

A study on the Historical Evolution of Public Gymnasium Space in China

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Abstract

Public gymnasium space has a different evolution history in China with that in the West. Based on the traditional Chinese fitness culture, and the two interruptions of World War II and the Cultural Revolution, the spatial development of China public gymnasium space can be divided into three stages since the introduction of fitness culture in China in the early 20th century: Gymnasium Hall Period, Gymnasium Field Period and Gymnasium Room Period. During these stages, both in terms of the characteristics of the gymnasium space itself and the content and organization of the fitness activities, Chinese culture and social characteristics are constantly being revealed.

Public Gymnasium Space is a kind of public space specially used for fitness. Gymnasium culture can be traced back to ancient Greek and has a clear evolutionary context in western culture. As to China, however, the evolutionary context is combined with Chinese traditional culture, social context, etc., and is relatively complicated. This paper is based on the perspective of western gymnasium culture and strives to explore the history of form and culture connotation of public gymnasium space in China.

Traditional Gymnasium Space of Ancient China

Ancient Chinese had their own way of fitness exercise, which is quite different with the western way. There were 2 different kinds. One is static "Tao Yin" with over 2000 years history. It spread worldwide by French missionaries and is widely known as "Taoist

medical sports" (Cibot P M, 1779). Some western scholars even believe that "Tao Yin" culture had even influenced the idea of Pehr Henrik Ling (Dudgeon J, 1895), whose famous training method had a clear reference of "Tao Yin". However, as a form of fitness exercise, "Tao Yin" does not advocate blindly heavy exercise or training, but rather promotes moderate or restrained fitness behavior. At the same time, "Tao Yin" does not need a certain period. Instead, it advocates a health consciousness that is fully integrated into daily life. This ultimately leads to "Tao Yin" not being attached or requiring a specific public space.

Besides "Tao Yin", another ancient China fitness exercise way is motion Chinese Martial Arts. Quite similar to Ancient Greece Gymnastic method, Chinese Martial Arts had a clear war background. Even the folk martial arts exercise has a clear positioning of military reserves. There are different types of public space and facilities for public martial arts exercise. The official "martial arts school" in feudal times was called "Wu Xue". However, as to the "emphasizing culture education and despising martial arts education" common view, "martial arts school" was greatly assimilated by "culture school". The biggest difference in space is an open space for archery (was often abandoned finally). As to Folk practice of martial arts, it was officially banned in many dynasties (such as Yuan and Qing Dynasties) and as a result, its development was greatly hindered. Even allowed, the folk martial arts community was often organizing the training "in the front of the Xueshe Mountain, using the flat land for training field" (the excerpt is taken from "Story of Wrestling" by Luzi of the Northern Song Dynasty), which was not specifically designed.

