An Exploration Into Socio-Cultural Meridians of Chinese Athletes’ Psychological Training

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This article, via discussing various psychological manifestations among Chinese elite athletes, illustrates sociocultural “meridians” in Chinese elite sports including (a) “Whole-Nation system,” (b) Chinese culture, and (c) their interaction. We propose that the sociocultural characteristics be integrated in athletes’ psychological training and further discuss the aspects of (a) cultural inheritance and (b) traditional beliefs, including “harmony with differences,” “doing the best and following the fate,” “Ah Q spirit,” “all are Buddha,” and the balance between Confucianism and Taoism. We suggest that the ultimate goal of sport psychologists is to facilitate the athlete’s overall development, with such a maturing process only achieved by integrating the above factors into athletes’ sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: Whole-Nation system, Chinese culture, psychological training, sport

In this article, psychological training refers to a process in which professional methods are implemented by psychologists to enhance clients’ psychological capabilities. Psychological training includes mental training; focusing on mastering knowledge, skills, and methods; and psychological counseling, where focus is placed on building a positive self-image and a constructive thinking pattern. The present article explores the sociocultural context of Chinese athletes’ psychological...
training, specifically pertaining to Chinese elite athletes who are at least at the national level.

The Perceived Pulse Quality: Intrapersonal Afflictions and Interpersonal Order

Based upon approximately 20 years of experience and study (e.g., Si, 2008; Si, Lee, Zheng, & Liu, 2009), the first author suggests that Chinese athletes and coaches face two main issues: (a) self-extrication from intrapersonal afflictions and (b) interpersonal challenges around order and relationships. Effectively managing these two issues can enable athletes and coaches to achieve their ultimate goals of high quality performance enhancement and overall well-being.

Intrapersonal Afflictions

There appear to be three types of intrapersonal afflictions that Chinese athletes experience. First, Chinese athletes often experience significant distress following poor performances, such as failure in important competitions and acute/chronic injuries, both of which could induce extreme psychological and physiological pain. Second, Chinese athletes often have high expectations. Every athlete wants to achieve excellent results, especially in Olympic Games, Asian Games, All-China Games, and World championships. Success in any of these tournaments is a dream come true, but the pursuit of these goals may lead to tremendous pressure, fear of failure, and anxiety. Extreme anxiety can affect the athlete’s daily functioning, lead to inconsistent performance, or even threaten the athlete’s overall well-being. Finally, some athletes are significantly distressed due to performance slumps and stagnation, a relationship break-up, chronic injuries, or a combination of the aforementioned. Such distress often manifests as feeling meaningless in their athletic lives, resulting in a struggle to continue. Self-extrication from the above afflictions is the path to self-transcendence and self-development, through which the meaning of an athletic career and life in general can be actualized. In this article, we use the term “self-extrication” in reference to how elite Chinese athletes self-protect or self-regulate as a way of responding to those common intrapersonal afflictions.

Interpersonal Order

The world of sport is a microcosm of Chinese society. On one hand, it has a top-down, official/rank-orientation, in which the national ruler overtly sets up the boundary for interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, there are various bottom-up, hidden regulations brought from traditional Chinese relationalism (Hwang, 1987, 2000), such as “guanxi” (i.e., interpersonal connection, art of relationship), “renqing” (i.e., rules of social exchange), and “face” (i.e., socially contingent self-esteem), which covertly confine social interaction. Deng (2010) stated that interpersonal relationships or connection determine one’s relationship with objective entities (e.g., systems, resources, and organization) among the Chinese, which is in sharp contrast with Western society.

A clear interpersonal network is very important in the sport world, which considers great achievements (e.g., success with medals) as the absolute standard.
The covert and overt influences described above, however, may interact or conflict with each other. Therefore, athletes and coaches must learn and adjust to their roles so that they can adapt to what sometimes are unclear situations. For this reason, fairness is one of the most common topics discussed and complained about among Chinese teams, including fair resource allocation, fair opportunities, and even fair results. All these matters are intertwined with interpersonal ties and relationships. Consequently, there is sometimes a struggle between personal, interpersonal, and more global expectations.

