanced. In 2007, the ‘Improvement of the Support System of Elite Athletes’ policy was issued by the Sports Ministry. The policy clearly indicated that the local department should organize vocational training for the elite retired athletes during their career converting period.

The ‘Suggestions on the Improvement of the Education and Welfare System for Elite Athletes’ was jointly issued by the Chinese Sports Ministry, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Human Resource and Social Security in 2010. This file claimed that all or different levels of departments of Human Resources, Social Security and Sports should instruct the retired elite athletes to join various vocational training and help them convert their career successfully. Furthermore, because only about 10% of the athletes could be selected into the elite sports team from sports school, “we cannot sacrifice 90% of athletes’ education in order to only cultivate 10% of elite athletes. Moreover, the ‘10%’ of elite athletes will not be guaranteed when the 90% athletes’ number reduces” (Liu Peng, 2010).^[10] Under this situation, this policy also mentioned that the career education would be formally included into the academic education project in sports school, and the education should be carried out differently for the 10% elite athletes as distinct from the rest of the 90% normal athletes.

Liaoning is one of the China’s successful sporting provinces and this sports team has been called ‘the Gold Factory’. Table 3 shows the re-employment situation of the retired elite athletes from 2002 to 2009, and indicates that the number of the retired elite athletes who chose re-education is the most (Zhen Jiquan, 2010).^[11]

Table 3: The re-employment situation of the retired elite athletes in Liaoning province from 2002 to 2009

Year	Retired athletes	Arranged by mandatory measure	Re-education	Self-employed	Un-employed
2002	214	83	64	0	67
2003	107	27	37	26	17
2004	116	22	39	24	31
2005	112	25	42	30	15
2006	230	41	76	82	31
2007	108	20	52	22	14
2008	91	16	42	20	13
2009	121	21	53	32	15
Total	1,099	255	325	236	203

Source cited in: Zhen Jiquan, 2010.

In brief, the policy and measures of the retired elite athletes’ education, issued in the marketing period, have improved and matured gradually. More and more athletes acquire the opportunity to re-education in college and get skills through vocational education. Both measures will help athletes to develop themselves

and allow them to stand on their own feet after retirement.

Conclusion

As can be seen the changes in the sports policies have

been difficult for retiring elite athletes and despite best efforts there is still no guarantee of work for retired athletes. There is a conflict between wanting to achieve in sports and having an education to fall back on when retiring at a relatively young age. This is understandable since training to win requires enormous physical training and time. Elite athletes are not able to find the energy to concentrate on academic learning and thus find themselves at a disadvantage when competing in the job market with better educated non-athletes. A situation needs to be developed that will allow elite athletes both compete at a national or international level and yet be provided with an education that will allow them enter the job market when they retire. After years of hard and difficult training this is the least athletes can expect when they transition from a life of sports to a life of providing for themselves as individuals.

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