
Body Nurture: New China's Physical Culture and Education

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Physical activity is the most critical component of human existence and endeavor. The personal well-being of the individual is closely linked to it, as in conditioning exercise and sports. The collective well-being of society is also intimately tied to it, as in work. In the latter connection, where work entails considerable physical exertion, physical fitness is explicitly imperative. But, the implicit salience of physical activity is made particularly conspicuous by the fact that physical fitness programs are constantly and continually urged upon those engaged in work of a non-physical nature. Body nurture and its teaching are major concerns in both theory and practice in any society.

As a case in point, the People's Republic of China has devoted huge amounts of its human and material resources to physical education and sports ever since its establishment in 1949. During recent years, for instance, China has undertaken sports exchanges with more than 100 countries all over the world. Mass participation in physical exercise and sports is also given special and systemic emphasis in newspapers and other media. Stadiums and other sports facilities have mushroomed in all regions of China. One recent American visitor reports that:

The truest measure of sport in China today is the look of its people. They are healthy, lean and tough, where before in this century most of them were not. (Johnson, 1973)

This visible transformation in people's appearance, of course, bespeaks many general changes in China during the last three decades. Nutrition, health care, and personal hygiene now are a great deal better than previously, all of which undoubtedly have served to invigorate the physique of the individual. But, one of the principal ingredients of the healthy complexion also is, by all accounts, the nation's all-out effort to create a new physical culture and to involve the people in the activities thereof. And perhaps in no other place is this affirmative action in favor of body nurture more systematically spelled out and implemented than in China's primary and middle schools.

In the 1950s, for instance, physical education was already the third most important subject in the country's middle schools. During the six years of the middle school, 404 class-contact hours were spent on physical education, and after-class sports activities claimed an equal number of hours, making a total of 808 hours. Hours of class contact numbered only 306

in geography, 374 in biology, 334 in chemistry, 438 in history, 404 in socialist education, 468 in physics, 484 in foreign languages, and 102 each in music and drawing. Another 404 hours were taken by productive labor. Only Chinese language (1,146 hours) and mathematics (1,170) were ahead of physical education and after-school sports in the time-budget of the middle school curriculum. (Kolatch, 1972: 113).

Of this emphasis on physical culture and education in primary and middle schools, no signs of change have been observed since the 1950s. If anything, it clearly holds firm. In a primary school in Tsingtao, Shangtung, as of 1978, for instance, the great majority of the 950 pupils participated in physical exercise one hour or more every day. Calculated on the basis of 34 weeks in an academic year, this means that some 850 hours are invested in physical culture and sports during the five primary school years. (*Tiyu Bao*, February 12, 1978: 2)

Moreover, this emphasis has been buttressed by

even more explicit official proclamations supporting and encouraging athletic pursuits among boys and girls of school ages. On May 5, 1975, the Physical Culture and Sports Commission of the Central People's Government issued a new set of "Regulations and Standards for the National Physical Fitness Training Program." Part of the State Council (Cabinet), the Commission is the highest policy-making body in China. Specifically, the Standard is aimed at children and youths 10 to 17 years of age, though it includes provisions for those older than 18. The former are subdivided into three age-grades (10 to 12, 13 to 15, and 16 and 17). Different standards of achievement are established for the three age groups, the overall aim of which is to develop speed, stamina, strength and agility via track and field events and gymnastics.

To illustrate the thrust of the new Standard, we turn to the particulars in the case of 10 to 12 and 13 to 15 age groups, which are given in Table 1.

Table 1
National Standards for Achievement in Physical Fitness Training by Age and Sex*

Event	BOYS		GIRLS	
	10 to 12	13 to 15	10 to 12	13 to 15
1. 60 Meter Dash or 100 Meter Dash	10.3 —	9.6 15.0	10.8 —	10.4 17.4
2. 400 Meter Run or Rope-skipping (1½ mintues) or 800 Meter	1:30.0 170 —	1:20.0 — 3:16.0	1:40.0 190 —	1:34.0 — 3:45.0
3. High Jump or Broad Jump	1 meter 3 meters	1.10 3.60	.95 2.80	1.00 3.10
4. Grenade-throwing (300 g) (500 g) or Baseball throwing (25.42cm) (30.50cm) or Rope- or Pole-climbing (hands and feet) or Pull-ups Push-ups	23 meters — 30 meters — 2.80 meters — —	32 28 — 34 3.50 5 times —	18 — 20 — 2.00 — —	22 18 — 24 3.00 — 6 times
5. Gymnastics (Too numerous to mention in this table.)				
6. Swimming (free-form and no time limit) or ice-skating Back-pack marching (3 kilos 4 kilometers)	25 meters —	100 38	25 —	50 40

* Physical Culture and Sports Commission, "Regulations and Standards," May 5, 1975, pp. 4-5.

