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Physical education in Chinese schools: role models, repetition, and winning

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On the importance of role models, repetition and winning – Physical Education in Chinese primary schools

I stood in front of 36 children, neatly lined up outside their classroom, standing at attention their arms pressed against their bodies and expectant eyes on me. My eyes gazed longingly after their teacher who was about to disappear to the teachers' office at the end of the corridor. I had arrived in Nanjing a few days before, to carry out research in two primary schools on the development of children's cooperative behaviours and motivations. While negotiating access for participant observation, I had mentioned that I had practiced Seirenkai martial arts, karate and jujitsu, for nearly two decades and had taught children of varying ages for several years. So I had found myself a role, teaching a weekly class of karate to over 300 second graders, while devoting the rest of my time for research. Things had moved forward with remarkable speed and efficiency; I was overwhelmed and jetlagged, and my Chinese was rusty after four years since my last fieldwork. But standing in front of the children I knew better than to show fear. "Right, let's go", I said, turned around and started walking down the corridor, hiding my relief when I saw the children were following. "Where is the sports hall?", I asked the pair of kids behind me, and they pointed towards the far end of the school grounds. There stood a four storey red brick building that, I would learn later, contained not only six basketball courts, but a dance studio, a ping pong hall, climbing equipment, artificial ponds for miniature ships, a race car track, music rooms, studios for arts and crafts, for baking and for building robots. And these were just the resources inside the building. The double doors at the back opened up to a massive sports ground; behind four more basketball courts and playgrounds with state of the art equipment and a soft tarmac covering the ground, a six-lane running track enclosed a neat artificial grass field. The school had been opened recently and without a doubt the investment in these impressive sports facilities had been influenced by the Youth Olympic Games that had been hosted by the city that summer. Quite remarkable by any standards, they stood in stark contrast to the facilities in the second school where I started teaching some

weeks later, which consisted of a running track and four basketball courts, all outdoors. The sports hall was used only for office space and in the occurrence of bad weather PE classes were simply cancelled.

As I led the children to the sports hall, we walked underneath the flags of all the countries that had participated in the Games. The walls were covered with slogans such as “Share the games, share our dreams” and images of athletes, both Chinese and foreign, who had competed. We were joined by two of the children’s regular PE teachers, Teacher Gong and Teacher Jia. Careful not to interfere with my class, they mostly watched on the side lines, stepping in every now and then to mutter something to one of the less committed kids. Despite being slightly overwhelmed, I felt confident enough. After all, the methods of teaching karate heavily draw from East Asian pedagogical traditions, and back in Finland I had taught it to similar groups of children for years. How difficult could this be?

After about ten minutes of trying to get the children organised into two straight lines facing myself, I had come to realise that my teaching was missing some essential component of pedagogical clarity and motivation, and very few of my actions had the intended result. When I told the children to pair up, they took it as an invitation to start running around with their best friend. When I told them to come closer to watch me demonstrate a pair technique, I had to repeat the ten-minute process of trying to get everyone back in lines. The only thing that really worked the way I expected was to have the children stand in lines and throw punches in the air with a shout – which they did with much gusto and delight. I was quite relieved when the forty minutes were over and Teacher Jia took charge. A tall young man with a gentle smile and a newly obtained degree in Physical Education, he quickly had two straight lines of children walking back to their classroom in silence. Teacher Gong, a man in his 60s with decades of experience of teaching PE, stayed behind with me.

You did alright, at least they listened to you. We've had foreign teachers before and usually they can't control the children at all. But we don't want to interfere because when we have, they've complained about our methods. So we don't interfere but the Western methods don't work with Chinese children, they are used to different methods. But you are alright.

If there was any sense of self-satisfaction to be drawn from this feedback, it had definitely worn off by the following week – as had the novelty of having a foreign martial arts teacher that had held the children back slightly. I now had Teacher Zhao, the head PE teacher, observing on the side lines with his notebook. The entire class was, quite frankly, chaos, and by the end of it I knew I would have to change things. For an anthropologist, the obvious response was to get out my own notebook and spend the following days sitting on the side lines of Teacher Zhao's classes, recording everything from the pedagogical structure to the phrases he and his colleagues used to give instructions. Bearing in mind that I had no interest in introducing new teaching practices to these schools, but to carry out effective and safe teaching while learning everything there was to learn about the schools as developmental environments, I was happy to adapt their techniques down to detail (except for the occasional slap delivered on the head).