In conclusion, the static "Tao Yin" and the

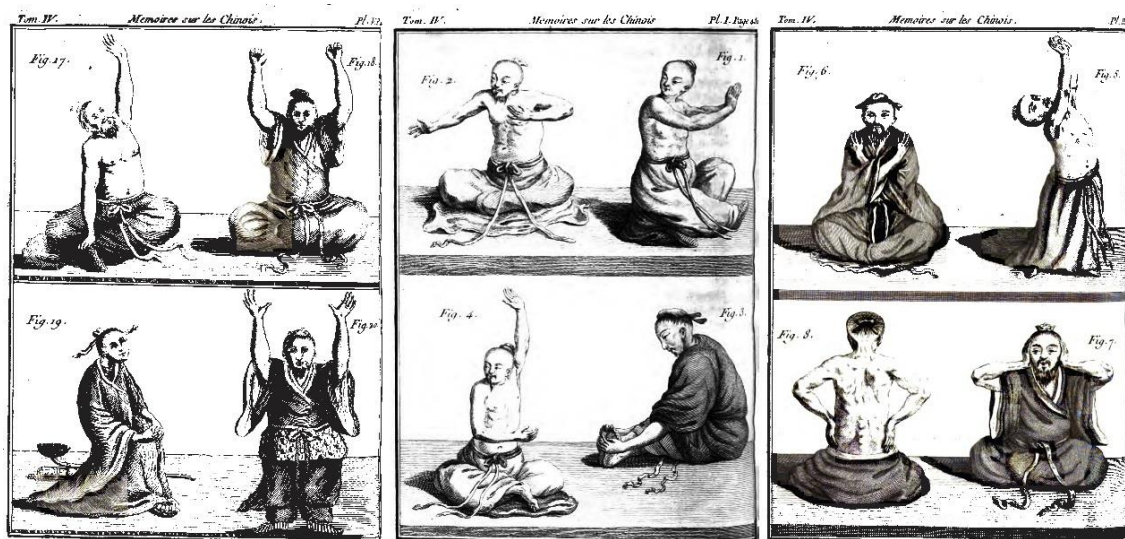


Figure 1. “Taoist medical sports” routine by French missionaries (Excerpt) (Source: Notice du cong-fou des Bonzes Tao-sée (Cibot P M, 1779))

motion “Martial Arts” had not led to the “Tao Yin Room”, “Martial Arts Hall” or other public gymnasium space with traditional Chinese culture, because of the “emphasizing culture education and despising martial arts education” common view.

Gymnasium Hall Period (late 19th century – World War II)

Western Sport culture was introduced in mid-19th century, gymnasium culture and space mode included. Whether it was because the spontaneous innovation of the Qing government, or the forcible introduction of western powers, the western sport was gradually integrated into the normal people lives of China., including fitness culture. In this period, the YMCA played a vital role.

China's YMCA began in Tianjin in 1895. The first self-built club was the Sichuan Middle Road Club in Shanghai in 1907 (Zhang Z, 2010). Although many youth clubs in China had different scales due to budget differences, they were all born of American YMCA clubs in style and internal facilities. Gymnasium Room, as an important facility in the American Youth Club, was first introduced in Shanghai Sichuan Middle Road Club in 1907. As this was the first attempt, the first gymnasium room in China was only a separate room in space and quite small in scale. Even so, the fitness culture is rapidly being accepted by Chinese youth and therefore, the standard two-story gymnasium hall, with distinctive American YMCA characteristics, was soon been introduced into Beijing (Zuo F, 2005), Chengdu (National Association of the Chinese YMCA, 1935),

Tianjin, etc. in turn. Finally, this YMCA "two-story with a runway in 2nd floor" (Xing W, 1992) hall became the most common place for mass fitness at that time and became the cradle of Chinese basketball (Yang X, 2013).

Duo to the Anti-Christian movement in the 1920s, the development of Christianity in China, as well as the YMCA, was hampered. Some of the buildings of China YMCA clubs were demolished, and some of them were transformed into other urban public functions (such as Beijing Club became a movie theater, Tianjin Club became a children's palace, Shanghai Xiqiao Club became an independent sports center, providing Swimming pool, hostel, etc.). As so, the function of the gymnasium originally located in the YMCA had also changed into the movie theater, the children's palace indoor sport room, or the independent swimming pool. Although these China's first batch of Gymnasium space gradually disappeared, they had already become the blueprint of the earliest batch of sport buildings in China, including not only public gymnasiums, campus gymnasiums, etc., but also other fitness group in that period, such as National Martial Arts School, Folk Martial Arts Club, Bodybuilding Club.

From late 19th century to early 20th century, China's fitness culture had just been introduced from the west, and gradually integrated into urban life. Meanwhile, traditional fitness culture, such as martial arts, recovered as well. The fitness exercise and training were mostly carried out in groups, with the guidance and supervision of coaches. This mode, similar to

Table 1. Years of establishment and addition of the YMCA Self-built Club of China Key Cities, 1895-1935 (Source: The 50th Anniversary of the Chinese YMCA: 1885-1935 (National Association of the Chinese YMCA, 1935), organized by author)

