

Sport and politics in the 1980s: the Olympic Strategy

To cite this article: (2012) Sport and politics in the 1980s: the Olympic Strategy, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 29:1, 74-97, DOI: [10.1080/09523367.2012.634985](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2012.634985)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2012.634985>



Published online: 15 Feb 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 921



View related articles [↗](#)

Sport and politics in the 1980s: the Olympic Strategy

Following Deng Xiaoping's domestic and foreign policies, which was based on economic reformation and opening up to the outside world, the 1980s saw a profound transformation of Chinese society. China's ambition was to achieve modernisation and to catch up with the Western capitalist world. Chinese sport played an important part in stimulating the nation's enthusiasm and in motivating the Chinese people towards modernisation. It began with the restoration of China's International Olympic Committee (IOC) membership in 1979. Subsequently, other international sports organisations recognised the membership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Chinese athletes began to compete at major international sports events where they achieved some noticeable successes.¹ China's sports success at international sports competitions became a symbolic means of catching up with, and even overtaking some strong Western powers. Chinese athletes were freed from the Cultural Revolution, but they undertook new political commitments in the new era as the politicisation of sport continued.

The transformation of athletes' political commitment

Together with the economic and political reforms, China's sports policy underwent transformation. The Sports Ministry held a national sports conference in Beijing in February 1979 to discuss the future development of sport. The conference decided to abolish the class struggle oriented sports policy that had been applied during the Cultural Revolution and to adopt a new sports policy which aimed to serve the 'Four Modernisations'.²

The Sports Ministry held another national sports conference in 1980 to establish officially a strategy for the future development of sport. The strategy would include both mass sport and elite sport. However, the main focus would be on elite sport because it had suffered and had declined more than mass sport during the Cultural Revolution.³

In addition, the Sports Ministry wanted to use elite sport to bring confidence to the nation and thus serve the 'Four Modernisations'. Wang Meng, the Sports Minister, explained the reasons. He argued that, on the one hand, China was still a poor country and had only a limited amount of money to invest in sport; on the other hand, that elite sport was an effective way to boost China's new image on the international stage. The best way to develop elite sport was to bring elite sport into the existing planned economy and administrative system, which could assist in the distribution of the limited resources of the whole nation to medal-winning sports.⁴ It was hoped that the international success of Chinese athletes would, in return, bring

pride, confidence and hope to the nation, all of which were badly needed in the new era of transformation.⁵

Wang's statement illustrated the government's desire to use sport to enhance the national self-esteem, self-confidence and national dignity. A sports strategy was produced which was full of patriotism. Elite sport was set as the priority both in the short and the long terms. The short-term plan required the national team to finish in the top 10 at the 1980 Olympics and the top six at the 1984 Olympics. The long-term plan required China to become one of the sports superpowers by the end of the 1980s.⁶ Deng Xiaoping, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), wrote an inscription for the Fifth National Games in 1983 that showed his support for this elite-sport-first policy: 'Improve the Level of Performance, Win Honour for the Country!'.⁷

The government's new sports policy brought great change to the nature of Chinese athletes' political commitment. The old slogan 'Friendship First, Competition Second' was replaced by the buzz word – 'Competition!'. The elite athletes, who used to serve the country's foreign diplomacy as sports ambassadors in the 1970s, received a new mission: to compete well at international sporting events and to win glory for the country.

The return: the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics

The 'elite-sport-first' strategy was first tested at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. The 1980 Moscow Olympics had been boycotted by 65 countries led by the United States in protest against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The 1984 Olympics again witnessed the cold war in sport between the two rival blocs. Led by the Soviet Union, 13 Eastern bloc countries boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics. However, China chose to join the Western countries because of political, diplomatic, economic and strategic reasons, making the Los Angeles Olympics the first summer Olympics that the PRC had attended since 1952.

Fifty-two years after Liu Changchun travelled to Los Angeles to represent China at the 1932 Summer Olympics, Chinese athletes landed in Los Angeles again and re-embraced the Olympics.⁸ The difference was that Liu Changchun's 'One-man Olympic Team' was replaced by a huge Chinese delegation. Altogether, 225 Chinese athletes, the new 1980s generation, were sent to participate in the Games.⁹

The Games opened a new page for China. The absence of the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries gave China an opportunity to shine at the Games. A large number of events that had been dominated by the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries were now 'shared' by China and the United States. China won 15 gold medals in shooting, gymnastics, diving, swimming, weightlifting, volleyball and fencing. The team finished fourth in the medal tally. Xu Haifeng, a pistol shooter won the first Olympic gold medal, making him the first Chinese to be crowned an Olympic Champion. Juan Antonio Samaranch, President of the IOC between 1980 and 2001, awarded the gold medal to Xu Haifeng. He commented that Xu's victory was a great landmark in Chinese history. Li Ning, a Chinese gymnast won three gold medals, two silver medals and one bronze medal at the Games and was labelled the 'Prince of Gymnastics'. China's Women's Volleyball Team defeated the United States and went on to win the world title three times in succession.¹⁰ Luan Jujie, who won the gold medal in women's fencing, became the first ever Asian athlete to win an Olympic gold medal in fencing.

The Chinese Olympic Team was praised and honoured by the Chinese people, the government and the media. Overseas Chinese in the United States supported the team with a silk banner with big Chinese characters stating ‘You make Chinese people feel proud and elated! You represent the spirit of the Chinese nation!’¹¹

On their return to Beijing on 14 August, the Olympic athletes received a warm welcome at the airport by representatives of the central government. On the same day, they received a congratulatory telegram from the State Council stating: ‘You have achieved great success in sport at the Olympics. The victory at the Olympics has helped to construct China’s spirit and confidence. It has inspired the Chinese people on their march toward modernisation’.¹² On 19 August, a reception for the Olympic athletes was jointly hosted by the Sports Ministry, the Chinese Olympic Committee, the National Trades Union, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, the All-China Women’s Federation, the Ministry of Education, the General Political Department of the PLA and the Beijing Municipal Government.¹³

Chinese athletes’ remarkable achievements excited many in China. The media called the winning a ‘historic breakthrough’; ‘a new page in China’s involvement in the Olympic movement’; ‘a new chapter in China’s emergence as a great sports power’; and ‘a milestone’.¹⁴ It stimulated a strong call for the further development of elite sport from both ordinary Chinese and the central government.

The Olympic Strategy

China’s success at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics supported the validity and the necessity of its ‘elite-sport-first’ strategy. After the 1984 Olympics, most Chinese welcomed the patriotic slogan – Develop elite sport and make China a superpower in the world.¹⁵ Inspired by the Games, Deng Xiaoping stated, ‘Now it is evident that the impact and influence of sport are great. The success of sport reflects the power of economy and culture of one country. Sport inspires so many people. We need to promote elite sport more’.¹⁶ Deng’s view immediately became official policy. The central government issued a document on ‘The Further Promotion of Sport’ in October 1984. It gave birth to the mission of making China a world sports power.¹⁷ The relationship between sport and politics was highlighted in the document:

Sport has a close relationship with people’s health, the power of the nation and the honour of the country. It plays an important role in promoting people’s political awareness, achieving modernisation targets, establishing foreign relations and strengthening national defence. Therefore, the Party and society have recognized the importance of sport in our society and will further develop sport in China...The remarkable achievements in sport, especially the success at the 1984 Olympics, have restored our self-confidence and national pride. It has stimulated a patriotic feeling among all Chinese both at home and abroad and enhanced China’s international influence...Our policy is to develop both mass sport and elite sport, and strive for greater success in the international sport arena.¹⁸

Following this theme the Society of Strategic Research for the Development of Physical Education and Sport produced the ‘Olympic Strategy’ for the Sports Ministry in 1985. The new strategy aimed to develop elite sport despite the nation’s limited resources. The ultimate goal was to build up China’s international image by transforming China into a leading sport power.¹⁹ One year later, the Sports Ministry

issued ‘Decisions about the Reform of the Sports System (Draft)’. The major objective of this draft decree was to raise the standard of elite sport.²⁰ The clauses of the policy clearly indicated its elite sport oriented nature. Seven out of nine of them (highlighted by the author in **bold text** below) were directly related to elite sport, aiming to:

- (1) Strengthen the role of the Sports Ministry in leadership, coordination and supervision;
- (2) **Establish a scientific training system;**
- (3) **Improve the system of sports competitions;**
- (4) Promote traditional Chinese sports and pastimes;
- (5) **Promote sports science research;**
- (6) **Reform the sport and physical education system;**
- (7) **Emphasize political significance of sport**
- (8) **Improve the rewarding system of competitive sport;** and
- (9) **Develop flexible policies for international sports competitions.**

