Sports Literature and Tang Poems

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Abstract. Overviewing human’s history of literature, we could see the bud of sports literature in ancient Greek’s myths and the beginning of it in Homer’s Epic and China’s ancient poems collection The book of Songs. In the revival of modern Olympic Games, Coubertin’s Ode to the Sports shows vivid description of sports images and events from aesthetic perspective. The author made a comprehensive retrieve towards 42,863 poems in The Whole Collection of Tang Poetry and offered people a new perspective to appreciate sports and literature.

Introduction

Sports literature can be defined as literature with the theme of sports, including myth, poetry, legend and novel. In the five-thousand-year history of China, many poems and proses describe the ancient sports. Ancient Chinese poetry developed greatly in Tang and Song Dynasties. Sports activities also boomed unprecedentedly in these periods. There are sufficient academic studies of poetry and studies of sports in Tang Dynasty respectively, however, the combined studies for the two parts are rare. The author made a comprehensive retrieve towards 42,863 poems of 2,529 poets in The Whole Collection of Tang Poetry. There are up to 99 poems associated with ball activities, 11 poems describing the dragon boat festival customs, 47 poems mentioned or specifically described the swing activities of Tang Dynasty during the Cold Food Festival and Qingming Festival, 160 poems being associated with climbing mountains, 16 poems depicted acrobatics, more than 320 poems referred to the chess, 83 poems about fishing, 350 related to hunting and 430 poems related to shoot. Examples of the ancient sports events in Tang poems are listed as follows.

Archery. It had been a long history of archery in China and integrated into the social customs in Tang and Song Dynasties. Ethnic riding, shooting, dances and so on were widely popular. Riding and shooting in peak of Tang were popular for all ranks of people, while many women were involved in. The famous Tang poet Wang Jian and Zhang Ji wrote poems about shooting. Du Fu’s Mourning by the Winding River described: “The female Attendants were armed with arrows and bows; The white coursers, gnawing the golden bits, marched in rows. Her Highness smiled to see the archers leaning back. To shoot skyward and bring down a pair of birds from the rack.”

The art of Sword (剑术). The most famous Tang poet Li Bai created a great number of works, in which his own sports experiences were involved. He proclaimed that he was into sword at 15 years old. During all his life, he insisted on the art of sword, hunting, riding, hiking, boating, boxing and could be considered as an athlete among the ancient writers. Among the existing 964 poems in The Complete Collection of Li Bai, over 200 poems are concerned on fencing and sword. The combination of poems and swords reproduced his ideals and vigorous figure.

Polo. Cao Zhi, a gifted scholar in Three Kingdoms Period, mentioned “Ji ju (击鞠)” in his Famous Capital. It referred to the ancient polo, which was a competitive sport that riding a horse to shoot. It proved that the polo existed long before the late Han Dynasty which became more popular in Tang Dynasty. The requirements for the riding participants with skilled riding technique were high. Team work and cooperation were needed for the victory. Referring to equestrian, Emperor Li Shimin was skilled in it and in the charge of many military ridings in battles.
Empress Wu Zetian had a poem praising his riding skill. In Han Yu’s *Bian Si Sent to Zhang Pu*, vivid shooting strokes made people completely crazy.

**Cuju**. Ancient football was called Cuju in Tang dynasty and liked modern football. In addition to the official competition, two or three people could also dribble, pass each other or kick freely while there is no goal. It was known as the game of “bai da (白打)”. Famous poet Wang Jianceng wrote a verse *Palace Poem* (《宫词》) which described the maids in the palace playing football in the Cold Food Festival. Referring to Cuju, people would also think of Gao Qiu in the *Heroes of the Marshes* (《水浒传》). Due to his good skill in football, he was appreciated by emperor Huizong and promoted to senior officials. It showed how prosperous Cuju was at that time. Great poet Lu You recorded the scene of Cuju game in Xian Yang when he was young in his *Feelings of Late Spring* (《晚春感事》), from which the lively scene of ancient football could still be imagined today. In the Ming dynasty, football had become very popular and prevalent. A poet of Ming dynasty Qian Fu wrote a seven-syllable poem vividly describing women football game in the palace. Looking at the fierce competition and the skilled ladies, women performed as well as men. Readers would feel as if they were in the spot and hear the applause while reading.

**Wrestling.** In the cold weapon era, people’s physical fitness played a crucial role in the war. Thus the ancient military officials paid great attention to the wrestling training with military function. Wrestling, archery and driving coach were equally important in the book of *Li Ji·Yue Ling* (《礼记·月令》). After Emperor Qin unified ancient China, martial arts were prohibited in civil and wrestling became an entertainment activity, named as Jiaodi (角抵). Jiaodi(wrestling) was very popular in Han dynasty. It was a frequent performance especially in the imperial palace. The prosperous society in the Northern Song Dynasty, promoted the development of culture and sport causes. Jiaodi, chess, water sports and so on were also very hot besides Cuju. Great poet Yang Wanli wrote a poem *Jiao Di* to record the splendid scene when he watched a wrestling game held by government.

