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The Olympics and Chinese Sports –
From Discrepancies to Fusion



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The Olympics and Chinese Sports – From Discrepancies to Fusion

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Doubt, misunderstanding, indifference and sneers were all around them when a 31-year-old Frenchman and fellows who shared his ideals and ambitions announced the revival of the Olympic Games at a conference held in Paris, France in 1894. People could not have anticipated that Pierre de Coubertin and his associates were initiating an institution that would exert profound influence on the development of human civilization. Today, more than 100 years later, the Olympic Movement has attracted participants from 202 countries and regions all over the world, including China, a country with 1.3 billion people. It has been recognized as a grand event in human history.

The Olympic Movement is an unprecedentedly grand phenomenon of social culture in the history of civilization. The phenomenon, including the evolution of sports, the advancement of technology, the fusion of multi-cultures, the prosperity of the economy and the disintegration of racialism, has a vivid reflection in the Olympic Movement. Its charm not only derives from the Olympic Games, where the athletes explore their physical limits, but also from the respect of the multi-cultures. With its incomparable ability to tolerate and absorb, it continuously draws beneficial nutrients from the multi-cultures in the world. The ancient and the modern, the east and the west meet and blend under the current world system. Diversified, splendid cultures from countries and regions of the five continents constitute inexhaustible cultural resources and spiritual strength for the Olympic Movement. The understanding, exchange, complementation and interaction between the Olympics and Chinese sports have a profound significance for the development of both the Olympic Movement and Chinese society.

In addition to its long history and splendid civilization, China also has a tradition of love with sports. Traditional sports such as wushu (martial arts), qigong (a system of deep breathing exercises), taijiquan (traditional Chinese shadow boxing), five-animal play (exercises patterned on the movements of the tiger, deer, bear, ape and bird), dragon dance, boat race, mountain-climbing, hiking, tripod-vessel-lifting, stone-throwing, wrestling, archery and various ball games all date back to ancient times. These sports, with different styles, played an important role in the development,

prosperity, civilization and progress of the Chinese nation. However, Chinese sports developed in a relatively closed environment before 1840, all bearing the imprint of an agricultural society. At the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, amidst the dramatic changes in China, western sports and the Olympic Idea were introduced into China and fused gradually with the Chinese sports and culture through intense conflicts, impacts and exchanges.

In 1908, the Tientsin Young Men magazine raised such questions: When would China send its first athlete to the Olympic Games? When a delegation? When would the Olympic Games be held in China for the first time?

In 1922, Wang Zhengyan was selected to be the first Chinese IOC member. In 1931, the IOC recognized the All-China Athletic Association. China, an ancient oriental nation, formally became a member of the Olympic Family. Liu Changchun, who was the first Chinese Olympic athlete, made his debut in 1932. He was the only Chinese athlete to visit the Olympics in Los Angeles. In the first half of the 20th century, China participated in the Olympics three times, but did not achieve good results. When immersing in the glorious achievements today, we should not forget those sports forerunners who have struggled in Olympic competitions and whose efforts definitely have a far-reaching influence on the development of Chinese sports.

Since the foundation of new China in 1949, China has chosen a way for the development of modernization, whose social and cultural background has seen great changes at the same time. Those changes not only created the conditions for the development of the Olympic Movement in China, but also made it possible to actively adapt the Olympic sports to the Chinese environment. China's comeback into the Olympic Family and its economic development have provided a new opportunity for the fusion of the Olympic Movement and Chinese sports. China has had a series of achievements in the Olympic Movement.

In 1984, Xu Haifeng, a sharpshooter, won China's first gold medal at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. To date, China has

won a total of 112 gold medals. High-level competitive games have driven the all-round development of Chinese sports and has promoted the expansion of the Olympic Movement.

The night of July 13, 2001 was a sleepless night for the 1.3 billion Chinese people, when the IOC chose Beijing to hold the 2008 Olympic Games. It was the greatest moment in the history of Chinese sports, and also a new start for Chinese sports.