Supported by the new sports policy, China’s elite sport experienced rapid growth in the 1980s. The famous ‘Juguo Tizhi’ (support from the whole country for the elite sport system) was applied to promote elite sport. Based on the professional training and selection system that had been officially launched in 1963, a well-organised and tightly structured three-level pyramid system was developed to meet the needs of the ‘elite-sport-first strategy’ (see Figure 1). Local sports commissions were required to establish a ‘scientific training and selection system for young talented and for professional athletes’.²¹ More and more funds were channelled to Olympic sports such as swimming and athletics. Training activities and competitions were all based on the ‘Olympic Strategy’.²² Under this system, athletes were obliged to devote all their energy and life to their training and performance. They worked long hours, trained under physical, social and psychological strain and carried a heavy responsibility to win glory for the country. Zhou Lingmin, a Chinese cyclist in the 1980s emotionally expressed that ‘I am representing the nation to sprint toward the peak of the world. I will devote myself to proving that the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation are invincible!’.²³

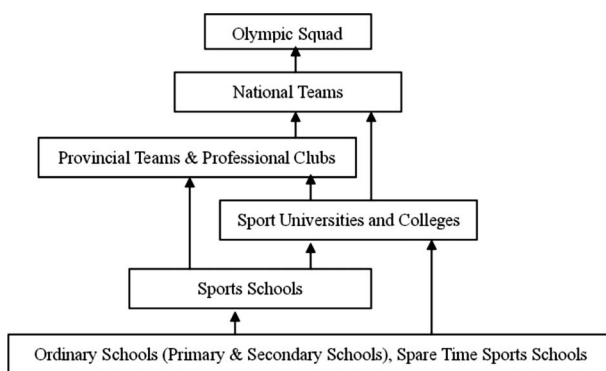


Figure 1. Pyramid of China’s selective system for elite sport.
 Source: Fan, ‘Sports development and elite athletes in China’, 409.

Luan Jujie, the female fencer who won a gold medal at the 1984 Olympics, recalled:

Between 1978 and 1988, I held the line for ten years. I cannot let myself fall down. I must play well in order not to let the mother country and the people down! So I trained day and night, no holidays. People called me the 'Iron Girl.' Some people thought that I was stupid. They asked me why I train so hard . . . I did not train for money. There was no bonus for us. We only have a small salary. I think it was a kind of spirit that held me up. I am a professional athlete. Fencing is my job. I must do it and do it well!²⁴

The elite sport pyramid developed rapidly in the 1980s. In 1980, there were 77,428 coaches, staff and athletes in the system. By the end of 1990, the figure had nearly doubled and it reached 139,048. The number of sports schools and institutes also experienced rapid growth. There were 26 third level sports institutes in 1980. Altogether, 5,299 students studied in these institutes. By 1990, the number of schools had increased to 156 and the number of students reached 37,230 (see Figure 2).

Train the young talent

The mission of the elite sport pyramid is to produce, systematically and effectively, more elite athletes. The core of the system is the selection and training of young athletes. The Sports Ministry issued a series of instructions and decrees in the mid-1980s to improve the system. The major concern was to build up the base of the elite sport pyramid. For example, the order 'Instruction on the Cultivation of Young Talents' issued in April 1986 divided those who were talented at sport youth into advanced level adults, middle level youth and junior level youth/children. Scientific selection, scientific coaching and scientific training were listed as the basic approaches to produce elite athletes.²⁵

Those who were talented at sport were selected and trained from a very young age. When boys and girls between the ages of 6 to 9 years old were identified as having some particular talent, they were encouraged to join local sports schools throughout the country on a voluntary basis. After a period of training, young

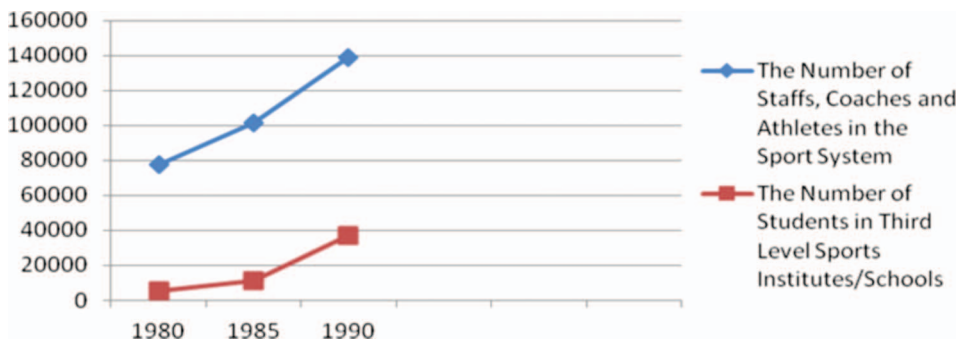


Figure 2. The number of staff, coaches and athletes in the sport system/the number of students in third level sports institutes/schools.

Source: Figure developed by the author. Data from Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, ed., *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1949–1991)*, Vol. 1, 1993.

people with potential were selected for municipal or provincial sports academies/schools or training centres and were trained as semi-professional athletes. In most of the sports academies/schools, young athletes got up at 6 a.m. to do exercises such as running and general warm-up for 1 to 2 hours. They would then have their breakfast. After breakfast they had morning session training from 8 a.m. to midday. In the afternoon, they studied general education courses for four hours. After dinner, they continued their training for another two hours. They would generally train 6 to 8 hours per day. In some senior sports schools students would work 10 hours per day (training during the day and studying in the evening after dinner).

The training method was a combination of the training ideologies of 'Three Fearless' and 'Be Tough in Five Ways', which were adopted in the 1960s, and of Western training methods which emphasised a more scientific approach to training and the incorporation of rest periods. These teenage and child athletes had to train hard because only the fittest could survive and remain in the school or be promoted to professional teams at regional and provincial level. Only the best could make it to the provincial or national teams with the rewards of a good salary, honour and a bright future.

Teenage and child athletes in the elite sport pyramid were not permitted to be children. They were denied normal family lives, social lives and important contacts and experience. They lost their rights to play like a child. According to the World Labour Report, some characteristics of child labour are: working long hours; working under strain; working for very little pay; and taking too much responsibility.²⁶ Child athletes should be regarded as child labour. They are too young to understand that they should have rights to enjoy their innocent age. A British journalist once visited one of the sports schools in China and sighed with emotion: 'I admire these children. I have a daughter of five years old. I can never imagine that she could endure such a hard life'.²⁷

Lu Li, a gymnastic champion in the 1992 Olympic Games, is one of the many child athletes who sacrificed their childhood to China's elite sport system. Lu Li was born in 1976. Her parents were both workers in a factory and she was sent at the age of six to Hunan provincial sports school. They hoped that Lu Li could succeed in sport and thus change the destiny of their working-class family. It was a long way from her home to the sports school. Every day, after her normal school, her mother or father would take her to the sports school by bike – in the cold of winter and the heat of summer. Sometimes, when her parents were not available, her coach would take Lu Li into her home and look after her. When she was 10 years old she became a residential pupil in a sports school where she had to look after herself. She and her schoolmates got up at 6 a.m. for two hours' training. After her breakfast she went to a normal primary school. She came back at noon and received training for the whole afternoon. Life was not easy for the little girl but she never thought that she could go back. Neither did her peers. She learned her social role, her responsibility and commitment in this collective structure.

Lu Li was a lucky girl. After five years' hard training, she made the Hunan Provincial Gymnastic Team at the age of 12 in 1988. She was selected to be a member of the national squad in 1991. One year later, she made her international debut at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona and won the gold medal in the uneven bars event. As soon as the television had shown her performance in Barcelona, the managers and directors of her parents' factory, the mayor of her home town and leader of her province came to her home with congratulations and

rewards. Her family moved into a newly furnished, three bedroom apartment, her father was promoted from factory floor worker to office clerk and her coach Zhou Xiaolin was also promoted. Lu Li herself received reward money of more than 30,000 RMB from the Sports Ministry, acquired various sponsors in the form of rich and patriotic Hong Kong businessmen and earned money from advertising. She retired in 1994 and went to study at Beijing University. She now coaches gymnastics in the United States.²⁸

The dark side of the elite sport system

In the medal-crazed atmosphere, athletes, coaches and team managers tried anything they could to improve the level of performance. In order to help the athletes maintain focus on training and competition, enclosed and semi-military management was applied to most of the national, provincial and municipal teams. Athletes' daily lives were limited to the territory of sports schools/institutes or training camps and they were isolated from society. Nearly all team managers and coaches did not allow their athletes to have relationships with the opposite sex. Athletes' accommodation in sports schools/institutes and training camps was divided into two parts, one for male athletes and another for female athletes. Mixed gender apartments were strictly prohibited. Most of the athletes also chose not to fall in love or get married, because they believed that they might not be able to focus on training.

Some coaches and athletes chose to cheat the organisers of domestic and international competitions by changing their birth certificates. By doing so, young talented athletes could enter competition earlier than permitted; and in time adult athletes could compete with teenage athletes and thus gain advantage at the level of their particular age group.

