

The Functions, Characteristics, and Contemporary Educational Implications of Sports Culture in the Eight Warring States

Zipeng Zhang*, Mohd Rahimi Bin Che Jusoh

Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies, City University, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: Zipeng Zhang, zzpsport0@outlook.com

Abstract

The The Warring States period (475-221 BCE) represents a crucial stage in the formation and maturity of traditional Chinese sports culture. This study systematically analyzes the composition of sports activities, their underlying ideological content, and the multi-layered social functions that emerged during this dynamic historical era across the Eight Warring States (Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao, Wei, Qin, and Zhongshan). Drawing extensively upon both archaeological discoveries and transmitted classical literature, and adopting the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Function Theory, Cultural Ecology, and historical comparative analysis, the research reveals that the sports culture of this period displayed four dominant characteristics—militarization, leisure and entertainment, health preservation, and broad popular participation. These cultural characteristics embodied a comprehensive functional system that integrated military training, moral education, and social recreation. The value of sports during the Warring States period was manifested through three core dimensions: safeguarding national defense through organized military sports; fulfilling spiritual and emotional needs via entertainment, competition, and ritual performance; and promoting physical and moral education through the combination of ritual, discipline, and martial spirit. Ultimately, this study highlights the profound historical significance and contemporary relevance of Warring States sports culture. It provides a theoretical foundation and empirical reference for China's modern "Sports Power" and "Mass Fitness" strategies, offering valuable insights into the integration of traditional cultural inheritance with current sports education reform and national fitness development.

Keywords

The Eight Warring States, Sports Culture, Cultural Function, Sports Education, Mass Fitness, Military Sports

1. Introduction

The Warring States period (475-221 BCE) marked a critical transformation in Chinese civilization. During this time, political fragmentation and warfare stimulated rapid economic growth and the rise of diverse philosophical traditions. These historical conditions gave birth to an unprecedented expansion of physical activities that transcended the rigid ritual system of the Western Zhou dynasty [1]. The result was the emergence of a distinctly militarized and secularized sports culture that served both national defense and social development purposes.

Archaeological discoveries from major sites such as Linzi, Handan, and Xianyang provide abundant evidence of organized physical activities including archery, wrestling, and chariot racing [2]. These findings demonstrate that sports in the Warring States period were not isolated amusements but integral components of statecraft and education. Ding et al. further argue that physical activities during this period were tightly linked with military systems and political institutions [3]. This perspective reveals the deep functional connection between body training and governance.

Meanwhile, textual sources such as the Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji) and Strategies of the Warring States (Zhanguo Ce) record detailed descriptions of martial training, hunting, and ritual competitions [4]. Fan et al. note that these practices reflected a conscious attempt to balance military necessity with folk entertainment [5]. In this sense, sports culture became a mirror of the broader social transformation underway across the Eight States.

Western scholarship also contributes comparative insight. Peiser identifies the Warring States as a formative stage in which physical activities began to acquire social and symbolic meaning similar to early European martial traditions [6]. Carter's analysis of feudal-era sports further illustrates how warfare and physical competition often evolved in parallel within hierarchical societies [7]. Such comparisons help situate ancient Chinese sports within a global developmental context rather than viewing them as an isolated phenomenon.

Despite growing scholarly interest, most research remains fragmented, focusing either on individual sports or on limited archaeological materials. Few studies attempt a systematic reconstruction of how sports functioned simultaneously as

military training, moral education, and cultural transmission. This study addresses that gap through a comprehensive examination of both textual and material evidence. It draws upon Cultural Function Theory to analyze how Warring States sports met biological, spiritual, and social needs at multiple levels [8]. By integrating insights from cultural ecology and comparative history, the paper aims to reveal the enduring value of Warring States sports culture and its potential applications for modern physical education reform [9].

Furthermore, the research connects historical understanding with contemporary policy. The educational implications of ancient sports philosophy, especially in terms of moral cultivation and teamwork, resonate strongly with China's current "Sports Power" and "Mass Fitness" strategies [10]. Exploring how ancient practices aligned body training with ethical and civic development may provide useful reference points for modern sports education.

2. Research Methodology and Data Foundation

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design to reconstruct the structure and function of sports culture in the Eight Warring States. The methodology integrates three complementary approaches: literature analysis, archaeological synthesis, and historical comparison. Each approach contributes distinct perspectives that together form a coherent analytical framework.

