



# Features of formation and development of student sports in China

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**Abstract**

On the large scale of China (PRC) establishment, physical education in the country has a nearly 70-years history, evolving from simple to complex, adjusting and giving a rise to various sub-disciplines [1]. This research reveals chronology of school physical education in New China through different periods, analyzes prominent impact of policy amendment, and reflects on its epoch-making course of development. By exploring the history of school sports, we gain insights into China's education system, the role of sports in nation-building, and their great influence on youth health and spirits, as well as high educational standards. Taking into consideration a thorough study of Chinese and foreign literature, we define three stages of growth: the initial phase (1949-1976), the period of reform and recovery (1977-2008), and the era of discipline development (2009-present).

**Keywords:** *China school physical education; education system; adolescent health; quality education.*

**Introduction.** The physical education of students in China has undergone a nearly 70-year transformation, reflecting the country's broader educational and societal shifts. This paper aims to provide a chronological analysis of school physical education in New China, from its inception to the present day. We explore the history of school sports to understand China's education system, the role of sports in nation-building, and their impact on youth health and spirits, as well as high educational standards. The study is structured around three growth stages, each characterized by distinct policy influences and societal needs. By reviewing Chinese and foreign literature, we aim to define the evolution of school sports and its significance in the broader context of China's educational development and national identity.

**Methodology.** Our research methodology is a blend of historical review and analytical techniques, aimed at providing a clear and scientific understanding of the development of student sports in China:

**Historical Documentation Review:** We scrutinized historical records, policy changes, and curricula to chart the evolution of school physical education.

**Content Analysis:** We identified key themes and trends by analyzing literature, focusing on the effects of policy, teaching method evolution, and the role of sports in education.

**Comparative Analysis:** We compared China's school sports development with global practices to understand its unique trajectory and international influences.

**Case Studies:** We examined specific instances, such as the creation of sports academies and the Beijing Olympics, to understand the real-world impact of policies and reforms.

**Results. Stage I (1940s-1976): The Emergence Period**

Since 1949, along with foundation of China (PRC), physical education at schools gained a paramount attention. To start with, in 1951, the Central People's Government issued the "Decision on Education System Reform," which provided new regulations on the status, duration, and coordination of various levels of schools. It marked the initial formation of a specialized teaching workforce, creating favorable conditions for the development of school physical education [2].



Due to insufficient health conditions of students at all levels of education everywhere, the Central People's Government issued an order the same year, emphasizing the improvement of students' physical health as a crucial task to ensure their successful achievement of academic goals and the cultivation of modern, robust youth [3]. Further, in 1951, a Chinese sports delegation visited the Soviet Union and, drawing from Soviet experience and China's specific circumstances, led by Yang Lie, completed elaboration, issuing, and implementation of the first national broadcast gymnastics program [4].

Secondly, in 1952, in view of the shortage of staff and insufficient quality of PE teachers, under those circumstances the first sports academy was established: the East China Physical Education Institute (later renamed Shanghai University of Sport in 2023). It was formed by merging the physical education departments and divisions of three universities: Nanjing University, Jinling Women's University, and East China Normal University [5].

Next, in 1953, the Ministry of Education decided to take a ten-year school physical education curriculum as a model. Specifically, it was emphasized that school physical education classes should be based on the principles of improving students' health, promoting their comprehensive development, and creating lively, diverse, and student-oriented education to boost their interest and achieve objectives [6].

Afterwards, in 1956, the first "Primary and Secondary School Physical Education Curriculum Outline" was published, establishing the gist and aims of school PE curriculum. Physical education was no longer solely focused on physical training, but placed a greater emphasis on cultivating comprehensive qualities.

Thus, during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, China's PE curriculum development came to a standstill, and the physical education sector suffered severe disruptions. During this period, many physical activities and teaching contents were canceled and replaced by military courses and some labor courses, resulting in a significant setback in China's physical education [7].