Some coaches and athletes tried to use traditional Chinese recipes and herb medicines to enhance performance. When doping was introduced to mainland China in the early 1980s, they began to consume these 'miracle pills'. Zhao Yu, a former professional cyclist from the Shanxi provincial cycling team, recalled:

Some athletes and coaches followed the advice of 'quacks' and consumed herbs and panaceas. Others travelled around the country, hoping to find secret recipes to build up their physical strength. Some of them even went to hospitals to buy placentas and used them to make soups. A friend of mine [Zhao Yu] told me: 'In order to get the medal, athletes eat anything except dust ...'

One day we were talking about the coming competition and one of my team mates mentioned drugs. Another team mate added that some athletes he knew cycled like machines after taking drugs. We realised that it would be unfair to compete with those 'machines.' From that day on, I began to study doping. I learned that a Dutch cyclist died at the 1960 Olympics because of doping. A British cyclist also died of doping at the Tour de France ... I was shocked and dared not turn to my coach for help.

The competition was approaching and I decided to have a try. I knew that it would harm my health ... I got some benzedrines from my friend who was working in a local hospital. The benzedrines were for myself and three other team mates. My coach did not know that I was ready to risk everything!

I took three pills before the competition. The first 30 minutes of the competition was fine. But later I began to feel bad. My lungs no longer worked properly and I felt that I couldn't breathe. I was frightened and felt that I might be killed by the benzedrines ... The competition went on. It was time to take other pills. Suddenly, I recalled the Dutch and British cyclists who died of doping and I decided not to take the pills. When I reached the finishing line, I was exhausted and the result was poor. The next day, my team mates and I failed to compete as normal. The benzedrines ruined the competition ...²⁹

By the mid-1980s, doping became a widespread phenomenon and helped to create an illusion of success in elite sport. At the 1986 Seoul Asian Games, China won 94 gold medals and was placed first in the medal tally. The Chinese swimming team won 10 gold medals and for the first time defeated the Japanese swimming team. However, at the doping test after the Games, 11 Chinese swimmers' urine samples tested positive for doping.³⁰

Two years later, two female Chinese athletes tested positive before the 1988 Winter Olympic Games and were disqualified. They argued that they had taken some Chinese traditional medicine for their relaxation on the recommendation of their relatives.³¹ In the same year, Chinese female swimmers collected 12 gold medals at the World Swimming Championships in Rome, further stimulating suspicion that Chinese athletes had taken performance-enhancing drugs. Commentators drew particular attention to the masculine physique of many Chinese female swimmers. Four positive tests were recorded for Chinese swimmers around the time of the Rome World Championships.³²

The Chinese Sports Ministry saw doping as a big threat to the elite sport system and to the reputation of Chinese sport and China. An anti-doping policy was first introduced in August 1985. In a decree entitled 'Regulation on the Research and Use of Nutritional Supplements for Athletes', the Sports Ministry declared: 'The IOC's regulations on doping must be implemented. Anti-doping tests must be conducted at national level sporting events'.³³ China's first Anti-doping Testing Centre was established in Beijing in July 1987. It was recognised by the IOC in 1989. In March 1989 the Sports Ministry announced the 'Three Serious Principles': serious prohibition on drug use in sport; serious conduct of drug tests; and serious punishment of those who use drugs in sport. It issued the 'Regulations of Anti-doping in National Sports Competitions'. On 3 May 1989, the Sports Ministry established a policy titled 'Enforce the ban, closely inspect and implement serious punishment' to direct the anti-doping campaign. On 19 May 1989, national regulations for doping testing began to be implemented.³⁴ However, these policies and decrees failed to achieve completely the desired effect and doping continued to corrupt the elite sport pyramid into the 1990s and 2000s.³⁵

Hero or coward? – nationalism and the shaping of athletes' public image

During the 1980s, China's sport success was regarded in China as evidence of ideological superiority and a totem of national revival. The government and most Chinese people believed that Chinese athletes' excellent performance on the international sports stage could be the best proof of China's great achievements in economic reform and modernisation. As Xu stated, 'China's status and relative strength among nations became measured by the number of gold medals won at the Olympics'³⁶ and 'The idea that winning is everything has entered the mindset of many Chinese'.³⁷

The victories achieved by Chinese athletes at international sporting events not only demonstrated China's ability to stand proudly and independently among the other nations in the world, but also strengthened the Chinese people's patriotic belief and nationalism. Since the early 1980s, nationalism has been expressed intensively in international sports competitions such as the Olympics, the World Championships and the World Cups. International sport scenes were places where Chinese people

could witness the glory of China, feel proud of being Chinese and sense unity as a great nation.³⁸

After the Chinese Men's Volleyball Team defeated South Korea at the qualifying match of the 4th International Volleyball World Cup in March 1981, university students in Beijing took to the street to celebrate. 'Pull together, Revive China!' was their slogan. One month later, the National Table Tennis Team won seven gold medals at the 36th International Table Tennis Championships which took place in Yugoslavia in April 1981. Soon after the news reached China, 'Long live China!' and 'China! China!' became popular slogans shouted by Chinese people who took to the street to celebrate the success. Thousands of congratulatory letters were sent to the national squad by the fans. An editorial published in *Sport Daily* in January 1982 titled 'Contribute to the Development of Socialist Culture and Ethics' concluded:

The relationship between sport and nationalism has never been so tight. The influence of sport on people's mind and life has never been so strong. The contribution of sport in the development of Socialist culture and ethics has never been so important.³⁹

Throughout the 1980s, continued sport success exhilarated the Chinese people and was linked to nationalism, patriotism, collectivism and heroism. Once an athlete won a world title at an international sports event, he or she would be honoured as a national hero. The story of the Chinese Women's Volleyball Team in the 1980s is the best example of this.

The team won its first world championship title at the World Cup match held in Japan in 1981. This success coincided with China's first introduction of the open and reform policy and made heroes of the women's volleyball team throughout China. Having just ended the 10-year Cultural Revolution, Chinese people needed hope and glory to restore their confidence. The sports victory over both Eastern and Western economic powers provided Chinese people with a perfect occasion to express their patriotism. After the Chinese team defeated Japan at the finals on 16 November 1981, tens of thousands of students and citizens in Beijing gathered in Tiananmen Square to celebrate for the whole night. They shouted 'Long live China! Long live China's Women's Volleyball Team!'.⁴⁰

The following day, the news of the volleyball team's victory became the headline of almost all the newspapers in China. An editorial titled 'Learn from the Women's Volleyball Team, Restore the Chinese Nation – China Wins' was published in the *People's Daily*. It stated, 'We will achieve modernisation if we use the spirit of the Women's Volleyball Team'. The *People's Daily* also established a special column titled 'Study from the Women's Volleyball Team and take action!' to propagate the spirit of the volleyball team. Many reports were published that linked the spirit of the women's volleyball team to the national revival.

The team was awarded the 'National Medal of the New Long March' by the central government and the 'National Medal for Women' by the All China Women's Federation.⁴¹ Ordinary Chinese also appreciated the team. According to a report published in the *People's Daily*, by 5 December 1981, the women's volleyball team had received more than 30,000 congratulatory letters. Lang Ping, a key player called 'iron hammer', received more than 3,000 congratulatory letters and gifts. Students in Taiyuan Institute of Engineering produced a two-metre wide tablet for the team stating 'Revive China'.

The women's volleyball team won three World tournaments in 1981, 1982 and 1986; one gold medal at the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984; and one World

Cup title in 1985. This was called the 'Five Successive Championships'. The consecutive championships brought hope and glory to China and the Chinese people. They believed that those female volleyball players represented the Chinese spirit.⁴² Deng Yinchao, wife of the former Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, published 'A letter to China's Women's Volleyball Team' in 1984. She emphasised: 'The Chinese Women's Volleyball Team has set a good example for all of us. We must learn from it to use it for an example when talking about the four modernisations'.⁴³ The 'women's volleyball spirit' was disseminated throughout the country as ideological indoctrination, a model to be emulated by all walks of life. Top player Lang Ping and the coach Yuan Weimin became role models for many Chinese. Lang Ping recalled:

After the Women's Volleyball Team won the world title, my image was on new stamps in China. The image of the team was on the calendar, commemorative coins and medals. Team members became national heroes. The only choice for us was to make further progress. Playing volleyball was no longer a job or a personal matter. It was a national matter. The team became a flag. The spirit of the team served the revival of the Chinese nation and became the symbol of China in the 1980s.⁴⁴

Lang Ping later became a successful volleyball coach internationally. She was the head coach for the US women's volleyball team in 2008 and the US team beat the Chinese women's volleyball team at the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Yuan Weimin became the Chinese Sports Minister. He was the first and, to date, the only Chinese Sports Minister coming from an athletic and coaching background.