**Chess.** Chess was very popular in China and Xin Luo during the Tang dynasty and became a very important medium of the frequent exchange between the two countries. Pu Qiu ever wrote a poem *To Pu Qiu’s back to Xin Luo for farewell*. The poem not only expressed the author's sincere feelings for his friend and longing, but his praise to Pu Qiu’s superior chess skill could also be perceived.

With the increasing friendly contact between China and Japan, China and Korean Peninsula in the Tang Dynasty, sport exchanges became more and more. The sports exchange between China and Japan related to many kinds of sports, such as Cuju, polo, step play (步打球), Wu Yi (武术), GO and so on. Board game was very popular in Song Dynasty. A famous Confucian scholar Cheng Hao wrote a poem vividly described the mood, expression and changes amidst the board between the both sides. Poetess Li Qingzhao also likes playing chess with her husband. They two often played chess at home, and agreed on that the loser had to write lyrics on the spot. Then her *Drunk with the Shade of Flowers* (《醉花阴》) was created: “At the East Hedge there we used to drink wine, Unseen fragrance filling sleeves mine. Isn’t that I was blessed? There blows wind from the west, I’m a day lily growing lest.”[3] The sentences had become imperishable classic.

**Aquatics.** Aquatics were prevailed from the ancient time. In both south and north China, where there was water there were aquatics. As early as in the Tang Dynasty, poet Li Yi wrote a poem about frolic in the Qiantang Rivers which told a story about a lady who was being ignored by her wealthy husband and willed to marry a beach swimmer in fighting wind and waves. Three brothers whose last name are Ruan in the *Heroes of the Marshes* are also master-hands of waves fighting. At that time, Qiantang River Waves in Hangzhou was already legendary. Poet Xin Qiji described the fearless heroic of the beach swimmers in his poem, from which we knew that those beach swimmers had extremely superb skills. In the Song Dynasty, there was also an activity called Paoshui, which referred to water polo. Zhaoji, the Emperor Huizong of Song dynasty, wrote a Septasyllabic on it. It was still unknown that whether the Paoshui activity was the father of water polo in modern Olympics. To the Song Dynasty, frolicking in the waves has reached its heyday. There were a large number of notes and poems described the seaman in detail, especially in the *Tales of Wu Lin* (《武林旧事》) of Zhoumi.
Ji rang (Striking wood, 击壤). Ji rang was mentioned in Jin Dynasty litterateur Zhang Xie’s Qi Ming, Tang poet Li Qiao’s Song of Good Rain, Song Dynasty Fan Chengda’s poem. There is detailed record in Yi Jing.

Yuan Gan (Bamboo pole climbing). Yuan Gan further developed during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. In the Music treatise of SuiShu (《隋书·音乐志》), the writer described a performance in which two bamboo poles were needed, and performers in the show jumping from one pole to another. The performance was undoubtedly far more thrilling than it with a single pole. According to the Records of Tang Xuanzong, the Bamboo pole climbing usually was performed in palace in Tang Dynasty. This activity continued in Qing Dynasty as in Songfeng Pavillion (《松风阁诗抄》). Despite the performances were highly ornamental, it was a risky activity.

Circus. Circus refers to different content at different historic periods. In the Tang and Song Dynasties, it referred more to the horse taming and horsemanship performance. To the Song Dynasty, the circus further developed and more items appeared. In Song Dynasty, Meng Yuanlao in Anecdote of Dong Jing Meng Hua: climbing Baojin Pavilion watching circus (《东京梦华录：驾登宝津楼诸军呈百戏》) explained what were the horse introduction, horse showing, horse leaving, horse deceiving, horse jumping, horse dragging and lion horse in the Song Dynasty’s circus.

Fishing. Fishing was an activity with a long history. Archaeological excavation confirmed that Chinese ancestor had invented fishing hook with bone early in the Stone Age. Tang poet Zhang Zhihe wrote “Before the west pass hill white egrets fly, In the peach stream Mandarin fish hie.” in his Song of the Fish (《渔父歌》). Liu Zongyuan’s Angling in snow (《江雪》): “In each hill you, birds flown to none. On all tracks there, no souls, all gone. The caped one in the lone canoe. On river cold angles for snow.” Si Kongshu depicted it in his A Scene at a Riverside Village (《江村纪事》): “The boat the returned fisherman did not tie; When the moon sinks, down in it he is to lie. Even if the wind blows the boat away at night, it cannot go beyond the reeds in water nearby.” There even were works especially on fishing, i.e. Lu Guimeng’s Fishing instruments (《渔具》) in Fu li Collection (《甫里集》).

Tug-of-war. It was a mass sport, had become a popular sport in the society in Tang Dynasty. Xue Sheng wrote To the Tug-of-war (《拔河赋》).

Swing. So many poems were about swing and women’s playing on swing; i.e. Du Fu’s Two poems at Qing Ming (《清明二首》), Bai Juyi’s He Chun Shen (《和春深》), Li Qingzhao’s Rouged Lips (《点绛唇》), the southern Song Dynasty poet Yu Guobao’s Feng Ren Pine (《风人松》). And the most famous was Tang poet Wang Jian’s Song of Swing (《秋千赋》).

