

Sport and the “Competitive Spirit” in Ancient China

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I.

Many of the sporting activities pursued by the ancient Chinese were very similar to activities found in other ancient cultures. As in China, ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Crete/Greece and India all also show evidence of widespread archery, boxing and wrestling. However, thanks in large part to Confucian and Taoist ideology, in ancient China, athletics and sporting events were meant to foster individual virtue (德) and social harmony (和), composed of rituals (禮) intended to support the established social hierarchy, and seem not to have been individual “competitions” in the modern sense.

In this study I will address citations from ancient Chinese literature (from the Western Zhou to Eastern Han dynasties, ca. 1000 B.C.E. to ca. 200 C.E.) which involve competitions, and analyze the use of ritual and etiquette. Finally, I will compare the ancient Chinese uses and spirit of competition with the modern American uses and spirit of competition.

II.

Before discussing the history of the philosophy surrounding competition as described in the literary and historical texts of ancient China, the following three qualifications must first be acknowledged:

- 1) The philosophy described in these texts is not necessarily a direct indication of the actions of individuals; rather, it should more appropriately be viewed as a set of “guidelines” which the leaders might use to regulate society, and a description of an idealized system of behavior that all people might aspire to follow (or at least all men, as according to Confucius, women were not able to take part in competition¹).
- 2) A distinction must be made between three spheres of competition:

¹ *The Book of Rites* (禮記), “The Meaning of the Ceremony of Archery”, Section 4 : “Archery is specially the business of males.” : “射者。男子之事也。”

- a. Hunting and warfare
- b. Mental competitions (board games and games of chance), and
- c. Physical competitions, ritually governed and in the public sphere.

These distinctions are critical to understanding the role of competition in ancient China. When hunting for food, especially in the earliest stages of Chinese history, the hunter would be bound by no rules of competition – the desire to provide food for oneself and one’s family was often a struggle for survival, and any way that one could succeed would likely have been acceptable. The same seems to have been true for rules governing warfare, at least on the individual level – in a “life or death” situation, one’s comportment would necessarily come second to the basic need to defeat one’s enemy. War was also commonly associated with the word *chaos* (亂)², the opposite of *harmony* (和), and thus was not considered a part of normal or appropriate social interaction.

Mental and intellectual competition flourished in ancient China, perhaps even to the point that it could be argued that all competition was inherently a mental activity. Board games such as Go (圍棋) and Chinese chess (象棋) were widely popular, along with games of chance (賭博). While there were undoubtedly social rules in effect during these contests, it seems the participants were allowed free reign to use their mental skills in order to win.

Instead of including all competitive activities in ancient China, I will focus on physical competitions, ritually governed and in the public sphere, and which feature in much of early Chinese literature and historical records.

- 3) It must also be noted that the physical competitions I focus on were not exclusively non-competitive, and that there is some evidence for the use of such competitions in resolving legal disputes and enforcing social rank. For example, during the Warring States period, the state of Wei (衛) employed archery as a means to settle legal cases, and in the *Book of Rites*, it says:

² *Guang Yun* (廣韻·換韻): “亂，兵寇也。”;
Zuo Zhuan (左傳·隱公四年): “臣聞以德和民，不聞以亂。”

“Those who hit the mark were permitted to take part in the sacrifice; and those who failed were not permitted to do so. (The ruler of those) who did not receive the permission was reprimanded, and had part of his territory taken from him. The ruler of those who were permitted was congratulated, and received an addition to his territory. The advancement appeared in the rank; the disapprobation, in the (loss of) territory.”³
“射中者得與於祭。不中者不得與於祭。不得與於祭者有讓。削以地。得與於祭者有慶。益以地。進爵紕地是也。”

In light of this statement, it would be a mistake to assume that all competitions would have followed the rules of etiquette outlined below, and it must be assumed that the exact amount of competitive behavior would have varied widely, even within similar social groups and time periods.

III.

The earliest evidence of ritual sporting activities in Chinese society comes from the *Book of Songs* (詩經), which distinctly mentions archery in four of its poems, two of which contain remarkably detailed descriptions of shooting competitions. These poems date from the beginning of the Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1000 B.C.E.) to the mid-6th century B.C.E. The authorship and provenance of the poems is uncertain (though it is usually assumed that the poems in sections named for ancient Chinese states did indeed come from those regions).