Individual achievements are based on formal performance tests, and each individual has one calendar year within which to qualify in all six events once the person begins taking a test in any one event. Those who take more than one year to meet the minimum standards must undergo re-test where satisfactory performance dates from more than a year ago. It should be noted that the particulars in the table are the minimum achievement standards. In actuality, many boys and girls surpass the standards set for their own age-group, in which case the successful persons may participate in training for the standards set for the next older age group. Commendations for achievement are issued to boys and girls who have passed the tests. Since December 1977, youngsters who pass the tests have also been awarded specially designed certificates and badges for the "National Physical Fitness Training Program." Thus, the overall thrust of China's new standards for physical fitness training is to promote "achievement orientation" and "individual excellence," among other beliefs and behavior.

The standards for the National Physical Fitness Training Program are, according to the Physical Culture and Sports Commission, to be widely put into effect in schools and in units of the armed forces. Leaving the latter aside (which is beyond our concern here), the stipulation that schools are to be the principal milieu within which to apply the standard is consistent with the fact, as previously noted, that physical education and sports have long been part of the curriculum of Chinese schools. The introduction of standards of nation wide applicability means greater emphasis rather than change of a basic kind in the Chinese educational system.

A commentator for China's *Xin Tiyu* (New Sports) stated that:

The youngsters now in primary and middle schools will, in 10 or 20 years, be adults. They are the fresh forces that will build our country into a great powerful modern socialist nation within the present century. As regards this army of fresh soldiers, we must begin now to diligently nurture them in order that they will become a generation of new people who are well developed morally, intellectually and physically." (*Xin Tiyu*, No. 342, Feb., 1978: 12)

Therefore, whatever other purposes may be served by the added emphasis in this area, the new standards are not intended to enhance physical education and sports at the expense of other curricular components. The stress on individual achievement and excellence may, for instance, serve to raise the overall

level of athletic skills and to enlarge the pool from which athletes of outstanding potentials may be recruited and trained to compete in international games such as the Olympics. But, it does not seem that it will generate any lop-sided thrust in the educational processes. At the primary and middle school levels, Chinese educators are committed to students' moral, intellectual and physical growths simultaneously and in a balanced way. And this commitment is clearly evident in how physical education classes are conducted as well as in how physical education teachers describe and deal with the issues confronting them in their classes.

Typically, as shown in Table 2, the structure of a P.E. class is divided roughly into four parts. Each component part both accomplishes separate tasks and is organically linked to what transpires in other parts of the hour. Each lesson is conducted, as is also indicated in the table, at both verbal and nonverbal levels. Explanations, review and related procedures consume a large chunk of the time while actual physical activity occupies a little more than half of the class period. Thus, a P.E. lesson is not simply an interlude between classes when students gather to play games or to participate in unorganized physical pursuits.

That P.E. lessons are highly structured affairs is also shown by the practice that students are typically organized into four small teams. This means that as there are about 35 to 40 students in a class, each team has about 10 members. This, it is said, facilitates teaching, differential instructions, and full utilization of space and equipment. Where space and equipment are adequate, students in a class can be involved in similar activities simultaneously, but since students differ in their physical make-up, the teacher can best look after them when they are divided into small teams. Where space and equipment are limited, different teams can undertake different activities and take turn in the use of limited space and equipment. By this rotational arrangement, students will not remain idle or wait around while a few of them are busy. (Wang, 1977: 44 and Li, 1977b: 39)

Another advantage that accrues from this small-team arrangement is, according to a P.E. teacher in Peking's No. 101 Middle School, that not only does it contribute to students' mastery of basic principles, their ability to overcome existing technical deficiencies and their positive sense of learning, it also serves to pave the way for "organizational discipline" as well as for teaching collectivism. As narrated by this teacher, a relevant episode is as follows:

Competition may be adopted in the teaching of physical education. According to teaching needs,

Table 2
Typical Structure of a P.E. Lesson*

	Initial Component	Preparatory Component	Basic Component	Concluding Component
Duration (In minutes)	5-8	8-10	25-30	3-5
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Briefing students of the goal, task and content of lesson. —Gathering their attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Allowing students appropriate warm-up in order that they can do more vigorous exercise and that their body can develop properly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Explaining new lesson in detail, and reviewing old lessons. —Getting students to master basic skills via doing the exercises included in old and new lessons in order that the goals of physical exercise and better body condition may be reached. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Summing up the lesson's good and bad points. —Getting students to gradually quiet down in order that they can be ready for the following class of another nature.
Measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Line students up in formation, group exercise in formation, and games conducive to attention development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Warm up exercise or demonstration of new exercises. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —To be based on the grade (age) of students involved, and on the overall teaching plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Relaxing exercise for arms and legs.