Unsurprisingly, my classes started to run better, even to a degree that some weeks later Teacher Jia was able to abandon his placement as my shadow. What changed? Of course adapting the form, structure and style of communication that the children were accustomed to was helpful. For example, PE classes were always carried out working in four lines where each child had a pre-designated place and a partner. Classes started and ended with routines lead by the Sports Commissary (one of the children) and very detailed instruction kept the children focused on the activities throughout. But as the weeks and months passed and I continued to observe the life and

the classroom practice in the two schools, I started to understand how some of the methods were connected to more general Chinese ideas about education, and the conceptions of human mind and body. Despite the differences between the two schools – one of which could be called an elite school and the other an average Chinese school – these principles behind Physical Education worked in very similar ways.

One characteristic of PE is the emphasis on role models, which connects to classic Chinese thought about education through emulation. Education is ultimately a process of moulding the mind and the body, which takes place only partly through learning skills. Reforming one's attitudes is just as important, and one of the most effective ways to motivate a person to adapt new, appropriate attitudes, is the use of exemplary role models.¹ This is clear in the Chinese classrooms where good students are routinely praised and invited to share their methods and motivations to tutor others; while those performing less favourably are criticised. "You chase I rush" (*ni zhui wo gan*) is a phrase that is used to refer to the situation in which a role model and the person who tries to emulate them both benefit from the relationship through improvement in their performance. Feng Nan was the fastest boy in his age group in one of the schools and often represented the school in regional races. In fact, he was so superior that none of his school mates could pose a real challenge. Every day at 10:10 am the entire school gathered at the track to run three rounds. In front of the group, set apart from the standard lines of uniform-clad children who all ran at the same pace to the beat of the march music, ran Feng Nan. While many of the children would be dragging their feet half way through the second round, Feng Nan would not show a sign of fatigue even in the most sweltering heat of the early summer.

In the karate classes, I was quick to replace my customary egalitarian practice, whereby I would invite kids of varying levels of skill and commitment to serve as my partners when demonstrating

techniques, with this principle of emulating role models that was more familiar to the children. Nominating a child that had some propensity to the sport but struggled to concentrate or to find motivation, proved to be particularly effective. With the influence of the Beijing Olympics and the Nanjing Youth Olympics, sports heroes like Yao Ming now compete with classic communist role models like Zhu De and Feng Lei as topics of discussion during moral classes. Individual success, winning and glory have become accepted media for serving the motherland. Moreover, in the Chinese education system that is characterised by high disparity between regions and institutions, talented athletes can earn extra points that can make a difference in the competition for access to best schools. Individual competitiveness is not only tolerated but an essential part of the education system.

The daily running scene illustrates many of the elements that characterise PE in Chinese schools today. The practice of setting aside a daily slot for collective exercise, on top of the PE classes, is a remnant of the mass calisthenics that used to take place at communes and work units during the Maoist era. To anyone who has seen hundreds of people performing calisthenics in unison to the blaring music, the collectivist, homogenising and standardising ideals behind this form of mass sport could not be clearer. Its origins are in the campaign in the 1950s by the Communist Party to introduce sports to the masses. Until then, sports had not been of wide interest in China. For the elites, aside from the few sports such as archery and *wushu* that were part of the self-cultivating education involving the body, the heart and the mind, sports were considered a demeaning past-time and athletes enjoyed a low social status similar to entertainers.ⁱⁱ For the masses, education only became widely accessible after the 1949 Revolution. The Communist Party promoted both mass and elite sports, and schools became the first institutional setting for the groundwork. The Party's enthusiasm for sports was driven by nationalistic motivations – physical education of the masses was seen as preparation for war, while elite sports were a potential avenue for international

acclaim.ⁱⁱⁱ PE at the schools today still carries some of these militaristic characteristics. The first thing that first graders learned when they started PE, was marching. Under the quiet but stern tutelage of the veteran Teacher Gong, the children learned to form four lines quickly, to march to the beat and to stand at attention, before they were transferred to one of the younger teachers who started teaching them actual sports. “We have to get them under control right from the beginning. If we can’t, later we’ll have no way of controlling them”, Teacher Zhao told me.

Another element of PE that resonates with the Maoist militarism but also draws from older Confucian ideas of education as a holistic process of self-cultivation, is the value of enduring hardship (*ku*). In the words of Teacher Lin, an experienced PE teacher and herself a volleyball player:

The most important benefits of sports are: first, for the child to exercise and to develop a healthy body. Second, for them to be able to take strong pressure (*qiangya*). Third, for the child to establish a good moral character (*shuli*). That includes when they grow up, in every stage of a person’s life, if a person has a strong psychological character they can usually pass through difficulties.