The dyad between athletes and their coaches can be complicated. Coaches are supposed to be authoritative while athletes are growing and maturing. Coaches as mentors and parental figures nurture athletes, beginning when they are very young and continuing after the athletes become world-class performers. Athletes, in turn, may perceive the relationship with their coaches differently at progressive developmental stages (i.e., childhood, adolescence, young adulthood). If this change in the coach-athlete relationship is ignored or mismanaged, problems may arise. A number of real life cases have illustrated how perceptual discrepancies and poor management can cause various difficulties among Chinese sport teams.

The Meridians Behind the Pulse: Whole-Nation System and Chinese Culture

Many individuals deal with their own psychological issues/symptoms or at least seek relief within their own life context. It is, however, difficult for Chinese athletes to draw upon resources from their existing context and deal with challenges in isolation. The sport psychologist is among the resources from which athletes seek help. While sport psychologists may not be able to directly create or help restructure the environment for the athlete, they can serve as messengers/facilitators who deliver psychology knowledge and impart important skill sets. Such sport psychologists must be rooted in the athletes’ environment and comprehend the sociocultural backdrop so that they can help athletes effectively manage various intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges such as those described above. The following section exemplifies Chinese athletes’ sociocultural context via two main areas: (a) Whole-Nation system (Chinese sport system) and (b) Chinese culture.

Whole-Nation System

Whole-Nation system is a specific national setup implemented in this historical period in China’s sport system. State-government, via various administrative means, allocates financial resources and implements effective management to develop sports according to a national strategic plan. The contribution of this system toward competitive and elite sport development in China is apparent (Liang, 2005, 2006). The two main impacts conveyed from the system and impacting Chinese athletes are (a) collective interests as the priority and (b) an executive-led system that takes charge of professional/technical issues.

Collective Interest as the Priority. The key objective of the Whole-Nation system is to win glory for the nation and serve national interest and political purposes. National and collective interests come first and are supposed to override personal
interests when necessary. Such a mindset is the key difference from Western sport systems. From the selection of national teams to personal decisions such as studying and retirement, Chinese athletes are supposed to behave in accordance with the overarching collective benefits. Collective mindedness works well in inspiring athletes’ visions and patriotism as well as nourishing athletes with excellent self-organization and self-discipline. However, values that prioritize the state may limit athletes’ self-determination or initiative. This is why some athletes express that they have to rather than want to practice during daily training.

**Executive-Led System.** Administrative, training, and competitive sectors compose the structure for the Whole-Nation system, where the administrative level takes the decisive role within the hierarchy. Government manages sports via administrative means and allocates resources based on political strategies. In other words, from policymaking and resource allocation to training arrangement, goal-setting, and even cooperation with sport science and medicine (such as whether morning session is optimal for a particular athlete), the administrative sector is responsible for all of these decisions in principle. The usual practice of setting up medal targets for each team during Olympic Games (national teams) and All-China Games (provincial teams) is a good example. Administrative executives would ask, if not order, their respective teams to achieve a specific level of results. Executive-led characteristics are manifested in many aspects in the sport system. It, indeed, coincides with the Chinese thinking style, which tends to pay homage to the overall and collective situation (see below). The fundamental mindset can be described as “don’t tell me your difficulties, tell me what you can contribute!”

**Chinese Culture**

The culture of any society consists of the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that the members of that society have acquired through instruction or imitation and which they share to a greater or lesser degree (Linton, 1936). Chinese culture, as one of the world’s oldest and richest cultures, has been widely explored by scholars from various disciplines. This section focuses on three related characteristics: (a) cognitive process, (b) authoritative character, and (c) social relationships.

**Cognitive Process: Holistic/Dialectic Characteristic.** Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001) proposed that East Asians are relatively holistic-oriented, attending to the harmony between subjects and the entire field or any field influence, accepting the existence of possible contradiction and relying on “dialectical” reasoning to see the world. In contrast, Westerners are typically more analytical, paying attention primarily to the object, using rules, formal logic, and law of noncontradiction to understand the world.

