A Study on the Evolution Characteristics of Women’s Views on Sports at Three Different Stages in Modern China

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**Abstract.** This paper uses literature and comparative methods to research the evolution characteristics of women's views on sports at three different stages in modern China. The major findings are as follows: (1) The modern Chinese women's views on sports has undergone three different stages that evolve and interact mutually, from "entertainment" to "self-emancipation", from "protecting the country by strengthening people" to "women's fitness" and from "gender difference" to "gender equality". (2) China's modern views on sports at three different stages present distinctive historic features—namely high competitiveness, modernization and diversity. (3) The evolution characteristics of women's views on sports at three different stages in modern China reflect women's attitudes and inclination towards sports.

1. Introduction

The development of women's sports in circumstances of domestic problems and foreign invasions is closely related to the opinions of the nation and the state of the country. The Opium War of 1840 has resulted in large-scale aggressions by Western powers to modern China. As a result, new western culture had a great impact on Chinese traditional culture. Faced with two choices of absorption and abandonment, advanced Chinese intellectuals began exploring the way to save the country and people. The public's perceptions and views on women's sports are constantly changing and perfecting with the interaction of many factors such as political trends, national situation and western thoughts. The views on women's sports based on these concepts have distinctive features of the time, influencing the development of modern Chinese women's sports to a large extent.
2. Stages of Chinese Modern Sports History

The period from the Opium War of 1840 to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 is the history of modern Chinese sports. The development of China's modern sports is generally affected by two factors: one is the traditional views on sports that were descended from ancient China before the Opium War of 1840; the other is the modern sports thought that was introduced from the West after the Opium War. The interaction of these two factors affects the development of China's modern sports. The entire history of modern Chinese sports can be roughly divided into three stages: the early dissemination of western sports thought in China, the integration of traditional sports thought and modern western sports thought, and the boom of modern school sports thought.

The first stage is from the beginning of the Opium War in 1840 to the ending of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. China was on the verge of being divided and ruined at that time and the Chinese concentrated their efforts to defend the country. As a result, few people paid attention to the sports industry and many western missionaries took the opportunity to propagate western sports thought on the pretext of making changes on women's body.

The second stage of China's modern sports came with the failure of the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 or the Westernization Movement. The Chinese people advocated defending the country through physical fitness to get rid of the image of the "sick man in East Asia". The ideas of "saving the country through physical fitness and protecting the country by strengthening the species" enjoyed nationwide popularity, which have something in common with the western concept of "fitness". At that point, domestic thoughts and foreign ideas had begun to influence the development of China's modern sports.

The promulgation of the 1922 New School System marked the beginning of the booming period of modern school sports thought, which means the development of China's modern sports had entered the third stage. The popularity of school sports thought helped women to participate in school sports and to have equal access to sports facilities, breaking the previous gender gap in sports fields and promoting the development of modern women's sports.

3. Evolution Characteristics of Women's Views on Sports at Different Stages in Modern China

3.1. Evolution Characteristics from "Entertainment" to "Self-Emancipation"

3.1.1. Continuation of the Traditional "Entertainment" Concept of Women's Sports

Influenced by the ancient Chinese traditional trend of thought, women had been expected to adhere to "wifely submission and virtue", "three principles and five virtues" and the image of a good wife and mother at the beginning of modern times. There were only a few ways and places available for women to exercise themselves, most of which were still the continuation of the ancient women's sports and were combined with productive labor, military struggle, and royal court play. Such sports as kites, shuttlecocks, cuju (Chinese ancient football), springboard, swings and so on were women's favorites.

At the beginning of modern times, women's sports activities did not appear organizational in a strict sense, and even their physical training effects were found somewhat lacking. The value of women's sports lies in "entertainment", "recreation" or dating.
3.1.2. Formation of the “Self-emancipation” Concept of Women’s Sports

At the sound of a bomb in 1840, western powers invaded China. In order to propagate western thought and culture, foreigners established churches and schools in major cities and promoted sports in China. By 1876, the number of missionary schools for girls had increased to 121. These schools not only played an important role in eliminating illiteracy, arousing girls’ individual consciousness and their sense of oppression, but also introduced modern sports to Chinese women. In 1930, Shen Ruizhen said: "Let the female compatriots complete the first step - to liberate the body". Her so-called body's liberation is to remove two major obstacles that hindered physical growth and physical health: foot-binding and chest corset.

What's the most different from men's sports is that women's physical and physiological conditions must be taken into account for the development of women's sports. The school gave the rules that sports should be promoted and physical constraints should be freed. Some schools spot-checked whether girl students wore corsets and held discussions on the harm of wearing mini-underwear. In the check of students' suitcases, mini-vests and corsets would be confiscated if found. Yang Zilie (Zhang Guoxi's wife) once said in his self-statement that she tore off her vest by the influence of the May 4th Movement during his studies. At that time, her classmates also went to the clothes-airing yard to tear others' vests.

From 1840 to 1937, Chinese society was suffering from wars at home and abroad, and the calls for "saving the country by sports" continued to emerge. Therefore, demands were made on strengthening the physical fitness of the people through school sports. The space and field for sports were simple and crude at that time, which brought certain limitations to teaching activities in physical education, and since most students had experienced foot-binding, it was inconvenient to have sports activities and what could be done was just to free their feet under the circumstances. As a result, some schools used sports as a means of advocating foot-liberation. They not only encouraged girl students to do sports outdoors but also invited their parents to watch them on the spot, so that parents could realize the inconveniences of foot-binding.