People would look back on the evolution of the relationship between the Olympics and Chinese sports with mixed feelings. Due to the big difference in the sports system and the social-cultural background of the east and the west, Olympic sports and the traditional Chinese sports had profound and fierce conflicts in early times. The conflicts not only existed at the surface level of sports format and structures but also at the core level of sports values and philosophy. The conflicts reflected the social difference between the industrial and the agricultural world and also the essential disparity between the cultural systems in the east and the west. However, it was those differences that brought the opportunity for the fusion of the sports culture in the east and the west.

I. Discrepancies and Conflicts

The western sports culture (represented by Olympic sports) and the eastern sports culture conflicted with each other in many aspects, such as the different sports activities and social backgrounds.

1. Agricultural and Industrial Civilization

Traditional Chinese sports developed in a unique social environment. China used to be the strongest country in the world. China had already been the ordered and harmonious feudal empire since the Qin and Han dynasties. After the establishment of the empire with its ancestor and legal systems, the traditional Chinese culture formed whose core is Confucianism. Confucianism continuously functioned as the unifying bond to hold the family and society together for thousands of years in China. The Chinese culture, which is rather self-enclosed, is an independent and self-contained part of the world culture.

The social and cultural background of China is stable and unique. In addition, the cultural tradition of China has a long history and a solid social basis, has great inertia and a coercive power, and influences the people's choice of sport events. In the context of such a social and cultural background, the traditional Chinese culture obviously bears the imprint of an agricultural society. People are used to the harmonious, quiet and stable lifestyle. They are not interested in competitive and confrontational activities full of risks and conflicts. The competitive sport events were not in the foreground of the traditional Chinese sports. The majority of the Chinese sports activities were to contemplate people's own navels and to take care of their health by controlling the breathing methods so as to have a supernatural experience. The most typical events are daoyin (a primary formative ingredient in the well-known soft style, Chinese martial art taijiquan), qigong, wushu, taijiquan, etc.. Those events have a special value in strengthening and optimizing people's physical functions. They are suitable for the stable social structure of an agricultural society and people's thinking styles, which are the most developed sports culture in the agricultural nations.

The social environment for the origin of the Olympic Movement was quite different in the aspects of economy, politics and culture. After the 17th century, the western countries went through the industrial revolution. Europe soon went into the industrial society. In the 19th century, the western countries were brought to prominence, so tremendous changes in the social thoughts and the lifestyles took place. With the appearance of public nuisance events and the evils of capitalist societies, new sports forms came forth so that people might find ways to relax instead of a high-tempo lifestyle due to large-scale industrial production. In addition, the development of natural science also made people seek the ideal sport activities. The competitive sport events, which incarnated the competitive spirit and functioned as an entertainment, developed rapidly and caused the birth of the Olympic Movement.

The birth of the Olympic Movement, with such a social and cultural background, is a further development of human civilization. Having closely combined with the competitive systems

of capitalist marketing and advanced technologies, the Olympic Movement exemplifies the spirits of the western peoples, such as being enterprising, independent and paying attention to physical abilities, after entering into industrial civilization. The multi-level structures of sports culture in the western countries and the competitive characteristics of the sport events should have met the need of the social development and the development of the individual body and mind. The western sports culture is characterized as being international, competitive, scientific and commercial, etc. Compared with western sports culture, the Chinese sports culture of the agricultural type demonstrates great differences in the value of life, the theoretical understanding, the training methods, the management styles and the facilities, etc.

2. Enclosing and Expanding

The development of traditional Chinese sports involved absorbing a foreign culture and had a profound influence on its neighboring countries in Asia. The status of the transportation, the communication means and the strong superiority complex in its own culture then determined that the sports cultural exchange could only be of a small scale like a tricklet, usually unilateral. The features of traditional Chinese sports such as wushu, yangshenggong, balls, chess, dancing and folk games came into being in the Qin and Han Dynasties. The patterns and rules were finalized, showing little cultural exchange. Until the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the feudal empire carried out the closed-door policy. From small-scale open policy to closed-door policy, the traditional Chinese sports culture reflected a strong revulsion towards other sports culture.