Period	Year	YMCA Self-built Club (Bold means with gymnasium)	Period	Year	YMCA Self-built Club (Bold means with gymnasium)
Founding period	1896	Tianjin YMCA Huihai Road Club	Frustration period	1923	Fenyang YMCA Club
	1907	Shanghai YMCA Sichuan Road Club		1924	Baoding YMCA Club
Growth period	1912	Nanjing YMCA Club	1925	Taishan YMCA Club	
	1913	Beijing YMCA Club	1926	Jinan YMCA Club	
Development period		Chengdu YMCA Club		Nanjing YMCA Club Fudong Road Club	
		Hong Kong YMCA Brisbane Street Club		Ningbo YMCA Club	
		Hankou YMCA Club (temporary)		Changsha YMCA Club	
	1914	Tianjin YMCA Dongma Road Club		Chengdu YMCA Club Renovation	
	1915	Taiyuan YMCA Club	1927	Nanchang YMCA Club	
		Shanghai YMCA Sichuan Road Club		Xiamen YMCA Club	
		Teenager School addition	1928	Taiyuan YMCA Club Renovation	
	1916	Guangzhou YMCA Club	1929	Hankou YMCA Club department addition	
	1917	Hankou YMCA Club		Suzhou YMCA Club office addition	
		Yantai YMCA Club		Hong Kong YMCA Kowloon Waterloo Road Club	
	1918	Hong Kong John Street Club		Shanghai YMCA Xiqiao Club	
		Guangzhou YMCA Sichuan Road Club	Recovery period	1930	Yantai YMCA Club Renovation
	Teenager School addition		1931	Zhengzhou YMCA Club	
1919	Hangzhou YMCA Club			Shanghai YMCA Baxianqiao Club	
1921	Suzhou YMCA Club			Guangzhou YMCA Club Renovation	
1922	Xi'an YMCA Club		1934	Hong Kong YMCA Kowloon Waterloo Road Club Expansion	
	Zhoucun YMCA Club		1935	Kunming YMCA Club	
	Hangzhou YMCA Club Gymnasium addition				

the teaching course, clarified that the gymnasium space in that period should be able to carry a large number of people at one time, and thus, the indoor Hall naturally became the most important space model.

With the onset of World War II, the gymnasium space, such as National Martial Arts School, YMCA and other fitness organization, were targeted by the Japanese army as a key target. Except for the rear areas such as Sichuan, the buildings of these gymnasium space in main cities were destroyed, and a lot of text and picture records on them were also destroyed. Although partly recovered after the war, it is no longer possible to return to its former heyday.

Gymnasium Field Period (World War II - Reform and Opening)

After the war, fitness returned to the public's vision. YMCA, Martial Arts club and national school, bodybuilding club, etc. were all

gradually recovering. However, at this period, with the establishment of "Radio Gymnastics", outdoor gymnasium space became the most popular and common form in that period.

"Radio Gymnastics" was promoted by Chairman Mao Zedong. He was greatly influenced by Educator Yang Changji in his early years (Zhou Y, 2009) and attached great importance to sports and physical education. In 1917, he wrote the article "Study on Sports" (Li Z, 2009), which explained the important status of sport and fitness culture in Chinese history and the disadvantages of contemporary sport education. Besides, he proposed the "Six-segment Exercise" based on the traditional Chinese "Tao Yin" method, which includes six segments: hand movement, foot movement, torso movement, head movement, striking movement, and reconciliation movement (Mao Z, 1979), with total 30 actions. By referring traditional "Tao Yin" culture, Mao's "Six-segment Exercise" simplified fitness content

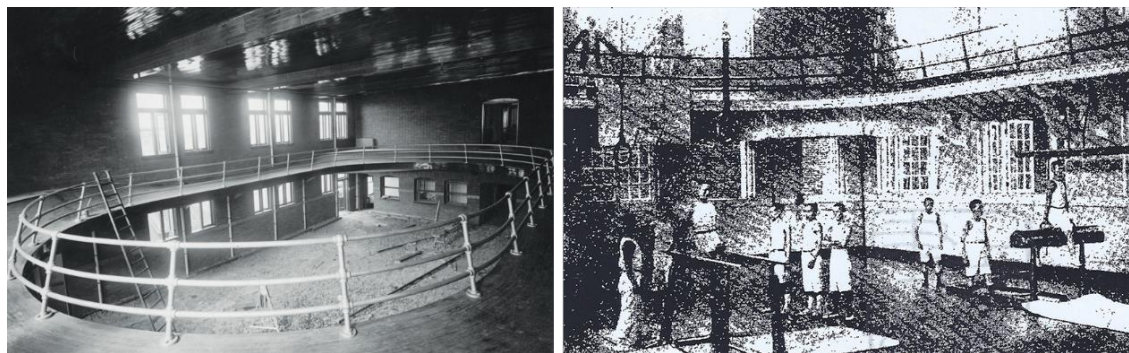


Figure 2. The gymnasium room in Tianjin (left) and Guangzhou (right) YMCA (Source: “Y.M.C.A. Building, Tientsin, China 1914”, “KAUTZ FAMILY YMCA ARCHIVES”, University of Minnesota (left) and The 50th Anniversary of the Chinese YMCA: 1885-1935 (National Association of the Chinese YMCA, 1935)(right))

and lowered the barrier to fitness for public (Liu H et al., 2008).