Physical Education is considered an integral part of developing the moral character of the child. “Rigorous exercise” is a standard component of becoming a good person, a virtuous child, a diligent student and a loyal citizen. In the moral education books that are part of the curriculum, it is listed alongside goals such as “diligent study”, “civilized manners” and “sleep early, rise early”.

This holistic process of self-cultivation can also be observed in the so-called rote learning that is considered characteristic of Chinese, or more generally East Asian, education. Adapting it to the

karate classes meant that rather than demonstrating a self-defence technique as a whole and have children work on it independently with their partner, it was broken into parts, which were then repeated on count by the whole group. PE classes of the first graders consisted solely of working in lines, performing calisthenics and military-style drills. Older children learned a variety of sports from skipping rope to break dance and basketball. But regardless of the sport, learning was structured in the same way. The children stood in lines and watched the teacher demonstrate an activity, or more often a small part of it, and then performed it repeatedly. This meant that children spent a majority of their PE time standing in lines. Every activity was broken into parts, and learning was structured for student progression from the simple to the complicated. For example, when children started to learn rope skipping, they first practiced moving their arms without the rope, then jumping without the rope, and finally combining these parts and bringing in the rope. For a complicated activity such as playing basketball, the process from starting to learn how to handle a ball to actually playing the game can take several years.

Without a doubt the pedagogical approaches to PE in the two schools resulted from a combination of factors, but they were in line with two developmental ideas that are quite distinct from those informing Euro-American education. First, the Confucian idea of *jiaohua* refers to transformation (*hua*) of the self and of others through education (*jiao*).^{iv} It is the idea of shaping the self through education that starts with the body and involves the mind and the heart. In this tradition the reading of classics is combined with a deliberate, slow, repetitive bodily exercise, through which the self becomes impregnated with not only knowledge, but with correct attitudes and moral virtues. The repetition of the physical action has value in itself, aside from leading to a mastery of a skill. This brings us to the second point; part of the process of self-cultivation is that a person does not fully understand what they are learning when they are learning it. This is particularly true of children, who at young age are considered to have a remarkable capacity for learning and memorising, but

very limited capacity for understanding.^v Using the ballgame as an example, at this point it does not make sense to try to teach the child the principles of a complicated game played between two teams. Rather, it is important to make the most of the child's ability to learn and to memorise new skills. At a later point, when the child's developmental stage allows for it, they will be able to apply these skills in the wider context of the ballgame. This pedagogical practice is in contrast to the idea that it is important to provide the broad context early in order to allow a child, or a learner in general, to draw connections between different elements they learn and the general principles. In the latter tradition, a child would start for example with a simple ballgame and move toward more complicated games.

Finally, while the nationalistic project of mass sports has given some way to individual competitiveness that characterises the current Chinese education system in general, the political undercurrents of PE at schools continue to be clear. Most recently, Xi Jinping's enthusiasm for football has been interpreted as part of China's quest for soft power in the international arena. In 2014, it was announced that football would become part of the compulsory national curriculum and after-school clubs were promptly established in both schools. By March 2016, when I returned to visit the schools, part of the PE classes had been devoted to the game, much to the delight of the children in this research.

Physical Education in Chinese schools today is characterised by a combination of elements from classic Confucian thought on self-cultivation of the body, the heart and the mind; by the Maoist tradition of homogenising and militaristic mass sports; and the most recent developments (spurred by the Olympic Games) that emphasise individual competitiveness but also the uniting potential of sports. In different countries Physical Education – and sports in general – links to somewhat distinct cultural ideas of morality and sociality. Think here for example the emphasis in the US on the idea

of “fair play”, or in Finland on the concept of “everyone plays”. In the sports grounds of Chinese schools learning new skills takes place alongside self-cultivation through diligence and endurance; teachers demonstrate their skill and commitment through an authoritarian role and close attention to detail; and individual talent is rewarded but those who stand out are also expected to serve others as committed role models.

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ⁱ Munro, “Man, State, and School.”

ⁱⁱ Christesen, *Sport and Democracy in the Ancient and Modern Worlds*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brownell, *Training the Body for China*.

^{iv} Billioud and Thoraval, *The Sage and the People*.

^v Ibid.