Climbing. It has been a long history of climbing on Double Ninth Festival. According to the reliable historical record from the Wei and Jin dynasties, it had become a favorite activity which brought us a lot of stories and beautiful poems. For instance, Tang poet Wang Bo’s September ninth (《九日》) wrote on the Double Ninth Festival, Wan Wei’s Remembering My Brothers East of the Mountain on September Ninth (《九月九日忆山东兄弟》); Li Bai’s Climbing Ba Ling viewing Dongting water force (《九日登巴陵置酒望洞庭水军》), Du Fu’s At Lantian Cui’i’s village on ninth (《九日蓝田崔氏庄》). These sports literature combined climbing with philosophical thought, tales of legend and eating habits.

Lion Dancing. A popular sport in the history and it was no exception in Tang Dynasty. It could be reflected from many notes, poems and paintings, i.e. Yuan Shen’s Xi Liang Ji (《西凉伎》), Wu Zimu’s Notes of Meng Liang (《梦梁录》)in Dong Jing Meng Hua Lu (《东京梦华录》),etc..

Tage (踏歌). Tage was an ancient Chinese dancing spread widely in Tang Dynasty, especially in the government. Liu Yuxi, a poet of Tang dynasty, created a poem Go to Tage. It spread even far to Japan at that time.

Dragon boat race. Liu Yuxi, as mentioned above, vividly recorded the pomp of Hunan dragon boat race in area of Ruan River in his Dragon Boat Song (《竞渡曲》).

There were also a lot about Wu Shu and health care in the Chinese ancient books and records with its heyday in novels of Ming and Qing dynasties. These two activities featured with deep
philosophical thought, practice methods and perfect artistic image. The ancient Chinese sports were influenced by the Confucianism, and it stressed on cultivate moral character and build one’s personality. It was totally different from ancient western sports which pursue physical beauty, strength, speed and other quantitative competitive sports. Qi Gong was described in Xiao Yanzhi’s *Nan Xiang Zi* (《南乡子》).

**Summary**

First of all, sports literature is firstly to express human’s survival. Literature, expresses human’s need to survive, including both the joy and the sorrow. In the fabricate literature world, people could describe dream, excitement, happiness, confusion, dilemma, depression and pressure. A relatively free space could be gained by imagination in literature. Sports in literature is firstly a reflection of survival. It is not a description of how a game or event going or who wins, which is the task of journalism, but a presentation of winners’ applause, losers’ tears and athletes’ images. People could see their survival footprint.

A nationality’s survival condition is vividly recorded in literature works. The history of literature is a picturesque history of a nationality. Sports literature is of no exception. For instance, Chinese nationality’s survival condition was desperate because of foreign nationality’s aggression in modern China (1840-1919). The goal of sports literature at that period was to encourage people to be more robust to resist aggression.

Sports activities were most colorful in Tang and Song Dynasties comparing to other periods in ancient China. A popularity among all ranks of people can be perceived. It was inseparable with the enlightened political policies, economic boom, strong national power and frequent international communications. The frequent communication in sports between China and foreign countries, especially to Japan, Korean peninsula and other Asian countries took on an unprecedented prosperity in ancient sport history.

Secondly, sports literature is to express culture and aesthetics. Enjoy and refresh oneself both physically and mentally are the cultural function of sports and literature, especially in the folk sports and women sports. China’s ancient sports were mostly leisure sports rather than competitive modern Olympic games which owned aesthetic values. Seemingly sports and literature feature contradictorily by firm and gentle, movement and motionless, outer and inner, nevertheless, pent emotions in people’s inner world could both be vented and a healthy, recuperative and balanced psychology could showed. For instance, Li He’s *South yard* (《南园诗》), showed the great ambitions to serve the country; Wang Wei wrote in his *Watching the Hunt*: “Stiff wind, horn bows sing. The generals were hunting near Wei City. Grass thins out, falcons’ eyes sharpen. Where snow ends, horses’ hooves fly. Suddenly they’re past New Market Town. Already home at Willow Branch Camp.” A border defending general’s relaxed and happy mood and exquisite hunting skills were showed in it. Du Fu’s *Mourning by the Winding River* described the delightful mood of court maid shooting prey who are good at shooting in Tang Dynasty court. Wang Jian’s *Song of swing* showed women’s emulative psychology while playing on a swing. In ancient China, women lived under the doctrine of “Three Obedience and Four Virtues”, who had to follow the doctrine of women and dare not go out of their home even one step to take part in social activities. Only when in sports games could their mind and emotion be vented. This can be considered as a special function of ancient China’s sports culture.

Studies of history of ancient sport must be based on solid and certified sports literature. Due to the lack of original references of sports in Tang Dynasty, so many vivid poems and essays about sports in that period supplemented and enriched them greatly, and aesthetic values were added. At the same time, sports literature opened a new domain of literature in Tang Dynasty.

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References


