

# A Study on the Evolution of Urban Sports Spirit under the Influence of Tianjin-style Culture

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**Abstract:** The urban sports spirit is a key element of urban temperament and an important aspect as well as a symbolic representation of urban culture. This paper takes the timeline of over four decades since the reform and opening-up as a starting point and uses Tianjin as a case study to analyze the “evolution” of the urban sports spirit nurtured by Jin-style culture. It explores the development and evolution of the urban sports spirit under the influence of reform and opening-up from the perspectives of time measurement and theoretical analysis. The research indicates that the shaping of Tianjin’s sports spirit requires and, in turn, nurtures: the accumulation of sports economic development, a solid material foundation of sports venues, the enhancement of citizens’ comprehensive sports literacy, and comprehensive government services. The direction of its mature transformation lies in adapting to new contradictory environments and deeply integrating with the spirit of Tianjin.

**Keywords:** Tianjin-style culture; Urban sports spirit; Reform and opening-up

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## 1. Introduction

The urban sports spirit represents vitality and dynamism for a city’s development, comprehensively reflecting the common pursuits, beliefs, ethos, cohesion, and other aspects of a city. It is also a comprehensive manifestation of a city’s traditional sports culture, architectural style of sports facilities, and the overall sports quality of its citizens, including their sports values, level of civilization, mental outlook, and ideological and moral standards. On the whole, the urban sports spirit is a concentrated expression of the spirit inherent in a city’s economy, politics, culture, ecology, and sports. The progress and development of urban sports cannot be separated from the driving force of the sports spirit. As an important component of the national sports spirit, it possesses diverse characteristics such as tradition, modernity, integrity, and consciousness. The urban sports spirit not only exhibits diverse characteristics but also serves multiple functions, including guiding, cohesive, encouraging, critical, and radiating functions. Similar to the evaluation of the development of things in Marxist

philosophy, the urban spirit is also dynamic rather than static. In times of peace, without the integration of the sports spirit, the development of a city lacks a soul. Since the reform and opening-up, the urban sports spirit has undergone tremendous changes alongside the growth and advancement of cities. This paper takes the “evolution” of the urban sports spirit in Tianjin as the research object, analyzing it based on the timeline of the past forty years of reform and opening-up, and examines the transformation of the Tianjin urban sports spirit nurtured by Jin-style culture.

## **2. Overview of Jin-style Culture and the Connotation of Urban Sports Spirit**

### **2.1. Jin-style Culture**

“The confluence of the Luyu and Wei rivers leads to the sea, and the scenery of Dinggu has long been renowned.” The unique geographical location and special historical circumstances have shaped the growth and development of Tianjin city, and have also accumulated a profound and distinctive Jin-style culture<sup>[1]</sup>. Regional culture is an integral part of Chinese civilization, and deepening research on Tianjin’s regional culture, grasping its main developmental trajectory and cultural core through its diverse and multi-layered external characteristics, is a foundational project for promoting cultural inheritance and development and showcasing the confidence in Chinese cultural theory<sup>[2-3]</sup>. Tracing back to the Neolithic Age, there were already people inhabiting the Tianjin area. During the Ming Dynasty, when the Prince of Yan, Zhu Di, crossed the river southward from here and successfully ascended to the throne, he bestowed the name Tianjin upon this place and established a garrison here, thus giving rise to Tianjin Wei. Tianjin’s geographical location as a “confluence of rivers and the sea” and its historical circumstances of opening up in modern times, along with the population migration brought about by its position as “a vital junction of nine rivers and a thoroughfare for seven provinces’ boats and carriages”, have resulted in a social structure characterized by “a mix of people from all directions and a blend of the north and south.” This, in turn, has fostered the unique characteristics of Jin-style culture through the fusion of local culture, immigrant culture, and Western culture<sup>[4]</sup>. Specifically, this is manifested in four aspects:

