

Progress and Prospects of Chinese National Fitness Program Research

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Abstract

Review Article

This study utilized the literature method and the logical analysis method, which propose the problems in the development of National Fitness Program (NFP) research in China. Meanwhile, a quantitative analysis and discussion were conducted on the current research. It is found that the current research lacks comparative studies of countries with different cultural backgrounds and does not delve deeply enough into regional research. Finally, prospects for the future research of NFP are presented, including discussions on the legacy impact of major events and comparative studies with Western countries.

Keywords: National Fitness Program, Sport for all, Fitness.

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1. Conceptual studies on National Fitness Program

The National Fitness Program (NFP) is a plan for governance of Sport for all launched by the Chinese government in 1995. It is an important part of the construction of a leading sporting nation proposed by the Chinese government. In the early years, the whole nation system was mainly applied by the Chinese government to the governance of competitive sports and helped China achieve great results in some international competitions. Now the Chinese government is exploring the implementation of a new type of whole nation system by summing up previous experience and transferring it to other areas of sport to achieve their goal of building a sports power (Wang and Zhou 2023).

Before the 'National Fitness Program Outline' was formulated, the Chinese government's two national five-year plans: the 'Sixth Five-Year Plan (1981-1985)' and the 'Seventh Five-Year Plan (1986-1990)' hardly mentioned Sport for all. This situation was changed in 1995, and then under the influence of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, Sport for all in China have been further developed. In 2014, the Chinese government promoted the National Fitness Program as a national strategy in the policy document. Since then, Sport for all have been

highly concerned by the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party (Lu, 2019). The main purpose of this plan is to improve the physical health of the people. Chinese government regards it as one of the contents of the country's modernization development. Plus, government regards it as an important part of the "Two Centenary Goals." It means that the government will directly provide all support, including funds and facilities, for this plan. Part of the funds of the China Sports Lottery Public Welfare Fund is also used to sponsor this plan. The National Fitness Program is divided into two periods at the earliest. The first period is from 1995 to 2000, which is divided into three stages: 1995-1996 experimental stage; 1997-1998 to promote the implementation phase; harvest phase 1999-2000 (Central Committee and State Council, 1995). The second phase of the plan is from 2000 to 2005. Since then, every five years, the Chinese government will make a plan for the next five-year National Fitness Program and review the progress of the previous five-year work (as shown in Figure 1). In addition, local governments in each province and cities also need to formulate local National Fitness five-year plans and set assessment indicators according to the plans of the central government.

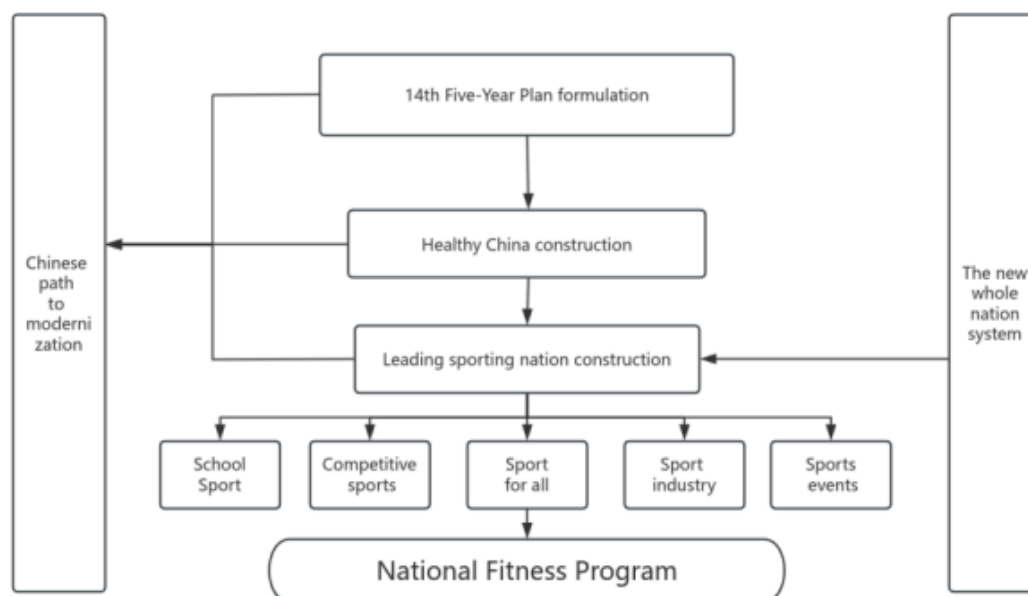


Fig.1 Strategic Position of National Fitness Program

In conclusion, the National Fitness Program is currently being highly concerned in China. Obviously, the government is the dominant force in the governance of the National Fitness Program, while other organizations, institutions, and individuals have played different roles in the governance process, which is the pattern of Government-led, multi-subject participate in governance.