In summary, after the founding of China (PRC), there was laid the framework for the development of particular sports ideology and advanced teaching methods. The evolution of policies and reforms reflected the government's shifting concerns and priorities regarding school physical education. In this way, school physical education gradually went through the

stages of renaissance, with a renewed emphasis on nurturing students' physical health and comprehensive qualities. However, during the Cultural Revolution, the development of school physical education experienced a setback and disruption.

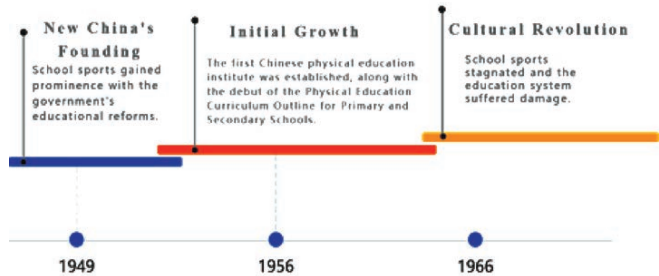


Fig. 1 Early development of Chinese sports

## Stage II (1977-2008): The Period of Reform and Revival

Considering the second stage, it marks a turning point in the development of PE in Chinese schools, spanning the decades following the initiation of economic reform and opening up. During this period, Chinese school physical education had undergone significant policy changes and reforms that not only influenced the course of school PE involvement, but also shaped the scope.

To begin with, in 1977, the National Sports Commission restored the School PE Department. Simultaneously, each province, city, county, and education department established special PE and health departments, as well as specialized PE teaching and research offices [8]. In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee introduced the concept of economic reform and opening-up. Subsequently, the management structure of school physical education underwent gradual restoration and fortification. This period also witnessed the enhancement of management systems across various educational levels in the nation, ushering school PE toward standardization, institutionalization, and scientificity [9].

Secondly, in 1979, there was the introduction of the full-time ten-year system for primary and secondary school PE curriculum which marked a significant milestone, placing it on a well-ordered course. This action initiated a direction for the development and reform of PE teaching curricula [7].

Consequently, the implementation of economic reform and innovative policies presented fresh opportunities and challenges to school sports in China. During this period, China began engaging with the interna-



tional education system, gradually opening up to the world. The field of PE also underwent transformation. Thus, in 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a resolution on education system reform, emphasizing that the fundamental goal of education reform was to enhance the nation's overall wellbeing. As a result, school sports under the headline of high-standard education entered a new large-scale stage.

It's worth to mention, that incorporating comprehensive studies, the assimilation of educational philosophies, and sports concepts from Western countries led to the emergence of various sports ideologies, such as "Happy Sports," "Successful Sports," "Restorative Sports," and "Lifelong Sports," were based upon the foundation of these ideas. Originated in distinct theoretical concepts, these sports activities converged to integrated improvement of students' physical and mental development. Consequently, this period significantly enriched the understanding of school sports and contributed to the diversification and open policy of school sports. In particular, school sports curriculum expanded beyond traditional gymnastics and shift basic PE programs to imply team sports like basketball, soccer, and volleyball, offering students greater choice and participation opportunities in various athletic activities.

Eventually, in 1992, official PE c for nine-year PE curriculum was constituted and issued for primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, China initiated a new round of physical education curriculum reforms in 2001, with the Ministry of Education issuing an Outline of Curriculum Reforms for Basic Education. This period also witnessed the growth of PE teaching staff in terms of both quantity and specialization, reflecting the evolving requirements of school PE in cultivating talent for 21st-century. It also demonstrated the notable achievements in primary and secondary school PE curriculum construction and teaching reforms [10].

Additionally, PE fostered interdisciplinary collaboration with various fields, extending its research beyond the domain of sports to encompass areas like psychology, biology, and sociology. Moreover research methodologies were diversified, due to incorporation of quantitative research, qualitative research, and case studies, resulted in a broader spectrum for discipline exploration [11].

Altogether, Chinese school sports induced an increasingly influential presence on the international stage. Thus, in 2001, Beijing was awarded the host city

for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Consequently, international sports events and academic exchanges spread, leading to the integration of Chinese physical education into the global PE scale. At the same time, China actively expanded its sports culture abroad, providing a high appreciation of China by the international community.