The poems which most clearly delineate ritual sports activities are “The Guests are Taking Their Seats” (“賓之初筵”) from the “Minor Odes” (“小雅”) section and “Wayside Reeds” (“行葦”) from the “Major Odes” (“大雅”). “The Guests are Taking Their Seats” is composed of 5 stanzas of 56 characters each, and contains a long description of an archery tournament which devolves into drunken revelry. The first two stanzas which deal directly with the competition read:

“The guests are taking their seats,
To left, to right they range themselves.
The food-baskets and dishes are in their rows,
With dainties and kernels displayed.
The wine is soft and good,
It is drunk very peaceably.

³ *Book of Rites*, Section 9.

The bells and drums are set;
The brimming pledge-cup is raised.
The great target is put up,
The bows and arrows are tested,
The bowmen are matched.
‘Present your deeds of archery,
Shoot at that mark,
That you may be rewarded with the cup.’

Fluting they dance to reed-organ and drum,
All the instruments perform in concert.
As an offering to please the glorious ancestors,
That the rites may be complete.
For when the rites are perfect,
Grandly, royally done,
The ancestors bestow great blessings;
Sons and grandsons may rejoice,
May rejoice and make music:
‘Let each of you display his art.’
The guests then receive the pledge-cup,
The house-men enter anew
And fills that empty cup,
That you may perform your seasonal ceremonies.”⁴

“賓之初筵、左右秩秩。籩豆有楚、殽噶維旅。
酒既和旨、飲酒孔偕。鐘鼓既設、舉酬逸逸。
大侯既抗、弓矢斯張。射夫既同、獻爾發功。發彼有的、以祈爾爵。”

籥舞笙鼓、樂既和奏。烝衎烈祖、以洽百禮。
百禮既至、有壬有林。錫爾純嘏、子孫其湛。
其湛曰樂、各奏爾能。賓載手仇、室人入又。酌彼康爵、以奏爾時。”

“Wayside Reeds” is a poem of 4 short stanzas which also details an archery tournament, again with wine-drinking as its complement. The last three stanzas which describe the competition read:

“Spread out the mats for them,
Offer them stools.
Spread the mats and the over-mats,
Offer the stools with shuffling step.
Let the host present the cup, the guest return it;
Wash the beaker, set down the goblet.

⁴ *The Book of Songs* (詩經), “The Guests are Taking Their Seats” (“賓之初筵”), trans. Arthur Waley, © 1937.

Sauces and pickles are brought,
For the roast meat, for the broiled.
And blessed viands, tripe and cheek;
There is singing and beating of drums.

The painted bows are strong,
The four arrows well balanced;
They shoot, all with like success;
The guests are arranged according to their merits.

The painted bows are bent,
The four arrows, one after another, are aimed.
The four arrows are as though planted;
The guests must be arranged according to their deportment.

It is the descendant of the ancestors who presides;
His wine and spirits are potent.
He deals them out with a big ladle,
That he may live till age withers him,

Till age withers him and back is bent;
That his life may be prolonged and protected,
His latter days be blessed,
That he may secure eternal blessings.”⁵

“肆筵設席。授几有緝御。或獻或酢。洗爵奠斝。
醢醢以薦。或燔或炙。嘉殽脾臄。或歌或嘏。

敦弓既鈞。舍矢既均。序賓以賢。敦弓既句。
既挾四鍬。四鍬如樹。序賓以不侮。

曾孫維主。酒醴維醑。酌以大斗。以祈黃耇。
黃耇台背。以引以翼。壽考維祺。以介景福。”

By analyzing the content of these two poems, we can reach several conclusions about the nature of the archery competition: First, the tournament takes place within a larger ritual context, complete with music, eating and drinking. As is related in the 5th-century *Book of Rites*:

“Archery is specially the business of males, and there were added to it the embellishments of ceremonies and music. Hence among the things which may afford the most complete illustration of ceremonies and music, and the frequent

⁵ *ibid.*, “Wayside Reeds” (“行葦”).

performance of which may serve to establish virtue and good conduct, there is nothing equal to archery: and therefore the ancient kings paid much attention to it.”⁶

“射者。男子之事也。因而飾之以禮樂也。故事之盡禮樂。而可數爲。以立德行者。莫若射。故聖王務焉。”

