

A Reexamination of Physical Education and Sports in Japan (1): Physical Education and Sports during the Establishment of the Modern State

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Recently, it seems, the terms "physical education" and "sports" are often confused, and their individual meanings have become unclear. While it is true that the two terms overlap to some extent, it is also true that they have distinctly different areas of meaning.

Physical education developed mainly as part of the school curriculum, and there are prescribed standards of content and methodology (teaching methods) which have varied historically, geographically, and with different types of student. Sports, on the other hand, have diverse origins and histories, but the majority developed as a form of play, and their main purpose can be seen as amusement, relaxation, or recreation. The present study, the first in a series, examines how physical education and sports were treated in the process of being "imported" from other countries as Japan sought to become a modern state, and what influence this has had on physical education and sports in Japan today. (The period under study is centered on the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and extends from 1841 to establishment of the Meiji Constitution in 1889.)

The introduction of foreign, and especially Western, culture to pre-Meiji Japan was greatly delayed by the policy of national seclusion maintained by the Tokugawa shogunate for over two hundred years. The political and social changes known as the Meiji Restoration led to the rapid establishment of a unified modern state; during this urgent process, westernization (modernization) was accompanied by moves to eradicate the existing feudal order. Under these conditions, Japan modeled its physical education and sports entirely on those of Western nations. At the time, however, they were of only marginal importance in the training of Japanese teachers, and they were not developed as fully as other subjects.

Further, as the schools came to play a part in Japan's pursuit of military strength, physical education, in particular, formed the basis of an education system designed to build a nation with "desirable" qualities of both body and mind. Under a modern imperial state seeking to boost its military strength, physical education in the schools took on the role of developing the body and mind in accordance with a policy of "educating the people to serve the nation (the emperor)," which was distinct from the old spirit of bushido. There was also a series of changes in the training of PE instructors, whose subject was known successively as taiikugaku, taiiku, and taiso.

Physical education and sports in Japan could thus be said to have got off on the wrong foot because they developed during the period when the feudal order was giving way to the establishment of a modern imperial state. This fact can be seen as having had a major influence on their subsequent development, and hence on the state of Japanese physical education and sports today.