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Competitive Spectacle during China's Northern and Southern Dynasties: With Particular Emphasis on "Dragon" Boat Racing

In general, scholarship on the social and cultural history of sport in early China has not yielded rich insights. Book-length works on early Chinese sports are typically organized by different sporting traditions, profiling the development of each one through different periods of Chinese history, and offering only occasional generalizations and anecdotal material regarding the relationship of sporting practice to the wider social context of any particular period or place.¹ A few, more focused studies have offered a glimpse of the sorts of insight we might gain from a deeper exploration of the role of sport.² This essay will explore the role of competitive sporting spectacles in the social and political life of early-medieval China in an effort to show that it is a topic worthy of deeper and more sustained scholarship.

A useful comparative point for appreciating the potential insights gained from the study of sports and spectacles is their role in classical Mediterranean civilizations, a topic which has attracted much more thorough and complex scholarly attention than it has for early China. Athletic competitions signified some of Mediterranean culture's most deeply-held beliefs and most significant social phenomena. From the Greek tradition of *agon*, or competitive struggle, exemplified by the Olympics, to the Roman devotion to competitive spectacles such as chariot-racing and gladiatorial combats, the central place of sporting

¹ Shao Wenliang 邵文良, *Zhongguo gudai tiyu* 中國古代體育 (Beijing: Renmin tiyu chubanshe, 1986); Liu Bingguo 劉秉果, *Zhongguo gudai tiyu shihua* 中國古代體育史話 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1987); Huang Wei 黃偉 and Lu Ying 盧鷹, *Zhongguo gudai tiyu xisu* 中國古代體育習俗 (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1994).

² Thomas Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania P., 2006); Stephen Selby, *Chinese Archery* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P., 1999); Mark Edward Lewis on kickball, in *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: SUNY P., 1990), pp. 146–50; James T. C. Liu, "Polo and Cultural Change: From T'ang to Sung China," *HJAS* 45.1 (1985), pp. 203–24.

events in the civic culture of those societies is indisputable and has been an obvious target for research.³

At first glance, early China appears to have been quite a different universe. Though some competitive spectacles had roots in pre-Han times, Chinese elites wrote a good deal less about them than did their Greek and Roman counterparts, and showed a significant bias against them, a bias which was generally carried into the medieval era. As a result, few sports gained much literary attention; the elite sporting world seems best exemplified by polo, a pastime anchored in non-Han traditions and practiced primarily among court and military elites, rather than for public performance. Since polo did not serve a central role in popular urban culture, as did chariot racing (for example) in ancient Rome, the implication is that sports in China had relatively little social and cultural impact.⁴

Closer study of the early-medieval period, however, offers a much more complex picture. The courts of the northern dynasties were vigorous patrons of public games and entertainments, in practices at least somewhat akin to those in the classical Mediterranean, albeit on a smaller scale. Public spectacle entertainments, though not physically competitive ones, were also an important component of the southern court under Liang emperor Wu 梁武帝 (r. 501–549). The most intriguing developments were in the central Yangzi region (modern Hubei and Hunan), where communities dominated by local military garrisons developed new sorts of sporting spectacle such as boat races and tug-of-war competitions. These shared many elements with the legitimization strategies of the northern courts, but also offered a distinctively team-based competitive theater that served to ameliorate the tensions of a divided and fractious local social order. By peeling away the intervening layers of reinvention and misdirected scholarship about these practices, we can begin to see how they exemplified a vigorous and very competitive social world.

³ Donald G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Mark Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998).

⁴ Liu, "Polo and Cultural Change."

BACKGROUND: SPORT AND SPECTACLE
ENTERTAINMENT UP TO THE HAN PERIOD

In the broadest terms, what might be called “sports” in Chinese culture have traditionally been subsumed under the term *xi* 戲, “entertainments,” which included non-competitive spectator events such as parades, jugglers, and dancers, as well as competitive but rather un-spectacular pastimes such as board games. The term was also applied to competitive entertainments involving animals: horse and dog racing, cockfights, and falconry. Finally, it was used to indicate activities suggested by the modern term “sport”: competitive pastimes that involved human physical participation, either one-on-one or in teams, often conducted in front of an audience for entertainment purposes.