Secondly, in both poems the archers are “arranged according to their department” or “matched”, showing a very distinct hierarchy, based upon manner, not skill. And thirdly, the main point of the poems is not to extol the winners, or even give any results of the matches at all, but rather to have a good time and, in the first poem, to conduct the tournament “to please the glorious ancestors, that the rites may be complete, for when the rites are perfect, grandly, royally done, the ancestors bestow great blessings” (“烝罔烈祖，以洽百禮”) and “that you may perform your seasonal ceremonies” (“以奏爾時”). Also worth noting is the phrase “all the instruments perform in concert” (“樂既和奏”): “concert”, usually translated “harmony” (和), is a concept used in early Chinese thought to depict a state of peace; while it is used here in a musical context, the music likely would have had a harmonizing influence upon the ceremony, and upon the guests. Undoubtedly, the creation and preservation of social harmony was likely the main reasons these ritual events were held. According to Michael Speak in the article “Recreation and sport in Ancient China”:

“Archery was considered essential for the strength and defence of the nation, but was also used for the selection of feudal dignitaries and officers during the Zhou period. Ritual archery was highly significant and was regulated by complex rules based on social rank...Great archery formed part of ceremonies to worship divinities and ancestors, and success was based not only on accuracy but physical demeanor and harmony with music.”⁷

The quote from the *Book of Rites* in the previous section perfectly illustrates the role of archery tournaments in society: the use of *ceremony* (禮) to establish *virtue* (德).

The sections immediately following read:

“Thus, in the states, the rulers and their officers devoted themselves to archery, and the practice in connection with it of the ceremonies and music. But when

⁶ *Book of Rites*, Section 4.

⁷ Speak, Michael, “Recreation and sport in Ancient China”, in Riordan, James and Jones, Robin, *Sport and Physical Education in China*, © 1999, p.27.

rulers and officers practice ceremonies and music, never has it been known that such practice led to their banishment or ruin.”⁸

“故曰。射者。射爲諸侯也。是以諸侯君臣盡志於射。以習禮樂。夫君臣習禮樂而以流亡者。未之有也。”

and:

“Hence it is said in the ode [now lost]:

‘The long-descended lord
Presents your cups of grace.
His chiefs and noble men
Appear, all in their place;
Small officers and Great,
Not one will keep away.
See them before their prince,
All in their full array.

They feast, and then they shoot,
Happy and praised to boot.’

The lines show how when rulers and their officers earnestly devoted themselves together to archery, and the practice in connection with it of ceremonies and music, they were happy and got renown. It was on this account that the son of Heaven instituted the custom, and the feudal lords diligently attended to it. This was the way in which the son of Heaven cherished the princes, and had no need of weapons of war (in dealing with them); it furnished (also) to the princes an instrument with which they trained themselves to rectitude.”⁹

“故詩曰。曾孫侯氏。四正具舉。大夫君子。凡以庶士。小大莫處。御於君所。以燕以射。則燕則譽。言君臣相與盡志於射。以習禮樂。則安則譽也。是以天子制之。而諸侯務焉。此天子之所以養諸侯而兵不用。諸侯自爲正之具也。”

Assuming these citations represent the real procedures of the archery competitions and the intent of their officiants, there can be little doubt that the purpose of the tournaments was basic social engineering with the goal of *virtue* (德) or *rectitude* (正).

This leads one to ask why such great care was taken to make sure the rules of propriety were followed, and why the ancient Chinese would have valued structured ceremony above open competition. Two of the great works of Chinese philosophy, *The Analects* by Confucius and the *Tao-Te-Ching* by Lao-tzu, both discuss the question of the

⁸ *Book of Rites*, Section 5.

⁹ *ibid.*, Section 6.

usefulness of competition. Confucius specifically mentions archery as the medium by which contention is paired with virtuous behavior:

“The Master said, ‘The student of virtue has no contentions. If it be said that he cannot avoid them, shall this be in archery? But he bows complaisantly to his competitor, ascends the hall, descends again, and exacts the forfeit of drinking. In his contention, he is still the superior man.’”¹⁰

“子曰：「君子無所爭。必也射乎！揖讓而升，下而飲。其爭也君子。」”

Lao-tzu also eschews the competitive mindset in the *Tao-Te-Ching*:

“In this way when the sage rules, the people will not feel oppressed;
When he stands before them, they will not be harmed.
The whole world will support him and will not tire of him.
Because he does not compete, he does not meet competition.”¹¹

“是以聖人處上而民不重，處前而民不害。是以天下樂推而不厭。
以其不爭，故天下莫能與之爭。”

This echoes the modern Olympic creed, which states:

“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part,
just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle.
The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.”

