

Sport in China

The Emergence of a Sports Giant

by Jean Loup Chappelet



After the interruption brought about by the Cultural Revolution, China's return to the fold of the IOC in 1979 marked an important step forward in the rebirth of Chinese sport. But it is only quite recently that China has fully entered upon the international sports scene, after having deliberately missed the opportunity of doing so at the Games in Moscow.

A whole series of victories won during the last few months are there to prove it, the recent Universiads in Bucarest constituting a sort of apotheosis. Here, China's athletes won 21 medals (including 10 gold), to come fourth

among the countries taking part. They had won only 6 (one of them gold) at the Universiads in Mexico in 1979.

Naturally, many of the successes achieved recently were won in disciplines in which Chinese athletes have always excelled, such as table tennis (World Champion all categories 1981) and diving (three titles out of four at Bucarest). Nevertheless, several results show that we are witnessing the laying of solid foundations in disciplines that are new for Chinese athletes : pre-qualification for the Football World Cup 1982. World Volleyball

Champion 1981, gold medal in the triple jump (Bucarest 1981), silver medal in the women's foil (Clermond-Ferrand 1981), world record for compressed air pistol, moving up from pool C to pool B in ice hockey, etc...

These very good results are due to several factors analysed below in an attempt to understand a rare phenomenon : the emergence of a sports giant.

Sport for all

From a very early age, Chinese schoolchildren are used to starting their school day with a few rhythmic gymnastics movements, in their recreation yard or on the pavements. In addition, an hour's physical training is included in their daily timetable. Every year, sports contests are organised in all primary and secondary schools in order to select participants for inter-school meetings. In Shanghai, the best are known as "good athlete pupils".

Up until the age of fifteen (end of compulsory schooling in the towns), the most promising children are coached during their leisure hours and their holidays in 2,600 sports schools (i.e. roughly a little more than one per district). In this way, about 3.2 million schoolchildren out of a total of 200 million are coached in a given sport, often chosen more according to their aptitudes than to their personal preferences. Priority is given to football and athletics¹.

The basic sports education is given by about 230,000 physical training instructors, including 30,000 teachers trained, since 1949, in thirteen sports universities and twenty-four sports institutes located throughout the whole of China (more than one per province). In addition, 5,000 athletes possess the title of Sports Master and work most of the time as coaches.

At the top of the pyramid are the National Games which are held every four years, in the year immediately preceding the Olympic Games. The fifth National Games will be held in Shanghai in 1983. The first four were held in Peking.

Alongside this pyramidal structure that has existed since 1949, there is a Chinese ancestral practice : the *taijiquan*, a form of gymnastics consisting of slow movements accompanying breathing exercises, and the

wuchu, reserved for young people as it is more violent. In what other country in the world is it possible to see, early in the morning in the parks and squares, a large part of the population, including old people, practising a sport of some kind, even if only gentle callisthenics? The habit of jogging is much less widespread in the West.

In addition, all Chinese regularly cycle. This necessity, combined with the absence of too rich a diet, means that the average Chinese is physically fit. Besides, the life expectancy, which is 68 (72 in Peking), is exceptional for a developing country. Thus the instruction "Promote sport and strengthen the physical constitution of the people", issued by Mao Tse-Tung in 1952, has been carefully followed. China now possesses a healthy population supplying a number of athletes that might be considered comparatively small when compared with the number of citizens, but is nevertheless very large in absolute value.

A suitable environment

This mass of sportsmen is not however sufficient on its own to explain the emergence of Chinese athletes on the international scene. It has also been necessary to provide a suitable environment for the top sportsmen, thus discarding the equalitarian principles advocated during the Cultural Revolution.

Since 1949, most large towns have been provided with football and athletics stadiums. In addition, 3,800 sports arenas have been built. An Olympic preparation centre has been created in the southwest of China, at Kunming, capital of Yunnan province (at an altitude of 6200ft.).