2. Overview of sport for all

Sport for all is a new concept in modern western society. It was approved in the "European National Sports Charter" in 1975, and it involves a series of subsequent sports policies, which mainly hope to expand the impact of sports on economy, education, and other aspects to all levels of society. Through this policy document, the European Council conveys a core idea that all member states should urge people to participate in sports (Marchand, 1990). In the European Charter, sport is understood as 'in the modern sense of free, spontaneous physical activity engaged in during leisure time'. It means that any activities require some physical effort, such as sports and various physical activities, will be included. According to this definition, sports themselves include not only competitive sports and sports, but also various forms of recreational sports. Tews (1999) noted that the emergence of this concept broke the achievement concept that prevailed in Western society from the 18th to the 19th century, especially in Britain, which was centered on the improvement of sports performance and competition performance. It made people shift from instrumental thinking to individual goals, paying more attention to personal physical and mental health and happiness, which is an important feature of modern 'Sport for all' with a feature of sports democratization, that is, to provide everyone with equal opportunities for physical exercise, regardless

of age, gender, or economic class. Many sociological researchers have followed the view of Inglehardi (1977) and Beck (1992) that such developments are part of social change, which occur naturally over time. However, Tews (1999) pointed out in the study that this view is not comprehensive, and the reasons for this development are multiple, including people's personalized development and the growing demand for sports. Murphy & Waddington (1998) pointed out that the goal of 'Sport for all' is diverse, mainly depending on how different countries or researchers view this issue. Its goal can be to increase the number of people participating in sports to cultivate more potential Olympic champions. It can also be to shift the attention of young people to reduce crime rates. It can also be to cultivate people's values of respecting opponents and fair competition. Based on this view, they made a hypothesis in their research, the main purpose of 'Sports for all' is to improve the health of the people.

3. Current status of domestic NFP research

Firstly, in terms of the number of literatures, according to the data from China National Knowledge Infrastructure the number of related literatures is only 20 in 1994 and has increased rapidly to 112 by 1995, which was the first year of the implementation of the NFP. In the following years, research on the NFP remained very popular, with the number of published articles reaching a peak of 187 in 1996. The number of articles published on the NFP fluctuated between 81 and 56 from 2001 to 2011. After 2012, the overall number of published articles showed a decreasing trend, dropping to a minimum of 13 in 2024.

Secondly, in terms of the journals in which the papers were published, Journal of Physical education, Journal of Sport Culture Guide, Journal of Chengdu

Sport University, Journal of Beijing Sport University and Journal of Sport Science.

Among these journals, the number of Journal of Physical education is the highest, reaching 94. According to the bibliographic method, the research on oral history of sports in China can be divided into three stages: the first stage (1994-2000): The period of rapid development of NFP research. There are 866 articles in the whole text, according to 41%. This long process has made tremendous progress. Researchers have discussed the significance and concept of the NFP, as well as the key points, difficulties, shortcomings and replicable successful experiences during its implementation. It is a preliminary exploration of NFP; Phase 2 (2001-2011): the embryonic period. During this period, 765 papers were published, accounting to 36%. The average annual number of published articles at this stage has decreased significantly. The last phase (2012-2025): High-quality development stage. During this period, 479 papers were published, accounting for 23%. Most of the research at this stage focuses on summarizing the successful experiences of BFP in different regions in the past, identifying the problems that still need to be solved, and presenting ideas for the future development of NFP.

4. Value and significance of NFP

The Chinese government is trying to give priority to the National Fitness Program to various policy documents, and many policies on NFP have been formulated at both national and provincial levels, which gives the NFP research significance, and provides many valuable research materials for the study of the NFP, including policy documents and official data.

