

Characteristics of Chinese Traditional Sports Culture: From the Standpoint of Chinese Traditional Culture

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Abstract: Influenced by the three schools of thought of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism in Chinese traditional culture, the Chinese sports culture has apparent differences compared to its counterpart in the West. Chinese traditional sports culture pursues “the cultivation of human mind” and “the identity of human and nature,” achieves moral and spiritual satisfaction and then “harmony,” and does not advocate competition and physical confrontation. The Western sports culture is characterized by “competition” and pursues the spirit of transcendence to itself and nature. In the process of the formation of Chinese traditional culture, the sports culture contained in it has been suppressed. The formation of the social atmosphere of “emphasizing literature and light martial arts,” the decline of the group of “chivalrous men,” the criticism of traditional martial arts in the May Fourth New Culture Movement, and the contemporary sports system of China all, to a certain extent, restrained the healthy development of sports culture. How to further improve, cultivate and disseminate sports culture is a problem that Chinese sports scholars and governors should address.

Keywords: Chinese traditional culture; Sports culture; Cultural characteristics; Cultural differences

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1. Introduction

Culture is the product of social history and the foundation of a nation. China is one of the world’s ancient civilizations, and its cultural heritage has never been interrupted. Throughout thousands of years of history, the Chinese civilization and the Western civilization have always been shining lights that have lit up the world to step forward from ignorance. However, compared with the western culture, it is difficult for Chinese culture to have a place for sports culture in its rich historical and cultural accumulation. Since the reform and opening up, China’s economy has developed rapidly and now it has become the second largest economy in the world. The enhancement of China’s economic strength has promoted China’s international status. China aspires to become one of the world’s greatest sporting nations in order to further expand the country’s influence.

Over the decades, however, most of the medals the Chinese athletes have won at major international sports events were from the individual sports events, such as shooting, weightlifting, and gymnastics. The team-based performance is less than satisfactory in the most popular team sports, such as football, basketball, and volleyball ^[1]. The General Administration of Sport of China and the Chinese Football Association have made many reforms and invested a lot of money to improve the performance of team sports, especially football, but still little has been achieved. There is a big difference between the

performance of Chinese athletes in team sports and individual sports, which has troubled many Chinese scholars. This paper explains this phenomenon from the perspective of the characteristics of Chinese traditional sports culture.

2. Characteristics of Chinese traditional culture and sports culture

The formation of Chinese traditional culture is mainly influenced by three schools of thought, namely Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. There is a saying that “Buddhism governs the mind, Taoism governs the body and Confucianism governs the world.” Confucianism, which occupies the orthodox position in Chinese culture, advocates the maxim that “the function of rites is to make the relationship between people more harmonious” (礼之用, 和为贵), and the thought of benevolence and love (仁、爱). Daoism advocates “the governance of people according to the laws of nature” (无为而治), and shows a reverence for nature and the thought of harmony between human and nature. The Buddhist culture emphasizes the thought of the existence of anything is determined by objective conditions (因缘和合), advocates the cultivation of mind (修心) and comprehension of zen (悟禅), and treats all things with a heart of universal love^[2]. These three schools of thought reflect the Chinese people’s general character of pursuing harmony, gentleness, loyalty and tolerance. Therefore, the thought of “harmony” has an important position in Chinese traditional culture. The Chinese nation has always paid attention to “the unity of human and nature” (天人合一) and “modesty and harmony” (中庸和谐).