With the expansion of capitalism, the Olympic sports gradually spread all over the world. Capitalism, like a cyclone, broke the status that some countries had closed their doors to the outside world. Later the world market came into being, international exchange in sports became popular and the Olympic sports went beyond the limits of politics, religion, complexion, race and language. Modern sports in the west evolved from a regional culture into an international one. Other sports forms were eclipsed by the Olympic sports and became a sports sub-culture. The traditional Chinese

sports' great inertia made it unavoidable to conflict with the Olympic sports and their international characterisation.

3. Naïve Materialism in Ancient Times and Natural Science

The essential feature of traditional Chinese sports is that the sports are guided by a naïve materialism. The ancient Chinese philosophies such as the theory of Qi, Yinyang and Wuxing deeply penetrate the traditional Chinese sports.

The ancient Chinese philosophers think that Qi is the original and essential substance of the human being, as a saying describes that life is a collection of Qi. To live is to assemble the Qi and to die is to let Qi fall apart. So the rise and fall of a life is determined by the condition of whether Qi is of surplus or deficiency, which is up to the moving status of Yin and Yang in the body. If Yin and Yang are in balance in the body, the person will live long. If Yin and Yang are not in balance in the body, the person will die young. So to keep a harmonious environment of Yin and Yang is a way to keep healthy. According to this principle, people should do some sports but avoid taking over-intense exercises. To keep the stable movement of Yin and Yang through regular activities and to decrease the loss of Qi may help achieve the goal of long life.

It is valuable for the ancient Chinese people to have such an understanding of the nature of life in the age of low productive forces and a society with a rather undeveloped technology, which used to guide the ancient Chinese sports to a higher level. However, these values of life and health are the theories that base on grand and instinct experience, which, to some extent, depend on comparison and association. Compared with ancient Chinese sports, western modern sports are quite different, in which they are based on the experimental science by means of analysis.

The foundation of Olympic sports is natural science. In the Renaissance, the emergence of scientific experiments (mainly by means of analysis) offered a favorable condition for the development of sport. Meanwhile, the mechanical decomposition theory of metaphysics took the place of the westerners' former way of thinking (perceiving a matter as a whole and intuitively). The

characteristics of the mechanical decomposition theory are that it is easier to deeply study the local part and obtain accurate results, which brought a sense of prosperity to modern natural science. A significant breakthrough had been achieved in the field of biology, physiology, anatomy and medicine. A large number of outstanding achievements had also been registered in the field of sports science. People came to have a more accurate and deep understanding of the nature and rules of living activity, the function of the body and the capability of movement, which provided a solid foundation of science for the development of modern sports. The framework of the concept for easterners and westerners tended to vary essentially. They came to have a qualitative difference as to the theoretical basis of the Olympic sports and Chinese sports.

4. A Perspective of the Whole and the Parts

Traditional Chinese sport characterizes a perspective of the whole. In sports, the body is treated as a whole from start to end. To learn about oneself and to comprehend nature are processes of introspection, so both the theory and the practice of traditional Chinese sports are based on a thinking pattern of chaos type. There are two categories. On one hand, “combining mankind with nature” is stressed, that is, to view mankind and nature (the two basic elements of the world) from a perspective of the whole. On the other hand, “combining mind and body” is emphasized, that is, to treat the mind and the body as a whole. In traditional sports such as qigong, wushu and yangshenggong, the influence of the perspective of the whole is widespread. Thus a sports system has been set up to optimize life as a whole, that is, to cultivate both the spirit and life and to educate both mind and body.