The most important competitive activities involving human combatants up through the Han period emerged from military training. The archetype of such events was hunting, a central part of elite culture and political legitimation since at least the Shang dynasty (ca. 1700–1100 BC). Hunting as a recreational activity served many functions, including the demonstration of the ruler’s organizational power and resources and, on a more personal level, the martial abilities of the ruler himself and his associates. It also allowed the military elite to practice military maneuvers and develop stronger personal bonds through shared physical activity.⁵ Though it could potentially function as a spectator sport, this role was usually confined to other members of a fairly elite class that could travel out to the wild lands where hunts were typically staged. More commonly, the valor and prestige of the hunt were communicated to the wider populace indirectly, through written and oral retelling and visual imagery.⁶

By no later than the Spring and Autumn period, hunting was complemented by the more formally staged, spatially confined, and spectator-friendly sport of archery. Most of what is known about this tradition comes from texts written or at least edited in the Han era, so it can be difficult to reconstruct exactly how the sport was performed. There is little doubt that archery as a sport had its roots in competitive military exercises, and there are numerous early tales celebrating the prowess of famous archers, such as Yang Youji 養由基.⁷ The emphasis of Han-era Confucian ritual texts, however, was not on archery as a competitive sport but as a performance, sometimes done in time to

⁵ Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, esp. pp. 41–43, and chap. 7, pp. 119–40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197 (spectators), pp. 133–40 (publicizing prowess).

⁷ Shelby, *Chinese Archery*, p. 70–1, 129–35.

music, in which the objective was not to demonstrate the participants' martial prowess, but their self-control, their understanding of ritual, and their appropriate deference to elders. The competitive element was largely if not entirely eviscerated, no doubt in response to traditional Confucian concerns for maintaining "harmony," and corresponding disapproval of competition as undermining the smooth composure of the exemplary man and his relationships with others.⁸

There is ample evidence from the Warring States period for the proliferation of numerous other, more directly combative sports, such as wrestling (*jiaodi* 角抵 or *jiaoli* 角力) and miscellaneous martial arts (*jiji* 技擊 or *jiqiao* 技巧), as well as the only known team sport, *cuju* 蹴鞠, usually translated as "kickball." Like archery, these sports also grew out of military training; unlike archery, they ordinarily demanded direct physical combat between participants, and thus were resistant to ritualization. As a result, they were not adapted into the curriculum of the ideal Confucian gentleman, and remained confined to the military. As spectator events, however, they became quite popular; kickball is reported to have been common (along with cockfights and dog races) among the general populace of the state of Qi in Warring States times.⁹ Elite sponsorship of popular games persisted into the early Han empire; Han emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 140–87 BC) is known to have staged wrestling and other such entertainments for public amusement, attracting spectators from as far as a hundred miles away.¹⁰

Entertainments of all sorts became a frequent target of criticism. Texts on military strategy recognized the importance of some sporting activities for military training, but drew a sharp line between such games and the serious (and very destructive) business of warfare, warning against allowing the competitive and entertaining aspects of sporting activities to be carried over to the battlefield.¹¹ Civil officials, under the influence of Confucian thought, argued more broadly that imperial sponsorship, attendance, and participation in sports and entertainments were simply a waste of valuable time and resources. Entertainments which were sponsored and staged for the broader public were further

⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

⁹ Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 69, p. 2257. All references to the Chinese dynastic histories are to the editions by Zhonghua shuju.

¹⁰ Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書 6, p. 194, entry for the spring of Yuanfeng 3/108 BC.

¹¹ E.g. Sun Tzu 孫子 (Roger Ames, trans), "An Interview with the King of Wu," in *The Art of Warfare: The First English Translation Incorporating the Recently Discovered Yin-ch'üeh-shan Texts* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), p. 193, notes: "Using the military is to gain the advantage; it is not a matter of being fond of it. . . . It is not a matter of sport (*xi* 戲). If your majesty wants to ask about war in terms of fondness and sport, I dare not reply."

criticized for encouraging undesirable social mixing between elites and commoners. Competitive entertainments received the greatest censure, since they further encouraged gambling, fighting, and other forms of dissolution. These objections notwithstanding, competitive entertainments remained a well-established feature of the Han court and upper class, and by the end of the Han some of them, especially animal competitions involving horses, cocks, and falcons, had gained sufficient cultural legitimacy to become acceptable topics for descriptive and lyrical poetry, as hunting had long been.¹²

Evidence suggests that the criticisms did have some effect, however, in restricting the public aspect of competitive events over the four centuries of the Han empire. Hunting expeditions had never been very well suited to being a common spectator sport, but kickball certainly was, and during the Han period it developed important ritual associations. Yet Han-era kickball fields are found within imperial palaces, suggesting that the game had become a semi-private activity for the emperor, his courtiers, and his elite military corps, rather than a spectacle event for general public entertainment.¹³ The preference for more private venues for competitive sport may have been due, not only to repeated admonitions from non-military officials, but also to the unchallenged supremacy of the Han court, which no longer needed to rely on ostentatious public entertainments to legitimate its rule.

