

PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN CHINESE SCHOOLS

Role Models, Repetition, and Winning

By Anni Kajanus



Students doing exercises in the school, Fujian, China. Source: Keren Su/China Span, Alamy.com.

I stood in front of thirty-six children, neatly lined up outside their classroom, standing at attention with 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 behaviors and motivations. While negotiating access for participant observation, I mentioned that I had practiced *Seirenkai* martial arts (*karate* and *jūjitsu*) 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 to 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, and 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 toward the far end of the school grounds. There stood a four-story 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, and studios for arts and crafts, baking, and 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 canceled.

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 in them. 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 sidelines, 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 organized into two straight lines facing myself, I had come to realize 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 sixties with decades of experience of teaching PE, stayed behind with me:

You did all right; 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 all right.

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 sidelines 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 sidelines 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 in four lines where each child had a predesignated place and a partner. Classes started and ended with routines led by the sports commissary (one of the children), and very detailed instruction kept the children focused throughout the activities. 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.

Physical Education Curriculum in Chinese Primary Education

Physical Education is part of the compulsory national curriculum set by The Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China from the first year of primary school up to the second year of college. The weekly PE time for grades one to two should be four hours, and for grades three to six, three hours.¹ Schools are required to organize extracurricular physical activities that can include morning exercises, class-break exercises, competitions, events, and after-school sports. MOE provides standardized teaching materials for the basic content of the curriculum. The basic elements are fundamental motor skills, athletics, games, gymnastics, martial arts, and other traditional sports. In addition, the curriculum outlines goals for knowledge about sports, health and safety, and for psychological development that emphasizes resilience and cooperative skills. The primary education is divided into three levels, grades one to two, three to four, and five to six. For example, in gymnastics, level one consists of basic skills of marching to the beat, standing at attention, changing directions, etc.; at level two, children carry out more complicated activities in formation and start to learn gymnastics with equipment; level three consists of relatively complicated mass calisthenics and use of equipment such as rope and double bars.² Children are required to pass standardized PE tests (modified for children with special needs) in order to continue their education to the next level. In addition to these standard elements, MOE also issues content for electives that can be offered by schools. The offering of electives depends, for example, on the priorities set by provincial-level education bodies and on the facilities and teaching resources available locally. These vary greatly, especially between rural and urban areas, and not all schools are able to meet even the basic standards of the curriculum.

Anni Kajanus

NOTES

1. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 教育部关于保证中小学体育课课时的通知 (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, 2004).
2. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 体育与健康课程标准 (011 年版) (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, 2011).

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 molding 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; those performing less favorably are criticized. "Ni zhui wo gan" ("you chase I rush") 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 schoolmates could pose a real challenge. Every day at 10:10 a.m., 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 halfway 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 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 such as 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 characterized by high disparity between regions and institu-

tions, 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 characterize PE in Chinese schools today. The practice of setting aside a daily slot



Ambassador of Nanjing 2014 Youth Olympic Games and famous Chinese basketball player Yao Ming (C) poses with reporters during the Young Reporter program of the 2014 Youth Olympic Games, in Nanjing, east China's Jiangsu Province, August 26, 2014.
Source: Xinhua/Ren Zhenglai, Alamay.com.

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, homogenizing, and standardizing 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* (Chinese martial arts competition) that were part of the self-cultivating education involving the body, the heart, and the mind, sports were considered a demeaning pastime and athletes enjoyed a low social status, similar to entertainers.² 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.³ 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 *ku* (hardship). 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



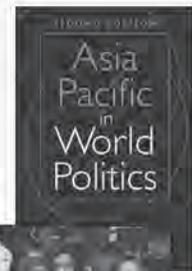
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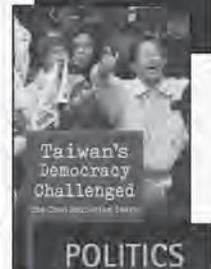
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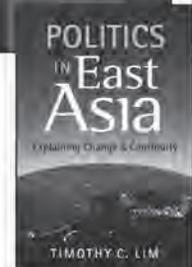
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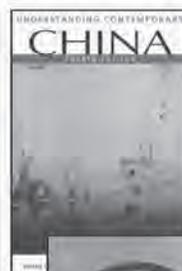
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Students practice martial arts for the first time during morning exercises at Jiujiang Primary School in east China's Jiangxi Province on May 3, 2013. The school has choreographed a special set of morning exercises combining traditional martial arts and poetry recitation since the beginning of the spring 2016 semester. Source: *Xinhua*, courtesy of *Imgur* at <http://imgur.com/L5rGsoB>.

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-defense technique as a whole and having 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 to basketball. But regardless of the sport, learning was structured 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 means that children spend a majority of their PE time standing in lines. Every activity is broken into parts, and learning is structured for student progression from the simple to the complicated. For example, when children start to learn rope skipping, they first practice 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 are in line with two developmental ideas that are quite distinct from those informing Euro-American education. First, the Confucian idea of *jiaohua* refers to *hua* (transformation) of the self and of others through *jiao* (education).⁴ 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 a young age are considered to have a remarkable capacity for learning and memorizing, but very limited capacity for understanding.⁵ 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 memorize 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 characterizes 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 soccer has been interpreted as part of China's quest for soft power in the international arena. In 2014, it was announced that soccer 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 characterized by a combination of elements from classic Confucian thought on self-cultivation of the body, the heart, and the mind; by the Maoist traditions of homogenizing and militaristic mass sports; and the most recent developments (spurred by the Olympic Games) that emphasize 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 of 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. ■

NOTES

1. Donald J. Munro, "Man, State, and School," in "China's Developmental Experience," Michel Oksenburg, ed., *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 31, no. 1 (1973): 121–143.
2. Paul Christesen, *Sport and Democracy in the Ancient and Modern Worlds* (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
3. Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
4. Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
5. *Ibid.*

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