

SOCIAL MOBILITY AMONG CHINESE ELITE ATHLETES

—Performance Capital and Status Attainment

by Bingshu Zhong



成绩资本和地位获得

我国优秀运动员群体社会流动的研究

钟秉枢 著

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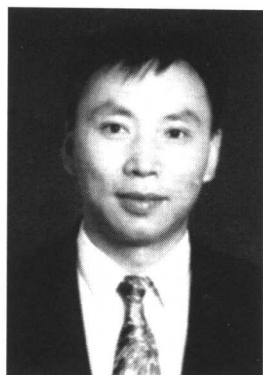
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Chapter One : Overview

Part One : Introduction

Various folk sports had long existed in China before the modern Western sports were introduced between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. However, not until the Chinese Communist Party got access to power in 1949, sports were mainly taken up by urbanities, especially school students. Sports workers and athletes were at low strata of society and were despised as “having strong body but simple mind”. Though Chinese athletes emerged and won some places in some international competitions, such as the Far East Games, China was quite backward in sport, just as Chairman Mao Tsetung pointed out in 1956: “China used to be stigmatized as a ‘decrepit empire’, ‘the sick man in East Asia’, a country with a backward economy and a backward culture, with no hygiene, poor at ball games and swimming, . . .”^[1]

The foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949 formed a watershed. Drastic changes have taken place in Chinese society-politically, economically and socially. Sport is not exception. Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the central government sport has played an important part in the socialist construction.

In 1951, China began to set up elite sports teams under the leadership of the State Sports Commission. Initially, there were only basketball, volleyball and swimming teams with 25 athletes. In April 1951, the PLA Sports Brigade was set up. Hereafter, the six military areas, including the Northeast of China, the Southwest of China, the Northwest of China, the East of China, the South of China and the North of China, established their own sports brigades. By 1959 when the First National Games were introduced a certain

[1] Mao Tsetung, “Strengthen Part Unity and Carry Forward Party Traditions”. Selected Works of Mao Tsetung, Volume V, p313. Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1977

number of were established in virtually every province and autonomous region, even Tibet, had had its elite sports teams for a certain number of sports.^[1]

Around 1963, based on the positive and negative experience, China issued a "Regulation of Sports Team (draft)".^[2] The Athletes Ranking System that was endorsed in 1956, was revised and enforced.^[3] In addition, some relevant policies were also formulated. In 1964, the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, the Ministry of Labor and the State Sports Commission released the "Joint Announcement about the Calculation of Service Term of Professional Athletes". It said "whoever takes part in the professional sports team from schools and the countryside would become the state employee after he/she enrolls in the professional team and enjoy the same benefits as other employees in this country."^[4] Since then, the career of athlete has been considered as a profession in China.

Elite athlete in the case of this study refers to a person who is admitted into an elite sports team. He/she makes a living by taking part in sports training and competition, also called specialised athlete or sports worker.

With the deepening of economic reforming and opening-up to the outsiders in China, sports reform accelerated after the late 1980s. "The system of sports teams began to change significantly. Sports Commissions of all levels adopted various measures to manage sports teams with enterprises or obtain sponsorship from enterprises. Some trade unions, enterprises and colleges or universities ran their own high-level sports teams, and in many sports paid training and risk insurance were put into practice. Football reform went ahead of others, and the transfer of membership was introduced."^[5] At the same time, "the athlete's registration system and the reform of the system and method of competition management, which began in 1994, laid down a foundation for the introduction of athlete's exchange."^[6]

Though elite athletes (about 17, 000 in total) are only a tiny proportion of all em-

[1] Rong Gaotang, et al. 1964:16; Yuan Weimin, 1994a: 76

[2] Selection of Sports Documents(1949 ~ 1981), pp439 ~ 474, Sports Press, Beijing, 1982

[3] The athletes ranking in China include six categories: international master of sports, master of sports, first grade sportsman, second grade sportsman, third grade sportsman and junior sportsman

[4] See the Document of Ministry of Civil Affairs and State Sports Commission(1980), No. 253

[5] Wu Shaozu, 1995

[6] Yuan Weimin, 1995

employees in the country at the present,^[1] they exert a vast influence on the public. They appear on TV in the prime time or headline news on newspaper virtually every day. Successful athletes are symbolism of patriotism, collectivism and nationalism. Therefore, they are regarded as national heroes and pride. For example, Rong Guotuan, a former table tennis world champion, put forward "how many times of struggles are there in life" in the 1995s. The table tennis team expressed their aspiration that "having China in mind and the world in view" and a dialectical view of starting from zero in the 1960s. The climbing team demonstrated their courage of as "letting red flags swing on the top of Himalayas". These encouraged people all over China to overcome the 3-year natural disaster. In the 1980s, the national diving team initiated the slogan that "Go out of the Asia and advance toward the World". Luan Jujie, who did not leave the game when her arm was hurt in competition until she fainted on the fencing field, exhibited the strong will. The swimming team made their desperate efforts to promote Chinese swimming to the world level. The Chinese Women Volleyball Team struggled hard to win honors for the country which inspired Chinese people to contribute themselves to the modernization of China. The so-called Heroic Ambition or Patriotic Spirit has become the spiritual wealth all over the society.