The first component involves a systematic examination of transmitted classical texts, which record abundant details of sports activities, philosophical ideas, and social customs. Key sources include Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), Strategies of the Warring States (Zhanguo Ce), The Annals of Lü Buwei (Lüshi Chunqiu), Xunzi, and Zhuangzi [1]. These works provide insight into the ideological values that guided the evolution of physical culture during the late Zhou dynasty.

Hu (2019) emphasizes that these texts, when read in conjunction, reveal a consistent concern with both the physical and moral development of individuals [2]. His analysis shows that athletic activities were often portrayed as means of cultivating discipline and virtue, not merely displays of strength or entertainment. This textual evidence establishes the cultural foundation for subsequent empirical interpretation.

The second component synthesizes material discoveries from key excavation sites across the Eight Warring States. Artifacts unearthed in Linzi (Qi), Jiangling (Chu), Handan (Zhao), Xianyang (Qin), and Lingshou (Zhongshan) have yielded rich physical evidence of sports-related objects such as bronze weapons, crossbows, pitch-pots (touhu), Liubo boards, and wrestling figurines [3].

Speak (1999) notes that these artifacts collectively illustrate the social embeddedness of sports in daily life and demonstrate the close relationship between military and leisure practices [4]. For instance, the presence of Jiaodi (wrestling) figurines in tombs implies that athletic contests held both functional and ritual value. Similarly, Liubo game sets found in both aristocratic and commoner graves indicate that intellectual games had already become widespread recreational and educational tools.

Ma (1986) further argues that the symbolic layout of Liubo boards mirrors cosmological patterns, which implies that physical recreation was simultaneously a reflection of moral order and metaphysical thought [5]. These interpretations support the idea that sports culture in the Warring States period combined utilitarian, educational, and ritual dimensions.

The third component adopts a comparative-historical approach informed by Cultural Function Theory. According to Chen and Duan (2016), this theoretical perspective views all cultural practices, including sports, as functional responses to fundamental human needs such as biological, psychological, and social well-being [6]. Applying this model enables an integrated understanding of how sports activities fulfilled overlapping purposes ranging from ensuring military preparedness to promoting communal harmony.

Malinowski's anthropological framework provides additional methodological justification for examining the social roles of sports within complex cultural systems [7]. By situating Warring States sports within this functionalist paradigm, the study highlights their role not as isolated traditions but as adaptive cultural mechanisms essential for state formation and identity construction.

Furthermore, cultural ecology offers a complementary perspective. Jin et al. (2021) suggest that analyzing the ecological interdependence between environment, technology, and physical training reveals how geographical conditions shaped each state's sports practices [8]. For example, northern states such as Zhao developed advanced mounted archery suitable for steppe warfare, while southern states such as Chu emphasized aquatic and ritualized dance forms suited to humid landscapes.

All textual and archaeological data have been cross-validated through multiple sources. The consistency between material evidence and historical documentation significantly enhances reliability. Carter (1985) stresses that cross-validation is vital for reconstructing ancient physical cultures because literary sources alone may exaggerate or idealize events [9].

The integration of these diverse datasets ensures both empirical rigor and interpretive balance. This multi-source design supports the descriptive reconstruction of Warring States sports and facilitates the theoretical analysis of their

educational and social implications. Chen and Chen (2021) observe that interdisciplinary synthesis provides the strongest foundation for linking historical insights with contemporary educational reform [10].

3. Results

This study systematically delineates the rich variety of sports projects prevalent during the period of the Eight Warring States. These activities are organized across four functional categories: military, competitive, leisure, and health preservation. Furthermore, the core ideologies driving these physical practices across the major philosophical schools are summarized.

3.1 Comprehensive Analysis of Sports Activities in the Eight Warring States

The most salient feature characterizing sports activities during the Warring States period is their composite functionality. This means that a single activity frequently served multiple purposes, such as military training, competitive entertainment, and the promotion of physical health.

The category of Military and Competitive activities constituted the foundational layer of Warring States sports culture. Activities such as Swordsmanship and Polearm Combat were widespread. Qin, for example, developed a highly militarized training system, while Qi saw a significant popularization of swordsmanship among the general populace, reflecting strong martial customs evident in Chu. Archery and Crossbow practice were central to military technology and skill assessment. Zhao institutionalized this through the Mounted Archery Reform; Qin achieved technological superiority with standardized crossbow mechanisms; and Chu developed sophisticated theoretical frameworks for crossbow deployment. Jiaodi (Wrestling) and Kang Ding (Cauldron Lifting) served as primary mechanisms for strength training and talent selection. Qin provides compelling archaeological evidence for these practices, with dedicated figurines for both wrestling and lifting activities, and the practice of Kang Ding being demonstrably tied to military merit and reward systems. Finally, Running and Long Jump were crucial for military mobility and endurance. Wei's selective training for the Wei Wu Zu required completing a heavy-load 100-li march, emphasizing rigorous physical endurance assessment, a demanding practice mirrored in Qin's stringent troop training regimes.