Since Chinese traditional culture is produced by the gradual integration and development of three schools of thought – Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism – we can explore the root of the philosophy of Chinese sports from these^[3]. As the carrier of Chinese sports culture, Chinese traditional sports embody the characteristics of traditional culture. Chinese martial arts can be regarded as the typical representative of Chinese traditional sports^[4]. Chinese martial arts have a broad spirit, and Taijiquan, Qigong and pictographic boxing are all important martial arts. Taijiquan is one of the most characteristic traditional Chinese sports and a national intangible cultural heritage in China. Taijiquan is a kind of Chinese traditional boxing which combines the inner and outer cultivation, softness and slowness, lightness and the combination of hardness and softness; this was formed on the basis of Confucianism and the dialectical ideas of Taiji and Yin-Yang in Chinese traditional philosophy of Taoism, and the changes of Yin-Yang and Five Elements in the *I Ching*^[5]. Taijiquan is not only a physical exercise, but also a form of expression of the natural law of the movement of heaven and earth through the human body^[6]. Created by Hua Tuo (A.D. 145-208) in the Eastern Han Dynasty, Wuqinxi is one of the traditional Chinese Qigong for health. It imitates the living characteristics of the tiger, deer, bear, ape and bird, and imitates the strength of the tiger, the ease of the deer, the calmness of the bear, the dexterity of the ape and the lightness of the bird. Pictographic boxing is a kind of boxing that simulates the specialties and forms of various animals, for example, monkey boxing, eagle claw boxing, snake boxing, mantis boxing, drunk boxing and so on. There are deeper cultural reasons for mimicking animal movements, not just because they are good for human health. These arts are the embodiment of Chinese traditional culture represented by Chinese traditional sports, that is, the expression of the identity of man and nature. The identity of man and nature is the core of Chinese traditional culture, and Chinese traditional sports is to show this cultural spirit through the movement of human body.

These martial arts reflect the Chinese traditional sports culture’s pursuit of the cultivation of “mind” and “the identity of man and nature” to achieve moral and spiritual satisfaction, and then to achieve the concept of “group harmony,” but do not advocate the competitive attack and defense combat techniques. Therefore, with the gradual maturity of Chinese traditional culture, the influence of Chinese traditional martial arts has gradually become disperse and its competitiveness weakened.

3. Emphasis on thought, light on physique: The mainstream of Chinese traditional cultural consciousness

Chinese traditional culture is an “ethical” pan-moralism culture, which focuses on ethics and moral education, and emphasizes people’s observance of morality and order. The emperors of ancient China all governed their country by means of cultural governance and ideological education ^[7]. The imperial Examination System established during the Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581-618) is a good example. The imperial Examination System lasted more than 1,200 years from its inception until its abolition in 1905, which strengthened the rulers’ control over the minds of the people by selecting officials, and encouraging them to study literature rather than believe in the force. However, in the grassroots society with weak dynastic ruling power, the governance mode mainly relies on the folk forces such as clan and gentry ^[8]. Most of the people defend or fight against the rulers by force to safeguard their own interests. Since these people are not highly educated and are being brave and aggressive, they prefer to practice martial arts rather than study, and are regarded as a factor of social instability, arousing the disgust of the ruling class which denotes martial arts as “low and inferior skills.” The ruling class regards martial arts practitioners as destroyer of social stability, and regards them as a contradictory relationship with social governance ^[8]. Therefore, in order to strengthen the rule, the local officials forbade the folk to set up martial arts schools.

With the establishment of the imperial Examination System, the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907) began to establish the imperial examination on martial art. The imperial examination on martial art began in the Tang Dynasty during the reign of Wu Zetian (A.D. 624-705) and ended in the late Qing Dynasty, lasting more than 1,200 years. However, since the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279), it has been ignored by the rulers. Zhao Kuangyin (A.D. 927-976), the first emperor of the Song Dynasty, seized the imperial power and established the Song Dynasty by launching the military mutiny at Chenqiao based on his control of the army. But he felt insecure and feared that the general’s power would threaten his ruling position, so he constantly weakened the general’s power and gave priority to civil officials and despised the generals ^[9]. Despite the comprehensive and functional imperial examination system on martial art, this system in the Song Dynasty was mainly based on literature ^[10]. After literature had taken a stronghold in the social and cultural center of China, martial arts practitioners had to stay away from the society, and gradually became shunned away by the Chinese society.

