

# Concepts and Origins of Ethnic Sports, Folk Sports, and Traditional Sports

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**Abstract:** This study enhances the theoretical framework of ethnic sports, folk sports, and grassroots sports culture from cultural, sociological, and economic perspectives. It clarifies the concepts related to multiculturalism, ethnic sports, and folk sports. Based on this foundation, an analysis of the origins of ethnic sports, folk sports, and grassroots sports is conducted from a multicultural perspective. In ancient China, there was no concept of "sports" in the modern sense, but there existed a rich variety of traditional ethnic sports and physical activities with diverse forms. These activities originated from various sources, including religious beliefs, the pursuit of health, entertainment, and even evolved from warfare.

**Keywords:** Ethnic sports, folk sports, grassroots sports, origins

## 1. Introduction

In ancient Chinese vocabulary, there was no term like "sports." The word "sports" was introduced to China in the early 19th century from Japan. During the mid-19th century, countries with relatively advanced education systems worldwide began to use the term "sports." Japan's "Meiji Restoration" promoted the adoption of Western social culture, scientific technology, and educational reforms. In the late Qing Dynasty, under the influence of the Meiji Restoration, a large number of Chinese students traveled to Japan for education. They introduced the term "sports" to China. The term "sports" first appeared in China in the charter of a kindergarten in Hubei in 1904, which mentioned the "preservation of physical health and the development of sports as a foundation." Once introduced, the term "sports" was quickly embraced by the Chinese people, and they actively examined various societal issues, such as economics, education, and history, from a sports perspective. In 1997, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council of China and the former National Education Commission established four sub-disciplines under the primary discipline of sports science: sports education and training, sports humanities and social sciences, sports human body science, and traditional ethnic sports science. Since then, ethnic traditional sports have been officially named as a secondary discipline of sports science. However, in academic research and communication, there has long been a tendency to mix the concepts of ethnic sports with folk sports, and grassroots sports. In recent years, with increased attention from the government and deeper theoretical research in ethnic sports, the concept of traditional ethnic sports has gradually become clearer, and its application scope has become more defined.

## 2. Conceptual Analysis of Ethnic Sports, Folk Sports, and Traditional Sports

### 2.1 The Concept of Ethnic Sports

Sports theory scholars have defined the concept of traditional ethnic sports from various research perspectives. Tu Chuanfei et al. (2009), from the perspective of ethnic identity, argue that ethnic sports are a unique form of traditional sports culture that is collectively owned and enjoyed by all the people of one or several ethnic groups, and it fosters a sense of ethnic identity among them<sup>[1]</sup>. From the perspective of ethnic communities, as elucidated by Mi Lin in 2014, ethnic sports should be understood as sports practiced by various ethnic groups around the world. This includes sports within the Chinese Han ethnic group as well as foreign sports. Within the Chinese Han ethnic group, there are sports practiced by the existing 56 ethnicities and those that have disappeared. Zhang Ruifeng and others, in 2015, provided a cultural definition of ethnic sports, stating that they are closely linked to a specific ethnic culture<sup>[2]</sup>. These sports are developed and distilled by the indigenous people of that ethnicity in

the course of their production and daily life. They possess the customs and characteristics unique to that ethnic group. From a global perspective, nearly every ethnic group has its own preserved traditional sports or physical activity methods, such as China's martial arts and qigong for health. Please do not add or subtract words, and ensure the accuracy of each paragraph.

## ***2.2 The Concept of Folk Sports***

Folk sports are closely related to the customs, cultural habits, and way of life of a particular ethnic group. They are rooted in and intertwined with the folk culture, including ethnic customs and traditions. Folk sports are most intimately connected to the physical and daily lives of the people within that ethnic group, widely practiced and accepted, and they exude a strong ethnic flavor and folk cultural essence. These sports activities, which have evolved from ethnic customs and traditions, typically involve collective participation and follow established patterns. They are commonly observed during special ethnic festivals, holidays, or gatherings.

## ***2.3 The Concept of Grassroots Sports***

The term "folk" sports primarily refer to sports activities among the general population<sup>[3]</sup>. It represents a widely practiced form of sports within the community that has not evolved into formalized sports with established rules and structures. Activities like tug-of-war, swings, shuttlecock kicking, and sandbag tossing are prevalent in folk sports, but until they have unified rules and formal organizations, they remain classified as folk sports<sup>[4]</sup>. In essence, folk sports encompass all sports activities outside of officially recognized sports, and even if games like basketball and badminton undergo gamification, they do not fall under the category of folk sports.