The following case can serve as an example, illustrating such cognitive processes. The example is one of the most common in the elite sport realm: precompetition anxiety, or maintaining a “desire to win but fear of failure.” The Chinese intervention would be “cure the root,” which implies searching for the fundamental issue underneath the athlete’s problem and then working through that issue. Many athletes are afraid of losing, typically due to subsequent distracting and/or negative thoughts. The reason for those distracting and negative thoughts can be the block-
age of a positive image. In other words, athletes’ “spirit of origin” (i.e., Buddhist concept describing the state of mind inborn to everyone) is contaminated by their surrounding environment (e.g., benefit, fame). Practitioners would help athletes to self-analyze repeatedly, strengthen and consolidate the positive image, and purify the unconscious mind gradually until they reach a level of detachment and subjugation. This intervention approach can be described as “cognitive restructuring.” The intervention is relatively dialectic and intuitive, but not black and white. The efficacy or effectiveness also depends on the athletes’ ability understanding or their “root of wisdom,” which in turn can lead one to truth. In contrast, it should be stated that the Chinese intervention known as “cognitive restructuring” is different than the Western psychological intervention of the same name. In Western culture, cognitive restructuring is part of the cognitive-behavioral tradition and seeks to modify the content of one’s thoughts by subjecting it to Socratic analysis (Beck, 1976).

Sport psychology interventions targeting precompetition anxiety in Western culture is typically quite different from that of its Chinese counterpart. The most common Western intervention is more symptom-oriented. Sport anxiety is defined as the athlete’s perception of worry stemming from situations that seem to threaten her/his current or future self-esteem. Sport anxiety is also characterized as consisting of cognitive elements of anxiety, somatic elements of anxiety, and self-confidence (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990). Previous authors (e.g., Edwards & Hardy, 1996; Gould, Petlichkoff, & Weinberg, 1984; Hardy, Woodman, & Carrington, 2004; Thomas, Maynard, & Hanton, 2004) have suggested that sport performance is negatively correlated with the cognitive elements of anxiety, positively correlated with self-confidence, and form an inverted-U shaped relationship with the somatic elements of anxiety (see Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Psychological training is thus intended to improve the cognitive and somatic elements of anxiety and self-confidence with a clear, objective procedure and evidence-based research to measure the effectiveness.

In contrast, a holistic and dialectic cognitive process is always employed in our (i.e., Chinese) daily lives and facilitates one’s understanding of the overall situation. If athletes can make good use of this dialectic thinking, it is believed that they can cope well with various adversities and afflictions. Actual practice, however, has revealed that such cognitive processes can also pose some challenges. If athletes begin to ponder results before the plan or training has started, it may be more difficult for them to enjoy the process and the pursuit of their goals. Chinese athletes seem to emphasize suffering heavily or “regarding hardship as joy” (different from “finding joy in hardship”), and enjoyment and inspiration may be overlooked. Another example of such challenges is that some coaches and trainers rely on their own personal experience predominantly, or even exclusively. Such coaches and trainers believe they can take hold of all aspects of the training; however, training and elite sport in modern society has been recognized as a scientific and academic discipline, which emphasizes logical analysis, testable evidence, and theory-driven development.

Authoritative Character: Traditional Values. In Chinese society, cardinal relationships, such as sovereign and minister and father and son, are regarded as morally and ethically meaningful and form the basis of an authoritative value system. The principle of respecting the superior within the dyad has been constraining and specifies the social exchange and interaction among Chinese people (Hwang
& Han, 2010). Wen (1991) concluded that Chinese authoritative characteristics include (a) obedience toward sovereign, elderly people with political and social status; (b) respectfulness of others with experience and knowledge; (c) submission to social order; (d) the valuing of collective interests rather than personal ones; and (e) acceptance of a lifestyle adjustment to accompany societal needs.