Therefore, since the Song Dynasty, the concept of “emphasizing literature and light military power” and “everything is inferior and only reading is superior” has become increasingly emphasized, and has been more and more respected in Chinese traditional culture. These concepts make the public regard the culture with sports characteristics, such as martial arts, as an unfashionable culture, affecting the development of Chinese sports culture. The lack of sports culture in China’s mainstream culture has led to the long-term marginalization of China’s sports industry, which has not been truly recognized by the public and even suffered from the discrimination of mainstream cultural concepts. “Focusing on thought, ignoring physique” has become the mainstream of Chinese traditional social and cultural consciousness.

4. Survival of Chinese traditional sports culture in the decline of “chivalrous men”

It can be said that chivalrous men (侠) has a unique role in ancient Chinese society. The chivalrous men culture has existed in China for thousands of years since the pre-Qin period when there were written records. In the pre-Qin period, the vassals had the custom of raising scholars, and then the scholar class rose gradually. At the end of the Spring and Autumn Period, this special social group began to divide, those who did not advocate the use of force became Confucians, while those who were good at it became chivalrous men. That is to say, Confucians were specialized in literature while chivalrous man in martial arts. Thus, the identity of chivalrous men appeared in Chinese history. Chivalrous men were a special class group that was distinguished from the identity of Confucian scholars and literati. Most of them were good at martial

arts and had physical and competitive skills that were different from ordinary people ^[11]. Chivalrous men thought that people need more to prove their worth by force in troubled times. Due to the widespread existence of imperfect laws and social injustice at that time, while the common people were often oppressed by the landlord class, the chivalrous men were willing to help the common people by praising virtue and punishing vice and upholding the justice ^[12]. The chivalrous men have their own unique cultural background and take martial arts as priority. Therefore, the values of chivalrous men are based on the basic thoughts of martial arts. Force, (武), which means “to stop war” (止戈), is to use force to quell wars. That is to say, the purpose of martial arts is to stop the strong from bullying the weak.

Chivalrous men existed all the time in the ancient Chinese history, but they never formed a certain class in the society, and their culture and spirit were not recognized by the mainstream society. The main reason is that its cultural value conflicts with Chinese traditional cultural value. Some scholars studied the depictions of the chivalrous men in works such as *Historical Records* and *History of Han* found that there were few descriptions about them in official history. Therefore, they believed that chivalrous men gradually became a marginalized group after the Han Dynasty ^[13]. As early as in the Warring States Period, Han Feizi put forward that “chivalrous men break the ban with force” and “chivalrous men are not conducive to the peace and prosperity of the country,” believing that the existence of chivalrous men is a negative factor affecting social stability and the rule of law. Since the Han Dynasty “ousted all schools of thought and respected Confucianism only,” Confucian culture has become the mainstream of social culture, advocating benevolence (仁), love (爱), propriety (礼), and righteousness (义). Since the Song Dynasty, the social morality of “emphasizing literature and light military power” had surfaced, chivalry culture had been more and more unacceptable by the mainstream culture, and the status of chivalrous men had gradually declined. As a result, the role of the chivalrous men had always been on the margins of Chinese society.

In the process of the formation of Chinese traditional culture, due to the suppression of the “chivalry” spiritual culture, a traditional culture combining “harmony,” “modesty,” and “focusing on thought, ignoring physique,” which were the mainstream thoughts, was formed in China. These martial arts practitioners can be regarded as people from sports communities in ancient China ^[14], but they were regarded as outlier by the mainstream culture, and the “chivalrous culture,” which could be regarded as the original form of Chinese traditional sports culture, has been gradually erased from the history. Therefore, Chinese traditional sports culture had always been struggling with survival.

5. Criticism of traditional martial arts in the May Fourth New Culture Movement

The Opium War in 1840 became an important external factor for the transformation of Chinese society from feudalism to modernity. The May Fourth New Culture Movement in 1919 intensified the opposition between Chinese traditional culture and Western culture to a certain extent, and invited criticism to the traditional culture. The May Fourth New Culture Movement was different from many Enlightenment movements in Chinese and foreign history, which took the form of respecting the ancient ways. Instead, it emerged in a distinct form of anti-tradition because it was difficult to find the basis or banner for reform in the old ideology, morality and culture, and it gradually became a serious obstacle. The slogan “Down with the Confucianism of Confucius” pointed the criticism towards the use of Confucian classics to restrain people’s thoughts and personality. The choice of “Down with the Confucianism of Confucius” as a breakthrough point was undoubtedly conducive to breaking through the old cultural pattern with feudal politics and ethical order as the core.