Different to Chinese culture, western culture characterizes a perspective of detailed analysis. In order to study the function of sport on different parts of a body, people tend to explain the mystery of sport by means of analysis and experiment, taking the advantage of advanced science such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, anatomy and physical mechanics. Thus the development of sport has its own direction and objective. This kind of sport pays more attention to the outer-body movement and does not attach importance to the harmony of the inner-body

and outer-body movement. Chinese sports stress the optimization of the body functions as a whole, but western sports follow the principle of treating the body in parts. According to the anatomical structure, the body is divided into parts such as arms and legs, trunk, abdomen and back; based on fitness, the division can be stamina, velocity, power, flexibility, co-ordination; or according to the supply characteristics, there are aerobics and non-aerobics. Western sports are to integrate the effects of the exercises on parts of a body so as to achieve the aim of body-building.

5. Mind-oriented and Body-oriented

One feature of traditional Chinese sports is to do body exercises under the guidance of the mind so as to improve both the body and the mind. Traditional Chinese culture pays more attention to the cultivation of the inner temperament, character and spirit. The human body is regarded as the living space for the spirit. So traditional Chinese sport advocates that the aim of doing exercises is to express the people's inner part. From the outside to the inside, the sublimation of the spirit is realized through physical activities. Thus, the ideal personality is shaped. Similar features are reflected by the training methods of the sports activities. The psychological training is highly respected. All physical movements have a close relationship with the mind, whose purpose is to train the mind. So few people solely practise physical activities for the shape of the body.

The Olympic sports emphasise physical form of the body itself, advocating that the purpose of practising sports exercises is to be physically strong and healthy. So the western sports attach great importance to the outer physical movements. Their objective is to be "Faster, Higher, Stronger". They adore the body in shape and highly praise the power.

6. The Priority of Ethic Morality and Fair Play

Chinese culture is of an ethic type, which deeply influences traditional Chinese sports. A unique feature for traditional Chinese sports is that people are the foremost and morality is important. Thus the main task of traditional Chinese sport is not to win, but to follow the rules and norms in the competition, so as to realize

moral sublimation. Competitive sports such as archery and wrestling in ancient times fell in the category of morality. Confucian moral thought, including being gracious, tolerant, humane, modest and faithful, has also been incarnated in other moralities. The purpose of competition is not to win, but to find who follows the norms of morality more closely. To win or to lose is not of importance. The players should be men of noble character in the competition.

With the development of the commodity economy, competition came to be a popular phenomenon in the modern society of western countries. To survive and to improve in competition was the normal psychology for the people. The system of competition would also be in the field of sport, which grew as the soul of western sport culture. In sports competition, the social status does not matter, while fair play is the only principle. In fair play, physical capability is demonstrated, to experience the good feeling after the conquest of the opponents like man, nature and society.

For to the above-mentioned reasons, traditional Chinese sports and Olympic sports should belong to two sports systems of great difference in nature. There are many causes for the development of the Olympic Movement in China, to have tough experience in the early days. First, Chinese sports and Olympic sports belong to two different sports systems. Secondly, the social background of the east and the west varies. Thirdly, the Chinese people are contrary to western sports because of colonialism. Fourthly, the Olympic Movement has its own defects. However, people are to realize the value of western culture after the comparison and analysis of the conflicts between the two different cultures, which create favorable conditions for exchange and communication later.

II. Exchange and Fusion

As history develops, tremendous changes have come over the social Chinese culture. The foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 opened a new page in Chinese history. Chinese sports went into a new stage, the stage of modern sports. The modern Chinese sports, on one hand, inherited the valuable heritage of traditional Chinese sports and, on the other hand, absorbed the essence of western sport, which developed with Chinese socialist

characteristics. The Olympic Movement then began to have the conditions for its development in China. As the Olympic Movement developed, its intellectual framework and the organization system have been improved. Moreover, there are more activities for the Olympic Movement. The Olympic Movement meets the development of modern society and bears great life force. Chinese sports and Olympic sports naturally and equally need and benefit each other, which help them fuse the higher level.