In the struggle for emancipation, women began to express their voices of "liberating themselves" and "pursuing freedom" through sports. Their physical exercise was no longer the "entertainment" and "recreation" restricted by venue and form, and they began to have the concept of "liberating themselves".

3.2. Evolution Characteristics from "Protecting the Country by Strengthening the Species" to "Women’s Fitness"

3.2.1. The Rise of the Concept of "Protecting the Country by Strengthening the Species"

Under the influence of ideological trend of "saving the country through physical fitness", women were required to have a healthier body because strong mothers would give birth to powerful soldiers. Therefore, a new kind of self-worth and self-esteem, which is different from the traditional idea of "men are superior to women", gradually took roots in women's mind and the idea of "protecting the country by strengthening the species" formed.

In 1934, it was written in an article “how to be qualified to be a healthy woman" that the reason why a country can survive forever is based on eugenics and strong species. Who is able to conceive in the country? It's nothing more than a woman. Women were called on to take up the role of
"mother of the nation" and shoulder the responsibility of strengthening the country. Thus, the rise and fall of the nation was deemed ascribable to fertility of women.

3.2.2. Evolution from "Protecting the Country by Strengthening the Species" to "Women’s Fitness"

During the reign of the Northern Warlords government, the education model followed that of the United States. Thus, the natural sports theory was introduced in physical education and the slogan of "sports is life" was put forward. Specifically, the women’s role in sports training changed from the "mother of the country" to "new women with talent for sports". At the same time, due to the "wide opening of the country" and the diversified development of culture, the concept of "healthy beauty" and "fitness" from the western world began to appear in society. As a result, a new concept of "women's fitness" came into being. The concept of "fitness" means that women get "healthy and beautiful" body through sports, and women are encouraged to take physical exercises like men to gain a healthy body and independent personality, which is similar to the modern concept of independent women.

The public's expectations of "fitness women" could be seen from the news media. In a sports competition in East China, some reporters used such words as "brave and skillful in battles", "good offenders and defenders", "the invincible" and "as agile as a flying dragon" to describe female players, and there were often strong female players who had been mistakenly considered as male by reporters. Such descriptions abounded in the 1930s when the concept of "fitness women" prevailed. Regardless of national policies or social media, it revealed the mainstream view of women's sports in society at that time, namely the concept of "women’s fitness".

3.3. Characteristics of the Evolution from "Gender Differences" to "Gender Equality"

3.3.1. Women’s Sports Views under the Traditional Concept of "Gender Differences"

The sports concept of "gender differences" dates back to ancient Chinese feudal dynasties. At that time, the thoughts of "men are superior to women" and "ladies should stay in boudoirs" enjoyed wide popularity. Therefore, most women dwelled in deep seclusion and rarely went outdoors, let alone taking physical exercises with men together. At the beginning of modern times, Chinese women were not able to assume the same status as foreign women: "Chinese women have just freed themselves from the shackles of being weak for two thousand years and they seem over-confident to keep up the pace with the increasingly powerful nation".

In the 1930s, the titularism, which deviated from the spirit of sports, prevailed in the international sports world, leading to the blind pursuit of sports medals regardless of the health of athletes. At that time, a film called "Queen of Sports" was shown, telling that a female athlete competed in games for the championship in spite of her illness and unfortunately lost her life. After that, there were more public opinions about the difference between women and men and the concept of "gender differences" became increasingly popular.

3.3.2. Formation of Women’s Sports View of "Gender Equality"

Dialectical arguments on gender awareness were made at the first national sports meeting held by the Ministry of Education in 1932. Zhang Huilan, an expert of women's sports, said: "women's physical and mental conditions cannot be viewed from the perspective of men." Xiang Xianggao wrote in his article "Women's Sports and Women's Future": "I expect women can swim, shoot, walk,
ride, struggle, attack, and defend.”. He also encouraged women to do physical training and participate in track and field events, martial arts, and even various outdoor adventure sports, not just confined to light and beautiful dances or gymnastics.

The slogans of "freedom" and "equality" during the New Culture Movement were reflected in sports, striving to achieve equality between men and women. The number of women participating in the 1948 Summer Olympics was only 9.4% of the total number of athletes while female athletes had become the focus of public attention by the 6th National Games. At that time, Nanfang Zhang even wrote in *the Times*: "The National Games belongs to women!"

Plenty of arguments indicate that women's sports view of "gender equality" is gradually taking shape. Women's fearlessness and courage to compete with men are no different from those of modern women. Obviously, the sports concept which is similar to “gender equality” had been accepted by the public at that time.

4. Conclusion

Under the influence of traditional thoughts, Chinese advanced people and western culture, the modern women's sports concept became diverse, evolving from "entertainment" to "self-emancipation", from "protecting the country by strengthening the species" to "women’s fitness" and from "gender differences" to "gender equality". They interacted and interwove with each other, reflecting the social phenomena and ideology of our country in that period. The three sports concepts at different stages have shown distinctive characteristics of the times, namely the intense competitiveness, the outstanding modernization and the complex diversity. In short, the evolution of women's sports views at three different stages in modern China has reflected women's attitudes and tendencies towards sports.

References