- (1) A combination of elegance and popularity in cultural forms. The cultural expressions of Jin-style culture not only exhibit a vertical community distribution resulting from the pace of historical development (from ancient to modern times) but also feature an aesthetic clash between elegance and popularity within the mainstream cultural environment. Especially under the influence of modern concession culture, the fusion of ancient and modern, tradition and modernity, and the East and the West has created an atmosphere in Tianjin that is both elegant and close to popular culture. This has endowed Jin-style culture with the characteristics of seeking common ground while preserving differences and harmonious coexistence.
- (2) A coexistence of transfer and absorption in the form of inheritance. Jin-style culture has a distinct community state and a dock culture characterized by welcoming and bidding farewell, which, to a certain extent, affects the firmness of the development of Jin-style culture’s roots. Jin-style culture has its own origins, but much of its flourishing development is attributed to cultures from outside its region, indicating a lack of prominent leading figures and a large local team in Jin-style mainstream culture. Meanwhile, Tianjin has always served as a granary transport port, with a significant transfer personality in welcoming and bidding farewell. However, as Tianjin’s urban functions have become increasingly powerful, it has continuously demonstrated strong cohesion and attraction, facilitating the absorption of

“other” cultures by Jin-style culture and making it a unique cultural characteristic. Jin-style culture is vibrant and diverse, constantly “transferring” and full of vitality.

- (3) A combination of gaps and diversity in interactive exchanges. The community nature of Jin-style culture is relatively pronounced, a result of historical sedimentation. Due to this, there are certain gaps between communities and the diversity of immigrant cultures, making the Tianjin region significant in seeking common ground while preserving differences.
- (4) Mutual promotion of creativity and symbiosis in ecological development. Jin-style culture exhibits a state of diversified development, prompting the enhancement of its grafting and creative abilities, further forming and aggregating the city’s core strength. Cultural activities in the city’s later stages become more revolutionary, and the city’s style becomes more stable and open-minded. On the other hand, it also reflects the strong receptive ability of Jin-style culture, using its innovative spirit to change people’s lives. In summary, Jin-style culture has a profound heritage, gradually forming and accumulating over the course of history. It is the spiritual birthplace of the Tianjin region and an important symbol that distinguishes it from other regional cultures. For every citizen of Tianjin, Jin-style culture is a vivid carrier of their cultural identity.

## **2.2. Connotation of urban sports spirit**

The connotation of urban sports spirit reflects a deeper level of social consciousness, which can be summarized into two aspects, both centered around the city. One aspect pertains to the cultural form of sports, while the other relates to sports spirit phenomena associated with the city. The integration of these two aspects embodies the connotation of a city’s sports spirit <sup>[5]</sup>. Specifically, it can encompass urban sports culture, architectural styles, and the comprehensive sports literacy of citizens (including value orientations, levels of civilization, spiritual outlooks, and ideological and moral standards). The urban sports spirit serves as the soul of a city’s development; without the support of sports spirit, a city lacks the inherent vitality and momentum for growth. It is an inevitable outcome of the development of urban sports civilization, representing the core content of urban sports civilization with distinct urban sports characteristics. It embodies the essence of a city’s economy, politics, culture, and sports. The value orientation of urban sports spirit reflects the spiritual and cultural values of the city and represents the direction of its development. Urban sports spirit represents not just a city, but also serves as a pillar of the powerful sports spirit of a nation and a driving force for the development of sports endeavors.

## **3. The “evolution” of urban sports spirit in Jin-Gu culture during the reform and opening-up process**

The reform and opening-up policy, decided upon at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December 1978, marked a historic turning point for China’s development. It initiated a comprehensive effort towards socialist modernization, setting China on the path of reform and opening-up. As one of the first coastal cities to open up under this policy, Tianjin, under the correct leadership of the municipal party committee and government, has continuously pursued innovation and deepened reforms, achieving remarkable success in various fields. Among these achievements, the sports sector has also flourished since the reform and opening-up, reflecting Tianjin’s unique urban sports spirit.