After the founding of the PRC, under the impetus of Chairman Mao, in November 1951, China's first set of “Radio Gymnastics” was born. It referred to the traditional “Tao Yin” culture, and drew on the Soviet Union "hygiene exercises" (also called "morning exercises") in the model (the amount of "hygiene exercises" in the former Soviet Union was about 8-12 knots, 10-15 minutes. (Yu L, 2010)), and Japanese " Radio Calisthenics" in the content and form, which was popular in China at that time. It finally formed a total of 10 sessions of 5 minutes of aerobics content. This model was simple and low threshold, suitable for all ages, and was easy to promote. After a large-scale promotion and the support of radio stations all over China, “Radio Gymnastics” had caused huge social influence and became the most popular mode of public fitness. "When Beijingers came out to do radio gymnastics, kicked the last nightmare out of their sleeping town, the neat alleys and streets in the city suddenly became a sports field" (This essay was written by former Soviet poet Nikolai Tikhonov in China in the 1950s).

As the most representative and most common form of mass fitness in this period, Chinese “Radio Gymnastics” ignited the enthusiasm of fitness for all. And with the reference to “Tao Yin”, this fitness form does not have any need for space, with only music, unlimited time, unlimited terrain, and completely freehand. This completely broke down the group fitness method and the need for large indoor hall in “Gymnasium Hall Period”. Fitness went outside to the playgrounds, streets, squares and other public space. With the radio on, all these kinds of public space became the “Gymnasium Field”, which reflected the distinct Chinese

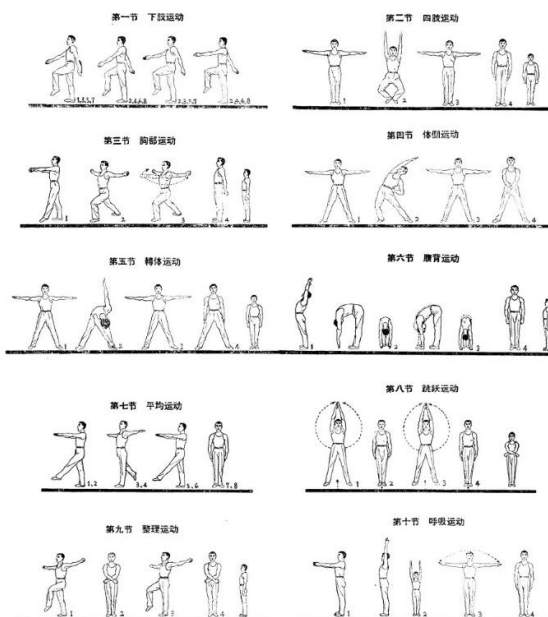


Figure 3. The first set of “Radio Gymnastics” actions (source: Manual of Radio Gymnastics (People's Sports Publishing House, 1964), organized by author)

characteristics.

Gymnasium Field Period (World War II - Reform and Opening)

Bodybuilding culture in China began since the 1930s, with several early groups, such as "Shanghai Bodybuilding College". After the war, many bodybuilding groups emerged all over China (Yang S, 1988). However, during the Great Cultural Revolution, the bodybuilding culture, in the aim of muscular body and physical beauty, was criticized and banned for more than 20 years due to being capped with "bourgeois sports" (National Physical Education Institute Teaching Material