However, Chinese nationalism could also turn a national hero into a coward or traitor overnight. Su Xiaokang argued in his famous book *The River Elegy* in 1988:

When the Five-Star Red Flag rose, People began to jump and cry. But what if they lose the match? People would swear, smash and make trouble. China is a nation that cannot afford to lose any more. The women's volleyball team has already achieved five straight championships. History and the nation have placed a heavy burden on their shoulders. What if they lose next time?⁴⁵

Take Zhu Jianhua for example. Zhu was the most famous Chinese high jumper in the 1980s. He broke the world record three times in 1983 and 1984 and was three times awarded a place in the 'Top Ten Chinese Athletes' by the Sport Ministry. When Zhu went to the 1984 Olympics most Chinese expected that he would win a gold medal. However, Zhu only won a bronze medal and disappointed the Chinese. When Zhu's result was reported, an angry crowd gathered outside Zhu's home in Shanghai. They abused his family members and smashed the windows.⁴⁶

Li Ning, the outstanding Chinese gymnast, is another example. Li was the winner of four gold medals at the 1984 Olympics. After the Games, he was honoured as the 'Prince of Gymnastics' by the Chinese media and he became a member of the National People's Congress. The Sports Ministry awarded him as one of the 'Top Ten Athletes' in 1985, 1986 and 1987 successively. He replaced the role model Lei Feng (1940–1962), a soldier famous for serving the people selflessly in the 1960s, as a new role model for the Chinese people in the 1980s.⁴⁷ The Communist Youth League of China honoured him as the 'Pace-setter of the New Long March' in 1984. The government of Guangxi province, where Li Ning came from, also awarded him the title of 'Model worker'. Li Ning decided to retire after the Games due to injury. However, the national team needed him to perform in 1988. He agreed for the sake of the team although he knew that he was not at his best. He performed in the 1988

Olympics but failed to finish the hand ring event and the men's vault event. After falling on the ground from the vaulting horse, he hid his disappointment and smiled to his team-mates to encourage them. As soon as he retired to the changing room he cried, not for himself but for his peers. He told his team-mates: 'I am sorry my friends. I've let you down'.⁴⁸ He later told Lu Guang, Chief Editor of *China Sport Daily*: 'I am suffering the greatest pain in the world. I will never have the opportunity to make up the loss!'.⁴⁹

However, Li Ning's failure and the 'smile' caused trouble. Some people condemned him for the 'shameless smile' as they believed that Li should have felt sad. Newspaper articles also criticised him for failing to win gold medals.⁵⁰ A letter was sent from Liaoning province with a plastic rope inside and it read: 'Li Ning, you are the death prince of gymnastics, please hang yourself!'.⁵¹ He was condemned as a guilty man who had let his country and his people down. After coming back from Seoul, Li did not dare to go out as he feared that people would humiliate him on the street.⁵² Facing the criticisms and pressure, Li retired soon after the 1988 Olympics. 20 years later, he recalled: 'The Chinese people in the 1980s wanted gold medals rather than sport. The Sports Ministry wanted champions rather than athletes'.⁵³

The same thing happened to the famous Chinese Women's Volleyball Team. After its five straight championships between 1981 and 1986, the squad was defeated by the Soviet Union and Peru and only won a bronze medal at the 1988 Olympics. The result disappointed the Chinese enormously. Luo Zhiyong, a university student at that time, recalled:

When they lost to Peru, students in the common room turned to anger. They began to curse the players. They threw things including wine bottles and glasses out of the window.⁵⁴

Wang Chong, a journalist who worked for the *Nanguo Daily* recalled:

The Chinese Women's Volleyball team used to be an icon. They represented the spirit of never giving up. They were 'The Light of Chinese Nation'. When they were defeated at the Olympic Games, people refused to accept this reality. They kept asking, 'How can they lose?' Suddenly, people began to criticise and curse the players. Some of the people were so angry that they even sent funeral telegrams to the head coach.⁵⁵

A Chinese scholar observed, 'China is a nation that cannot afford to lose any more, including in sport. In the 1980s athletes shouldered all the burdens of the nation'.⁵⁶ Gao Min, an outstanding Chinese female diver, who won gold medals in the springboard event of the 1988 Olympics, the 1987 FINA Diving World Cup and the 1988 World Championships, stated:

I felt that every gold medal is like a heavy burden on my shoulder. Sometimes, I do hope to lose even though I knew that I could not afford it. I hope all the Chinese people could understand that Gao Min is not a god. She is an ordinary person and it is normal for her to lose.⁵⁷

However, some argued that with the influence of the market economy athletes had become more concerned with money. Therefore, they no longer had a strong will and had forgotten their commitment to the country and the people.⁵⁸ Sometimes, a loss in a sports event would result in nationalist riots. The most infamous one is the '5.19 Soccer Riot in 1985'. It was when the Chinese Men's Soccer Team played against Hong Kong in Beijing on 19 May 1985. After the Chinese team was defeated

by Hong Kong and lost the chance to participate in the Mexico World Cup, the audience came to the realisation that a British colony's team had humiliated the Chinese nation.⁵⁹ Many remembered China's suffering at the hands of Great Britain in the late nineteenth century, the 'Opium War', and vented their anger in the worst riot in China's football history. They broke chairs inside the stadium, lobbed bottles, garbage and bricks at passing vehicles; burned cars and buses including cars from foreign embassies; smashed windows and spat at foreigners and injured 30 police officers.⁶⁰ The football team had to be rescued by the police. Even after the players had safely returned to their residence compound, many people surrounded their building, singing and shouting. The song they sang, with tears in their eyes, was the 'International': 'Get up, you who are branded by a curse, you, the world's starving and enslaved! Our outraged minds are boiling, ready to lead us into a deadly fight.' Zuo Ruilian, who was at the football stadium, recalled:

People burnt down cars and shouted insults near the head coach's house. I think we were simply finding an outlet for our disappointment after losing a game we shouldn't have lost - not to Hong Kong.⁶¹

To quell the anger of the 'whole nation,' the soccer team issued an apology on the front page of a soccer journal that very day. Even then, the team did not dare to leave their residence for three days and the head coach Zeng Xuelin resigned on 31 May 1985. The Chairman of the Chinese Football Association also resigned in November 1985. Zeng Xuelin recalled: 'The 5.19 Incident was a nightmare ... the defeat to Hong Kong was the heaviest blow that ever fell upon me and the most important lesson in my life. After the incident, I never coached any team again'.⁶²

To conclude, nationalism brought a strong desire to achieve sport success and to give something for the whole nation to be proud of. Throughout the 1980s, Chinese athletes were under great pressure because they feared that sports failure would bring shame to their country, their family, their peers and themselves. No one could stand the shame of going from hero to zero.

'The Dream To Be a Strong Nation' and the call for sports reform

After the introduction of the 'Reform and Opening-up' policy and the improvement in Sino-American relations, the 1980s became a period of enlightenment which 'culminated in an intensified cultural passion - a soul-searching discussion, led by the educated elite, about China's history, culture and future'.⁶³ Facing the total failure of the Cultural Revolution that had seriously damaged the country, intellectuals and nationalists turned to search for the cause of China's failure during the Mao era. Many of them blamed traditional Chinese culture and called for the 'adoption of Western culture and models of modernisation to regenerate China'.⁶⁴ They established a strongly favourable image of the West and some of them even developed a romantic affinity with the idea of 'God to be found in a foreign land'. A large number of books on Western history, philosophy, social science and humanity were translated into Chinese.⁶⁵ At the same time Chinese scholars published books and articles criticising Chinese traditional culture and Chinese national character.

By the late 1980s, a group of intellectuals led by Su Xiaoguan, took anti-traditionalism to an extreme and proclaimed that 'Chinese culture must be thoroughly and entirely destroyed'. Having lost confidence in Chinese culture, the group placed hope entirely upon the introduction of Western culture.⁶⁶

The pro-Western movement reached its peak with the airing of the TV mini-series *River Elegy* (He Shang) in June and August of 1988.⁶⁷ *River Elegy* represented the Chinese intellectuals' self-questioning on Chinese civilisation and their searching for a future way of development in a new era. It portrayed China as a declining, ancient civilisation. The revered cradle of Chinese civilisation and proud accomplishments of their ancestors were described as ideological bondage. Zhao stated that

Having turned key symbols of China's glorious past into symbols of its modern backwardness, the series used images of the blue ocean as symbols of modern civilisation and called on China to immerse itself in the serene blue. The symbolic contrast between China's Yellow River Civilisation and the Western Blue Ocean civilisation reflected the deep sense of national crisis experienced by many Chinese intellectuals.⁶⁸

The pursuit of Westernised studies, the widespread influence of Western individualism and extreme attitudes all constituted radicalism in the late 1980s.⁶⁹ Stimulated by the *River Elegy*, this radicalism led to the pro-democracy demonstration in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The famous demonstration was filled with nationalist sentiment. It was initiated by patriotic students who believed that national salvation and revival could only be achieved through radical political reform.