### 3.1. Construction of a large number of sports facilities

Since the reform and opening-up, the Tianjin government has renovated and expanded a significant number of sports venues and facilities. Looking back at Tianjin's historical development process, the 1950s marked the first peak period for the construction and development of sports venues and facilities in the city. The second peak came during the 1980s, following the reform and opening-up, when four training bases and specialized venues for various sports were built at sports colleges and universities. Leveraging the opportunity to host the 43rd World Table Tennis Championships, Tianjin completed the nation's first indoor track and field competition venue, significantly transforming the backward situation of sports venue construction in the city and playing a crucial role in promoting the development of Tianjin's sports culture and international exchanges. With the upgrading of sports venues in terms of scale and quality, venues such as the Tianjin Tennis Center, Tianjin Baseball Field, and Diving Platform have taken leading positions domestically. Since the 21st century, with the acceleration of modernization, Tianjin has actively developed urban sports venues and facilities, comprehensively enhancing the city's carrying capacity and promoting further development of the sports sector. Notably, the Tianjin Olympic Sports Center served as a venue for the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup and the 2008 Beijing Olympics<sup>[6]</sup>. To meet the demands of hosting these events, many first-class competition venues have been constructed. For instance, during the 13th National Games hosted by Tianjin in 2017, venues for various sports events were readily available, ensuring a perfect conclusion to the games. Over the past 40 years of reform and opening-up, Tianjin's construction of a large number of sports venues and vigorous development of the sports sector have undeniably integrated the sports spirit well into urban cultural construction, enhancing citizens' cohesion and the city's influence.

### 3.2. Hosting of sports events

Since the reform and opening-up, alongside the construction of a large number of sports venues in Tianjin, some significant sports events have also been held in the city with great enthusiasm (**Table 1**). The World Table Tennis Championships were held in 1995, followed by the World Gymnastics Championships in 1999 and the Women's Water Polo World Cup in 2006. After the successful hosting of these international competitions, Tianjin secured the right to host the 6th East Asian Games in 2007. In the same year, the Tianjin women's volleyball team achieved a remarkable "five consecutive championships" in the National Women's Volleyball League, while the Tianjin women's football team also excelled, winning both the National Women's Football Association Cup and the Super League, dubbed the "double crown." Since the reform and opening-up, Tianjin has achieved commendable results in competitive sports, greatly encouraging citizens' enthusiasm for participating in sports and promoting the integration of sports spirit with urban spirit. On August 16, 2011, Tianjin successfully obtained the right to host the 13th National Games of China in 2017, becoming the fourth province or municipality to host the National Games after Jiangsu, Shandong, and Liaoning, following the central government's decision to end the monopoly of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong. Since the reform and opening-up, Tianjin's overall strength has continuously risen, equipping it with the capability to host events. It is committed to making the 13th National Games a more people-friendly and beneficial event, perfectly aligning with the Games' philosophy of "National Games for All, Benefiting All through the National Games." The inclusion of mass events highlights the comprehensive characteristics of Jin-Gu culture, which appreciates both elegance and popularity and embraces diversity, allowing the general public to fully immerse themselves in the healthy, joyful, and passionate atmosphere brought by the National Games. It also underscores Tianjin's

unique urban sports spirit that combines sports as a platform, economic exchanges, and cultural prosperity.

**Table 1.** Overview of competitive sports events hosted by Tianjin since the reform and opening-up

Hosting Time	Event Name	Results and Achievements
1995	World Table Tennis Championships	A turning point for the Chinese table tennis team from a low point to strength and prosperity
1999	34th World Artistic Gymnastics Championships	China's first time hosting an international gymnastics event; won four gold medals in men's team, men's rings, men's vault, and women's balance beam, opening a new chapter for Chinese competitive gymnastics
2006	Women's Water Polo World Cup	The Chinese team finished eighth despite having home advantage
2008	Co-host City for the Beijing Olympics	The "Water Drop" Sports Center completed; significant improvements in urban development and social civilization
2009	FIBA Asia Championship	As the birthplace of Chinese basketball, it demonstrated the spirit of the Nankai Five Tigers
2012	9th National University Games	Comprehensive completion of the Haihe Education Park
2013	East Asian Games	The concept of hosting events frugally aligned with the city's ecological civilization development approach
2015	Asian Women's Volleyball Cup	Embodied the spirit of the Tianjin women's volleyball team
2017	13th National Games of China	Reflected the philosophy of "Games for All, Benefits for All" and showcased a more open and inclusive sports spirit