In Chinese sports, corresponding government officials serve as the authority toward coaches and athletes, whereas coaches have the commanding role with their athletes. The relationship between coaches and athletes in China seems to differ from those in Western countries. Due to traditional values, Chinese coaching affirms distinct values of authoritativeness, morality, and consideration (Yang, 2004). These coaching values are further highlighted by the Whole-Nation system. Many professional athletes, such as gymnasts, divers, and swimmers have been living and training with their coaches since they were very young (e.g., 6, 7 years old). Time with their coaches can exceed time spent with parents. Consequently, to a certain extent, relationships with coaches can be more intimate than ones with biological parents. This dyadic relationship can be described as intimate and authoritative, requiring athletes to obey and respect various behavioral boundaries. When these athletes mature and experience new things, the dyadic authoritative relationship with their coaches is then challenged and prone to change. Eventually, athletes may see themselves as more equal and less subordinate to their coaches.

**Social Order: Relationship and Face.** The previous section pertained to the characteristics of social interaction in Chinese society. “One of us” (i.e., part of the collective) is an important concept in the Chinese interpersonal relationship (Yang, 2000). The Chinese would categorize people as “one of us,” which means categorizing in-group versus out-group members according to perceived closeness within family and friendship and adjusting one’s attitude and behavior based on cultural membership (see Gudykunst & Bond, 1997). In practice, in-group and out-group memberships are not entirely fixed and can be changed under certain circumstances. Given that the phenomenon of categorizing “one of us” is common among social units or groups in Chinese culture; the same value also spills over into the sports community. Such categorization and its ramifications more or less constrain and influence the team culture and atmosphere in sports. An effective leader can use the concept of “one of us” to cultivate an in-group effect, which encourages members to accept and support each other. On the other hand, mismanagement of in-group culture might possibly lead to unintentional clique behavior and create a poor group dynamic. Some athletes on certain teams feel unfair treatment can be partly due to such mismanagement. For instance, national team coaches may look after those coming from the same provinces, and those taught by the same coaches may be looked at a little bit more closely before selecting their national team.

The concept of “face giving” is another important characteristic in Chinese social interaction (Hwang & Han, 2010; Kulich & Zhang, 2010). Zeng (2005) proposed that there is a concept of “completeness” (or fulfillment) other than simply right and wrong in value judgment among Chinese, where resolving the situation is sometimes more important than being right. To illustrate, imagine a situation in which an athlete criticizes his coach in front of the whole team. Chinese people have difficulty accepting those who cannot distinguish right from wrong, because
it implies they are poor in decision making and ineffective at problem solving. However, they also have difficulties with those who maintain a black-and-white mindset in terms of justice and little thought in social correctness, because they may make others “lose face” and be regarded as unwelcome. Emotionally sensible and logically sound approaches are highly valued in Chinese communication, where the “emotionally sensible” value of prioritizing the other individual takes precedent. In other words, the Chinese first consider another’s face (i.e., honor) and dignity and then the logical principles within situations. This is the art of communication with the sense of “completeness” in Chinese society. Referring to the previous example, the athlete would be recommended to communicate with the coach privately and show agreement in public, if possible. If any party believes that she/he has lost face within the communication, a negative emotional reaction may be provoked and a more serious problem may be created. Both concepts of face giving and completeness are closely related to the significant cultural need for harmony.

Interaction Between the Whole-Nation System and Chinese Culture

The Whole-Nation system and Chinese culture are intertwined in many aspects. Such interaction can be revealed in various areas that follow below, including values, management and social order, and ideal characteristics.

Values. The Whole-Nation system emphasizes the value and honor of nationalism (i.e., “win glory for the nation”; Xu, 2008). This ideology comes down in one continuous line of collectivistic orientation in Chinese culture. The concept of filial piety (i.e., filial obligation to parents) is one of the fundamental bases breeding the collectivistic characteristic in Chinese culture (Ye, 2009). The ethical doctrine of filial piety extends the filial duty not only to parents, but family clans and other members in one’s social network. The ultimate extension of filial piety thus requires individuals to “achieve so as to glorify ancestors,” meaning that success reflects not only on oneself, but also on one’s social relations. Under such sociocultural conditions, Chinese athletes shape their unique value system by integrating winning glory for the nation and achieving honor for their ancestors.