A distinct sphere of activity evolved towards Leisure and Entertainment, stimulated by increasing economic prosperity. Pitch-pot (Touhu) functioned as a significant social tool, evolving from an aristocratic banquet ritual in Zhongshan to a broadly popular folk pastime in Qi. Liubo, an ancient board game, was widely practiced. Evidence includes exquisite lacquer sets found in Chu and widespread material artifacts in Qin and Zhongshan, functioning as intellectual competition and serving as a symbol of social status. Cuju (Ancient Football) found its definitive origin and broad popular base in Qi's capital, Linzi. It primarily served as urban entertainment but retained an underlying physical fitness aspect akin to military reserve training. Chariot Racing, exemplified by Tian Ji's strategic approach in Qi and the recovery of lavish chariots from Qin and Zhongshan, fundamentally transitioned from military application to aristocratic wealth display and strategic competition.

The Culture and Health category encompasses practices deeply embedded in the social fabric, often carrying ritual and aesthetic significance. Yuewu (Music and Dance) demonstrated high artistic refinement in states like Qi and Chu, often featuring female participation. These performances served crucial ritual and aesthetic functions while subtly promoting physical and mental cultivation. Baixi (Acrobatics), which included sophisticated pole-balancing, juggling, and animal shows such as monkey and cock-fighting in Zhongshan, served as popular folk entertainment and a display of specialized physical skill. Hunting and Horse Riding, particularly Zhao's integrated mounted archery, were essential aristocratic activities that successfully combined military training, resource acquisition, and social leisure. The unique presence of the Liuxing Suo (Meteor Sling) in Zhongshan further highlighted the distinctive fusion of northern nomadic traditions within leisure activities.

3.2 The Core Ideologies of Warring States Sports

The profound philosophical milieu of the Warring States provided a pluralistic ideological foundation for physical culture, effectively guiding it beyond mere martial practicality toward holistic well-being.

The Huang-Lao/Daoist strain, represented by philosophical figures such as Zhuangzi in Chu and foundational principles adopted in Qin's Lüshi Chunqiu, placed paramount importance on Health Preservation. This school deeply emphasized the concept of Qi as the fundamental origin of life and advocated for the philosophical guidance of "Movement to nourish life, stillness to nourish the spirit." Their prescriptive guidance focused on harmonizing Yin and Yang energies and ensuring the application of moderate exercise, thereby laying the essential theoretical groundwork for all subsequent health-cultivation practices.

In stark contrast, the Legalist/Military perspective, championed by influential figures such as Han Fei, Li Kui, and thinkers advising Qin and Zhao, rigorously stressed Pragmatism. This dominant ideology firmly linked all forms of physical training to the attainment of state power, asserting that "valuing military strength to strengthen the state" was the ultimate political objective. Training protocols, including Li Kui's institutionalized archery assessments and Qin's systematic Wei Wu Zu evaluations, were explicitly designed to be rigorous and systematic, ensuring that all military skills served immediate and critical national security objectives.

The Confucian school, notably through the teachings of Xunzi in Zhao and Qi, contributed the vital concept of Education. Xunzi proposed the fundamental idea that "the body is the foundation of the spirit," arguing convincingly that practical physical experience was essential for the parallel development of both physical fitness and moral virtue. This influential view formally linked martial skills, such as archery and charioteering, with the processes of self-cultivation and strict adherence to ritual propriety.

Finally, Synthetic Thought, best encapsulated by the compilation of Lü Buwei's *Lüshi Chunqiu* in Qin, achieved a remarkable Systemic synthesis of pre-Qin philosophy. This influential text formally proposed the comprehensive "exercise for fitness" theory, systematically integrating established principles of rational dietary regulation, music for health, and seasonal adaptation. This sophisticated holistic framework was designed to build a complete and authoritative system for health preservation, representing a recognized high point in the philosophical understanding of physical culture during the entire pre-Qin era.

4. Discussion

4.1 Six Dimensions of Cultural Characteristics

The sports culture of the Warring States period was uniquely defined by six prominent characteristics that emerged directly from the sustained pressures of military competition, significant social transformation, and continuous cultural exchange.

