

The Semantics of Stagnation: A Conceptual Analysis of “Tiyu” Versus “Sport” and Its Structural Impact on the High-Quality Development of China's Sports Industry

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Abstract: This study draws on a historical-sociological perspective, examines a long-standing puzzle in the development of China's sports industry: why large-scale capital investment has not translated into a dynamic and sustainable market. Existing explanations often emphasize regulatory constraints or market immaturity, yet such accounts leave key institutional tensions insufficiently addressed. This paper suggests that part of the problem lies in the semantic and institutional ambiguity embedded in the concept of Tiyu. Unlike Western contexts, where “physical education” and commercialized “sport” are conceptually distinguished, Tiyu historically encompasses both public welfare and market-oriented functions. By tracing the evolution of the term from its adoption as the Japanese loanword Taiiku to its consolidation under the Soviet-inspired Whole Nation System, the study shows that Tiyu was primarily constructed to serve national objectives rather than commercial development. This legacy continues to influence contemporary governance practices, often constraining attempts to treat sport as a marketable product. Policies such as the Integration of Sports and Education, while administratively rational, may further reinforce this conceptual overlap. The paper therefore proposes a strategy of conceptual decoupling, arguing that clearer differentiation between public welfare functions and commercial sport could help reduce institutional friction and create conditions for endogenous industry growth.

Keywords: Tiyu, Sports Industry, Physical Education, Sports Policy, High-Quality Development

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: The Imbalance between Policy Ambition and Market Reality

The Chinese government has elevated the sports industry to a crucial strategic position, with 2014 marking a key turning point. In that year, the State Council's “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption,” commonly known as “Document No. 46”, established the ambitious financial target of expanding the industry's scale to 5 trillion RMB by 2025. This policy signaled a fundamental strategic transition, as China began redefining its identity as a “sports power”^[1]—shifting focus from the traditional metric of Olympic gold medals to the cultivation of a robust, consumption-driven economy.

However, a decade later, a significant structural imbalance persists. Official statistics from the General Administration of Sport of China indicate a heavy industry skew towards the manufacturing of sporting goods (e.g., shoes, apparel, equipment), which constitutes a disproportionate share of total output. In contrast, core service sectors such as spectator sports, leisure participation, and sports agencies lag significantly behind developed markets in the United States or Europe. The central question remains: why has the world's largest middle-class population, with its rising disposable income and health awareness, failed to generate a proportional demand for sports entertainment and participation services?

1.2 The Linguistic and Conceptual Barrier

While conventional analyzes often attribute this stagnation to administrative monopolies, a lack of venues^[2], or insufficient youth training, these explanations tend to address symptoms rather than the root cause. This paper posits that the fundamental barrier is both ontological and semantic. The Chinese term Tiyu, universally translated as “Sport” or “Physical Education” depending on the context, effectively conceals the distinct logics governing these two domains.

In Western thought, “Sport” typically denotes a voluntary, secular, and often commercial activity governed by the logic of entertainment and fair play^[3], whereas “Physical Education” refers to a mandatory, pedagogical activity guided by the logic of human development. In China, Tiyu encompasses both domains but has historically privileged the latter, framing the body's cultivation as a service to the state. Consequently, when a commercial football league (CSL) is governed under the logic of Tiyu, it is treated not as a commercial product but as a vehicle for instilling national spirit and providing youth education. This conceptual misalignment creates high transaction costs for market participants, whose commercial objectives are constantly subordinated to political or educational mandates.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- 1) Deconstruct the genealogy of Tiyu to understand its path dependence as a tool for state-building rather than market-building.
- 2) Analyze how the semantic conflation of Tiyu manifests in contemporary policy failures, specifically the “Integration of Sports and Education”.
- 3) Demonstrate the specific mechanisms by which this conceptual ambiguity hinders the formation of a professional sports service industry.
- 4) Propose a theoretical framework for “Decoupling”, advocating for a linguistic and administrative separation of “School PE” and “Commercial Sport”.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Taxonomy of Human Movement: Western Perspectives

To contextualize the Chinese case, it is useful to first establish the standard taxonomy of human movement commonly used in sports sociology. This framework distinguishes between several related but distinct concepts:

Play: Unstructured, autotelic activity undertaken for its own sake.

