

## **From Celestial Empire to Nation State: Sport and the Origins of Chinese Nationalism (1840-1927)**

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‘The history of modern China is one in which nationalism replaces Culturalism/*Tianxiaism*<sup>1</sup> as the dominant Chinese view of their identity and place in the world.’<sup>2</sup> Sport has played its part in this process of change, both reflecting and stimulating the transformation of China from a culturally-bound empire to a modern nation state. Since the arrival of Western colonial powers in the mid 19th century, sport has stimulated the rise of Chinese nationalism and constructed Chinese national consciousness in many ways. It directly served the nationalist revolution that resulted in the formation of the Republic of China in 1912. This paper will examine the relationship between sport and Chinese nationalism in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. The focus is the role of sport in the making of modern China

### **Sport, the Self-strengthening Movement and the Emergence of National Consciousness (1864-1895)**

At the end of the 18th century, the Chinese ‘*Tianxia*’ (world) remained secure.<sup>3</sup> It was not until the mid 19th century that the Celestial Empire began to realise that it was no longer a dominant power in the world.<sup>4</sup> China’s defeats in the Opium Wars (1840-1842, 1856-1860) forced the Qing court to reevaluate its opponents. In this period, the ‘*Tianxia*’ was redefined, political elites and scholars began to study the outside world.

Before the first Opium War, Lin Zexu, an imperial commissioner, was sent by the Qing government to Guangdong province to suppress the illegal importation of opium by British merchants in 1839. In order to study the Western powers, Lin edited a book entitled *Sizhou Zhi* (The Four Continents). It was the first book that systematically introduced world geography and history to a Chinese readership. After the First Opium War, Lin Zexu met Wei Yuan, a scholar who was eager

to secure China from the danger of Western aggression. They both agreed that the lack of knowledge on the West was one of the key reasons for China's defeat. In order to waken the Chinese people and save the country, Lin suggested that Wei write a new world geography and history book based on *Sizhou Zhi*. In 1842, Wei published a new book *Haiguo Tuzhi* (Illustrated Treatise on Maritime Countries).<sup>5</sup> In *Haiguo Tuzhi*, Wei introduced world geography, history, politics, religion, modern science and technology. He also examined the reasons for China's defeat in the Opium War and raised the idea: '*shi yi zhi changji yi zhi yi*' [learn advanced technology from the barbarians to defeat the barbarians]. Wei suggested that in order to achieve national salvation, China must learn from the West to develop its industry, navigation, education, finance and have political reform.<sup>6</sup>

Zhao Suisheng has asserted that the rise of Chinese nationalism was entangled in the intellectual search for answers to the questions on China's defeat in the Opium war.<sup>7</sup> As the first book that discussed China's defeat and future, *Haiguo Tuzhi* enlightened scholars and political elites. Based on Wei Yuan's idea, notable political figures in the government including Prince Luanqi (1832-1898), Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909), Li Hongzhang (1823-1901), Zuo Zongtang (1812-1885), Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) and Feng Guifeng (1809-1874) launched the Self-strengthening Movement in 1864.<sup>8</sup> 'Learn advanced technology from the barbarians to defeat the barbarians', 'Self-strengthening' and 'Seek Wealth' became the slogans of the movement.

The Self-strengthening Movement leaders tried to discover the internal cause for China's weakness. Feng Guifeng proposed four reasons to explain China's failure: the lack of political, economic, social, and cultural development. To overcome these four reasons, he urged the introduction of Western technology as well as the means to produce the technology. Self-strengthening leaders initiated a modernization movement to promote industry, military force, commerce, agriculture and education. Modern factories were built, modern schools were established, and students were sent abroad to study. Western technologies were introduced to China.<sup>9</sup>

Together with Western science, technology and merchandise, Western military physical exercises which stressed physical power, unity and discipline were imported by the Qing government to build up the physicality of the soldiery. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852), a German gymnastics educator and nationalist, developed German gymnastics in the 1800s and 1810s. Jahn formed the idea of restoring Prussia by the development of people's physical strength through

the practice of gymnastics after witnessing Napoleon's aggression of his native land. He invented early models of the parallel bars, the rings, the balance beam and the vaulting horse and developed formation drills, weapon drills, running practice, jumping practice and other gymnastic drills. He opened the first open-air gymnasium in Berlin in 1811 and established the Turnverein, a gymnastic association, to train young people with both gymnastics and nationalistic ideas for the emancipation of their fatherland.<sup>10</sup> The system of Swedish gymnastics was formalized by Per Henrik Ling (1776-1939), a Sweden physical educator. Ling elaborated a system of gymnastics, exercises and maneuvers in the 1800s, divided into four branches: pedagogical, medical, military and aesthetic. He then obtained the co-operation of the Sweden government and created the Royal Gymnastic Central Institute in 1813 to train gymnastic instructors.<sup>11</sup> Both German and Sweden gymnastics became popular in Europe and the United States by the mid 19th century. They laid the foundation for modern gymnastics and physical education.