In conclusion, within the past half of the 20th century, Chinese school sports had undergone a series of notable developmental stages. From the reestablishment of the School Sports Division by the National Sports Commission and to the introduction of the full-time ten-year primary and secondary school PE curriculum, this period had marked the renaissance and standardization of school sports. The advent of economic reform and pursuing an open policy defined a new era of school sports, determined by various educational concepts and sports policies that enriched the content and practical teaching of sports at schools. Nonetheless, certain challenges remain and require further attention and analysis.



Fig. 2 Development direction after reform and opening up

Stage III (2008s to Present): The Period of Discipline Advancement

Considering the third phase, it signifies a distinct chapter in the evolution of school PE in China. It has been determined by increased policy support and substantial investments, facilitating the rapid development of the PE discipline.

Following the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government demonstrated a strong commitment to the headway of school PE, since series of policies and



initiatives were initiated to promote the growth of this dominating. First, in 2011, the "New Standards for Physical Education Curriculum" were declared with the objectives of enhancing physical abilities, acquiring motor skills, nurturing students' interests and enthusiasm for PE activities, and instilling the habit of persistent exercise through PE classes [12]. First of all, the Twentieth National Congress of the Party emphasized the intention to "build a modern educated and athletic country, promoting the entire development of students' physical and mental well-being" [13]. In 2022, the "Compulsory Education Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)" reinforced the focus on "strengthening multidisciplinary integration within physical education, make use of the full potential of physical education, and encouraging student development everywhere" [14]. Consequently, school PE has evolved into a complex discipline, giving rise to emerging sub-disciplines such as sports economics, sports law, sports sociology, and more. This diversification has enriched the essence of the PE discipline, rendering it more comprehensive and adaptable to diverse academic needs [14].

In response to technological advancements and the advent of the big data era, Chinese school sports has begun integration of science, technology, and innovation. Particularly, modern technologies like virtual reality and big data analysis has been applied to enhance the efficiency of physical education and training. Grounded in a data-driven teaching philosophy, big data technology facilitated the creation of precise PE teaching models, enabling a smart teaching approach characterized by the digitized capture, visualization, quantification, transmission, and presentation of PE process [15]. Wang Xiangquan et al. [16] advocated employing blockchain as a core component of information-based teaching to reform educational organization and teaching methods, as well as charted the course for the integration of PE curriculum. Consequently, big data has promoted comprehensive teaching and intervention, making them widely available and feasible. Afterwards, this transformation has given rise to significant changes in the landscape of college sports services, including the emergence of virtual sports classrooms, sports flipped classrooms, sports micro-courses, sports cat-echism, and other innovative teaching modes and methods that are driving the reform of sports teaching services in the modern era.

For this reason, smart sports service (SSS), embodying both technological and humanistic wisdom,

stands as a representative of the new frontier in sports service within the era of intelligence [17]. As the core value of college sports big data in SSS platform innovation and development becomes increasingly apparent, the continuous collection, dynamic aggregation, deep mining, and effective utilization of student data serve as crucial pillars supporting the advancement of SSS. This trend has significantly contributed to the development of sports research and training.

At the same time, international cooperation and exchange have been advanced, since scholars are engaging in international academic symposia and collaborative programs to draw insights from advanced international theories and practical experiences. For instance, in 2023, the FISU World Academic Congress was officially inaugurated in Chengdu, marking a significant educational event for FISU and a vital component of the Universiade [18]. This enhanced international collaboration together with encouraging persistent integration of Chinese school sports into the global academic ecosystem and advancing the discipline's globalization.