Games: Play that is structured by rules.

Sport: Institutionalized, competitive games characterized by physical prowess, requiring specialized facilities and bureaucratic governance^[4]. In the modern era, sport is deeply intertwined with the entertainment industry and consumer capitalism.

Physical Education (PE): A pedagogical process, typically school-based, aimed at achieving physical literacy and promoting health.

Physical Activity (PA): A broader public health concept referring to any bodily movement that results in energy expenditure.

In Western markets, these sectors interact but remain functionally distinct. The National Basketball Association (NBA), a quintessential “Sport” entity, is clearly distinguished from a high school gym class (PE), even if one serves as a talent pipeline for the other. Each possesses its own funding model, governance structure, and metrics for success. Table 1 further shows the conceptual comparison between western “Sport” and Chinese “Tiyu”.

Table 1: Conceptual Comparison: Western Taxonomy vs. Chinese “Tiyu”

Dimension	Western: Physical Education (PE)	Western: Sport	Chinese: Tiyu (The Umbrella)
Primary Goal	Physical literacy, health, social skills	Competition, entertainment, profit	National strength, political prestige, moral cultivation
Target Audience	All students (compulsory)	Athletes & Fans (voluntary)	The "People" (abstract), Elite Athletes (specific)
Funding Source	State / Taxpayer	Market / Commercial / Private	Mixed (State appropriation + State-directed corporate sponsorship)
Governance	Ministry of Education	Independent Associations / Leagues	General Administration of Sport (State)
Key Value	Participation	Excellence / Winning	"Eating Bitterness" (Chi Ku) / Glory

2.2 The “Tiyu” Discourse: A Sinological Perspective

Scholarship on Chinese sports has long noted the unique properties of Tiyu. Susan Brownell^[5] argues that Tiyu is best understood as a form of “Body Culture”. It represents a moral imperative within the Chinese social order, where the body is not the private property of the individual to be enjoyed (as in Western leisure sport), but a national resource to be cultivated. This distinction helps explain why notions of “fun” are often absent from the Tiyu discourse, supplanted by “discipline” and “glory”.

Tracing the concept's origins, Andrew Morris^[6] details the introduction of Tiyu in the early 20th century. He notes that Chinese reformers, aiming to strengthen the “Sick Man of Asia”, largely rejected the “playful” aspects of Western sport as frivolous, instead embracing “martial” and “disciplinarian” practices like German gymnastics and Japanese military drills. Similarly, the work of Fan Hong^[7] emphasizes the gendered, emancipatory, yet fundamentally state-directed, nature of early Tiyu. It served as a tool for modernization, breaking traditions like foot-binding, but its primary purpose remained national survival.

2.3 Theoretical Lens: Foucault and Governmentality

More recent scholarship has applied Foucault's concept of “governmentality” to Chinese sports, analyzing Tiyu as a technology of governance—a method for the state to manage the population's health and productivity. The “Integration of Sports and Education” policy exemplifies this rationality, as it seeks to manage youth bodies to ensure they become fit “Socialist Builders”.

A conflict emerges where this governmental logic intersects with market imperatives. The market demands autonomy, consumer sovereignty, and the pursuit of profit, while governmentality requires control, standardization, and the maintenance of public order. The inherent ambiguity of Tiyu allows the state to extend its governance logic into what would otherwise be market territory, thereby stifling commercial innovation.

3. The Genealogy of “Tiyu”: A Historical Burden

3.1 The Import from Japan: “Taiiku” vs. “Supotsu”

The term Tiyu is a loanword from the Japanese Taiiku (Sports), coined during the Meiji Restoration as a direct translation for “Physical Education”. Crucially, Japan later adopted a separate term, Supotsu, to denote Western-style competitive sports. China, however, retained Tiyu as the all-encompassing signifier for both domains.

This linguistic decision was pivotal and has created a lasting path dependence. By adopting a term rooted in “Education” (Yu) and “Body” (Ti) to describe competitive games, Chinese culture intrinsically embedded a pedagogical mandate within the concept of sport. This is not merely a semantic issue but an institutional lock-in: because the language defines the activity as “Tiyu”, the entire apparatus of the state treats it as a public service rather than a commercial product. The

legislative and administrative systems are designed around this definition, making it structurally difficult to introduce market mechanisms. A football match was thus never merely a match; it was simultaneously a lesson in teamwork, a display of national character, or a physical fitness drill.