The radical school of thought called for a thorough reform and also reached the field of sport. A wave of criticism concerning the elite sport system was set in motion by the editors of the *Journal of Sports History*, a national journal published by the Sports Ministry. They began to publish some controversial articles about the elite sports system and organised a conference in summer 1988 in Pingwu, Sichuan Province. Leading academics in the sports studies field and senior policy makers and administrators in sports authorities, for the first time in Chinese sports history, publicly questioned and debated the sensitive issues: whether millions should be spent on the pursuit of Olympic medals or on the improvement of people's physical exercise and health at grassroots level. The debate reached a critical level and became a national debate when Zhao Yu, a former cycling athlete and now a writer, published an article entitled 'The Dream to be a Strong Country' in *The Contemporary Age*, a famed literature journal, in April 1988.

'The Dream to be a Strong Country' harshly criticised the sports system and the Chinese people's morbid expectation for gold medals. Zhao Yu firstly criticised the sports schools that were regarded as the first source of young talent. He argued that the schools only focused on sports training, not academic education. Once a young athlete was eliminated from the elite sport pyramid through selection/competition, he or she could hardly find a proper job due to the lack of education. Zhao quoted a soccer player's mother's article entitled 'A Mother's Feeling' to support his view:

I am not a soccer fan. I don't know what 'offside' is . . . honestly speaking, I hate soccer. Every mother loves their children and wants their children to have a bright future . . . When Yang Lei, my son, grew to be a teenager, he fell in love with soccer. I was disappointed and tried to persuade him to give up soccer. I wanted him to be a college student instead of a sportsman. . . I knew that most of the sports schools could not provide proper academic education. Most of the students were sent there by their parents because of their poor academic performance. For them, playing sports might be a 'way out.' I failed to stop Yang Lei from entering the sports school. He spent most of his spare time on soccer. His academic performance declined. . . He left the family and is now playing in a 3rd level soccer team in Jiangxi province.

My son began to play soccer at the age of 11. Now he is 26 and is about to retire from his team. He was supposed to receive proper education during the past 15 years . . . he and his team mates are the base of the elite sport pyramid, they were sands in the system, not the 'princes' or the 'queen' . . . I am so worried about his future. It will be difficult for him to find a proper job after retirement . . .⁷⁰

Zhao also listed a series of problems of the elite sports system including overtraining, human rights abuses, doping and corruption. Zhao claimed:

A Gold medal is a good thing. Everyone wants to be the champion. I like to watch the athletes competing for gold medals, this symbolised human being's desire to advance. But if gold medals became a burden and pressure, it would bring disaster to us⁷¹

Therefore, the Sports Ministry should pay more attention to mass sport because a strong country depends on healthy citizens instead of a few elite athletes. The Chinese sports system must be reformed for the sake of the future of the nation.⁷²

Zhao Yu's article received response from the media, the general public and some of the state leaders. More than 30 newspapers published his article. The *Gangming Daily*, *Literature Daily* and *Wenhui Daily* praised it as a 'breakthrough of sports literature.'⁷³ The *People's Daily* commented:

Mass sport has been neglected for a long time. Sport in China focused on competitions and gold medals. We should not ignore this problem and should begin sports reformation. Zhao Yu's criticism and warnings have inspired many. It is an expression of honesty and real patriotism.⁷⁴

Some argued that 'The Dream to be a Strong Country' article changed the Chinese people's views on sport. Some commented that Zhao Yu explained the relationship between sport, politics and culture, criticised the morbid expectation for gold medals and highlighted the real position of sport in people's lives.⁷⁵

However, the Sports Ministry took a different view of Zhao's article. *China Sport Daily* and *China Sport Weekly*, mouthpieces of the Ministry, published articles disapproving of Zhao and his supporters. They criticised that Zhao had denied all the benefit that the achievements of the athletes and the elite sport system had brought to Chinese people and to the nation. They argued that Zhao used fake data to criticise the educational background of the coaches and athletes and failed to credit the hard work of thousands of coaches and athletes who devoted themselves to the development of Chinese sport. Some coaches, athletes and university students joined the debate. Zhao was welcomed to give lectures at Beijing Sports University; however, lecturers and students from Tianjin Sport University urged *The Contemporary Age*, which published Zhao's article, to issue an apology and went to the editing office of the journal to protest.⁷⁶

The debate went on for a few months without a clear winner and, by the autumn of 1988, the media and the public began to focus on the forthcoming Seoul Olympics.

The defeat in Seoul

The 1988 Summer Olympics took place in 1988 in Seoul, South Korea between 17 September and 2 October. The Games saw the return of the Soviet Union and other

socialist countries of Eastern Europe.⁷⁷ Altogether, 8,391 athletes from 160 nations competed in 237 events. China sent 299 well-prepared athletes to the Games. More than 100 Chinese journalists travelled to Seoul to report on the Games.⁷⁸ There was good news for the Chinese that table tennis, for the first time, had become an Olympic event. The Chinese began to calculate the possible gold medals: 10 gold medals were anticipated from men's pistol, gymnastics, women's volleyball, table tennis, weightlifting, swimming and diving events.⁷⁹

However, during the 15-day event, the Chinese athletes only managed to win five gold medals (two in diving, one in gymnastics and two in table tennis), 11 silver medals and 12 bronze medals. Zhuang Yong, a female swimmer from Shanghai, won the silver medal in the women's 100m freestyle. It was the first medal for a Chinese swimmer in the history of the modern Olympics. Li Meisu, a female shot putter, won a silver medal, making her the only Asian athlete to win a medal in the track and field events at the 1988 Olympics. The national rowing team won three silver medals and one bronze. It was the first time that Chinese athletes had won medals in rowing events at the Olympic Games.⁸⁰

Although Chinese athletes made some breakthroughs, the national team's performance at the Seoul Olympics was far below expectations and was seen by the media and Chinese people as a 'total failure'. They painfully watched their women's volleyball team being defeated by the Soviet Union; Li Ning, the 'Prince of Gymnastics,' lost his world title; He Zhouqiang, the 'Chinese Hercules', failed in men's weightlifting; the table tennis team lost to South Korea in Men's singles and Women's doubles events and thus failed to secure all the four gold medals that had been planned. Finally, China fell in the gold medal tally from 4th in 1984 to 11th in 1988. People sought a reason for the total failure and remembered Zhao Yu's criticism. The *People's Daily* commented that the truth lies in 'The Dream to be a Strong Country'.⁸¹ The *Literature Daily* stated, 'Zhao Yu made a prediction. The results of China's performance at the 1988 Olympics exposed the crisis of Chinese sport. ...The gold medal dream was smashed. The true value of "The Dream to be a Strong Country" is now realized'.⁸²

Zhao was invited by the *Wenhui Monthly* to produce a new article to further explore further the cause of China's failure at the 1988 Olympics. Two months later, Zhao Yu's new article titled 'The Defeat in Seoul' was published. It was a continuation of 'The Dream to be a Strong Country'. The author interviewed staff in the Sports Ministry and athletes from the Olympics team and criticised the current system. The 'Olympic Strategy' and the role of the Sports Ministry were questioned. Zhao's solution was, again, that mass sport should replace elite sport as the priority.⁸³

Other critics including *Journal of Sports History* also published critical articles about the elite sport strategy and system. Many thought that the government's 'Olympic' sport policy was at odds with the real spirit of Olympism. Dong Liangli, Head of the Department of Mass Sport of the Ministry of Sport, broke his silence and published an article in *Journal of Sports History* to criticise the government's sports policy which largely focused on elite sport and neglected mass sport. He pointed out that the sports policy and system should be reformed without delay. The new policy and system should focus on ordinary people's fitness and health which he called 'the evergreen cause'.

This time the Sports Ministry kept silent. Facing the pressure from the media and the public, the Sports Ministry had to admit the failure of the system. A resolution

reached at the Fifth Congress of the All-China Sports Federation, held on 14 April 1989, stated:

The level of sports development in China is low and is still far behind those of the developed countries. The sports system has failed to satisfy the needs of the people in terms of leisure and cultural life. The sports system also failed to suit the development of the socialist market economy. We must be aware of the current situation. The strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and difficulties must be fully acknowledged.⁸⁴

The Sports Ministry answered the criticisms raised by Zhao Yu and others, by starting to reform the system. It took the first step in 1989 of reforming the education system for young sports talents and athletes. The objective was to create an elite sport system that could attract more sports talent and achieve sustainable development. A seminar called 'Combine Elite Sport with the Education Sector' was held by the Sports Ministry in February 1989. It stated that academic education should be combined with sports training. It should be a key element of the reform of the elite sports system. The basic approach was to offer formal education to all the young athletes of school age and to include adult athletes and retired athletes in the third and further education sectors.⁸⁵ One year later the Sports Ministry announced that it would improve the education system for young sports talent, mature athletes and professional athletes.⁸⁶

The neglect of school physical education, another question that Zhao Yu had raised was answered by the government in 1990. The Sports Ministry and the education ministry jointly issued a decree titled 'Regulations on School Physical Education'. It stated, 'School physical education should be conducted in the education sectors and should be directed by the sports sector'.⁸⁷ In addition to the reform of the education system, the Sports Ministry also began to discuss the future development of mass sport. A seminar was held by the Sports Ministry between 25 and 29 July 1989 to discuss the theory and practice of mass sport, the functions of sport in modern society and the possibility of letting sport rely on society instead of the government. It was the first seminar of its kind in China.⁸⁸ Gradually the government began to put mass fitness and health as a priority and tried to cater for both elements: elite and mass sport.

