

Research on Mao Zedong's Early Physical Education Thought and Practice

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Abstract: This paper explores Mao Zedong's early views on physical education and practice, focusing on the "Six-Section Exercise" he created. The exercise, which integrates elements from traditional health-preserving techniques, gymnastics, boxing, and military training, was designed to promote balanced physical development, be practical and effective, and require less time per session. The paper argues that Mao Zedong's views on physical education were grounded in the belief that it could effectively transform individuals and contribute to the creation of a strong sports nation. The paper also discusses the historical context and social trends behind the creation of the "Six-Section Exercise", including the New Culture Movement and debates between Chinese and Western, static and dynamic, and new and old approaches to physical education. The paper concludes by suggesting that Mao Zedong's early sports thinking has significant academic value and can provide guidance for the construction of a healthy China today.

Key words: Mao Zedong, physical education, six-section exercise, new culture movement, Chinese and Western sports debate.

1. Preface

In his youth, Mao Zedong, influenced by his surroundings and personal practice, saw sports as a tool and ladder for willpower cultivation and civilizational evolution. He viewed sports as a necessary means for national salvation, intertwining it with grand ambitions and the destiny of the nation and its people [1]. Hence, the idea of sports occupies a crucial place in his overall revolutionary thinking, with his sports practice view, in particular, bearing distinct characteristics and unique theoretical and practical values. "A Study of Physical Education", published by Mao Zedong in the magazine *New Youth* in 1917, is his first publicly published article and this year marks its 125th anniversary. This article is not only one of the most significant modern sports academic works in China but also a crucial achievement of Mao Zedong's revolutionary thinking.

Domestic research indicates that "A Study of Physical Education" is the first precious document in our country to systematically discuss sports theory and

practice from the perspective of modern science and education [2]. Simultaneously, it is representative of new sports ideas in the New Culture Movement, filled with materialistic dialectical thought, scientific rigor, and practical orientation [3]. What is more important, "A Study of Physical Education" reflects not only the enlightenment of sports but also his critical inheritance or absorption of Chinese and Western cultures and the method of solving real problems with progressive theories under the influence of the spirit of the times [4]. The representative scholar in the contemporary international research of Mao Zedong Thought, Stuart R. Schramm (1924-2012), even established this text as the starting point of Mao Zedong's revolutionary thinking in his book *The Thought of Mao Zedong* [5]. Therefore, Mao Zedong's early sports thinking, as an important reflection of his early revolutionary thought, has prominent academic value.

The last part of "A Study of Physical Education" includes a fitness exercise created by Mao Zedong, named "Six Segments Exercise". On the surface, this

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might seem merely an appendage at the end of the text, but in fact, it is a representative achievement of Mao Zedong's sports practice view and the final landing point of the theory presented. By making it public in the magazine and noting that this exercise "takes the advantages of various exercises" and benefits quite a lot, it is obvious he hoped it could gain more practice and promotion, which fully reflects the forward-thinking aspect of Mao Zedong's sports thought. However, while current research on "A Study of Physical Education" is quite rich, there is not much study on the "Six Segments Exercise". Chengdu Sports University attempted to restore this set of exercises twice, in 1960 and 1977, but due to the passage of time, no relevant detailed information or outcomes can be found now [6].

This paper will analyze the formation and development of Mao Zedong's early view on sports practice to reminisce about the original intent of becoming a strong sports nation, and to provide guidance and reference for the construction of a healthy China today.

2. The Formation Process and Time Characteristics of Mao Zedong's View on Sports Practice

2.1 The Process of Formation and Main Characteristics

The enlightenment of modern sports thoughts in China originated from the emergence of modern education. In 1902, the Binyin school system, which set up physical education courses in schools at all levels, was promulgated. It even added sports-related content to the educational goals of elementary schools. Therefore, by the first decade of the 20th century, school sports development had already entered the stage of popularization.

The period from 1912 to 1919 was a transitional stage for China from imperialism to republicanism. The "Proclaimed School Regulations" was abolished and replaced by the Bingsi school system. At the beginning of his term, Cai Yuanpei, the first Minister of Education of the Republic of China, proposed the idea of "developing

a robust physique for the Republic", clearly outlining an education concept that integrates military-civil education, strength education, civic moral education, worldview education, and aesthetic education. This concept was very forward-thinking. In terms of sports selection, military drill was no longer the main focus of school sports and was replaced by relatively gentle and diverse gymnastics. Mao Zedong was studying at Hunan Fourth Normal School when Cai Yuanpei's new school system was implemented. This is the historical context for the formation of Mao Zedong's sports thoughts.