3.2 The Soviet Reinforcement: The Whole Nation System

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the importation of the Soviet model of Fizkultura further reinforced the utilitarian view of Tiyu^[8]. This led to the creation of the state-run “Sports School” system.

The Tixiao Paradox, as analyzed in recent studies, reveals the system's semantic anomaly. Labeled a “School”, it implies an educational function (PE), yet it operates as a specialized training camp for elite performance (Sport)^[9]. This hybrid model fails to provide either a holistic education—resulting in the well-documented problem of retired athletes with low literacy—or a sustainable commercial sports career, as it is state-funded rather than market-driven. This system solidified the separation of elite, professional “Sport” from the recreational activities of the general population, even as both continued to be categorized under the single term Tiyu. The masses performed radio calisthenics (Tiyu), while the elites won gold medals (Tiyu), stretching the term to cover diametrically opposite activities.

3.3 The Culture of “Chi Ku” (Eating Bitterness)

A unique cultural dimension obstructing the commercialization of Tiyu is the valorization of Chi Ku, or “eating bitterness”. In the traditional Tiyu narrative, sporting success is achieved through immense suffering and disciplined endurance. The celebrated “Spirit of the Women's Volleyball Team”, for example, is consistently framed in terms of hardship and personal sacrifice.

While a powerful tool for galvanizing nationalism, this ethos is toxic for a consumption-based industry. The modern sports industry markets concepts of “leisure”, “fun”, “lifestyle”, and “flow”. If the dominant cultural cognition of Tiyu is linked to “Eating Bitterness”, the middle class is more likely to consume it as a duty^[10] (e.g., sending children to swimming camps to pass an exam) rather than as a source of joy. This dynamic severely limits the “Lifetime Value” (LTV) of sports consumers, as consumption ceases once the external mandate (e.g., an exam, a national duty) is fulfilled.

4. The Structural Impact on the Sports Industry

This conceptual conflation is not a mere academic curiosity; it translates into tangible barriers that impede the industry's development. Empirical analysis of policy documents reveals that the term “Tiyu” is overwhelmingly associated with state objectives, while market-oriented terms like “Chanye” (Industry) appear far less frequently in core governance documents (see Table 2). This linguistic bias reinforces the bureaucratic dominance over the sector: Tiyu is predominantly used when discussing state objectives, reinforcing its non-market nature.

Table 2: Frequency of Keywords in Chinese Sports Policy Documents

Keyword	Context: "National Glory/Politics"	Context: "Education/Health"	Context: "Market/Industry"
Tiyu	High Frequency	High Frequency	Moderate Frequency
Yundong	Low Frequency	Moderate Frequency	High Frequency
Chanye	Very Low Frequency	Low Frequency	High Frequency

4.1 Barrier 1: Regulatory Ambiguity and “Guan-Ban” Associations

A primary consequence of conceiving Tiyu as a public good (related to Education and Health) is the state's retention of tight control, which manifests in the “Guan-Ban” (Bureaucracy-Run) nature of sports associations^[11]. The Chinese Football Association (CFA), for example, historically acts as both a state regulator (a government function) and a commercial operator (a business function).

Impact: This dual role means that commercial decisions, such as league expansion or scheduling, are often overruled by political mandates, like suspending league play for national team training. From a “Sport” perspective, the league is the product. From a “Tiyu” perspective, the league is merely a training ground for the national team. Such unpredictability deters long-term private investment, which

is crucial for market stability and growth.

4.2 Barrier 2: The “Integration of Sports and Education” (Tijiao Ronghe) Dilemma

The 2020 policy, “Opinions on Deepening the Integration of Sports and Education”, represents a top-down attempt to resolve the Tiyu-Sport tension. However, as Sun et al^[12] have noted, this initiative often falls into a “concept trap”.

The Conflict: The Ministry of Education approaches Tiyu as a tool for student health (the PE logic), while the Sports Administration views schools as a talent identification pool for elite competition (the Elite Sport logic).