1. China's Development Needs the Olympic Movement

A hundred years passed and fundamental changes to the Olympic Movement occurred. Endless vigor has enhanced Chinese sports due to scientific and reasonable penetration by the thinking framework, organization system and activities of the Olympic Movement. Thus Chinese sports started to develop in a modern way. A strong binding force appeared because of the involvement of the Olympics between traditional and modern Chinese culture, or between eastern and western culture, which acclimatized China to the present international society, the world economy, multi-polar politics and multi-cultures. The involvement of the Olympic Movement led China to the world and the world got to know more about China. Sport began to function as the window of the reforms and opening policy in China. In the process of bidding for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, China, with political stability, economic development, social opening and domestic harmony, has been presented to the world. Moreover, the modern value of life, the consciousness of a modern commodity economy, fair play, aesthetics and participation have been cultivated in the Olympic Movement. Meanwhile, people have been encouraged to be open-minded, to have a sense of nationality, to be with democracy and the concept of "rule of law", to think independently, to have a spirit of innovation and social responsibility. When we are building a socialist society with both high material standards and high cultural and ethical standards, the Olympic Movement will develop rapidly in China.

At the same time, there are some favorable conditions for traditional Chinese culture to absorb and receive the Olympic Movement. First, the Chinese people have a strong desire to contribute to the world

culture, which promotes a combination between Chinese sports and Olympic sports. Taking into consideration its vast territory, huge population, long cultural history, growing strength, China will devote more to the world culture. In the sports field, we will not only take part in the Olympic Games but will practise more international tasks. Secondly, the traditional Chinese culture is capable of absorbing foreign culture. The compatibility of the traditional Chinese culture determines that the Chinese welcome the Olympic Movement. Thirdly, some concepts of the traditional Chinese culture and the Olympic Movement have the same origin, for example, to be human-oriented and peaceful.

2. The Olympic Movement's Development Needs China

Since the era of reforms and opening, China's international standing has been raised, whose politics, economy and culture are of importance in the world. The Olympic Movement's development needs China, and China is a necessary and important part for the Olympic Movement. First, the Olympic Movement is an open cultural system with the nutrient of all cultures in the world. The Olympic Movement, whose basis is western culture, has absorbed the essence of eastern culture in the process of its development. As the representative of the eastern culture, Chinese culture with a history of 5,000 years has enriched the cultural treasury of the Olympic Movement. A transnational, cross-people and intercultural system of the Olympic Movement has been set up. Secondly, China has the largest population in the world. If the Olympic Movement does not develop in a country of 1.3 billion people, the Olympic spirit will not be wide-spread on a larger scale and the Olympic Movement cannot be international.

Thus, the Olympic Movement opens its arms and welcomes the participation of China. China's development needs the Olympic Movement, meanwhile, the Olympic Movement's development needs China. The Olympic Movement will develop rapidly in China due to the development necessity and the favorable conditions. At the same time, the exchange and the fusion between the Olympics and Chinese sports will soon occur, so will eastern and western social culture more closer together.

The exchange of these two cultures of different natures will not devour each other. The Chinese culture will not lose itself, but actively absorb the nutrient of western culture. After the conflicts and the communication, there emerges a new culture with the essence and the modern value of the former two cultures.

China is going global with a completely new shape and standing firm among the nations of the world today. Chinese sports are also becoming a force that should not be ignored in the Olympic Movement. The Chinese people start to understand and like the Olympic Movement which is a social culture of the largest scale and the greatest influence in the world at present. The Olympic Movement will further promote the development of Chinese sports and the Chinese people's pursuit for peace, friendship, civilization and progress. In 2008, the world will witness the Beijing Olympic Games, which should be a unique and grand ceremony. Chinese sports will also open a new chapter then.

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