Thus, we can understand the concept of competition that underlies the contest: the goal is not victory, but the undertaking of the challenge itself. It is possible to view nearly all competition in ancient China as intrinsically a competition with oneself – the goal is not to defeat one’s opponent, but to perform well by overcoming one’s own self-imposed limits. In this way, the archery tournament becomes a test of one’s inner strength, rather than a source of honor or shame caused by exterior results. The honor lies in playing one’s part as well as one is able, and following the accepted rules of competition in order to contribute to a harmonious whole.

With this in mind, we can understand the reason why private training took precedence over public competition in ancient China, and how the “training of the mind” would be given supreme importance. From the most ancient times of which we have records, there has been a large following for exercises involving both mental stamina and

¹⁰ Confucius (孔子), *The Analects*, trans. James Legge in *The Four Books*, © 1923, Section 3.7.

¹¹ Lao-tzu (老子), *Tao Te Ching* (道德經), Chapter 66.

physical ability. Many of these activities developed out of military training exercises into formalized dance, acrobatics, and especially physical activities designed to promote health or longevity, including *Qigong* (氣功) and *Daoyin* (導引), which preceded the later *T'ai Chi Chuan* 太極拳). In the “Great Learning”, Confucius states: “From the king down to the common people, all must regard the cultivation of the self as the most essential thing.”¹² The word for “self” is *shen* (身), which can easily refer to either or both one’s body and mind. By not distinguishing between the two, the ancient Chinese concept of “heart-mind” (*xin* 心) becomes clear – there is no difference between the mental and physical self, between the will and the body which enacts it, and in this case, no difference between the competitor’s mind which visualizes the result and the body which shoots the arrow into the center of the target.

During the Qin dynasty, the emperor Qin Shi-Huang attempted to essentially eradicate competition by passing edicts which declared that all weapons must be handed in to the central government and by prohibiting the practice of martial arts of any kind. The Han dynasty repealed these laws, but thanks to a strict Confucian idealism which promoted a quiet character and a delicate physique, all physical education was basically excluded from school curricula. Martial arts would not again become popular until 702 C.E., during the reign of the Empress Wu ZeTian during the Tang dynasty.¹³

Despite these restrictions, during the Han dynasty the game of *cuju* (蹴鞠), much like modern soccer, became extremely popular, and tournaments were set up in many areas of the country. Even though the game was intensely competitive in nature, a poet of the time, Li You (李尤, 50-130 C.E.), records in his poem “Ju Cheng Ming” (鞠城銘) the convivial atmosphere surrounding the matches and the players:

"Round balls and square walls,
Just like the *yin* and *yang*.
Moon-shaped goals opposite each other,
Each side has six in equal number.
Select the captains and appoint the referee,
Based on the unchanging regulations.

¹² Confucius (孔子), “The Great Learning”, trans. James Legge in *The Four Books*, © 1923, Section 6. : “自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以脩身爲本。”

¹³ Knuttgen, Howard G., Ma, Qiwei, and Wu, Zhongyuan, *Sport in China*, © 1990, p.21.

Don't consider relatives and friends,
Don't indulge in partiality.
Maintain fairness and peace,
Have no complaints of others' faults.
If all this is necessary for regulating football,
How much more for directing one's life!"¹⁴

“圓鞠方牆、倣象陰陽。
法月衡對、二六相當。
建長立平、其例有常。
不以親疏、不有阿私。
端心平意、莫怨其非。
鞠政由然、況乎執機。”

Here we can see that the traditional ideals of “fairness and peace” have been retained, even in a less-organized competition than the ancient ritual archery tournaments. In the last line, the poet pays tribute to the ancestral rules and their social effects: “If all of this [non-partiality, fairness and peace, not complaining about others] is necessary for *cuju*, how much more so for the business of [daily] life!”

IV.

My home country, the United States, is a country in love with unchecked competition. The roots of this phenomenon go all the way back to the roots of western individualism, at least to the “one man, one vote” egalitarian and proto-democratic society of ancient Greece. In the modern era, it has led to the outgrowth of free-market capitalism and the idea that the individual in society is supreme.

At its heart, the dichotomy between the ancient Chinese system of controlled social engineering and the American ideal of unrestrained competition rests with the differences between collectivism (the individual must be subservient to the goals of the group) and individualism (the individual is the sole important unit in society, and should enjoy unchallenged potential for growth). Both are useful, but both systems have flaws. Collectivism favors stability over “progress”, which can lead to slower overall growth, and possibly stagnation or apathy. Individualism is based upon self-determination, a

¹⁴ Li You (李尤), “Ju Cheng Ming” (“鞠城銘”). “Inscription on the Football Wall” *translation: J.Tharsen.*

concept likely detrimental to society as a whole if the individual's progress or greed is unchecked and allowed to impede others.