In addition, the National Fitness Program is representative, which represents the transformation of the current values of China's sports development. China has become one of the best competitive sports countries in the world as they have achieved excellent results in the Olympic Games. The Chinese government's focus on sports governance has shifted from elite sports to NFP, which is the key to achieving the goal of building a leading sporting nation (Zhang, *et al.*, 2001). Li Zhijian, then deputy director of the State General Administration of Sports, said that strengthening the people's fitness is the goal of sports, and should take advantage of the 2008 Olympic Games to vigorously develop NFP. It is believed that the development of NFP will promote the building of a well-off society.

Thirdly, over time, research on development and management of "sports for all" (SfA) in different regions of the world has entered mainstream academic research agendas. However, studies have largely focused upon experiences of Western countries like Sweden, Norway, Germany and Britain (see, for example, Tew, 1999; Nicholson *et al.*, 2010; Bergsgard *et al.*, 2010;). Therefore, there is an urgent need for further work to examine policy processes for "SfA" in more diverse

cultural backgrounds, such as China. The system and management of National Fitness Program is different from many Western countries, which is unique and enlightening. The research on the national fitness system can open a channel for both sides to understand each other and show the system and management of Sports for all in China.

5. Problems with NFP research

Firstly, the research focus on NFP is still on the current domestic development situation, and few studies have conducted comparative studies with countries from different cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, most of the research on NFP focuses on the national level, with little attention paid to the regional level. As China is a vast country, there are significant differences in both economic levels and development degrees among different regions. Therefore, the conditions for carrying out NFP vary greatly among different regions.

6. Prospect of NFP in China

6.1 The legacy effect of major sports events

Given that an increasing number of significant sports events are being held in China, including the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, and the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games, more and more researchers have begun to pay attention to the potential impact of these major sports events on the NFP as they can greatly enhance the enthusiasm of local residents to participate in the national fitness program, meanwhile, it can significantly improve both the quantity and quality of facilities and venues.

6.2 A Comparative Study of China and Western Countries

Unlike the federal system adopted by most Western countries, China adopts the Whole national system for the formulation and implementation of the NFP.

The rapid development of National Fitness Program provides evidence that the pattern of Government-led, multi-subject participate in governance able to concentrate various resources on major field, which have considerable advantages and potential reference significance in sports governance.

The National Fitness Program (NFP) is a national level program first issued by Chinese government in 1995, which aims to improve physical health of the population. Alongside the focus on becoming one of the best competitive sports countries in the world, the Chinese government's focus on sports development has also shifted towards physical activity and participatory sport through the NFP (Zhang *et al.*, 2001). It was believed that development of NFP would promote the building of a "well-off" society, which is

one of two 100-year goals put forward by Chinese government (Qiu and Luo, 2024).

The physical fitness of people has become a focal point in China, especially in the context of building a comprehensive “well-off” society. The latest ‘14th Five-Year Plan’ issued by the Chinese government proposed two important projects, namely, ‘Healthy China’ and ‘Leading sporting nation’ (The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of China and the Outline of the long-range goals for 2035, 2021). These two projects aim to improve people’s physical health by providing various resources for them (Central Committee, 2016). Government considers both two projects as key parts of China’s modernization, while the development of NFP plays an important role in the twin policy focus (Li, *et al.*, 2023).

6.3 Exploration of NFP Development in Different Regions

As China is a large country, there are regional differences in the development of NFP, such as the prosperous eastern coastal areas and the poor western inland areas. There are significant differences in the material conditions for conducting NFP in these regions, such as venues, facilities, and people’s awareness of participation. Based on these differences, the Chinese government and the General Administration of Sport of China also designated six places, namely Dongcheng District and Xicheng District of Beijing, Baoding City of Hebei Province, Shaoxing City of Zhejiang Province, Zhangjiagang City of Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province, and Chongyi County of Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, as NFP model regions in 2022. Future research is necessary to discuss this gap, conduct in-depth exploration of the NFP development in these regions, and consider whether the successful experiences of these regions can provide inspiration for the NFP development in other regions.

Nowadays, NFP has been placed in an important position by the Chinese government, and research on NFP has gradually deepened, from the initial focus on quantity to the current focus on quality. The development of NFP plays a significant role in the construction of a sports power in China. Therefore, for the long-term development of NFP, future research should focus on the impact of major events on the development of NFP, as well as comparative studies of NFP and ‘SfA’ in Western countries and in-depth discussions on the development of NFP in different

regions. Researchers should be encouraged evaluations of these efforts so the lessons learned can be documented, widely shared, and implemented for future National Fitness Program.

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