

# Chinese Sports History Studies [an Overview]

Research >  
China

Over five thousand years of written history has left China with a large number of history books. Yet, apart from some articles on *cuju* (ancient Chinese football), in the Han Dynasty (221 BC to AD 24), and the *Jiaoli ji* (the Records of Wrestling), in AD 960, there are very few documents about the history of sport – until, that is, the end of feudal China in 1911.

By Fang Hong

The beginnings of modern sports history studies can be dated back to the semi-capitalist China that existed after 1911. There then were twelve sports newspapers and nine sports journals and magazines, which occasionally published articles on the history of sport, most of which were introductions to, or descriptions of, the Olympic games. The first book, the *History of Sport in China*, was published in 1919 by Ge Shaoyu, a young student of physical education.

While the period between 1911 and 1949 observed a steadily increasing interest in sports history, the period after 1949 witnessed an unprecedented growth in the study as part of a wider strategy of both historical investigation and promotion of sport under the early Communist regime. In 1956, the Sports Ministry established the Sports Technology Committee in Beijing which was to research Chinese sports history. From 1957 to 1961, the Committee edited nine volumes of *Chinese Sports History Research Material*, which was published by the People's Sports Press – a profound achievement at the time. Due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward, however, the budget was cut in 1960 and the Committee eventually dismantled.

As a result, research on sports history became a responsibility of the various physical education institutes around the country. The first sports history research centre was established at Chengdu Physical Education Institute in 1962. After four years of concentrated work,

the Research Centre published three volumes of *The Ancient Chinese Sports Material* (3 volumes), drafted *Modern Chinese Sports History*, and translated four books on world sports history from English and Japanese.

The 1966 Cultural Revolution disrupted the progress of the study of sports history; the Historical Research Centre in Chengdu, then considered a nest of elite intellectuals producing feudal and bourgeois rubbish, was disbanded, and it would not be until the 1980s that interest in the study of sports history would officially return to China. In 1982 the Ministry of Sport established the Sports History Working Committee. It soon formed a large umbrella network, with more than thirty physical education departments and institutes, and offices in thirty-one provincial and sixty-four local sports commissions. The aim of the Committee was to promote the systematic study of both sports history in general, and Chinese sports history in particular. An annual working conference has been held since 1982 to examine the Committee's progress.

The distinguished Research Centre of Sports History in Chengdu was restored in 1980 and expanded in 1986, and now offers both MA and PhD degrees. At the beginning of the 1990s three new research centres were established in China, all offering MA degrees in sports history: the Beijing Physical Education University, the South China Normal University in Guangzhou, and the Zhejiang University in Hangzhou. By 1995, sports history was being taught at fifteen

physical education institutes, and in 159 physical education departments of various universities and colleges.

From 1982 to 2001, more than one hundred books on sports history were published, including thirty-one books on general sports history, twenty-two books on major sports events, twenty-six books on regional and local sports history, twenty-four volumes of sports history material, and three sports history text books which are now used in the universities and colleges. A new bi-monthly, academic publication, the *Journal of Sports Culture and History*, was launched in 1983, and has since become essential reading for academics, coaches and sports administrators in China. Meanwhile, twenty-seven local and regional sports history journals have also appeared between 1984 and 2000.

In 1984, the Chinese Society for the History of Physical Education and Sport was established, and as of the end of 2001 it claims more than six hundred. The Society, in cooperation with the Sports History Working Committee, organizes annual conferences and supervises various research projects on sports culture and history in China. Meanwhile, since 1984, regional and local sports commissions have organized more than one hundred conferences, the major themes of which have been the regional and local sports history, the lives of local sports heroes and heroines, and the experiences of ordinary people.

An innovative intellectual movement has since grown out of the resurgent interest in the history of sport in the 1980s and 1990s. As its growth paralleled the major ideological, political, economic, social, and cultural transformations in modern Chinese society, it attracted a large number of able, ener-

getic intellectuals from the fields of history, literature, arts, and sports studies, into its domain. Not satisfied with being mere bookkeepers of athletic records, these individuals decided to take different aspects of sports history with them to their areas of expertise, to join the exciting social and cultural movement. Though their respective fields are different, the fundamental approach has been the same: to document large structural changes between society and sport; to explain the evolution of culture and sport; to construct a coherent analysis of social relationships in and through sport; to reconstruct the sporting experiences of both athletes and non-athletes alike; and to establish a unique empire in the field of social science. In doing so they have not only inherited traditional historical methods and subjects, but also created a new field, which has profoundly affected the historical consciousness by broadening both the subject matter and methods of history.

In the spirit of change, however, sports historians should begin to free themselves from historical tradition, and use the vast accumulation of social science description to generate their own theories and build sound explanatory frameworks. Sports history should not come to dominate history, but should have a much stronger impact on all aspects of history. ◀



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Cover of the *Sports History of the People's Republic of China 1949-1998*, edited by Wu Shaouzu et al., published in 1999 by the Chinese Book Publishers [Zhongguo shuji chubanshe] in Beijing. Wu Shaouzu was Sports Minister of the PR China from 1990 to 2001.



Image provided by Fan Hong