Go West? Go East? Go abroad: the beginning of the migration of chinese athletes

The 1980s was not only an era of economic reform but also an age of liberation – the liberation of people's minds and lives. Enlightened articles were trying to liberate people's thoughts from the old socialist, collectivistic and egalitarian way of thinking.⁸⁹ At the same time, initiation of the free market economy paved the way for individual freedom. The rising privately owned enterprises changed people's way of life. More and more people quit their Danwei (work unit) and state owned enterprises and began to travel and work freely around China for their own business and careers.⁹⁰ They could now make their own decisions for their own future. Subsequently, transformations began to take place in Chinese society which had formerly been fully controlled by the government.

The West, which used to be portrayed by the Chinese government and the media as 'evil imperialists' and 'corrupted capitalist hell' was reintroduced to the Chinese people. Western studies flourished. University students abandoned the Russian language and started learning English, French and Japanese. Books and articles on

the topics of the politics, economy, society and culture of Western countries, especially the United States and Western European countries, were published. Western literature, arts, music and films, which had been condemned as 'poisonous weeds', became fashionable and won popularity among the urban population. For example, *Jane Eyre*, a novel by the English writer Charlotte Brontë, was translated into Chinese and was published by Zhejiang People's Press in 1979. It became one of the bestsellers of the 1980s.⁹¹ *Hunter*, a police drama television series, became the first ever American TV series to be broadcast in China. After the first broadcast in China in September 1984, *Hunter* became one of the highest rated TV series in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s.

In an atmosphere of liberation, the Chinese people opened their eyes to the world. The prosperity of the highly developed Western countries, especially the United States, shocked and impressed many. When they looked again at China, the illusion of a 'Great and Strong Socialist Country' suddenly burst. It became many people's dream to seek a better life abroad. However, due to migration controls, only a few could legally go abroad by marrying foreigners. Most emigrants chose illegal routes to Hong Kong, Japan, America and other developed countries and regions.⁹²

Compared to ordinary Chinese, elite athletes, especially international champions, had more opportunities to emigrate to Western countries, legally and easily. They could play in clubs and continue to enjoy their sports careers on foreign soil. Li Henan, one of the top female table tennis players in China in the 1960s and coach of the national youth table tennis team in the 1970s, became the first Chinese elite athlete to emigrate to the West. In 1982 Li was invited by the US Table Tennis Association to coach the American team. During this period, Richard and Sue Butler, table tennis enthusiasts in Iowa City, helped her to get a green card which enabled her to stay in America. In 1984 her daughter and Ai Ligu, her husband, who was also a national table tennis player joined her. When Ai Ligu was asked by journalists about why they wanted to move to America, Ai Ligu answered: 'I began to see the world as it really was after the Cultural Revolution. It opened my eyes . . .'.⁹³ Li became the US Table Tennis Association's first full-time Chinese coach in 1985 and led the US team to the 1988 Seoul Olympics.⁹⁴

Liang Boxi, one of the first divers to represent the PRC at international sporting events, also chose to emigrate to the West. Liang was the champion at six national competitions between 1955 and 1965 and won his world title in 1963 at an international diving championship. He was appointed head coach of the Chinese National Diving Team in 1981. A few years later, he coached Zhou Jihong to Olympic gold at the 1984 Games. Liang Boxi and his family emigrated to Canada in 1986. The next year, he became the head coach of the Vancouver Aquatics Centre Diving Team⁹⁵ and in 1989 he went on to become a coach in the Canadian National Diving Team. His student Blythe Hartley was crowned champion at the World Aquatic Championships in Japan in 2001.

Li Kongzheng is another national diving team member to emigrate to the West. Li was the gold medallist in the 10m platform event at the 7th Asian Games. He participated in the 1984 Olympics and won a bronze medal in the 10m platform event. He was sent by the Chinese government to study in the United States in 1985, making him the first national team member to study abroad. Li represented China again at the 1988 Olympics. After he retired from the National Diving Team in late 1988 Li, accompanied by his wife Jing Ling, continued his studies in the USA. He received his BA degree in 1990 and became the head coach of the University of

Texas's diving club in 1991.⁹⁶ He opened his own diving club in Orlando, Florida in 1993. From 1996 to 2003, Li was head diving coach at Minnesota, where he produced eight National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) All-Americans, six Big Ten champions and 45 Big Ten Championships finalists. He also served as a head coach or coach for the USA Diving National Team more than 20 times from 1998. Li led the National Training Centre of Diving in Melbourne, Australia between 2006 and 2008. He returned to the US and worked as the co-head coach of the US Elite Diving Academy in Columbus, Ohio until 2010 when he became the head diving coach for swim programmes at the University of Michigan.⁹⁷

Li Hongping, another national diving team member was sent by the government to the United States to study at the University of Southern California. He represented China at the 1988 Seoul Olympics and went back to the United States after the Games. Li received a bachelor's degree in physical education in 1989 and began to work as an assistant coach at Mission Viejo, a local diving club.⁹⁸ He was a coach for the US Diving team at the 1997 World Junior Championships, 1998 World Diving Championships and the 1998 Goodwill Games. He was the head coach for the US diving team that competed at the 2003 Grand Prix Diving Championships in Rome, Italy. Li Hongping is now the head coach of the diving team at the University of Southern California.⁹⁹

Luan Jujie, the first Chinese and Asian Olympic gold medallist in fencing, emigrated to Canada in the 1980s. After her retirement from the National Fencing Team in late 1988, Luan was offered a coaching position with the Chinese National Fencing Team. However, she chose to accept an offer from the University of Alberta to study there while working as a part-time coach at the Edmonton Fencing Club. Accompanied by her husband who quit his job in the Jiangsu Culture Radio & TV Bureau, Luan arrived in Canada in early 1989.¹⁰⁰ She became a full-time coach at the Edmonton Fencing Club in 1990.¹⁰¹ She continued training and competing in Canada and was crowned champion at the 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1999 Canadian National Championships. She also represented Canada at many International Competitions including the 2000 Sydney Olympics and the 2008 Beijing Olympics.^{102,103}

Some Chinese athletes went abroad with their families; and some intermarried. Cheng Xiaoxia, China's first international diving champion, the 'Queen of Diving', travelled to the United States in 1986 and studied at the University of California. She married an Chinese American in 1987 and later became an American citizen.¹⁰⁴

Jiao Zhimin is another example. Jiao was a female table tennis player who won a bronze medal in the women's singles and a silver medal in the women's doubles at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. After the Seoul Olympics, she married Ahn Jae-hyung, a South Korean table tennis player, in 1989. Due to the improvement in foreign relations between the PRC and South Korea, their marriage gained support from the two governments. Jiao became a Korean citizen and worked as an actor in Korea in the early 1990s.¹⁰⁵

Another table tennis player He Zhili went to Japan for more complicated reasons. She was one of the top women's table tennis players in China in the 1980s. She won the gold medal in the women's singles at the 39th World Table Tennis Championship in 1987 by refusing the team manager's request to lose the match to a North Korean player. Consequently, she was banned from competing at the 1988 Olympics. She then quit the Chinese national team and married a Japanese table

tennis player in 1989. She changed her name to Chire Koyma and became a Japanese citizen.¹⁰⁶ She competed for Japan at the 1994 Asian Games in Hiroshima, Japan and won the gold medal in the women's singles event by defeating Deng Yaping, China's No. 1 seeded player.¹⁰⁷ During the competition, she used the Japanese word 'yoshi' (よし, good, excellent) to encourage herself and enrage Deng Yaping.¹⁰⁸ Her action outraged Chinese audiences. For her complete transformation of image from Chinese to Japanese she was called 'traitor' by Chinese nationalists.

In general, the migration of athletes during the 1980s came largely from table tennis, diving and other individual sports. Chinese athletes went abroad mainly to take jobs in coaching or to continue their sports careers. Reasons for migration included marriage, the love of sport and simple desire to see the outside world. Zhao Yu predicted in his famous article 'The Dream to be a Strong Country':

It seems that some of the heroes are not sentimentally attached to this land ... they went away, together with the honour awarded by their mother country ... Is China not worth loving? Most of them do not want to come back, only a few still miss their homeland ...¹⁰⁹

Zhao Yu's prediction was wrong. With the rise of the Chinese economy and the rapid transformation of Chinese society, some of the Chinese athletes who migrated to foreign countries came back to China in the 2000s to start their own business or enterprises. For example, table tennis player Jiao Zhimin returned to Beijing in 2002 and started her own information technology (IT) business.¹¹⁰ Li Henan returned to China in 2003 and established a table tennis club at Shanghai Yangpu Secondary School.¹¹¹ He Zhili began to travel between China and Japan frequently since the Japanese company she worked for entered the Chinese market in the mid-2000s. She commented,

the times changed and people are becoming more open minded ... No matter where you go, no matter which country's passport you hold, you are always a Chinese. We [elite athletes who emigrated to foreign countries] were cultivated by China. No one can change this fact.¹¹²

Conclusion

The 1980s was an era of reform, opening up, enlightenment and liberation. Together with the economic and political reforms, China's sports policy underwent transformation. It brought great change to Chinese athletes' political commitment. With the establishment of the 'Elite Sport First' policy and the Olympic Strategy, the elite athletes, who used to serve China's foreign diplomacy as sports ambassadors in the 1970s began to compete for the honour of the country. It became their mission to build up China's international image. The elite sport system was improved by the government to meet the needs of the fast-developing elite sport.