In summary, there are both distinctions and connections among ethnic sports, folk sports, traditional sports, and grassroots sports. Firstly, these concepts share certain connections as they all originate from ethnic traditional cultures, collectively reflecting the coexistence of human history and culture. These concepts exhibit some overlapping in their content, as some activities belong to both folk sports and grassroots sports, such as kite flying and Yangge dancing. Secondly, these concepts differ to some extent, emphasizing different aspects in depicting the culture of ethnic sports. In other words, they are distinct in nature and scope.

## **3. Analysis of the Origins of Ethnic Sports, Folk Sports, and Traditional Sports**

### ***3.1 Originating from the need for survival***

In the harsh living conditions and adverse survival circumstances of ancient times, humans constantly had to contend with nature. In order to survive, they needed to possess good physical fitness and the ability to withstand risks. In primitive conditions, food sources depended on hunting and gathering. Additionally, to evade the threat of wild animals, individuals had to develop abilities such as running and climbing. Through the long process of struggling against nature for survival, the most practical, valuable, and simple skills of walking, running, jumping, and throwing were developed. These most basic physical skills were the germination of sports. In different geographical environments and climate conditions, various skills for utilizing natural resources and production conditions were formed. Alongside the development of their own cultures and ethnic identities, these primitive skills gradually evolved into traditional ethnic sports with rich cultural elements and national characteristics.

### ***3.2 Originating from Productive Labor***

After satisfying their basic survival needs, various ancient ethnic groups engaged in primary forms of labor such as farming, fishing, and nomadic activities due to differences in their geographical locations and environments. Over the course of their long-term labor and production activities, these ancient ethnic groups abstracted, refined, and transformed certain physical exercises that contributed to the development of bodily skills and capabilities. Through extensive selection and transmission over time, these practices gradually evolved into traditional sports and physical activities specific to each ethnic group.

### ***3.3 Evolution of Military Warfare***

As human society has evolved, conflicts, competition for resources, and even wars have arisen among different tribal and ethnic groups in order to expand their influence and control more resources. Although war is brutal, it has played a significant role in promoting the development of nations and human progress. To survive in war and achieve victory, one must enhance combat skills, cultivate physical fitness, and reinforce regular military training to increase the chances of winning a war. Simultaneously, war serves as an effective means of selecting the strong from the weak, giving rise to traditional sports that have played crucial military roles and continue to be passed down to this day.

### ***3.4 Originates from religious activities***

The ancient humans possessed a relatively rudimentary understanding of nature, often unable to comprehend many natural phenomena and entities accurately. Faced with the mysteries of the natural world and helpless in the face of natural disasters, people turned to higher powers beyond human capabilities, seeking divine intervention to rescue the tangible realm. This gave rise to religious beliefs. Common forms of religious activities included nature worship, totem worship, shamanistic rituals (shamanic dances), religious festivals, sacrificial rites, and the belief in mythical legends<sup>[5]</sup>. The early practices of religion differed significantly from contemporary ones, exhibiting a strong sense of ritual in ancient religious activities. These rituals involved physical activities such as dance, leaps, and running to invoke the presence of divine entities in the hearts of believers. While some primitive religious practices may have appeared relatively ignorant or backward, they played a constructive role in enriching the cultural aspects of different ethnic groups and promoting the development of their respective cultures, particularly in the realm of indigenous sports.

### ***3.5 Human Reproductive Needs***

The proliferation of races, the perpetuation of life, is of paramount importance to all ethnicities, particularly for ancient minority groups. In the remote past, when transportation and information were limited, opportunities for intercultural contact were realized through sports activities and competitive games, providing a platform for young men and women to engage in courtship and romance. Young individuals could showcase their athletic skills and competitive prowess through graceful performances in sports activities. Those with superior physical attributes, agility, and sharp sports acumen were more likely to attract the attention and admiration of the opposite sex. Through contact and communication via sports activities, better mate selection and the choice of suitable partners were facilitated, promoting the reproductive success of minority ethnic groups.