“Regulated individualism”, a combination of the two where the individual will be allowed limited freedoms, as long as others are not negatively impacted by the individual's actions and the group can maintain an overall harmony, will likely lead to the most balanced society. The group should be allowed to restrain the individual at any point deemed necessary – and must restrain the individual when harm to the group becomes apparent – only then can both society and the individual enjoy the greatest level of freedom while not endangering social stability.

In competition, this means the most important job is that of the referee, the group's appointed judge whose responsibility is to decide how much freedom within the rules is acceptable. And just like the ancient Chinese, the referee must have a great sense of overall harmony in his heart, allowing the ceremonies to be completed in a way that all the participants may exercise their virtue, leading to a result where everybody tries their best, and suitably, everybody wins.

摘要： 中國古代體育運動與競爭心

「鐘鼓既設、舉酬逸逸。大侯既抗、弓矢斯張。
射夫既同、獻爾發功。發彼有的、以祈爾爵。
籥舞笙鼓、樂既和奏。烝絜烈祖、以洽百禮。
百禮既至、有壬有林。錫爾純嘏、子孫其湛。
其湛曰樂、各奏爾能。」

—《詩經·小雅·桑扈之什·賓之初筵》

[孔]子曰：「君子無所爭。必也射乎！揖讓而升，下而飲。其爭也君子。」

—《論語·八佾第三·七》，《禮記·射義·十一》

「是以聖人處上而民不重，處前而民不害。
是以天下樂推而不厭。以其不爭，故天下莫能與之爭。」

—《老子(道德經)·六十六章》

中國古代體育運動與其他的古文明社會體育運動很像：古代的美索不達米亞、埃及、克里特島/希臘、印度都發現有舉行箭藝、拳擊、摔角的地方。

以上面的引證來說，在儒家和道家理論，古代中國社會好像利用體育運動來推展個人的“德”與社會上的“和”，並以“禮”來維持社會階級，而沒有現代式的個人競爭意味在其中。

我是從自一個特別喜愛競爭的國家：美國。現在在世界上美國文化和美式個人主義的影響越來越大，許多的社會也逐漸有美式競爭心，不但在體育運動的領域產生影響，同時也在社會與經濟的領域上產生影響。

我們可以思索下面的兩個問題：

中國社會本質與美國社會本質的差別對現代人有什麼意義？

比較重要是，我們從這種差別怎麼可能學習並互相受益？

Abstract:

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‘Present your deeds of archery, shoot at that mark, that you may be rewarded with the cup.’
Fluting they dance to reed-organ and drum, all the instruments perform in concert.
As an offering to please the glorious ancestors, that the rites may be complete.
For when the rites are perfect, grandly, royally done, the ancestors bestow great blessings;
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– *The Book of Songs* 詩經, “The Guests are Taking Their Seats” “賓之初筵”

“Confucius said, ‘The student of virtue has no contentions. If it be said that he cannot avoid them, shall this be in archery? [But] he bows complaisantly to his competitor, ascends [the hall], descends [again], and exacts the forfeit of drinking. In his contention, he is still the superior man.’”
– *The Analects* 論語, Section 3.7; also quoted in
The Book of Rites 禮記, “The Meaning of the Ceremony of Archery” “射義”, Section 11

“In this way when the sage rules, the people will not feel oppressed;
When he stands before them, they will not be harmed.
The whole world will support him and will not tire of him.
Because he does not compete, he does not meet competition.”
– Lao-tzu 老子, *Tao Te Ching* 道德經, Chapter 66

Many of the sporting activities pursued by the ancient Chinese were very similar to activities found in other ancient cultures: ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Crete/Greece and India all also show evidence of widespread archery, boxing and wrestling. However, as the above quotes illustrate, thanks in large part to Confucian and Taoist ideology, in ancient China, athletics and sporting events were supposed to foster individual virtue (德) and social harmony (和), composed of rituals (禮) intended to support the established social hierarchy, and seem not to have been individual “competitions” in the modern sense.

My home country, the United States, is a country in love with competition. With the increasing influence of American culture and the rise of American-style individualism around the world, other cultures are taking on this “competitive spirit” as well, not only in the realm of sports, but in social and economic contexts as well.

What does this dichotomy say about the different natures of Chinese and American society?

And more importantly, what lessons might we be able to learn from these differences?