Meanwhile, in the transition to the marketing economy, elite athletes demonstrate the characteristic of marketing economy, such as the motivation, the efficiency, the innovation, the optimized distribution of resource, and coordination, etc. (Zou Dongtao, 1996: 10). The radical changes of modern China in economy and politics, the reform of the competition system and the change of the athlete's income have challenged the methods and practice which used to be effective in the management of athletes.

In the field of sports study, there are a lot of reportage, biographies and news reports appraising elite athletes in newspapers, and many published thesis belong to the category of sports scientific training. For example, there were 563 thesis of the doctor and master degrees awarded by Beijing University of Physical Education after China restored the aca-

[1] There were 17,921 elite athletes in 1995 and it is 0.03% among national workers. See yearbook of Chinese Economic (1996). p849

demic system in 1981 up to 1995,^[1] of which 465 (82.6%) were related to competitive sports. However, of all the 465 thesis, only 174 (37.4%) targeted at athletes as studying subjects in terms of psychological, biological and pedagogic aspects of the training process as well as identification and production of elite athletes. These provided some suggestions from different angles in improving the athletic performance and extending the peak of athletic career. However, none of them explored such issues as the origin and growing pattern of elite athletes, and the effect of sports performance on their post-athletic occupation and future life. "Without correct mastery and appropriate application, the best training system, method and condition can not automatically function to reach a good result. (Tian Maijiu, 1988)." Therefore, to study and analyze elite athletes who regard sport as a career is of great significance. In theory, it can enrich the theory of social mobility of sociology, and promote its application to the group of athletes. In practice, it can clarify the origin, distribution and growing characteristics of Chinese athletes and their the social status, and provide the a basis for the formulation of the athlete's policy.

The occupation of elite athletes has a lot common points with other occupations, such as the model of personnel replenishment, socialization of job expectations, the mastery of technical ability and social ability, proper instruction principle, the establishment of authority and the handling of personal relationship, etc. Meanwhile, the athlete's occupational characters form its own occupational value and requirement, which, in most cases, conflicts with the personal motive, economy expectations and social demand.

First of all, the athlete's working condition has three characters. First, in the sports team, collectivism and teamwork are emphasized. Individual athlete, as a member of the team, especially in the team sports, is less important than the team. In addition, the athlete's personal performance is open to the public. Even for the team sport the final result of a match is based on performance of each individual athlete. This is different from other occupations. Lastly, no matter whether it is an individual sport or a team sport, the athlete has to perform certain movements himself in a given period of time and under the public observation. At this moment, he is the only person isolated from outsiders. However, the athlete who tries to combine the collective duty with the personal performance and

[1] A corpus of titles of the doctoral and master theses awarded in Beijing University of Physical Education from 1981 to 1995. Graduate School of BUPE. 1996

to solve the contradiction between the collective and the individual interests lives in the society in general. In addition, the human biological law determines the limited duration of producing excellent performance, that is to say, the athletic youth is short and the athletic peak is limited. According to the statistics of the many years of competition results of international elite athletes, which was carried out by the former Soviet research Ozuolin, athletes are usually in the peak of their high-level performance at the age of 18 ~ 20. But this peak for gymnasts, swimmers and divers is earlier than that for weightlifting, equestrian, shooting and sailing. Their athletic skills begin to decline after 20 ~ 33 years age (Zhao Guiyin, et al. 1993). This suggests that athletes end their athletic career at relatively young age and have to change to another occupation at age 20 to 33. This occupational character of athletes determines the universality of their social mobility. Therefore, to analyze athlete's recruitment, working condition, factors influencing their growing-up in a sports team as well as relationship between their sporting career future employment can help understand the meaning of the occupation, the effect of athlete's job characteristics on the post-athletic career opportunities in society in general.

Social mobility refers to the changes of people's social status and position. It indicates the changes in the social stratified structure and geographical space structure of a person or a group. Sociologists place special emphasis on people's change of position in a social stratified structure (Li Qiang 1993). What is to be discussed in this study is the recruitment, promotion, retirement and reemployment of Chinese elite athletes, which falls into the scope of social mobility.

Social mobility contains two meanings: geographical fluid and status attainment. It is no doubt that what athletes strive for is the status attainment. Then, under the present background of social structure, how can athletes attain their status?

With the implementation of the system of professional clubs in China recently, it arises an issue —— the transfer of athlete's membership. Many researchers begin to probe into it, namely, the athlete's inter-team mobility. However, the transfer of membership and inter-team mobility is only a superficial phenomenon. It is, in essence, an effort for athletes to change their social status. Under the circumstances of the transition from the old structure to the new, the emergence of professional athletes and the trend of athlete's fluid is a result of social changes. Therefore, it is greatly significant to approach the athlete's effort and the process of status attainment in the framework of social mobility.

Thus, it leads to a question: how will athletes attain their status in the course of mobility, In another word, what is the mechanism of athlete's status attainment in mobility?