### 3.3. Development of large-scale mass fitness activities

After the reform and opening-up, various social undertakings in Tianjin entered a stage of leapfrog development. The healthy and orderly development of sports undertakings encompasses not only competitive sports but also mass sports work, with Tianjin consistently maintaining a leading position nationwide in this regard. During the early years of reform and opening-up in the 1980s, fresh foreign elements continuously flowed into China, bringing about profound changes across the country, and Tianjin was no exception, experiencing numerous "firsts" in the development of its social undertakings <sup>[7]</sup>. With the improvement of Tianjin's economic level, the living standards of its people also rose accordingly, and sports undertakings were no longer confined to competitive sports. Mass sports activities characterized by fitness and leisure sprouted up like mushrooms after rain.

By 2002, Tianjin had over 4,000 sports venues of various categories, most of which were open to the public, providing places for ball games, swimming, fitness, and other recreational and sports activities during holidays and leisure time. Tianjin pioneered the nationwide "Holiday Sports" large-scale mass fitness activities, and in 2005, the State General Administration of Sport praised Tianjin for its leading position in mass sports activities nationwide. The overall pass rate of national physical fitness monitoring in Tianjin exceeded the national average, indicating a strong momentum in the development of fitness-for-all initiatives. With the deepening of reform and opening-up, sports undertakings developed rapidly, and Tianjin took the lead in other cities in terms of management level and concepts in conducting large-scale mass activities, walking at the forefront of the country. This was directly related to the establishment of community sports venues and community sports clubs, in line with the requirements of China's "National Fitness Program Outline", and reflecting a strong urban sports spirit of fitness-for-all. As institutional reforms continued to deepen and the market economy became increasingly sound, relevant sports departments in Tianjin actively promoted mass

fitness activities in this environment, responding to the national call to build healthy cities. The Tianjin Fitness-for-All Activity Center has always adhered to the guiding principles of “public welfare, professionalism, health, and science”, serving public health and providing Tianjin residents with a variety of fitness programs, with mass fitness activities keeping pace with reform. Meanwhile, various enterprises also actively participated in the development of mass fitness activities in Tianjin. For example, the “Tianjin Urban Joy Run” hosted by Vanke in 2018 won the favor and active participation of Tianjin residents and various enterprises and institutions, jointly experiencing the wonderful achievements brought about by 40 years of reform and opening-up.

### **3.4. Mature sports park culture**

For a city, parks are public shared spaces with public welfare characteristics, belonging to the city’s green and environmentally friendly infrastructure. They are also concentrated green spaces that improve the regional ecological environment, providing places for the public to play, appreciate, and rest. From the perspective of cultural dissemination functions, park culture can also reflect certain spiritual characteristics of the city, showcasing urban culture and the spirit of the times, and even becoming a spiritual symbol of urban development. In the wheel of historical development, Tianjin is a city that is both ancient and young, having experienced over 600 years of vicissitudes<sup>[8]</sup>. As one of the earlier port cities to open up in China, Tianjin has formed a unique Jinghu culture, which also means that the growth process of Jinghu culture has been very torturous. By grasping the development (context/history) of Tianjin and delving into the essence of Jinghu culture during the process of reform and opening-up, Tianjin’s park culture has gradually integrated into urban sports construction, reflecting the city’s symbolic personality and sports spirit.

Tianjin, as a northern city, exhibits a diversified trend in the development of sports forms, with sports parks being the most prominent feature. This is very suitable for the northern region and is also an innovation. With the continuous deepening of reform and opening-up, sports parks have been uniformly standardized in the later stages. The development and improvement process of Minyuan Stadium, which has a history of over a hundred years, is a typical representative of the standardized management of sports parks in Tianjin. In 2012, Tianjin’s first sports park, the Hedong Sports Fitness Park, was opened to the public, receiving high attention and praise from Tianjin residents, who considered it a significant initiative to promote fitness-for-all. Over more than 40 years since the beginning of reform and opening-up, the nature of parks in Tianjin has gradually evolved from initially providing places for residents to visit and play to serving both leisure and fitness purposes, with upgraded models. Sports parks have been built in various districts of Tianjin, stimulating residents’ interest and enthusiasm in participating in sports activities and spreading the urban sports spirit everywhere.