Management and Social Order. The administrative management in the Whole-Nation system, similar to the overall Chinese society, focuses on goals as the utmost priority, central command, and “Management by Person” (vs. “Management by Law”). The Chinese value hierarchy, ethic order (e.g., filial obligation), and top-down administration (i.e., central command). Likewise, the Chinese look up to and respect the authority of a national ruler, whereas Westerners value democracy (Yan, 1994). Under a Whole-Nation system, coaches and athletes have to adjust and adapt to this environment. They should develop Chinese-style character that embraces concepts such as “tolerance under any issue” and “being transcendent over mundane criteria” (i.e., to obey the authority; Lin, 2002) so that they are more likely to gain the platform and opportunity to develop their careers. This platform is the only path for coaches and athletes to develop and survive within the Whole-Nation system (Chung, Si, Jiang, & Zhang, 2010). In other words, athletes’ conformity to cultural values is part of what allows them to advance within the Chinese system.
Ideal Characteristics. Traditional Chinese culture teaches people to be “men of honor” whose typical character is tough and aggressive. According to I Ching (also known as the Book of Changes), “the movement of heaven is full of power. Thus, the superior man makes himself strong and untiring” (Wilhelm, 1956/1983, p. 113). Traditional Chinese culture has long been male-dominated. Only men received formal education and are taught the concept of “men of honor.” In modern society, however, this concept is being delivered to both men and women as “persons of honor.” Contemporary personality studies also affirm aggressiveness as a dimension of Chinese personality (Wang & Cui, 2003). The personality characteristic of “person of honor” can be extended and perfected through the concept of “internal saints” (i.e., conforming to national Chinese values) and “external kings” (i.e., dominance over others outside of the National state), which encourage people to become “internal saints” first, followed by becoming “external kings.” Where athletes often have aggressive characteristics, their goal achievement highly depends on their personal maturity. As previously described, the Whole-Nation system is authoritative in nature. Athletes under the Chinese system would therefore be somewhat constrained. They must submit to authority and follow the system’s requirements—hence they are, in part, internal saints. Yet, athletes’ aggressiveness and self-determination may be obstructed to some extent, and they may feel a lack of freedom. Such a situation requires the specific abilities of adaptation and internalization, called “a realm” (i.e., a realm of sublimation). Most Chinese athletes and coaches, who invest much effort and become successful, indeed reach a high “realm.” They understand the system and environment well. They demand of themselves and become “internal saints” first, and then conquer outward and become “external kings” when the opportunity arises. “Midway,” or moderation and modesty in thinking style (the golden mean of the Confucian school), but hardworking and aggressive in action (“person of honor”) is how they adapt (Ji, Lee, & Guo, 2010). This is seen as the ideal characteristics of Chinese coaches and athletes and is an example of constructive adaptation, balancing soft power from the culture and hard power from the system.

The Prescriptions Above the Meridians: Operational Goals and Ultimate Goals

Contemporary psychological training in Western countries has developed into a mature system. From schools of therapy (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, biofeedback), to strategies (e.g., cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, interpretation of transference, problem-solving), to skills (e.g., relaxation, effective communication, goal-setting), the system is well advanced. Practitioners cannot simply transplant the cultural elements or religious ideology underlying those systems into practice in Chinese culture, however. During service delivery sport psychologists must consider their athletes’ sociocultural backgrounds. Therefore, the following section describes, in terms of operational goals and ultimate goals, how athletes and coaches could be better served through an appreciation of their sociocultural background.
Operational Goals

Operational goals herein refer to how sport psychologists could provide a better psychological training experience and increase their service effectiveness with elite athletes, from a sociocultural perspective.

**Bringing Sociocultural Characteristics Into Modern Psychological Training.** The understanding of the Whole-Nation system and Chinese culture enables people to make sense of both self-extrication and interpersonal order in the Chinese sports world. Sociocultural conditions constitute athletes’ living structures, in which related characteristics would influence their mentality. When practitioners want to improve their athletes’ psychological functioning or capabilities, to a large extent they are developing athletes’ positive attitudes and active adaptation to their living structure(s). When designing and implementing psychological intervention programs, practitioners should keep in mind that one important task is to help athletes develop a deep understanding of and active adaptation to the whole sociocultural system. On the other hand, we should not ignore that the living structure of Chinese athletes is evolving gradually. For example, professionalism and commercialism in the modern sports industry has to some degree been interacting with, if not changing, the Whole-Nation system. Practitioners should take advantage of these changes to facilitate athletes’ adaptation to their living structure.