With regard to the speech at the National Education Conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, "Education is a headstone for national rejuvenation and social progress, a benevolent undertaking that serves both the present and future generations, and is of decisive significance in elevating the comprehensive quality of the people, promoting the all-encompassing development of humanity, enhancing the innovation and creativity of the Chinese nation, and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Education is a major national initiative and a fundamental party undertaking" [19]. In alignment with this vision, school sports have transformed towards the concept of comprehensive quality education, with Chinese peculiarities on the top. PE no longer solely focuses on athletes bringing up, but also represents the main course on cultivating students' innovation, teamwork, social responsibility, and overall development. Particularly, the Twentieth Party Congress introduced the notion of "Chinese-style modernization," defining a new stage of "Chinese-style education modernization" [20].

Nowadays, the policy of school sports in China may be distinguished by certain possibilities and challenges. The increase in number of disciplines, integration of science, technology, and innovation, as well as development of global cooperation, commitment to high standard of education, and emphasis on maintaining





PE and cultural heritage all in all provide a rich pool of resources and wide opportunities for the future PE. On the grounds that society has been evolving and the discipline advancing, Chinese school PE will progress, making a permanent contribution to the physical and mental well-being of students and advance of high-standard education. This stage of development has been designed to shape the bright future of school sports.

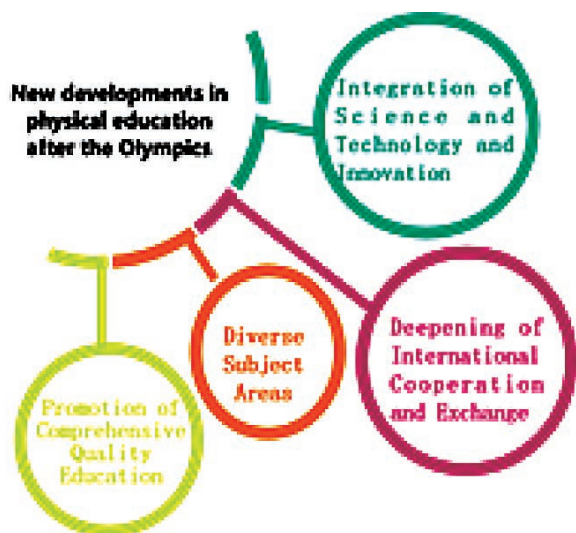


Fig. 3 The impact on physical education after the Olympic Games

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, within the past 70-years school sports in China has gone through an outstanding changes, moving from a "health-oriented" approach to adopting the concept of "lifelong sports." The government has issued a number of principles and strategic plans, that form an integral part of the national agenda, therefore established the firm relationship between health and education in school sports. The concept of "integrated development" has expanded further the mission of school PE, going beyond the development of physical fitness and skills of students for the benefit of society and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle. In addition, special attention is paid to improving the quality and diversity of the physical education curriculum. These developments have transformed school physical education into a key component of a well-rounded quality education, providing greater opportunities for the entire physical and mental development of young people.

As the discipline looks to the future, it must continue to support international exchanges, engage in interdisciplinary research, and maintain a strong fo-

cus on high-standards of education. These efforts are crucial to ensure that the discipline meets the needs of society, develops outstanding PE professionals, protects the well-being of the entire population, and continuously promotes the dynamism and innovation of school physical education in China.

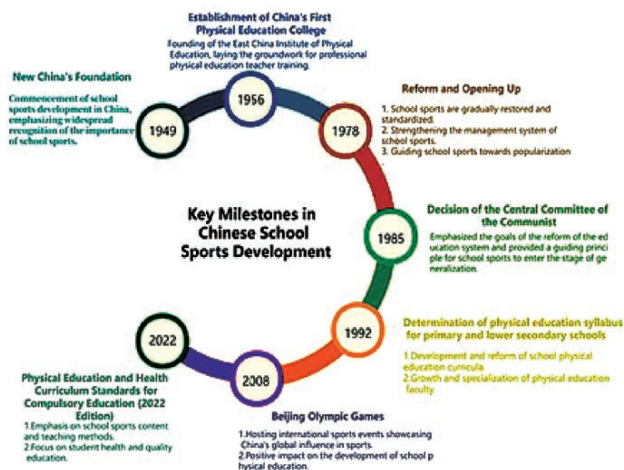


Fig. 4 The Development of Physical Education in New China from the 20th Century to the Present

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