In addition to these modern installations, scientific methods of selection are used, in particular based on height. 66 athletes out of 85 recently questioned by the newspaper *Guangming* admitted having been selected on the basis of physical criteria². The province of Heilongjiang is proud of being able to offer eight young girls over 6 ft. high for the national volleyball team³. Certain leisure sports schools are in fact veritable selection centres ; for example, the one in the district of Shishahai, in Peking, which admits its pupils after three months of trials. Its teachers are moreover former national or international athletes.

The best athletes in Peking live and train in the Workers Stadium and the grounds of the Temple of Heaven where they can be seen strolling about in colourful track suits contrasting with the ubiquitous blue clothes of the masses.

In exchange for these few privileges, the national athletes accept an iron discipline symbolised by the "Sportsman's Ten Commandments" published by the People's Newspaper in April 1981 : Support the Communist Party; train hard; show fair play; be disciplined and clean ; refrain from smoking and drinking ; refrain from falling in love ; postpone marriage ; be able to practise self-criticism ; be opposed to anarchy. 4 .

In spite of these material and moral measures, the Chinese sports environment is still far from



Diver Chen Xiaoxia on the podium.

The Chinese public takes, an avid interest in the development of sport

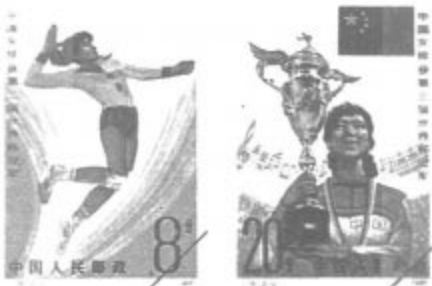
In a contest organised by eighteen newspapers, 252, 721 readers elected the ten "Sports Stars for 1981" in the following order : *Sun Jinfang*, 27 years old, captain of the Chinese women's volleyball team, already chosen as the best passer, best sportswoman and elite player at the third Volleyball World Cup in Japan in November last year. *Lang Ping*, 20 years old, a member of the volleyball team. The balls she strikes are often impossible to return. *Chen Xiaoxia*, 19 years old, won the title of champion at the second Diving World Cup in Mexico. *Guo Yuehua*, 26 years old, a member of the national table tennis team, came first in the men's singles at the 36th World Championships in Yugoslavia. *Rong Zhihang*, 34 years old, nicknamed the "soul" of the national football team. *Li Yuejiu*, 24 years old, a gymnast since the age of thirteen, won the title of floor exercises champion at the 21st Gymnastics World Championships in Moscow. *Zou Zhenxian*, 26 years old, a triple jump specialist, first with 17.23 m at the Universiads 81 in Bucarest (ROM) and second in the Athletics World Cup in 1981. *Tong Ling*, 19 years old, a member of the national table tennis team, women's singles champion at the 36th World Championships, *Wu Shude*, 23 years old, beat the world weightlifting record in the 56 kg category by snatching 126.5 kg at the Asian Weightlifting Championships in Japan. *Li Xiaoping*, 19 years old, world vaulting champion at the 21st Gymnastics World Championships in Moscow (URS).

perfect. Funds are lacking. Approximately 250 million Yuans (166 million dollars) is said to be set aside for sport by the government, and this sum has to cover the construction of sports installations too. There are not enough gymnasiums and coaches. A ten-year plan to improve the situation is said to be in preparation.

An ideological determination

To make up for these deficiencies, the Chinese government's attitude to sport has gradually changed, in this way creating a very favourable ideological climate.

The first sign of this change of attitude is the semi-official abandoning of the slogan "First of all friendship, then competition" advocated by Mao whose ideas on this were similar to Coubertin's. In this connection, an editorial was published by the newspaper *Tiyu Bao*⁵ a few days before the Winter Games at Lake Placid in which a team from the People's Republic took part for the first time. This editorial is worth quoting at length: "To win competitions and cover our country with glory, we must win friends as well as gold medals...



Stamps issued after the world volleyball championships.