Lu Xun is a famous writer and thinker in China, as well as the leader of the May Fourth New Culture Movement. He once wrote a large number of articles criticizing China’s old moral ethics and traditional culture, and even proposed that Chinese martial arts should be abandoned for being part of “the old feudal culture.”

In the Period of the Republic of China, many martial artists, educators and officials advocated the popularization of martial arts in the whole society to change the weak national atmosphere. At that time, the Northern Warlord government and some educators, such as Zhang Shizhao and Cai Yuanpei, proposed to include martial arts in the “gymnastics curriculum” of secondary and higher schools. The National Assembly of the Republic of China passed a resolution to make martial arts compulsory in all schools as “Chinese gymnastics.” Some universities have also set up martial arts organizations. Peking University, for example, has set up a martial arts club with a large number of participants among teachers and students, with the support of the famous educator Cai Yuanpei. But Lu Xun was so dissatisfied with this that he published an article in the New Youth magazine on November 15, 1918. He mocked, “It is said that Chinese people learn foreign gymnastics, no results, so instead of learning Chinese gymnastics martial arts, and practice some tricks like ‘Wu Song Unshackled’ (means some inferior skills)” and “Can you practice martial arts to the point where guns can’t hit? That was tried in 1900” [7]. Lu Xun believed that at the end of the Qing Dynasty, some princes and ministers advocated martial arts and supported the Boxer Movement, but they failed completely, not to mention the fact that nowadays, wars are fought with guns. He also mocked, “With all the strength, you can do some sacred work, improve your own life, save others, think of some ways to help each other, and get rid of the situation of mutual harm.” He believed that the spread of traditional Chinese sports martial arts is “mutual harm.” [7]

Some Chinese martial artists such as Chen Tiesheng and Chen Gongzhe wrote articles refuting Lu Xun, but Lu Xun still insisted that the social phenomenon of promoting martial arts was the spirit of “ghost Taoism,” and regarded those who practiced martial arts as “bandits.” [7] To some extent, Lu Xun’s criticism of Chinese martial arts weakened people’s confidence in traditional sports culture.

6. Characteristics of the development and dissemination of contemporary Chinese sports culture

The formation and development of European sports culture started from the spontaneous formation of the folk and gradually influenced the government from the bottom to the top. Finally, the Olympic Movement was promoted by the social elites such as Coubertin. It can be seen that the implementation of Olympic culture is from the bottom up. But the implementation direction of Chinese sports culture is the same as that of traditional culture, which is still top-down. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the central government has promoted scientific and popular sports for the nation through the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, and then set up the National Sports Commission to promote sports activities throughout the country [15]. Chinese sports culture shows the tradition of collectivism, which shows the values of the nation and the country as the highest interest, and has the firm concept of the country as the supreme. In the 1950s, Mao Zedong put forward “developing sports and improving people’s physical fitness.” In the 1960s, in order to elevate China’s status as a superpower, the National Sports Commission put forward “training at home, competing abroad.” In the 1970s, in order to establish friendly international relations, Chinese sports emphasized “friendship first and competition second.” In the 1980s, in response to the country’s reform and opening up policy, the Chinese sports community began to consider “winning glory in the Olympics.” In the 1990s, the National Sports Commission formulated Opinions on Deepening Sports Reform coordinated the country’s economic restructuring. After 2000, in order to build a well-off society in an all-round way, it is proposed to build a diversified sports service system. For more than half a century, the development policy and strategic direction of China’s sports have always been the country’s highest political and economic interests, and the overall concept of the country has been ranked first. However, the Olympic Charter makes it clear that the Olympic Games are a competition between athletes in individual or team events, not between nations [16]. Thus, it can be seen that in the selection of subject rank, Chinese sports culture ranks the significance of national subject, social subject, and individual subject in the first, second and third positions, respectively, while this is a complete reverse based on the

Olympic culture.