* Tuan, C.H., "Structure of Physical Education Lessons," *New Sports* (Xin Tiyu): No. 337, September, 1977, p. 49.

small teams can participate in "qualitative and quantitative competition" with one another. In this way, students will all be more diligent in practicing and thereby more able to master the basic motions. Moreover, as there are lessons that are boring, students often do not practice very diligently, and hence the result falls short of the planned objectives. For instance, when students are practicing passing a basketball with both hands from chest, some students frequently throw the ball either too hard or too low, making it impossible for the receiver to catch it. Under the circumstances, a P.E. teacher incorporated competition in ball-passing practice: one was to see which small team was most able not to drop the ball or to drop it the fewest times within three minutes, and another was to see which small team was more able to pass the ball the highest number of times within one minute. In this way,

students all became diligent in practicing ball-passing. Not only was the lesson's objective realized, the character of "organizational discipline" among students consequently was also strengthened. (Wang, 1977: 44)

Consistent with this practice of dividing students into small teams are various specific recommendations on how P.E. teachers should identify and train small-team leaders: "as student cadres are teachers' able assistants, small-team leaders must be . . . selected with care and trained according to plan." (Li, 1977a)

Teachers are not to rush into the selection of small-team leaders before they understand the circumstances. They should be in touch with both the previous and current homeroom teachers and undertake in-depth investigation

and understanding. Following observations and analysis based on two weeks' class contact and extracurricular activities, and eliciting students' opinions, teachers then nominate those students who are good in health, study and work, have enthusiastically served fellow students and have reached a certain level of technical skills. Small-team leaders will then be elected by democratic procedures. (Li, 1977b: 39)

Small-team leaders thus selected then possess the moral and technical qualities that command trust and obedience by fellow classmates. On the teaching side, teachers are to work closely with small-team leaders, making sure that the latter fully understand the instructional materials and that they put up P.E. equipment ahead of class time to avoid delay. On the organizational side, small-team leaders are asked to be in charge of their respective teams when space and equipment are being used on a rotational basis.

But, as another P.E. teacher in a small town in Kwangtung province pointed out, no matter how well teachers have prepared the lessons and arranged the equipment, instructional objectives will not be realized if the discipline among students is poor. (Huang, 1977: 35) Here small-team leaders are mandated to play a positive role in the maintenance of class discipline. As small teams are the usual format in physical education, a P.E. teacher can hardly be in full control of all teams (ordinarily four in a class) at the same time. Hence, in organizational terms, small-team leaders are a crucial link between teachers and students, performing both liaison and disciplinary functions. The structure and organization of P.E. classes in China have apparently been worked out with due consideration to both instructional goals and group discipline.

Concluding Observations

The issue of student discipline in P.E. class has evidently been receiving extensive attention in the People's Republic of China. (Li, 1977a and Huang, 1977) Perhaps this simply reflects a universal problem that confronts primary and high school teachers the world over. However, what is of particular significance here is the fact that even though P.E. instructors are speciality teachers, they have directly involved themselves not merely in the physical achievement of their students, but also in their mental and moral growth as well. This supports the view that the introduction of the new standards under the National Physical Fitness Training Program does not mean the

enhancement of physical education and sports at the expense of other components of the curriculum. Interest in the elevation of technical skills (which underlies the promulgation of the new standards) has not made physical achievement paramount in P.E. class. Judging from the evidence on how P.E. lessons are given and on how problems in P.E. class are handled, concern and conduct of P.E. teachers seem highly balanced, and are in keeping with Chairman Mao's instruction that "the aim of our education should be to enable students to grow morally, intellectually and physically."

Ever since 1970, when the thaw in U.S.-China relations began, numerous American educators and others have visited a large number of schools in almost all parts of the People's Republic of China. They have unanimously reported, among other things, that Chinese pupils are disciplined and behave well, and wondered aloud how this has been brought about in Chinese schools. We have here one obvious answer to this question: it has come about through the conscious and considerable efforts on the part of *all* primary and middle school teachers regardless of their teaching specialties. The stress on discipline and collectivism permeates the school environment. The thrust and tone of the P.E. class clearly echo and reinforce this emphasis. Thus, in theory and in practice, body nurture in China is part of the individual's overall growth. China's physical culture and education is designed to raise both the quality of body and the quality of mind. Individual physical excellence is to be achieved within the framework of discipline, and individual athletic achievement is deeply rooted in the soil of collective consciousness.

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