



# COMMENT ON “CHINESE AND WESTERN SPORTS PHILOSOPHY AND THEIR DIFFERENCES”

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## COMMENT ON “CHINESE AND WESTERN SPORTS PHILOSOPHY AND THEIR DIFFERENCES”

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According to Zhu and Du (2024), Chinese and Western sports operate within distinct social frameworks, each shaped by disparate origins, perceptions and value systems. These disparities have fostered the emergence of two divergent sports cultures, each offering unique interpretations of the characteristics of human civilization.

The genesis of traditional Chinese sports is intricately linked to activities, such as fishing, hunting, warfare and agricultural pursuits. The enduring influence of China’s agrarian heritage is unequivocal, profoundly impacting the cultivation of sporting habits over time and the formulation of sporting values. Throughout China’s historical evolution, the interplay between nomadic and agrarian civilizations has been a pivotal theme, particularly evident in the northern frontier regions. However, the agricultural underpinning of Chinese civilization remains indisputable. This is exemplified by the rulers of the Yuan and Qing dynasties, whose origins lay in nomadic or hunting traditions, but who predominantly adhered to the tenets of agrarian civilization upon assuming control of the Central Plains.

Compared to nomadic and commercial civilizations, agricultural civilizations typically exhibit less inclination and necessity for the advancement of sporting activities. Nomadic societies predominantly inhabit cold highland grasslands, characterized by a lifestyle centered on tracking water and pastures, herding livestock, particularly cattle and horses, predominantly relying on meat consumption, and frequently engaging in conflicts driven by

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resource movements. These circumstances collectively necessitate nomadic groups to possess significant physical fitness and combat prowess. Conversely, commercial civilizations often originate in coastal regions, where agricultural and pastoral practices alone cannot sustain them, thereby relying on trade. Survival in such civilizations similarly demands heightened combat readiness, as evidenced by the historical prevalence of early trading fleets doubling as pirates.

In contrast, the resource acquisition model in agrarian civilizations prioritizes self-sufficiency over plunder or trade, contradicting the competitive and cooperative emphasis of sports activities. The self-sufficiency inherent in small-scale farming and the rootedness of the land facilitate isolated agricultural practices with limited external interaction. However, this isolation is not at the individual, but at the communal level, particularly within village relationships. The relatively closed-off nature of village life fosters individual tranquility and peace, contributing to a dispersed rural existence with minimal emphasis on competition and cooperation. This foundational aspect significantly shapes traditional China's modest emphasis on sports and its limited popularity within folk society. Moreover, among the spectrum of emerging sports activities, their occurrence and value orientations are substantially influenced by agricultural culture. Notably, the emphasis on natural dependence on agricultural productivity prominently shapes many traditional sports events, often associated with praying for or celebrating bountiful harvests while expressing reverence for the natural world (Wang, 2023, p. 48).

In scenarios where traditional sports fail to proliferate, due to influence of agricultural culture, and predominantly remain non-competitive, the construction of traditional national governance exhibits two contrasting trajectories in sports occurrence and development, driven by distinct historical contexts and governance strategies that either encourage or suppress competition.

State encouragement of sports development primarily occurs during periods of national upheaval, particularly amidst competing regimes and conflicts. In such contexts, imperial authority's primary imperative is self-preservation, necessitating robust military development and fostering martial spirit and sportsmanship between both military personnel and civilians to cultivate a superior military force. Consequently, traditional competitive sports often emerge during turbulent epochs, predominantly propelled by military imperatives. For instance, during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, as the power of Zhou dynasty waned, the feudal order dictum of "the Son of Heaven decreeing ceremony, music, and warfare" gradually diminished, prompting various states to vigorously bolster military capacities and instill martial virtues in society for self-preservation or territorial expansion. This arms race and the pervasiveness of martial ethos have provided unparalleled opportunities for traditional sports development in China.

During periods of political stability or peaceful coexistence with neighboring states, the primary focuses of state-building transitions are maintaining social stability and safeguarding the populace's livelihoods, thereby consolidating internal governance. In juxtaposing these distinct internal and external political and diplomatic circumstances with the developmental trajectory of traditional sports, the former is more conducive to enhancing sports infrastructure and equipment to elevate the populace's physical fitness and competitive spirit. Conversely, the latter tends to stifle the emergence and growth of highly competitive sports, dampening individuals' spirit of competition.

In summary, traditional Chinese sports have evolved within the broader framework of political, economic and cultural landscape of Huaxia, continually enriching their specific contents and diverse forms over time. Concerning their origins, foundational physical activities, such as running, throwing, jumping and lifting, alongside more competitive pursuits, like martial arts, polo and competitive rowing, are intricately linked to military skills. Additionally, activities, such as ritual dances, health-preserving exercises, spring outings and chess, reflect the prevalent worldviews and the philosophical outlooks of their respective eras. The martial nature of sports often wanes with the consolidation of a unified dynasty and may even be intentionally suppressed by ruling elites. Eventually, sports became recreational activities utilized by nobility and the general populace to celebrate festivals and leisure pursuits. Consequently, traditional China did not establish a tradition of leveraging military prowess for state governance, a significant factor contributing to the limited prevalence of competitive sports in traditional Chinese society.

In contrast, the worldview and philosophical underpinnings of traditional sports exhibit a higher degree of coherence and continuity, inseparable from the profound influence of traditional Chinese philosophy on the populace. According to Professor Du Weiming of Harvard University, the focus of Chinese culture is on people. Chinese philosophy, whether Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism, constitutes a philosophy of life, with Confucianism emphasizing benevolence, Daoism emphasizing longevity and Buddhism emphasizing enlightenment (Shao, 2023). China has long maintained a stable agricultural and cultural structure, lacking a social foundation in natural sciences. Consequently, Chinese cultural rationality remains rooted in intuitive theoretical reasoning, prioritizing harmony and unity while needing more empirical analysis coupled with practical application. Traditional Chinese thought emphasizes grasping truth through concrete and intuitive insights, characterized by a unique logical nature. Intuitive thinking, rooted in limited facts and drawing upon existing experiences and knowledge, enables holistic judgments about the essence and regularity of objective phenomena, shaping the distinctive characteristics of Chinese sports culture. This culture emphasizes harmony between humans and nature, the unity of body and mind, and the individuals' harmonious integration into society, aspiring towards the transcendental realm of “the forgetting of self” and the “unity of man and nature.”

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