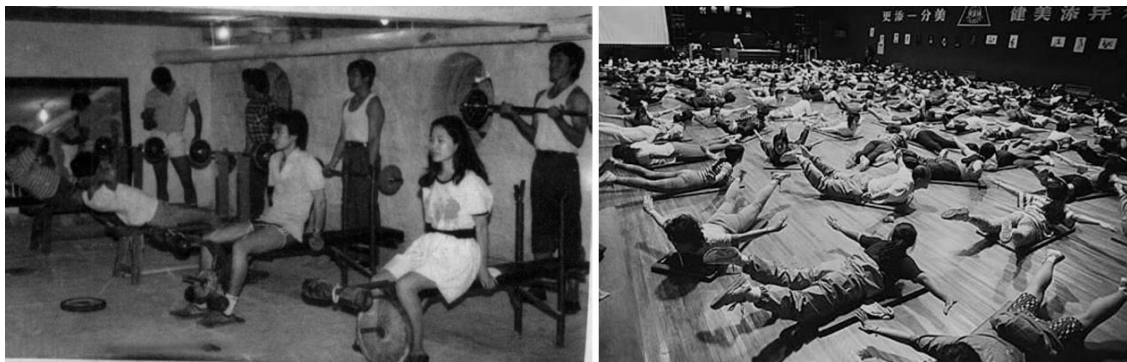


Figure 4. From “Pro Training Room” to “Life and fitness room” (source: Guo Q et al., 2011(left) and Li Jiangshu, “A Gym full of people”, Beijing, 1999 (right))

Committee, 1991). All bodybuilding group and gymnasium space were disappeared. However, bodybuilding was retained in form of Weightlifting (Lou Z, 1983).

In late 1970s to 1980s, with the reform and opening, people’s thoughts were liberated and “physical beauty” was gradually pursued by people (Guo Q et al., 2011). Bodybuilding culture, as well as bodybuilding space, for muscle and physical beauty, began to recover and stand out from weightlifting. The first “Lishi Cup” Men’s Bodybuilding Invitational Tournament (Guo Q et al., 2011) held in Shanghai in June 1983 clearly defined the independence of bodybuilding. Correspondingly, many amateur weightlifting halls and bodybuilding training classes had appeared, which became important space for mass bodybuilding. China bodybuilding gymnasium space ushered in the first period of rapid development. Because bodybuilding is often performed independently or in small groups, and the training equipment is mostly portable barbells (Guo Q et al., 2011), there is no need for a hall-like space. Most of the bodybuilding space in this period were small rooms attached to the public gymnasium. The basic training content included the traditional bench presses and deadlifts. Since most of the bodybuilding professional athletes were male at the time, these gyms were basically “male” spaces.

The gymnasium clubs in 1970s and 1980s were more like the “pro training room”. However, moving to 1990s, with the economic crisis, these early “training rooms” were greatly affected and forced to transform in order to lower the threshold to attract more people to attend. With the promulgation of the Outline of the National Fitness Program in 1995, CCTV

launched the program “Aerobics for 5 Minutes” and achieved unprecedented success. Aerobics became popular. Therefore, the “Aerobics Room” became the standard equipment for gyms. In late 1990s, China bodybuilding gymnasium space ushered in another period of rapid development. Many chain gyms, such like Mahua Fitness (1998) (Yu H, 2019), Xinhua Fitness, Haosha Fitness (1999), Zhangbei Fitness, emerged. With “aerobics room” and better training space environment, gymnasium space, or gyms, was turning from “pro training room” into “life and fitness room”.

In 21st century, the success of the Olympic bid further increased people’s enthusiasm for sports, and the occurrence of atypical pneumonia gave people a stronger sense of health. Gyms became more and more popular. Professionalization and Diversity were 2 major trends in gymnasium space development. Professionalization reflected in the more closely link between the space and the training requirement. Diversity reflected in the addition of more kinds of sport and leisure space, like swimming, yoga, SPA etc. The “life and fitness room” became the “life and fitness complex”. Since the reform and opening up, with the recovery and gradual popularity of bodybuilding exercises, the course-like fitness model carried out by large groups has been gradually replaced, and the spatial scale of fitness space has also become much smaller, duo to the portable dumbbell and barbell. The “hall” became the “room”. At the same time, with the expansion of fitness types and the need for personalized fitness, the fitness space is further differentiated into the complex of several fitness function spaces, changing from the “room” to the “complex”.

Conclusion

The development of China's public gymnasium space has distinct phases. Since the introduction of western public fitness space in the early 20th century, interrupted by the World War II and the Cultural Revolution, three distinct spatial evolution periods have naturally formed. The introduction of the western group fitness model and the YMCA standard gymnasium constituted the seed of the "Gymnasium Hall" period. The desire for the participation of the whole people in the fitness, brewed the outbreak of the "Gymnasium Field" period. The recovery of the pursuit of physical beauty and personality need promoted the maturity of the "Gymnasium Room" period. Although China's public gymnasium space originates from the West, it has a quite different evolutionary track, which is closely related to the development of Chinese society and the rise and fall of China sports culture.

Endnotes

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