In this period, Chinese nationalism gave birth to the desire to achieve sport success and to let the athletes, their parents, fans, coaches, the government and the whole nation have something to be proud of. A heavy political burden had been placed upon Chinese athletes. The nation's morbid expectation for Olympic gold medals and the government's 'Elite Sport First' policy raised criticisms and triggered a nationwide debate on elite sport. The media and scholars began to call for the promotion of mass sport.

The 1980s also saw the beginning of the emigration of athletes. The initiation of the free market economy paved the way for individual freedom. China's elite athletes began to make their own decisions for their future. Some of them emigrated to foreign countries to seek their future career and a better life.

Notes

1. China withdrew from the International Swimming Federation (FINA), the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB), the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), the International Basketball Federation (IBF), the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG), the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF), the International Wrestling Association (IWA) and the International Cycling Union (UCI) in 1958.
2. At the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, Deng Xiaoping announced the official launch of the Four Modernisations. This included the modernisation of agriculture, industry, technology and defence.
3. Interview of the former administrator of the Sports Ministry by the author, 12 July 2010.
4. M. Wang, 'The Report to the 1980 National Sports Conference', 150.
5. Rong, *The History of Contemporary Chinese Sport*.
6. Hao, *The History of Sport in China*, 11.
7. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1949–1991)*, Vol. 1, 8.
8. Liu Changchun (1909–1983) was the first Chinese athlete who competed at the Olympics. He represented the Republic of China at the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Although Liu Changchun failed to win a medal at the 1932 Games, his participation symbolised China's first move into the Olympic Movement.
9. Hao, *The History of Sport in China*.
10. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1949–1991)*, Vol. 1.
11. Xu Shan and Fang Liu, 'A Phone Call From China Changed the 1984 Olympics', *Observe the East Weekly*, 28 August 2008.
12. Hao, *The History of Sport in China*, 89.
13. Ibid.
14. Xu, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008*, 215.
15. Fan, Wu, and Xiong, 'Beijing Ambitions'.
16. Xu, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008*, 216.
17. Tan, *The History of Sport*.
18. Ibid., 416.
19. Fan, Wu, and Xiong, 'Beijing Ambitions', 216.
20. State Physical Culture and Sport Commission, *Decisions about the Reform of Sports System (Draft)*.
21. Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 'Notification on the Issuing of the "Sports Ministry's Decision on the Reform of the Sport System"', 107.
22. Ibid.
23. Zhou, 'Super Star's Quotation', 3.
24. Zhang, 'The Legendary Fencer', 62.
25. Sports Ministry, 'Instruction on the Cultivation of Young Talents (15 April 1986)', 112.
26. Donnelly and Peter, 'Child Labour, Sport Labour', 395.
27. *China's Child Stars*, BBC, July 1995.
28. Jesse Zentz, 'Olympic Gold Medalist Lu Inspires Gymnasts at Helena Kidsports', *Independent Record*, 15 July 2011.
29. Y. Zhao, 'The Dream to Be a Strong Country', 151–154.
30. , 'Anti-Doping Campaign in China in the Past 20 Years', *Huangshi Weekly*, 7 August 2008.
31. Yang and Jin, *Say No To Drugs: Anti-Doping Education Text Book*.
32. Interview of Cao Yuchun (reporter of *New Sport*) by the author, July 2004.

33. 'The History of Anti-Doping Campaign in China', CAIT, http://www.cait.cn/jyjc_1/cjw/201003/t20100330_52746.shtml (accessed 11 June 2011), 1.
34. Zong, 'The Anti-Doping Campaign in Sport'.
35. Fan, 'Innocence Lost: Child Athletes in China'.
36. Xu, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008*, 218.
37. *Ibid.*, 215.
38. Fan, Mackay, and Christensen, *China Gold: China's Quest for Global Power and Olympic Glory*.
39. 'Contribute to the Development of Socialist Culture and Ethics', *China Sports Daily*, 1 January 1982.
40. '1981: China Women's Volleyball Team Brought Glory to the Chinese Nation', *Nandu Weekly*, 18 July 2008.
41. The Long March was a military retreat undertaken by the CCP's Red Army during the Chinese Civil War. It began in October 1934 and ended in October 1935. Led by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, the Red Army retreated from Jianxi Province to Shanxi Province by travelling 12,500 km through remote regions in Western and Northern China. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Long March became a symbol. 'The National Medal of the New Long March' was awarded to those who had made a great contribution to the construction of the socialist country.
42. Lu, 'Chinese Girls', 19.
43. Reporter, '1981: China Women's Volleyball Team Brought Glory to the Chinese Nation', *Nandu Weekly*, 18 July 2008.
44. Lang, *The Passionate Years - The Biography of Lang Ping*, 64.
45. Economy Observer Editorial Team, *China's Reform and Opening Up*, 73.
46. Ju Li, 'Zhu Jianhua and Liu Xiang, The Glory of Shanghai', *Titan 24*, <http://sports.titan24.com/athletics/08-11-12/134317.html> (accessed 12 May 2011).
47. Lei Feng was a soldier who served in the People's Liberation Army in the early 1960s. He died in 1962 in an accident. After his death, Lei Feng was held up as a role model for the Chinese people and became an icon, symbolising hard work, selflessness, modesty and dedication.
48. Xing, 'The Story of the Prince of Gymnastics, Li Ning', *Naning Daily*, 13 November 1988.
49. Xiaoqiao Wang and Muzi Cai, 'Three Minutes and Twenty Years', *Nanfang Weekend*, 14 August 2008.
50. 'Li Ning's Smile Caused Criticisms', *Tencent News*, <http://sports.qq.com/a/20090909/000730.htm> (accessed 15 June 2011).
51. Shanshan Lin, 'Li Ning: A Life Long Struggle', *Tencent News*, <http://news.qq.com/a/20080813/000596.htm> (accessed 15 June 2011).
52. Wang and Cai, 'Three Minutes and Twenty Years'.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Wang Chong, 'The Defeat in Soul on black-white Television', *Nanguo Daily*, 17 March 2008.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Xu, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008*, 218–219.
57. *Documentary - Our Olympics*, China Central Television, 17 July 2008.
58. He, 'The Causes of the Women's Volleyball Team's Failure'.
59. 'Around the World; 125 Are Lectured In Peking for Soccer Riot', *The New York Times*, 26 May 1985.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Hongji Liu, ed., 'Road To the World Cup -Chinese Football Fans', CCTV, <http://www.cctv.com/lm/575/11/29284.html> (accessed 20 June 2011).
62. 'The 5.19 Incident in 1985', Xinhua News, <http://2008.sohu.com/20080702/n257885532.shtml> (accessed 20 June 2011)
63. S. Zhao, *A Nation State by Construction*, 136.
64. *Ibid.*, 132.
65. *Ibid.*
66. *Ibid.*, 133.
67. Liu, 'Restless Chinese Nationalist Currents in the 1980s and the 1990s'.