The Result: Instead of synergy, the policy often burdens schools with “High-Level Sports Teams” missions that can distort the educational environment. Meanwhile, the commercial youth training market, comprised of private clubs, is squeezed out. These clubs cannot compete with state-subsidized school teams, yet the school teams themselves cannot offer professional-level commercial pathways. Consequently, the vital middle layer—a commercially viable youth league system—fails to develop.

4.3 Barrier 3: The Absence of “Campus Sport” as a Product

In the United States, the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) functions as a multi-billion-dollar “Sport” product embedded within the “Education” system. This model works because the distinction is clear: weekday classes are education, while Saturday football is entertainment. In China, by contrast, university sports are governed strictly as “Education”.

Impact: University leagues like the Chinese University Basketball Association (CUBA) struggle to commercialize. As state entities, universities possess limited autonomy to sell broadcasting rights, sign sponsorships, or compensate athletes. They are constrained by the Tiyu mandate of “non-profit education”, leaving a massive potential market of university students and alumni largely untapped.

5. Empirical Evidence: Case Studies

5.1 Case Study A: The Collapse of CSL Clubs

The persistent financial crisis in the Chinese Super League (CSL), exemplified by the dramatic dissolution of the champion team Jiangsu Suning in 2021, illustrates the fragility of a market dependent on the Tiyu model. For years, investors, particularly real estate developers, poured money into clubs not as a primary “Sport” business venture (which consistently lost money), but to curry favor with local governments—a form of “Political Tiyu” capital. When the real estate sector cooled and political winds shifted (e.g., toward anti-corruption), this external capital vanished.

The league's collapse was precipitated by its failure to establish itself as a self-sustaining “Sport Product” with genuine community roots and diverse consumer revenue streams like ticket sales and merchandise. Its dependency on external, politically motivated subsidies left it fatally exposed.

5.2 Case Study B: The Success of E-Sports

Interestingly, the rise of Electronic Sports (E-Sports) in China offers a revealing counter-example. For years, E-Sports was rejected by the traditional Tiyu establishment as it did not align with the state's “Body Culture” narrative.

Result: Excluded from the Tiyu regulatory umbrella, E-Sports developed almost entirely according to market logic. It organically followed the global “Sport” model, built on intellectual property (IP) ownership, clear monetization strategies, fan engagement, and professional club structures.

Irony: Today, E-Sports stands as one of the most vibrant sectors of the Chinese “sports” industry, precisely because it escaped the historical and administrative baggage of Tiyu governance during its formative years.

6. Discussion: Towards a Conceptual Decoupling

6.1 A New Taxonomy for Policy

To foster a healthier sports ecosystem, China must introduce a rigorous conceptual distinction within its policy language.

School PE: This should remain Tiyu, with its primary goals being health, physical literacy, and character development. It should be fully state-funded and explicitly de-commercialized.

Competitive/Commercial Sport: This domain requires a new signifier, such as Jingji ("competition") or Yundong Industry ("movement industry"). This sector should be defined as part of the "Entertainment and Service" economy, governed by market laws and freed from the heavy moral and political burdens of Tiyu.

6.2 Redefining the "Student-Athlete"

The "Integration of Sports and Education" should not be interpreted as a mandate to merge bureaucracies. Rather, it should focus on creating distinct and viable pathways. A student should be able to participate in "School Tiyu" for health and, separately, in "Club Sport" for competition, without the two being conflated into a single, high-pressure "Specialty" track that serves neither domain well.

7. Conclusion

The primary bottleneck hindering the development of China's sports industry is not merely a matter of investment efficiency or administrative capability; it is a ghost of history. The concept of Tiyu, forged in the fires of national salvation, served China well in building a strong population and an Olympic powerhouse. In the current era of high-quality economic development, however, this monolithic concept has become a structural liability.

A thriving market requires clarity. It requires "Sport" to be liberated from the heavy moral and political obligations of "Education". Only by conceptually decoupling these domains—and aligning governance models accordingly—can China hope to unlock the immense potential of its sports consumption market. This will allow the nation to transition from being primarily a manufacturer of sports goods to a global creator of sports culture.

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