Foreign military officers were hired to train Chinese soldiers. Western military drills and gymnastics, based on German and Sweden gymnastics, were adopted by the army.<sup>12</sup> In the Xiang Army commanded by Zeng Guofan, Governor-General of Liangjiang, soldiers were required to practice gymnastics twice a day. 'The Work/Rest Rules' of the Xiang Army stated: 'Soldiers should practice gymnastics every morning and late afternoon. Officers should supervise these exercises.' Zeng Guofan believed that the army should build up its strength by practicing physical exercise every day. He explained the importance of physical exercise to the soldiers in the 'Instructions to New Soldiers' which was composed in the 1850s:

'Stick drills will build up your physical strength; spear drills will increase your flexibility; running and jumping will train your legs; sword drills will upgrade your skills; formation drills will train your body movements.'<sup>13</sup>

In the Huai Army commanded by Li Hongzhang, Governor of Zhili province, foreign military officers were employed to train soldiers with modern military techniques and exercises. English gymnastics were adopted by the Huai Army in the 1860s. Li Hongzhang sent seven officers to Germany to study in 1876. When they returned in 1879, they taught German gymnastics: formation drills, horizontal bar, parallel bars and gym-horse.<sup>14</sup>

With the implementation of Western military physical exercises in armies, political elites started

to turn their eyes to the promotion of Chinese people's physical strength. Zhang Zhidong, Governor of Hunan and Hubei province and an important leader of the Self-strengthening Movement, stated, 'Gymnastics concerns the future of the country. If everyone is as strong as soldiers, China will be a powerful country.'<sup>15</sup> From this point on, the importance of Western sports in fitness promotion and national building began to be realized.

The Qing government established modern schools to train specialized personnel for the army and industry. Physical education was part of the curriculum. In the Tianjin Naval School, which was established in 1881, in physical education classes students practiced fence-play, stick play, boxing, dumbbells, soccer, hurdles, running races, skating, the gym horse, basketball and tennis. In the Jiangnan Naval School, established in 1890, all students were required to participate daily in physical exercise including mast climbing, swimming and group exercises. Inter-school competitions were held. Wang Boen, a student in the Tianjin Naval School recalled, 'Inter-school sports meetings were frequently held between the Navy School, Army School, Telegraph School and other schools in Tianjin.'<sup>16</sup>

The second half of the 19th century was a turning point in Chinese history. Facing Western aggression, political elites and scholars became the leading force that contributed to the formation of the ideas of 'Foreign Countries' and 'Western Civilization', and thus stimulated the emergence of a national consciousness by redefining China's position in the 'New World'. The Self-strengthening Movement symbolized the rise of an embryonic nationalism that focused on building up the strength of the Chinese nation to fight against the Western powers. During the following century, Chinese nationalism followed this theme. In this period, under the influence of this embryonic nationalism, Western sport was regarded as part of 'advanced Western technology', and served as a vehicle for the government to enhance China's military power.

### **Sport and Reformers' Attempt to Establish a Modern Nation State in the 1890s**

The Self-strengthening Movement failed to achieve its goal of building China into a militarily strong country. 30 years after the initiation of the movement, China was defeated by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Political elites, activist reformers and scholars were aware that China's weakness existed not only on the technological and military side, but also attributed it to the

education and political system. With the support of monarchist reformists led by Kang Youwei (1858-1927), the Guangxu Emperor (1871-1908) initiated the 'Hundred Days of Reform' on June 11, 1898. Kang's original objective was to create a Western constitutional monarchy and transform the Qing Dynasty into a modern nation state.<sup>17</sup> However, the reforms were stopped by the Empress Dowager Cixi and ended in total failure. Although the reforms failed, the idea of abolishing the old political system to save China was consolidated.

The notions of nation state and nationalism were still ambiguous in China at the end of the 19th century. Chinese people were like sands on a plate which can not be held together.<sup>18</sup> Leading reformers and scholars believed that national salvation could only be achieved when people showed their loyalty to a modern nation state instead of submitting themselves to an emperor or a culturally bonded regime. Only a modern nation state could bond people together as a whole. In order to achieve this goal, the ideas of nation state and nationalism were introduced to the broader public.

Liang Qichao, (1873-1929), one of the most outstanding reformists in that period, argued that it was nationalism that has made Europe strong since the 16th Century.<sup>19</sup> He believed that the lack of collectivism<sup>20</sup> was one of the most important reasons for China's failure and the idea of nation state and nationalism which came from the West could be applied to enhance social cohesion and make China powerful.<sup>21</sup> Liang stated in 1901, 'Facing the danger of being invaded and occupied by foreign powers, we must cultivate and promote nationalism to defend [China]. This is the most urgent issue for China.'<sup>22</sup> According to Liang, the traditional idea of *Tianxia* should be replaced by 'country' and the only way to save China was to establish a modern nation state.<sup>23</sup>

In order to propagandize the idea of political and educational reform, reformers established study societies across China. For example, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao founded the *Qiang Xuehui* (the Society for the Study of Self-strengthening) in Beijing and Shanghai in 1895. The *Baoguoahui* (Protect the Country Society) was established in Beijing in 1898. Similar societies were also established in Guangdong, Guangxi, Sichuan, Hunan, Fujian, Zhejiang, Shanxi and Jiangsu provinces in the late 1890s and the early 1900s. Besides these societies, reformers established new schools in Guangzhou (1891, 1898), Changsha (1897), Beijing (1894) and Shanghai (1897, 1898) to educate 'new citizens'. Newspapers and journals, such as *Wanguogongbao* (World Affairs), *Shiwubao* (Chinese Progress), *Guowenbao* (The National News), *Guowenhuibian* (National Affairs)