68. S. Zhao, *A Nation State by Construction*, 135.
69. X. Chen, 'The Rise of Cultural Nationalism', 35.
70. Wen Li, 'A Mother's Feeling', quoted by Y. Zhao, 'The Dream to be a Strong Country', 110–112.
71. Weizhi Zhong, 'The Sports Ministry Was Outraged by *The Dream to be a Strong Country*', *Literature Weekly*, 1 August 2007.
72. Li and Zhou, *The Dream to be a Strong Country*.
73. Zhong, 'The Sports Ministry Was Outraged by *The Dream to be a Strong Country*'.
74. S. Wu, *The History of Sport in the People's Republic of China*, 352.
75. Ibid.
76. Zhong, '1998: The Dream to be a Strong Country'.
77. The Soviet Union and other socialist countries of Eastern Europe boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics due to the cold war.
78. Hao, *The History of Sport in China*, 257.
79. Zhong, '1998: The Dream to be a Strong Country'.
80. Hao, *The History of Sport in China*, 269–270.
81. Zhong, '1998: The Dream to be a Strong Country'.
82. Zhong, 'The Sports Ministry Was Outraged by *The Dream to be a Strong Country*'.
83. Y. Zhao, *Three Sport Reports*.
84. 'Resolution of the Fifth Congress of the All China Sports Federation', 47.
85. 'Minutes of the Workshop on the Co-operation between the Elite Sport System and the Education Sectors'.
86. X. Ma, 'The Formation of China's Policy on the Combination of Elite Sport and Education'.
87. Sports Ministry, *Sports Decrees of the People's Republic of China (1989–1992)*, 7–8.
88. 'Minutes of the Workshop on the Socialisation of Sport'.
89. L. Ma, *Cross Swords – The Liberation of People's Mind in Contemporary China*.
90. Danwei (work unit) refers to the place of employment. It was commonly used in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when China was dominated by a socialist economy. During that period, all the Danwei were state owned.
91. X. Wu, *Best-selling books in China in the Past 30 Years*.
92. Zhiwei Ye and Yong Jin, 'Illegal Immigration in the Past', *Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Daily*, 1 September 2009.
93. John Mossman, 'In U.S., This Coach Is One of a Kind', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 1985.
94. Ibid.
95. Vancouver Aquatics Centre Diving Team official website, <http://www.vacdivers.ca/index.php?id=30> (accessed 25 June 2011).
96. Bingyi Li, 'Li Kongzheng Opened his Own Diving Club', *Metro Express*, 30 November 2006.
97. 'Kongzheng "KZ" Li named new head diving coach at Michigan', Ann Arbor, <http://www.annarbor.com/sports/kongzheng-kz-li-named-new-head-diving-coach-at-michigan/> (accessed 25 June 2011).
98. 'Li Hongping Opened a New Era of Chinese Diving', *Shantou Special Economic Zone Evening Echo*, 8 January 2010.
99. 'Li Hongping's Profile', USC-Trojans, http://www.usctrojans.com/sports/w-swim/mtt/li_hongping00.html (accessed 25 June 2011).
100. Min Zhu, 'The No. 1 Fencer of the East Returned to the Olympics, The Legend of Luan Jujie', *Laonian Daily*, 7 July 2008.
101. Edmonton Fencing Club official website, <http://www.edmontonfencing.com/> (accessed 25 June 2011).
102. 'Luan Jujie', official website of Chinese Olympic Committee, http://en.olympiccn.com/athletes/serch_L/2003-11-04/3732.html (accessed 28 March 2011).
103. Changbo Ma and Tianwei Liu, 'Luan Jujie Returned Home after 20 Years', *Nanfang Weekly*, 21 August 2008, <http://nf.nfdaily.cn/epaper/nfzm/content/20080821/ArticleA01002FM.htm> (accessed 25 June 2011).
104. 'The Three Diving Champions', 46.
105. *Interview with Jiao Zhimin*, China Central Television Sports Channel, 9 September 2005.

106. Ye, *Debates on He Zhili*.
107. Yonglie Ye, 'He Zhili, I Want to Have a Home', *Xinmin Weekly*, no. 9 (2007): 36–38.
108. Ye, *Debates on He Zhili*.
109. Y. Zhao, 'The Dream to Be a Strong Country', 157–158.
110. 'Jiao Zhilin, From Table Tennis Champion to Business Woman', *Helongjiang Daily*, 6 December 2005.
111. 'Li Haonan and Her Students', *PLA Daily*, 22 April 2005.
112. Ke Chen, 'He Zhili, I am Always a Chinese'. <http://sports.163.com/09/0823/18/5HE0G35V00053JMB.html> (accessed 5 June 2011).

References

- CCCPC (the Central Committee of Communist Party of China) Literature Research Office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, ed. *Selected Works of Zhou Enlai*. Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 1990.
- Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 'Notification on the Issuing of the "Sports Ministry's Decision on the Reform of the Sport System"', National Sports Archives, the Sports Ministry, Beijing.
- Chen, Xiaoming. 'The Rise of Cultural Nationalism', *The Twenty-First Century*, no. 39 (1997): 35.
- Donnelly, Peter. 'Child Labour, Sport Labour'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32, no. 4 (1977): 395.
- 'Minutes of the Workshop on the Co-operation between the Elite Sport System and the Education Sectors'. In *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1990)*, ed. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, 65–70. Beijing: People's Sport Press, 1992.
- Economy Observer Editorial Team, ed. *China's Reform and Opening Up*. Beijing: Zhongxin Press, 2008.
- Editor. 'Minutes of the Workshop on the Socialisation of Sport'. In *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1990)*, ed. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, 60–4. Beijing: People's Sport Press, 1992.
- Editor. 'Notification on the Issuing of the "Sports Ministry's Decision on the Reform of the Sport System"' In *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1949–1991)*, Vol. 2, ed. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, 107. Beijing: People's Sport Press, 1993.
- Editor. 'Resolution of the Fifth Congress of the All China Sports Federation'. In *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1990)*, ed. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, 47. Beijing: People's Sport Press, 1992.
- Editor. 'The Three Diving Champions'. *Contemporary Sport*, no. 4 (1990): 46.
- Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, ed. *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1949–1991)*. Vol. 1. Beijing: People's Sport Press, 1993.
- Fan, Hong. 'Sports development and elite athletes in China'. In *Routledge Handbook of Sports*, eds, Barrie Houlihan and Mick Green, 399–417. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Fan, Hong, Ping Wu, and Huan Xiong. 'Beijing Ambitions: An Analysis of the Chinese Elite Sport System and Its Olympic Strategy for the 2008 Olympic Games'. *The International Journal for the History of Sport*, 22, no. 4 (2005): 510–529.
- Hao, Qin, ed. *The History of Sport in China*. Vol. 6, (1980–1992). Beijing: People's Sport Press, 2008.
- He, Huixian. 'The Causes of the Women's Volleyball Team's Failure'. *New Sport*, no. 1 (1988): 11–13.
- Lang, Ping. *The Passionate Years The Biography of Lang Ping*. Beijing: Dongfang Press, 1999.
- Li, Bingyin and Baiyi Zhou, ed., *The Dream to be a Strong Country*. Wuhan: Changjiang Wenyi Press, 1998.
- Liu, Jun Toming. 'Restless Chinese Nationalist Currents in the 1980s and the 1990s: A Comparative Reading of *River Elegy* and *China Can Say No*'. In *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective Historical and Recent Cases*, ed. C.X. George Wei and Xiaoyuan Liu, 205–231. London: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Lu, Guang. 'Chinese Girls'. In *The Dream to be a Strong Country*, ed. Li Bingyin and Zhou Baiyi, 19–96. Beijing: Changjiang Literature Press, 1998.

- Ma, Licheng. *Cross Swords – The Liberation of People’s Mind in Contemporary China*. Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 1998.
- Ma, Xuanjian. ‘The Formation of China’s Policy on the Combination of Elite Sport and Education’. *Journal of Shanghai Sport University* 29, no. 2 (2005): 1–5.
- Rong, Gaotang, ed. *The History of Contemporary Chinese Sport*. Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1987.
- Sports Ministry, ed. *Sports Decrees of the People’s Republic of China (1989–1992)*. Beijing: People’s Sport Press, 1993.
- Sports Ministry. ‘Instruction on the Cultivation of Young Talents (15 April 1986)’ In *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1949–1991)*, Vol. 2, ed. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, 112. Beijing: People’s Sport Press, 1993.
- State Physical Culture and Sport Commission. *Decisions about the Reform of Sports System (Draft)*, 15 April 1986. National Sports Archives, the Sports Ministry, Beijing.
- Tan, Hua, ed. *The History of Sport*. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2005.
- Wang, Meng. ‘The Report to the 1980 National Sports Conference’. *Sports Policy Documents (1949–1981)*. Beijing: People’s Sport Press, 1982.
- Wu, Xusheng, ed. *Best-selling Books in China in the Past 30 Years*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 2009.
- Xu, Guoqi. *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Yang, Tianle and Jichun Jin. *Say No To Drugs: Anti-Doping Education Text Book*. Beijing: Beijing Sport University Press, 1998.
- Ye, Yonglie. *Debates on He Zhili*. Beijing: China Book Press, 1999.
- Zhang, Wei. ‘The Legendary Fencer’, *New Citizens Weekly*, no. 4 (2008): 62–4.
- Zhao, Suisheng. *A Nation State by Construction*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Zhao, Yu. ‘The Dream to Be a Strong Country’. In *The Dream to be a Strong Country*, ed. Li Bingyin and Zhou Baiyi, 97–170. Beijing: Changjiang Literature Press, 1998.
- Zhao, Yu. *Three Sport Reports*. Changjiang Literature Press, 1998.
- Zhong, Weizhi. ‘1998: The Dream to be a Strong Country’. In *China after the Reform and Opening Up*, ed. Economy Observer Daily. Beijing: Zhongxin Press, 2008.
- Zhou, Lingmei. ‘Super Star’s Quotation’. *New Sport*, no. 1 (1992): 3.
- Zong, Wen. ‘The Anti-Doping Campaign in Sport’. *Chinese Coaches*, no. 1 (2005).