### ***3.6 Originates from Entertainment and Recreation***

According to the hierarchy of human needs theory model proposed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow, there are five fundamental and innate needs that constitute different levels or stages: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. The lower-level needs, also known as deficit or deficiency needs, are directly related to an individual's survival. Higher-level needs are referred to as growth needs and can contribute to a person's health, longevity, and vitality. When people satisfy their basic material needs, they naturally aspire to higher-level needs. Therefore, ethnic traditional sports are endowed with the responsibility of expressing emotions, such as joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, once the material needs for survival have been met.

### ***3.7 Originates from the Pursuit of Health***

Science has confirmed that sports play a role in promoting both psychological and physiological health. Although in ancient history, the utilitarian or fitness value of sports activities was not as apparent as in modern times, they still fulfilled roles that were difficult for other activities to replace. Examples include the Tujia people's "Bai Shou Wu," the Korean people's springboard, and the Tibetan people's "Ya Jia," among others. "Bai Shou Wu," known as "She Ba" in the Tujia language, evolved from Tujia sacrificial dances and is characterized by the integration of singing, dancing, music, and storytelling<sup>[6]</sup>. It portrays a wide range of historical and social aspects of Tujia culture, such as the creation of the world, ethnic migrations, legends, hunting, farming, and daily life. Beyond being a choreography depicting aspects of production, life, and war scenes, when viewed through the lens of

modern sports theory, "Bai Shou Wu" can be seen as a precursor to calisthenics, representing a form of physical exercise aimed at developing bodily functions and shaping the physique.

#### **4. Analysis of the characteristics of national sports, folk sports and folk sports**

##### ***4.1 National sports culture is rich in content, diverse in form, and has rich cultural connotation and multiple values***

In the long course of historical development, traditional national sports, like national culture and customs, are closely related to people's life in ethnic areas, and they are also subject to political and economic constraints. History over the years has proved that when the society is stable and the economy is revitalized, then the national culture and traditional national sports in this period will be developed, and vice versa. Traditional national sports have unique characteristics and are deeply loved by people of all ethnic groups. Because the national traditional sports come from the life, from the folk. In the long historical process of constant exchange, inheritance and gradual development, it reflects life, exercises the body, and has been preserved.

Sports culture is the physical practice close to life, is a kind of education content and means, national sports culture is the treasure of traditional culture, is the carrier of inheriting national culture and displaying national characteristics, is the means to improve the national physical and mental health level and condense the national spirit. National culture is the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth created by a certain nation in the long-term practice of common production and life, and can reflect the characteristics of the nation, and is one of the symbols of the level of historical development of the nation. In the process of historical development, each nation has its unique value system and cultural tradition, and its cultural identity has formed a unique national color. At the same time, the original cultural elements of each nation still exist.

##### ***4.2 Folk sports are usually traditional and national sports with strong national colors and folk culture***

Folk sports are sports activities with intrinsic vitality created by the people and integrated with the customs and habits of People's Daily life. Folk sport inherits a strong traditional folk culture and is the most active form of expression and the most intuitive display platform of folk culture. Folk sports has always taken sports activities as the form and content, serving the public, and its service purpose is completely consistent with the service purpose of national fitness. "With people's health as the starting point and destination, its purpose is to improve people's physical and mental health, quality of life, and meet people's desire for a better life."

##### ***4.3 Folk sports have distinct national customs and local characteristics***

With the appearance of human sports activities, folk sports came into being. It is a special cultural form produced and developed to meet people's needs. Its development and evolution process, affected by the specific natural environment, social and historical development process and various folk factors, shows its unique characteristics: (1) Folk sports widely exist in the folk, popular all over the world. Own unique style. Folk sports is a traditional form of sports with national and local characteristics. As an important part of mass sports, folk sports have been valued and popularized, and have been gradually endowed with new vitality.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In ancient China, there was no concept of "sports" in the modern sense, but there existed a rich variety of traditional ethnic sports and physical activities with diverse forms. These activities originated from various sources, including religious beliefs, the pursuit of health, entertainment, and even evolved from warfare. When these forms of activities became distinct from the production and daily life of ancient human societies and gradually evolved into an independent cultural phenomenon, they began to emphasize and enhance functions such as fitness, education, competition, and entertainment. As these activities were endowed with rules and gradually became standardized and regulated, they developed into organized sports disciplines.

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