**Reexploring the Traditional Culture in a Relevant Context.** Despite the intervention and therapeutic skills of mainstream psychology from Western societies, how to facilitate athletes’ growth (i.e., process of self-extrication and ultimately self-actualization) based on Chinese cultural ingredients is the goal and direction of the current applied field in China. In this section, we point out a few key cultural concepts and explore how they may affect Chinese athletes’ psychological conditions.

**Harmony With Differences.** The opening ceremony of Beijing Olympic Games affirmed the concept of “He” (和) as one of the most important elements in Chinese culture. “He” means harmony and togetherness in peace, but it can also imply harmony with difference. Under the umbrella of shared goals and direction, absolute homogeneity is not insisted upon, and certain differences are expected and accepted. When athletes are young and maturing, they may challenge or disagree with certain traditional values, training concepts, or system characteristics. If their ideas are always suppressed and rejected, frustration can result. Under the perspective of harmony with difference, a variety of values and training concepts can coexist. They can also interact and supplement each other with the assistance of science and experience. The objective of “He” is to maximize athletes’ originality, determination, and potential. “Harmony with difference” can help athletes deal with various issues in their careers and lives in general.

**Doing One’s Best and Following the Fate.** There are two meanings within the concept of “fate” in Chinese. The first meaning implies that one’s life events are predetermined by external forces. Individuals who are able to accept that their fate is predetermined may be more passive in cognitive style and behavioral patterns. Their
negative psychological reactions may potentially be weaker when facing provoking situations. Another meaning is that there are always patterns and regularity in peoples’ fate. Ones can learn, use, and even alter it based on wisdom. “Following the fate” can be interpreted on two levels. First, people are recommended to do their best and follow whatever is given in life and according to fate (Cheng, Lo, & Chio, 2010). Second, people are recommended to realize the regularity of fate and nature. Through realization, people can play along with the vicissitudes of the nature to achieve their life goals. Both interpretations consist of positive and proactive meanings for people to comprehend and adapt. Sport psychologists to a certain extent can serve as interpreters. Advocating for the concepts of “knowing fate” and “following fate,” practitioners can guide their athletes into an active lifestyle in which they develop perceived control and integrity in an ever-changing world.

**Q Coping Strategy.** “Ah Q Spirit” was developed by a Chinese writer, Lu Xun, in the early 20th century, and it represented his satirical criticism about Chinese who were avoiding and choosing not to face their reality. Studies concerning Chinese athletes’ anxiety-based coping found that similar self-comforting strategies such as self-talk can be effective for Chinese athletes (see Chung, Si, Lee, & Liu, 2004; Zhao & Si, 2007). Under serious pressure, athletes stay calm by saying to themselves some traditional idioms like “Winning or losing is just normal in competitions,” “Take a step backward and you’ll see things from a wider perspective,” or “The problem will resolve on its own, in its own good time.” Apart from approach and avoidance coping strategies commonly found in related studies in Western society, Chinese athletes often find the “Ah Q” coping strategy effective. There are often problems that can neither be resolved nor avoided in a given moment. “Ah Q” coping is neither approach nor avoidance in nature but can be very meaningful and pragmatic in real life situations. Chung and colleagues stated that in Chinese culture, “Ah Q” coping implies a positive mentality that promotes the capacity to live with adversity. There are many frustrations and challenges during one’s athletic career. Athletes must learn how to function effectively during periods of adversity.