If we look at the process of thought fermentation and formation, Mao Zedong's sports thoughts showed a clear practical characteristic from the beginning. He recalled that he was weak and often ill in his early years, but after participating in activities such as field trips and mountaineering, his physical strength gradually increased, thereby truly appreciating the value of sports [7]. This personal experience undoubtedly made his understanding of sports more practical. He realized the promoting role of physical exercise on health at a very early stage, but at that time, society and the education sector had limited awareness of sports, and the effects of sports were not obvious. Mao Zedong pointed out that when he attended Hunan First Normal School, despite having 2 h of gymnastics classes per week, the classes, which mainly consisted of walking, wooden stick exercises, and dumbbell lifting, were more about form than substance, and physical education was virtually non-existent [8]. This resulted in students' physical fitness not being fully developed. From 1915 to 1917, seven students died of illness, causing public outrage. Although the direct cause of the students' deaths was not a lack of physical exercise, it was closely related to their physical health levels. This had a profound impact on Mao Zedong, and at the memorial service, he wrote a couplet: "Why have seven classmates died? Because they did not practice the ten-minute break exercise enough," as a warning [9].

In such a situation, Mao Zedong and his like-minded friends chose to physically exercise in a way characteristic

of natural sports:

“We were also keen on physical exercise. During the winter holidays, we would hike through fields and forests, climb mountains and circle the city, cross rivers and lakes. When it rained, we would take off our shirts and let the rain soak us, calling it ‘rain bathing’. When the sun was blazing, we would also take off our shirts, calling it ‘sunbathing’. When the spring breeze came, we would shout loudly, saying this was a new sports item called ‘wind bathing’. On frosty days, we would sleep outdoors, even swimming in the cold river water in November. All of this was done in the name of ‘physical exercise’. This probably helped to enhance my physique. I needed such a physique later in the many marches back and forth in South China and in the Long March from Jiangxi to the Northwest.” [10].

By the time he wrote “A Study on Physical Education”, he had obviously formed a relatively complete view on sports practice. He created the “Six-Part Exercise”, adapting and merging the effective parts of traditional health-preserving techniques, gymnastics, boxing, and military training. When Zhou Shizhao asked Mao Zedong about the benefits of this method, he pointed out three aspects: first, it promotes balanced physical development; second, it is simple and easy to perform, not limited by equipment or location; and third, it is easy to practice regularly as it requires less time per session [11]. It can be seen that Mao Zedong's view on sports practice in his youth emphasized adopting all that is good, being practical, focusing on effectiveness, and promoting physical fitness as the primary goal. Combined with the overall content of “A Study on Physical Education”, the deeper purpose of Mao Zedong's sports practice is to cultivate all-round developed new youths, and the fundamental purpose is patriotic salvation.

2.2 The Creation and Design of “Six-Section Exercise”

In his work “Research on Physical Education”, Mao Zedong mentioned that the “Six-Section Exercise” he invented was a kind of gymnastics that integrated the

advantages of various sports. It was a combination of Chinese and Western styles and was easy to learn. His classmate at Changsha First Normal School, renowned revolutionary poet Xiao San, once recalled:

“Mao Zedong was not only an advocate of physical education among his classmates, but also an enthusiastic practitioner. He combined the strengths of various exercises such as Ba Duan Jin, gymnastics, and boxing to create a ‘Six-Section Exercise’, which involved the hands, feet, torso, and head, as well as striking and jumping movements, allowing for balanced movement throughout the body. He practiced the ‘Six-Section Exercise’ every morning and evening. The corridors outside the classrooms at the First Normal School were wide, and he often did two or three sections of the exercise in the corridors after class. Sometimes, after sitting for a long time reading or writing, he would stretch his legs, beat his chest, and rotate his head to refresh his spirit. Sometimes, he would even wake up in the middle of the night and run to the outdoor courtyard to exercise.” [12].

His other classmate Zhou Shizhao also recounted something similar: “He adopted the physical training elements from gymnastics, boxing, and military drills, modified and integrated them, divided the body parts into several sections, and practiced them. Over the years, he experimented, studied, improved, and finally created a ‘Six-Section Exercise’.” [13].

