

China's young in crisis of declining fitness (Update)

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In this Saturday, Jan. 19, 2013 photo, a college student kicks a soccer ball in front of Chinese characters on the fence reading "good health" in Beijing. Despite its formidable performance in recent Olympic Games, China has found itself in a crisis of declining fitness among its youngsters. (AP Photo/Alexander F. Yuan)

Xiao Ru spent her last year of high school studying from morning until late at night. That didn't help her complete one particular assignment in her first year of college: a 1,500-meter run.

With two friends setting the pace beside her, she finished the university fitness requirement—barely. Moments later, she doubled over and vomited.

"The weather got cold, so I haven't been training much," she murmured. "Then suddenly today I had to do this run ... and I just ... couldn't do it."

Clad in a purple wool sweater to fend off the winter morning chill, the 18-year-old student collapsed in the arms of her friends after the run at Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University. They held up each of her elbows as they escorted her from the track.

Such dramas are increasingly common on the tracks and fields of China, which, despite its formidable performance in recent Olympic Games, has seen the fitness of its young people decline.

"Our economic power has grown while our people's physiques have not only failed to improve, but have deteriorated. That's unacceptable," said Sun Yunxiao, deputy director of China Youth and Children Research Center in Beijing. "This is something that worries the nation."

The government has urged schools, especially K-12, to beef up their physical education following an outcry touched off by a series of events late last year.

Two Chinese college students collapsed and died when they were testing for an annual, mandatory 1,000-meter run in late November. Another two runners in their early 20s died in 5,000-meter and 10,000-meter races during a sporting event in the southern city of Guangzhou. The sudden deaths were considered accidental, but the spate of them was enough to draw attention to physical education in China.

And several Chinese universities canceled their men's 5,000-meter and

women's 3,000-meter events from their fall sports meets, for reasons including fear of liability and lack of interest.

The dismal state of fitness in the younger generation prompted a well-known and hawkish military officer, Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan, to bemoan the prospects for China's future in a recent editorial in the state-run Global Times newspaper.

"Femininity is on the rise, and masculinity is on the decline," Yuan thundered. "With such a lack of character and determination and such physical weakness, how can they shoulder the heavy responsibility?"

Sun attributes the decline to an obsession with academic testing scores in China's cruelly competitive environment for college admissions, as well as a proliferation of indoor entertainment options like video games and surfing the Internet. Though air quality in many Chinese cities has deteriorated in recent years, physical educators have discounted air pollution as a major deterrent for outdoor activities.

Sun said an overwhelming majority of Chinese young students cited their academic performance as their parents' top priority, with a chunk of the population saying it was the only thing that mattered to parents.



In this Saturday, Jan. 19, 2013 photo, students play basketball at their college's court in Beijing. Despite its formidable performance in recent Olympic Games, China has found itself in a crisis of declining fitness among its youngsters. (AP Photo/Alexander F. Yuan)

Lou Linjun, a former physical education teacher in Hangzhou in eastern China, said the grueling schoolwork has driven students out of the exercise yards. "It's become a norm that schoolyards are empty in the afternoon at many of the city's key high schools," said Lou, who is now an assistant principal.

"Students are less likely to be willing to endure hardship and do not like to run anymore."

The results are clear from the annual fitness tests that Chinese university students are required to take. Education Ministry data show that in 2010, male college students ran 1,000 meters 14 to 15 seconds slower on

average than male students who ran a decade earlier. Female students slowed by about 12 seconds in running 800 meters. Students also fared worse in other physical tests, jumping shorter distances and completing fewer sit-ups.

Meanwhile, obesity rates among Chinese college students have gone up. In 2010, 13.3 percent of urban male students were obese, compared to 8.7 percent a decade earlier. Still, that compares with rates in the United States of 19.6 percent for males aged 12-19, and 33.2 percent for males aged 20-39 for the same period.

Citing busy schedules, both China's Education Ministry and its general sports administration declined AP's requests for interviews.

Wang Fangchuan, a sports professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, sees the disregard of health as the "mark of a society in pursuit of academic achievements."

"We are walking on one leg," Wang said.

The pressure for academic excellence begins early in Chinese grade schools, which do not have a tradition of competing in sports against neighboring schools. The national goal of earning Olympic gold medals further separates sports from ordinary schools, because promising young athletes and resources are siphoned off to special sports schools nationwide.

"We have this strange phenomenon. Outside, we are showing off muscles, but at home we are panting," popular blogger Li Chengpeng wrote last summer, when China's Olympic athletes in London raked in 38 gold medals—second only to the United States.

"Outside, the red flags are flying. At home, the red lights are going up,"

Li wrote.

In Wuhan, 24-year-old police officer Yu Meng said he gave up on college and went to the police academy instead after his passion for soccer cost him academically in high school.

"On the playing fields are those with lackluster academic scores. Those with excellent scores are all in classrooms," Yu said. "Under the current education system, you cannot have both, and most prefer studies to exercising."

Xiao, the Tsinghua student, constantly did schoolwork while a high school senior in northern China's Shanxi province, rising at 7 a.m. and going to bed after midnight every day, to better prepare herself for college entrance exams.

"The school no longer required us to run in the senior year," she said, adding that her weekly physical activity consisted only of a bit of badminton with friends.

The long hours of studying paid off. School officials awarded her family 20,000 yuan (\$3,200) and an LCD television when she scored high enough in the exams to get into the prestigious university.

Sports educators at Tsinghua say they feel obligated to make up for missed opportunities in high school by planting the habit of exercise.

"We have elite education here," said Ma Xindong, the university's head of physical education. "If you live longer, you can contribute more to the society."

Tsinghua goes beyond the standard requirement of a 1,000-meter run and makes its male students run 3,000 meters for its fitness tests.

Sophomore Xu Sicheng, who had never run such a long distance before coming to Tsinghua, said he and his classmates were "shocked" to learn of the school's grueling requirement.

"We thought it was a mission impossible!"

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