The following parts will look at the structural factors affecting the occupational environment of the elite athletes and their inter-team mobility in terms of status attainment. What is "status attainment"? "Status attainment" refers to the effort and process of improving one's own status, a process moving from the high to the low level. That is to say, the fluid from the low social status to the high one is status attainment. It is an effort by which people pursue more valuable resources on purpose. The effort is something like a tool (Lin Nan, 1989). In reality, it is the reflection of the status change and it leads to the higher payment, change of occupation, and the improvement of prestige.

In fact, the inter-team fluid of athletes is a process of status attainment. Above all, the athlete's fluid from low-level to high-level team, from districts or countryside to key cities is to seek a better training condition in order to achieve better performance, and then a job with higher social status. Besides, when athletes are mobile, most of them have a high expectation for the future: they hope to improve the present economic status ever since. It is exactly the same to those who are mobile from the country to the cities. For the ordinary people, being an athlete means having a job, saving the chance of going to the countryside to work, sightseeing in foreign countries, heightening the social status, increasing the income, changing the life style and prestige. For athletes, the fluid between teams is a strategy to seek a broader space of resource disposition.

During recent years, more and more athletes have involved in business and politics, or gone abroad. They got promotion and become wealthy. To be an athlete and gain excellent performance has become an important means for some people to improve their social status.

However, for a long time, when at service, athletes have been confined to a certain sports team. Prior to the reform, the system of the sports team was a closed structure that prevented athletes from moving a system based on a work-unit system. "Without the permission of the administrative sports department, nobody is allowed to employ the athletes who have already been affiliated to another department" (State Sports Commission, 1963a). Many provinces and cities formulated their own regulations^[1] to stop the local

[1] See Selection of Local Sports Regulations, State Sports Commission ed, 1995

sports talents from moving. After retirement, athletes were confined to such limited professions as government staff, coaches or Physical Education teachers, and they had to follow the given model to involve in the re-distribution of social resources. But as the living situation is getting more and more tense, the resource competition is more and more fierce, the way of assigning a job to retired athletes by administration faces increasing challenge. The conflict between the annually decreasing rate of the high-level athletes and the increasing waiting list of low-level athletes for a job is unfavorable for the construction and development of sports team (Wang Guangyu, et al. 1994). Other ways have to be found to satisfy the increasing needs of both the athletes and the society.

Chinese economic reform resulted in the decentralization. At the same time market force expended. The trend of industrialization, professionalism, commercialization has made the basic law—price laws in the commercial economy regulate the distribution of the means of production, productive forces and talents in various production departments (Wang Kang, 1987). Thus, the gradual implementation of the transfer of athlete's membership make it possible for athletes to join the resource distribution between teams of different levels and enter a broader employment space after retirement even if they cannot be recruited into the national team—the symbol of the highest level.

Though athletes can only move within the specific sports teams, the emergence of the transfer of athlete's membership indicates such a fact that the system barrier of athlete's transfer between teams is collapsing, though not completely being broken. Therefore, to probe into the athlete's status attainment, we must pay attention to the present situation and put it in the framework social stratification.

Part Two: Analyzing Framework

According to the framework of status attainment, this study will probe into the process from non-athletes to athletes, from ordinary to elite athletes to post-athletic resources attainment. For athletes —subjects in this study, status attainment is closely related to their “performance capital”. Therefore, this study will focus on the function of “performance capital” in the process of status attainment.

1. Literature Review

The studies on Status Attainment was regarded as "another main development in the studies of social stratification in the past two decades" (Lenski, 1966:24). Since the publication of "The American Occupational Structure" in 1967 by Blau and Duncan, this kind of model has always been in a predominant position in the field of sociology. The studies on status attainment emphasize the achievements of every society and individual group as well as various factors influencing them. Its contribution to macro-sociology is "showing the limited extent of status advantage passing from one generation to the next in the modern industrial society " (Lenski, 1966:26).

Following Blau and Duncan, a number of scholars proceeded further with studies in this field and made some revisions to the model of Blau and Duncan, for example, Sewell added many social psychological variable, forming an Wisconsin model; Wright added the identify variable, forming an occupational status model. These researches have a common framework, namely (1) taking individual as an analytical unit, explaining individual achievements (e. g. occupational status, income) by means of individual factor (e. g. education, achievement motive); (2) analyzing individuals according to the exchanging relation and technique relation. Both of them emphasize that a person with good education and advanced technology (technique relation) could get a high salary and status in the exchange (exchange relation) of the labor market (Huang Yizhi, 1992).

But researchers criticized these models of status attainment in the 1980s. They pointed out that: (1) The models which were concerned with characteristics and qualities of individuals, placed emphasis on education's influence on payment, but ignored the structural factors, and their influence on payment. Besides, these models regarded the social background and the changes of systems as constants. But as a matter of fact, a person lives in a certain social structure, which influences him greatly. (2) The models personalized and simplified occupational status that is actually a historical process. The social mobility of occupation depends on the social reconstruction and commercialization (Wang Hansheng, 1994). Therefore, some scholars introduced structural variables into the analysis of the status attainment, of which the most influential were the theory of industrialization, the theory of cultural capital, and the theory of social resources.