A thorough reading of “Research on Physical Education” reveals that the “Six-Section Exercise” is divided into movements of the hands, feet, torso, and head, with a harmonious striking motion. Each section has several parts, totaling 27 parts. Not only can it achieve the effect of whole-body exercise, it is not too intense and does not require a high level of physical difficulty or physical fitness. It particularly emphasizes the extension and flexion of the limbs and self-massage and self-beating. Clearly, this mode of exercise carries the characteristics of traditional Chinese gymnastics. The “striking exercise” in the “Six-Section Exercise” is a self-beating method often used in many Ba Duan Jin exercises.

2.3 The Historical Context and Social Trends Behind the Creation

“Research on Physical Education” was published in April 1917, during the peak of the New Culture Movement. In the broad context of the development of social contradictions and revolutionary movements in modern China, many knowledgeable and ambitious individuals were earnestly contemplating and searching for solutions to the survival of the nation. Mao Zedong’s approach to physical education was grounded in exploring how physical education can effectively transform individuals and attempting to pave a path towards a strong sports nation.

At the critical juncture of national survival, the comparison and debate between new and old, Chinese and Western cultures were always the focal point. Advocates of the New Culture Movement extensively criticized tradition, advocating for total Westernization on one hand, and advocating for the reform and revival of local culture on the other, with intense clashes between the two. The “debate between Chinese and Western sports” was also taking root during this time.

During this period, many intellectuals embarked on reflections and criticisms of the shortcomings in physical education, making statements about the value and function of physical education. In 1915, Christian worker, Ke Leke’s speech “The Meaning of Physical Education” [14], Chen Duxiu’s “The Education Policy of Today” in 1915 [15], and “Youth Sports Issues” in 1920 [16], including “Research on Physical Education”, were all reflecting on and exploring what the correct view of physical education should be. Debates on the development of physical education—Chinese vs. Western, static vs. dynamic, new vs. old—ebbed and flowed, revealing the turbulence and intersection between new and old cultures and Chinese and Western cultures during the period of societal transformation. It was not until the “recovery of physical education rights” in 1925 that these debates gradually subsided. These debates seemingly manifested as criticisms of

championship-ism and the athlete system, but in essence, they were exploring whether the breakthrough for physical education development should be placed on acquiring athletic honors, or should be focused on promoting widespread health-oriented physical education equality. Evidently, Mao Zedong chose the latter. The purpose of “Research on Physical Education” was fundamentally to change the prevalent situation of the “nation’s physique becoming increasingly delicate”.

Contemplating how to transform people through physical education can be said to be the original driving force of Mao Zedong’s physical education philosophy. “Research on Physical Education” is the concentrated expression of this thought. He pointed out incisively in the text that the physical education of the time was mostly form without substance, and students often practiced gymnastics or other exercises with reluctance, not eagerness. The key issue was how to cultivate a self-awareness of physical education. Therefore, his physical education philosophy advocated a pragmatic value view of physical education that is a blend of Chinese and Western, ancient and modern, primarily dynamic, and fundamentally nourishing.

To achieve the goals of self-conscious and daily physical education, he proposed the fundamental idea of “civilizing the spirit and barbarizing the body” in the text, borrowing “the words of contemporary people”. He emphasized that during exercise, persistence is number one, full effort is number two, and simplicity and roughness is number three. This clearly outlined the objectives and specific requirements for physical exercise. This is obviously a prevalent mindset during the rise of militaristic nationalism in early Republican China. He also clearly praised the advanced physical education in Germany and Japan at the time in the text. However, when defining physical education, he also said, “Hence, physical education is nothing but nourishment for our life and joy for our heart.” He further pointed out that “The body is the carrier of knowledge and the vessel of morals. It carries knowledge like a cart and houses morals like a shelter.”

This, on the other hand, is a typical health view dominated by the traditional Confucian thought of the unity of body and mind and the cultivation of vital energy. The emphasis on “simplicity and roughness” is an internalization of militaristic nationalist thought and emotion in the context of the times by young Mao Zedong. But, his heart also recognized the traditional Chinese humanistic health view. The two achieved internal unity and reconciliation in the face of the deep-seated goal of enhancing national physique.