**All Are Buddha.** Nineteenth century German scholar, H. Oldenberg (1882), stated, “If in Buddhism the proud attempt be made to conceive a deliverance in which man himself delivers himself, to create a faith without a god . . . as the sole really active person in the great work of deliverance man himself” (p. 53). Chinese scholars also expressed that “If Western psychotherapy is a kind of ‘external therapy’ or ‘external help,’ Eastern Buddhism should be regarded as ‘self therapy.’ “All are Buddha” stresses the concepts of self-discovering and self-cultivating” (You, 2008, ¶16). “All are Buddha” is considered to be very meaningful. Within the adage, it is proposed that everyone could become her or his own Buddha by learning self-observation, letting-go, being in the present, and through emptiness. “Buddha is ordinary people with enlightenment, whereas ordinary people (without enlightened) is Buddha in the state of ignorance” (Ming, 2008, ¶5). Such a self-help model may provide some new insight and influence for elite athletes who are ceaselessly chasing, if not craving, fame and achievement. Western scholars (e.g., Haberl, 2007; Moore, 2009) have started to explore Buddhist mindfulness in helping athletes; however, there is a tendency to view the concept as a skill or tool to fix symptoms. Buddhism is indeed deep enough, however, to reach the root of an individual’s life functioning.
Balance Between Confucianism and Taoism. Zhang Kai (personal correspondence, February 1st, 2011) indicated that in Chinese indigenous culture, natural balance between Confucianism and Taoism is a very powerful form of psychotherapy. Confucianism espouses a more proactive and ideal approaching, whereas Taoism advocates a relatively flexible and following tenet. The combination of “tough versus soft” and “active versus passive” can be complementary and suitable for Chinese people. Chinese scholars in the past often found themselves as Confucianism followers when things were going smoothly, but employed a Taoist philosophy during times of distress. This is the wisdom of Chinese people, to be forever explored.

Likewise, athletic careers are full of obstacles, and challenges can be hidden in the midst of success. Confucianism’s proactiveness, Taoism’s nature following, and their interaction with it can help with athletes’ psychological development and adaptation. Sport psychologists could further extract various therapeutic elements from those Chinese traditional philosophies and apply them to the elite sport context. It is believed that principles and coping styles of Confucianism and Taoism can be acquired under systematic training (see Liu & Leung, 2010).

Ultimate Goals

Most Chinese athletes grow up and train in a competitive sport world within a closed environment, receiving a relatively low level of education compared with their fellow countrypersons of the same age. These athletes, therefore, often need professional counseling or mentoring in personal and social development. Chinese elite athletes normally develop, moving through three stages, from starting and pursuing success, to struggling with and surviving various challenges, until they fully comprehend the nature of one’s inner world (Si, 2008). There could be numerous difficulties and frustrations in all three stages. The key of this developmental process is learning how to positively coexist with one’s adversity.

The ultimate goal of sport psychology services is to facilitate the athlete’s performance and overall development of well-being. These services can counsel and nurture athletes so that they are willing to develop, sacrifice for development, and bear the responsibility for their careers. Such processes of maturation can more fully be accomplished with appreciation for the sociocultural context.

Conclusion

Over the last 10 years, Chinese sport psychologists have realized that apart from Western psychological interventions, applying Chinese cultural elements to facilitate athletes’ growth processes, from “self-extrication” to “self-actualization,” is a valuable goal in practice (Li, Li, & Liu, 2010; Si, 2006, 2010; Zhang, 2008; Zhang & Zhang, 2010). The present article, therefore, discussed the provision of psychological services with Chinese elite athletes. First, intrapersonal afflictions and interpersonal relationships within the sociocultural “meridians” were discussed. Such meridians, including the Whole-Nation system, Chinese cultural values, and their interaction, bring up the unique values system, interpersonal characteristics, and personality characteristics of Chinese elite athletes. Exploring and placing
sociocultural elements into psychological services was suggested. Specifically, understanding and appreciating the relevance of five important Chinese traditional elements was encouraged: (a) “Harmony with differences,” (b) “Doing the best and following the fate,” (c) “Ah Q coping strategy,” (d) “All are Buddha,” and (e) “Balance between Confucianism and Taoism.” Finally, we concluded that the ultimate goal of psychological services is to facilitate athletes’ performance and overall development through a constructive interaction with the sociocultural background, and that establishing a socioculturally based model for Chinese elite athletes may allow sport psychologists to have an even greater impact on the psychological development of their athletes.

References