Firstly, a defining characteristic was High Militarization and Pragmatism. The primary function of all sports was direct military service. This was consistently demonstrated through the institutionalized heavy-load march required for the Wei Wei Wu Zu and Qin's formal inclusion of Jiaodi and Kang Ding in its warrior selection processes. This pragmatic focus was further amplified by technological advancement, such as the mandated standardization of crossbow manufacturing, and by institutional reforms, such as the Zhao Wuling King's Mounted Archery Reform, which successfully popularized the martial spirit across the entire populace.

Secondly, an Enhanced Leisure and Entertainment function substantially developed in the social sphere as economic prosperity increased. The secularization of traditional rituals, exemplified by Touhu evolving from a ceremonial practice into a common pastime, clearly reflected a cultural shift away from the earlier rigid Zhou ritual constraints. Popular urban centers simultaneously saw the rise of both competitive and artistic entertainment forms, including Liubo, Cuju, and Baixi (acrobatics), fulfilling the general populace's growing need for cultural consumption and spiritual relief.

Thirdly, the Systematization of Health Preservation Ideology provided a crucial philosophical and medical foundation for the practice of physical activity. The Huang-Lao emphasis on the systematic cultivation of Qi in Qi State laid the essential groundwork for later Qi Gong exercises. Moreover, the detailed formulation of the "exercise for fitness" theory in the *Annals of Lü Buwei* stressed the importance of the Integration of Stillness and Movement, explicitly advocating for moderate exercise to promote physiological flow and prevent disease, signifying an early and profound fusion of sports and medical science.

Fourthly, Pronounced Regional Differentiation persisted, fundamentally shaped by the unique geographic locations and deep ethnic traditions of each state. The Northern Steppe Model, exemplified by Zhao and Zhongshan, excelled in mounted archery and practical martial skills, accurately reflecting its nomadic heritage. In contrast, the Eastern Maritime Model of Qi strategically leveraged its resources for aquatic sports and urban competition. The Southern Wetland Model of Chu developed sophisticated water combat techniques and distinctive ritualistic Yuewu, imparting a unique cultural quality.

Fifthly, Cross-Cultural Exchange and Integration were continuously facilitated by the high mobility of scholars, merchants, and military personnel. Technical borrowing was common. For instance, Zhao adopted nomadic archery techniques, and Qin assimilated advanced crossbow designs. These actions vividly illustrate the pragmatic and fluid exchange occurring within military sports. Furthermore, the cultural permeation of activities such as Chu's long-sleeve dance and Qi's Cuju fostered significant innovation and localized development across regional boundaries.

Finally, the Relative Gender Equality in sports participation provided a stark contrast to earlier periods. Archaeological evidence from states like Zhongshan and Wei consistently indicates that women were actively involved in activities such as hunting, Touhu, and Yuewu. In some cases, women are depicted handling long weapons during hunts, actively challenging traditional restrictions on female martial training and suggesting a more flexible and pragmatic social attitude toward women's physical competence.

4.2 Multi-Dimensional Functions and Values of Sports Culture

In accordance with Malinowski's Cultural Function Theory, Warring States sports culture played a vital and multifaceted role in meeting human needs across the biological, spiritual, and social levels.

The satisfaction of basic biological needs centered on Physical Safety and Health/Fitness. The Physical Safety function was realized primarily through Military Training, which included swordsmanship, archery, combat, and loaded running. These practices directly enhanced soldier combat effectiveness, significantly improved battlefield survival rates, and thus contributed fundamentally to ensuring state security. Furthermore, activities like Hunting and Horse Riding

provided essential practical skills that ensured the survival and self-defense capabilities of individuals in often hostile natural environments. The Health/Fitness function was met through specialized Health Sports, including Qi Gong and Daoyin. These practices strengthened the physique, promoted metabolism, and were believed to extend lifespan, thereby providing the state with an ample and robust reserve of labor and military personnel. The specialized strength exercises of Kang Ding and Jiadi further served to maximize physical capacity, aligning precisely with the pressing military demands of the era.

The derived spiritual needs were addressed through Entertainment and Recreation and Aesthetics and Artistry. The Entertainment and Recreation function involved popular pastimes such as Cuju, Liubo, Touhu, and Chariot Racing, which effectively alleviated stress resulting from war and daily life. They served to regulate emotions and greatly enriched social interaction, providing a crucial social release valve in a period of high political tension. The Aesthetics and Artistry function was visibly embodied in Yuewu and Baixi. Performances such as Chu's long-sleeve dance and Qin's detailed acrobat figurines successfully satisfied the aesthetic needs of both the aristocracy and the populace, vigorously promoting the development of performing arts and specialized folk skills. Moreover, ritualistic activities, such as prescribed Touhu ceremonies, consistently reinforced cultural identity and social cohesion, serving both aesthetic and spiritual ends.