This kind of rationalistic pragmatism, to a certain extent, gives one the impression that there is a flash of Legalist thought in Mao Zedong's physical education philosophy. Indeed, in the late Qing and early Republic period, the rise of the “New Legalist” political thought, derived from Legalist thought, was one of the cultural phenomena at the time. Including Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, Liu Shipei, Shen Jiaben, Chen Duxiu, Wu Yu, Chen Qitian, etc. were regarded as representative figures of modern New Legalists by later scholars [17]. Several of them have had an influence on the development of Mao Zedong's thought. However, focusing on the formation of his view on physical education practice during his youth, the influence of Yang Changji, Liu Wuting, and Chen Duxiu is the most specific and representative.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mao Zedong's early ideas of saving the nation were in line with those of Tan Sitong and Yang Changji, opposing monarchical despotism and criticizing feudal morality. In terms of middle school, Yang Changji inherited Tan Sitong's ideas, emphasizing the breakthrough of the net, the initiative to counter silence, dialectical concepts, and idealism, all of which had a profound impact on the young Mao Zedong. In terms of Western studies, Yang Changji admired Friedrich Paulsen, a German philosopher, and introduced Paulsen's ideas to young Mao Zedong, which he greatly appreciated, longing for and pursuing the liberation of the individual. The “Early Mao

Zedong Manuscripts” contains over 100 pages of annotations on his “Principles of Ethics”.

In the specific implementation path, influenced by Tan Sitong, Yang Changji, Chen Duxiu, and Liu Wuting, the key word in Mao Zedong's early physical education practice can be summarized as “transformation”. In April 1918, a year after the publication of “The Study of Physical Education”, Mao Zedong established the “New People's Society”, clearly stating its purpose as “transforming China and the world”. By extension, the six-part exercise is an attempt by Mao Zedong to transform himself through physical education, and to achieve the transformation of people at the physical and mental level. Although this attempt is not very well-rounded in form and content, it has important value in thought and method.

Mao Zedong's view of physical education practice originates from practice, is based on practice, and he received a good traditional education in literature and history, was well-read in classics, but did not fully agree with their principles. He once told Edgar Snow that “I am familiar with the classics, but I do not like them”. One of the main reasons is that he thinks some traditional thoughts are divorced from reality and therefore dull and boring. However, Mao Zedong's physical education thought and practice always contain traditional fitness and health preservation content, possibly because practice has proven its effectiveness. We can see the influence of traditional Confucian and Legalist thought on Mao Zedong's early physical education thought. Mao Zedong draws democratic and positive elements from traditional and Western culture, and agrees with the basic approach of Legalism seeking change and strengthening, and pays attention to the development of the people. In Confucian culture, he obviously agrees more with Xunzi and has repeatedly praised Xunzi's thought. This is not only because Xunzi is a compromise of Confucian and Legalist thought, but also because Xunzi's materialistic development view is obviously more suitable for the basic needs of China's development. In a certain sense,

the view of physical education practice of “barbarize one’s physique” and “focus on practice” is very similar to the revolutionary thought of “seeking truth from facts” later formed by Mao Zedong, which is also reflected in the slogan “Develop physical education, strengthen the physical fitness of the people” written in 1952.

Mao Zedong’s physical education practice ran through his revolutionary life. Among various sports, he loved swimming very much, swam the Yangtze River many times, and left behind the famous poem “Swimming”. In his later years, he swam across the Yangtze River again, proving his enthusiasm for physical education with action. A review of his early physical education rhetoric and practice shows that Mao Zedong advocated proactive and purposeful exercise, which is beneficial to enhancing physical fitness. Under the dual effects of proactive counter-silence and the liberation of individuality, Mao Zedong’s early physical education thoughts manifested as unity of mind and body, focus on movement, and pursuit of a robust physique through proactive exercise, thereby obtaining the courage and ability to break old ideological shackles.

“First, barbarize its physique to civilize its spirit. Once its physique is barbarized, the civilized spirit follows.” Recently, Xi Jinping repeated this sentence on different occasions, indicating the Party and the state’s consistent high regard for the development of youth sports, and also verifying the practical value of Mao Zedong’s physical education thought.

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, accelerating the construction of a sports power has become a consensus of the Chinese nation. It is obviously meaningful in practice to fully tap into Mao Zedong’s sports thought, which is of great reference significance for our fundamental task of promoting moral education and cultivating people. It can be said that the attempt to build a sports culture with Chinese characteristics in the construction of New China was sown as early as Mao Zedong’s youth, and

has accumulated a wealth of theoretical and practical experience for this. Mao Zedong proved the importance of cultural civilization and robust physique through actual actions. His view of physical education practice guides young scholars in the new era to have more self-awareness and persistence in sports. They should not only become “four-have youths”, but also “physically fit” and “courageous” new youth, striving to become talents who can bear heavy responsibilities; moreover, proactive practices in sports should gradually form a social atmosphere, making sports a part of people’s “better life” and a solid foundation; and the spirit and content of Chinese sports will continue to develop and transform in the sports practice of the new era, showing Chinese power and Chinese style in the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and becoming an important part of the new form of human civilization and lifestyle.

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