The spiritual difference between Chinese sports culture and Olympic culture determines that the development path of Chinese sports is different from that of Western countries. Since the implementation direction of Chinese sports culture is from top to bottom, the acceptance of sports culture by the masses is often formed passively rather than consciously. This kind of cultural communication mostly stays on the surface, and it is difficult to form the social foundation and cultural cognition conducive to the development of sports. Therefore, compared with the sports development of Western countries, China's advantage lies in its policy support, but it is also a disadvantage due to the lack of extensive social basis and cultural cognition. As the development of sports in China is greatly influenced by policies, it's often not sustainable.

7. Differences between Chinese traditional sports culture and Western sports culture

There are great differences between Chinese traditional sports culture and Western sports culture in the cognition of the relationship between human and nature as well as human and human. Since the Chinese sports culture is rooted in three traditional schools of thought (i.e., Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism), it advocates the identity of man and nature, and the cultivation of mind, attaches importance to the inner cultivation of man, and does not advocate competition ^[17]. The existence and development of Western sports has a completely different trajectory and direction from that of Chinese sports, and then shows another understanding of the relationship between man and nature, that is, transcendentalism ^[18]. It believes that human and nature are divided and opposed, and only in the process of constantly conquering and transforming nature can man achieve perfection ^[19]. The Western philosopher Heraclitus proposed that "the struggle is the law of the world, the war is the father of all things," and competition is the soul of Western sports culture. It is reflected in the form of Western sports, that is, various kinds of sports competitions, especially the competitive spirit of Western sports shown through track and field events. By constantly breaking the records, we can achieve the transcendence of human to nature and human to human.

In Chinese traditional culture, ideas such as harmony, modesty and humility attach great importance to people's inner cultivation and the culture does not advocate competition, which is not conducive to the development of competitive sports. But Western sports culture is characterized by competition. Influenced by the spirit of chivalry and the duel demeanor, Westerners show strong antagonism and aggression in sports culture, and their desire for victory is undoubtable. This cultural influence is the most evident in the competitive sports in the same field, such as basketball and football. Some Chinese do not understand the essence of these sports, fear confrontation and lack aggression on the field ^[20]. Sports is a kind of self-expression, but Chinese traditional sports culture is "self-lack," to some extent ^[15]. To some extent, there are conflicts between Chinese and Western sports cultural consciousness. Moreover, this phenomenon is not temporary, superficial and easy to eliminate, but a long-term and deep confrontation and collision between different values and civilizations.

8. Conclusion

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, sports culture represents the development direction of modern and future society but has many advanced cultural elements that the traditional culture lacks. Nowadays, Western sports culture occupies a dominant position in the development process of world sports and leads the development direction of world sports; however, Chinese traditional sports gradually lost its dominant position in the agricultural civilization society and fell into a difficult predicament. The development of many Chinese traditional sports is not a natural display of national emotion, but just a surface intentional behavior to show national characteristics ^[21]. The weak development of Chinese traditional sports and the awkward situation of modern competitive sports are rooted in the defects of Chinese traditional sports culture, which is caused by the failure of sports culture to get its due position in

traditional culture.

In the absence of the basis of sports culture, in order to quickly change the backward appearance of sports, China implemented the whole nation system. As the number of Olympic gold medals won by Chinese athletes continues to rise, the overall physical fitness of the Chinese people continues to decline, the abnormal development of Chinese sports is not only because of the sports system, but also because of the lack of its own sports culture. At present, if China wants to build itself into a sports superpower, the key lies in better cultivating sports culture in the whole society, improving the form and connotation of traditional sports culture, and changing the public's cognition of sports. The athletes should not only pursue trophies and medals, and people who participate in sports should be given favorable conditions for encouragements.

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