## **4. Countermeasure analysis on the shaping and development of urban sports spirit**

### **4.1. Comprehensively develop the sports economy to lay a solid material foundation for promoting the construction of urban sports spirit**

From a conceptual perspective, urban sports spirit belongs to the realm of ideology and superstructure, and its important foundation for development lies in the sports economy. For the development of urban sports spirit, the sports economy serves as a crucial material foundation, driving the prosperity and development of urban sports spirit and comprehensively reflecting the sports spirit of a city. The development of the urban sports economy and urban sports spirit has a dialectical relationship; without the support of material production in the sports economy, a series of display activities of sports spirit would not be formed. For a city to possess mature and

perfect sports, spiritual, and material civilizations, it must have material production activities. Therefore, the first priority is to develop the sports economy and improve the consumption levels and living quality of urban residents. As a national central city and comprehensive transportation hub, Tianjin must adhere to the common laws of urban development to maintain the sustained prosperity and development of its sports economy. It should identify innovative growth points for Tianjin's development, improve the layout of the sports industry, further promote the sustainable growth of Tianjin's urban sports economy, and provide impetus for promoting and shaping the construction of Tianjin's modern urban sports spirit.

#### **4.2. Enhancing the comprehensive sports literacy of Tianjin citizens and laying the mass foundation for urban sports spirit**

The construction of urban sports spirit not only requires the assistance of a sports economic foundation but also necessitates a strong foundation of the people to be realized and implemented. Tianjin boasts a vast population base, with an equally significant number of floating residents. In recent years, Tianjin has hosted an increasing number of large-scale sports events, particularly the successful hosting of the 13th National Games in 2017, which opened its doors wider, leading to a gradual increase in both floating and foreign populations. People with diverse cultural backgrounds, customs, and languages have gathered in this city, injecting fresh vitality into Tianjin while personally experiencing the fruits of its flourishing sports sector amidst reform and opening-up<sup>[9]</sup>. The people of Tianjin are not only participants in the construction of the city's sports spirit but also sharers in the benefits of its sports endeavors. Therefore, the sports literacy of citizens directly impacts the construction of urban sports spirit, making the enhancement of the comprehensive sports literacy of Tianjin citizens fundamentally crucial for shaping the city's sports spirit.

#### **4.3. The public service system serves as a guarantee for the construction of an urban sports spirit**

The process of constructing a city's sports spirit is highly complex, encompassing not only sports civilization, material civilization, and political civilization but also ecological construction civilization within the city<sup>[10]</sup>. If the government can provide strong organization and management during this process, supported by a well-established public service system, it will significantly bolster the construction and development of the city's sports spirit, akin to adding wings to a tiger. This will facilitate coordination between citizens and the construction of sports spirit, guiding citizens to form positive sports behaviors. The roles played by governments at all levels in Tianjin in the complex (systematic project) of constructing urban sports spirit should primarily be that of public servants, avoiding superficial efforts and focusing on the construction and implementation of the connotations of sports spirit. This will promote the synchronous construction, development, and reform of Tianjin's urban sports spirit.

### **5. Postscript**

The shaping of Tianjin's urban sports spirit requires and, in turn, nurtures: the accumulation of sports economic development, a solid material foundation of sports venues, the enhancement of citizens' comprehensive sports literacy, supply-side reform of sports public services, and comprehensive government services. The profound Jin-style culture has always been interwoven throughout the development trajectory of Tianjin, becoming its unique characteristic. With the continuous deepening of reform and opening-up, Tianjin's urban sports spirit

has undergone tremendous changes accordingly. How to continuously seek the transformation of its spiritual essence amidst the shift in the primary contradictions of social development in the new era, as well as how to deeply integrate with the Tianjin spirit of “patriotism, integrity, pragmatism, innovation, openness, and inclusiveness” in the new era, will be the directions for the continued maturation of Tianjin’s urban sports spirit.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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