The highest-level needs were met through the intertwined functions of Education and Inheritance and Politics and Governance. Regarding Education and Inheritance, the systematic Martial Skill Transmission carried out in the army and through private martial arts schools cultivated essential discipline, physical fitness, and teamwork among the youth, actively transmitting the vital martial culture. Rites and Music Education, integrated into Yuewu and Touhu rituals, provided essential moral and aesthetic education, effectively shaping individual conduct and promoting social harmony—a critical institutional mechanism in a politically fractured landscape. On the level of Politics and Governance, the state used Military Merit Incentives (prominently featured in Wei, Qin, and Chu) to highly incentivize soldiers. This mechanism effectively converted demonstrable prowess in sports and combat skills into elevated social status and wealth, thereby consolidating state power. Finally, the use of aristocratic sports, such as the elaborate chariots in Zhongshan, served as a Diplomatic Display, acting as a powerful symbol of national strength and civilization in diplomatic exchanges and a means of projecting regional influence.

5. Conclusions

Warring States sports culture stands as a unique and profound historical development stemming from China's challenging transition from the slave to the feudal system. It successfully integrated fundamental military needs, sophisticated philosophical contemplation, and diverse folk entertainment into a single, cohesive system. This system established a robust functional framework focused on physical strengthening, spiritual cultivation, and the consolidation of political power. The culture's core is defined by its strong pragmatic militarized foundation, systematic health preservation guidance, and carefully supplemented secular entertainment activities. The resultant flourishing of sports provided a solid military and human resource base that was instrumental in the subsequent Qin-Han unification and has since bequeathed an invaluable historical legacy for the sustained development of Chinese sports and the formation of mass fitness ideals in later eras.

The historical experience embedded within Warring States sports culture offers profound and actionable inspiration for China's current "Sports Power" and "Mass Fitness" strategies.

The "Sports Power" Strategy benefits from a Function-Oriented Approach that deepens the Integration of Sports and Education. Contemporary sports education must transcend a narrow focus on purely athletic achievement and urgently return to its essential functions of life education and practical survival skills. This means learning from the Warring States' strategic emphasis on fundamental physical fitness, including running and strength, and integrating rigorous functional physical training into school curricula to systematically build students' physical resilience for future challenges. Furthermore, drawing a lesson from the military merit incentives of Qin and Wei, contemporary education should establish robust academic and enrollment incentive mechanisms directly tied to physical fitness and demonstrated sports skills. For example, linking objective sports assessment results to academic credits or merit evaluation will motivate widespread participation and actively achieve true integration between sports and education.

For Mass Fitness, the clear focus should be on Inheriting Traditional Health Preservation Ideology and Building a Holistic Sports Culture. Upholding the "Movement to nourish life" philosophy from Lüshi Chunqiu and Zhuangzi supports the active promotion of traditional health practices such as Baduanjin (Eight-Section Brocade) and Wuqinxi (Five-Animal Frolics). Integrating these concepts of mind-body balance, moderate exercise, and alignment with nature into modern mass fitness activities will successfully attract a broader age demographic. Furthermore, drawing on the pronounced Regional Characteristics of Warring States sports, for instance, Qi's Cuju or Zhao's mounted archery, locally distinctive sports leisure and tourism projects should be systematically developed based on regional history and natural resources. This strategic development, which includes aquatic sports and traditional martial arts, is necessary to meet the diverse and evolving fitness needs of the entire populace.

Finally, in Cultivating Sportsmanship, there is a clear need for Rebuilding Martial Spirit and Ethical Norms. Learning from the powerful willpower refined by military sports, educators should utilize outdoor challenges and physical endurance events to systematically cultivate resilience, courage, and a spirit of overcoming difficulties in youth.

Promoting Cooperation and Competition, exemplified by the essential teamwork of tug-of-war (gouqiang) and the ethical norms of Touhu and Liubo, through team sports and traditional ritual-based athletic projects in schools and communities is absolutely essential for cultivating rule-following, fair competition, and strong team spirit. In summary, the Warring States sports culture, as a dynamic convergence of pragmatism, health philosophy, and pluralistic culture, holds invaluable functional value that can provide continuous historical wisdom and cultural impetus for the successful formulation and implementation of contemporary sports education and mass fitness strategies.

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