But to win friends we must first of all win gold medals. It is only if we achieve world standards that we shall be able to compete with the sports world on a large scale. If we merely take part in competitions and are incapable of obtaining brilliant results, then the dignity of our country and our people will be adversely affected, and the people will not be satisfied".⁶

It is now considered quite proper in Chinese stadiums to indulge in chauvinism, and the spectators do so wholeheartedly. The patriotic character of sports victories won abroad is emphasised and welcomed even by the Council of State Affairs (government). After the triumphant return of the women's volleyball team that had become world champion in 1981, each player was awarded the title of

"brave climber of the high summits" by the State Commission for Sport,

At the same time, sport is receiving greater attention in the Chinese media. Most newspapers now include sports sections. The radio and especially television devote more time than before to broadcasting competitions. A whole volume of the *Encyclopedia Sinica*, which is in the process of preparation, will be devoted to sport. A dozen films with sports themes have been produced since 1978, such as the very recent "Sha Ou" which tells the story of a girl basketball player suffering from a bone disease. Sport is also celebrated in poetry. Below we give a rendering of a poem written to celebrate the recent victory in the world volleyball championships:

"Victory, Victory, our players have won...

The cup lights up the radiant faces of our heroines,

The good news is carried by spring breezes to the four corners of the land,

And we shall surely, yes surely, attain our aim which is to achieve the four modernisations".⁷

Consequently, we are witnessing the birth of a sports star system, which was formerly reviled⁸. A list of the ten best Chinese athletes has been published for several years now based on a vote organised by the media. The enthusiasm of supporters is the only public manifestation of feeling tolerated in China. The spectacle of the crowds of spectators, after the victory of a national team, rushing through the streets of Peking on bicycles at over 30 m.p.h. waving the Chinese flag, is a sight to be seen.

Finally, this new ideological climate with regard to sport has also, and above all, an international aspect. Sports cooperation agreements have just been signed with France, Australia and Rumania, following the visits to Peking of the sports leaders of these three countries.

Relations with the third world have not been forgotten: more than a hundred Chinese coaches work there. China is to finance the construction of a stadium seating 60,000 at Salisbury (Zimbabwe). Chinese architects are drawing up the plans for the new national sports centre in Nairobi (Kenya).

Furthermore, as for the restoration of relations with the United States, sport will perhaps



The ancient martial arts constitute a traditional Chinese sport. After the foundation of new China great consideration has been given to the continuation and development of these arts. Here, young athletes train.

provide China with an opportunity of renewing normal relations with Taiwan. The wish expressed at a press conference by Mr. Rong Gaotong, Vice-Minister of Sport, to revive competitions with sportsmen from the island, preceded by six months the official offer of political rapprochement made on 1st October 1981.

This wish was moreover fulfilled at Edmonton in July 1981 when, on the occasion of the World Softball Championships, teams from the People's Republic of China and Nationalist China met for the first time. More recently, sportsmen from Taiwan were offered the possibility of taking part in the Chinese national championships and, in 1983, in the fifth National Games. In addition, Peking has proposed that on the occasion of the invitation tournaments to be held in China in 1982, two teams (one from the island and the other from the continent) should represent the host country, as is permitted for the organiser of the tournaments. It is not completely impossible that one day these proposals may be accepted by Taiwan.

In conclusion, it may be said that in the sports field, as in others, China wishes today to make up for the time lost by the Cultural Revolution. To do this, it still hesitates between the strengthening of the Soviet model of sports

organisation, which already exists in China, and the application of a western model and western techniques as it has already done for the development of its science.

Napoleon Bonaparte's words on China are often quoted: "*When China awakes, the world will tremble*". Long before the four modernisations, it is through sport that this prophecy will be fulfilled. It is in fact here that the main weakness of China – the huge size of its population – is a strength without equal.

J. L. C.



¹ Despatch from *New China Agency*, 12th December 1981.

² *Guangming Ribao*, 9th August 1981.

³ Despatch from *New China Agency*, 11th December 1981.

⁴ *Renmin Ribao*, 6th April 1981.

⁵ Equivalent of the French sports newspaper "*L'Equipe*".

⁶ Quoted by R. Wilkinson in the *International Herald Tribune*, 5th December 1980.

⁷ The four modernisations refer to agriculture, industry, defence, science and technology

⁸ According to the lessons instilled by the famous Chinese film of the 50's "Basketball Player No 5", it is teams and not individual players that win matches.