The more restricted range and social function of competitive sporting events at the close of the Han era is illustrated by the following account of activities hosted by Zhuge Rong 諸葛融, a commander for the Three Kingdoms state of Wu (third century AD) who was based at Gong'an 公安, in modern Hubei province.

When there was nothing happening beyond the borders, in the autumn and winter he held archery [practice] and hunts and war exercises, while in the spring and summer he invited guests for a large-scale meeting. Retired officials and soldiers on leave did not consider a thousand *li* too distant to come to take part. At each session he would screen the guests and, as they declared their abilities, he would group them and pair them up, some for board games (*boyi* 博奕), some for (other types of essentially one-on-one competitions such as) *shupu* 擲菹, *touhu* 投壺, or *gongdan* 弓彈. When this was all sorted out then sweetmeats were continuously served

¹² Robert Joe Cutter, *The Brush and the Spur: Chinese Culture and the Cockfight* (Hong Kong: Chinese U.P., 1989), pp. 6, 138–42.

¹³ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, pp. 146–50 (on kickball), pp. 157–60 (on wrestling); Shao, *Gudai tiyu*.

and clear alcoholic drinks made the rounds. Rong circulated to observe, not tiring for the whole day.¹⁴

The account suggests two important parameters for the social role of competitive events at the dawn of the medieval era. First, these “proto-Olympics” remained anchored in military institutions, sponsored by the leaders of the military, and participated in by their men, both active-duty and retired. The activities would have served to sharpen the competitive spirit, to promote bonding between the officers and the troops, and, in the case of hunting and war exercises, to train for large-scale military maneuvers. Second, there is no evidence from this account that the events were staged for public entertainment, or sought to develop a wider connection with the community at large. The staging of such activities was certainly concerned with political legitimacy and prestige, but if it was conveyed to the wider public at all it would have been done second-hand, through written, oral, or pictorial retellings, rather than through direct observation by commoners.¹⁵ In subsequent centuries, this second parameter underwent a significant transformation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPECTACULAR ENTERTAINMENT UNDER THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN COURTS

The renewed interest in staging spectacular entertainment for explicitly public consumption is a hallmark of the medieval period, shared by northern and southern courts alike. Though Chinese sources say little about the motivation for this development, studies of comparable phenomena in classical Mediterranean societies offer some useful suggestions.¹⁶ Most obviously, elite patronage of spectacular entertainments served to promote a martial culture, offering a venue for violence as well as a potential recruiting ground for the military. They also celebrated the munificence and legitimacy of the ruling elite that sponsored them. Patronage of public entertainments in China appears

¹⁴ Chen Shou 陳壽, Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (comm.), *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 52 (sect. Wu, j. 7), p. 1235. For this passage, see Albert Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2007), p. 386.

¹⁵ Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, pp. 133–40.

¹⁶ Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (London: Penguin, 1992); Simon Goldhill and R. Osborne, eds., *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1999), notably Goldhill’s introductory essay, pp. 1–29, and Athena Kavoulaki’s article “Processional Performance and the Democratic Polis,” pp. 293–320; Kathryn Lomas and Tim Cornell, *Bread and Circuses: Evergetism and Municipal Patronage in Roman Italy* (London: Routledge, 2002).

to have served similar purposes, as one part of the larger strategies of both northern and southern courts to “re-create the center.”¹⁷

Imperial patronage of public entertainments is evident from early on in the establishment of the Northern Wei court of the Tabgatch. As early as 403 AD, and again in 409, they are known to have sponsored an extensive array of public entertainments at their capital, Pingcheng (modern Datong). These included competitive sports such as wrestling and military games, as well as parades, music, and all manner of wild animal acts, in the first known staging of what would come to be called the “hundred entertainments (*baixi* 百戲).”¹⁸ By the time the Northern Wei court settled in Luoyang (495–535 AD), exhibitions of this sort were commonplace, not only in imperial exhibitions, but at temple fairs held throughout the city. “Hundred entertainment” events were held at Bright Clarity Temple 景明寺 (*Jingming si*) south of town on the Buddha’s birthday (the eighth day of the fourth month); similar exhibitions, including sword swallows, fire-breathers, and wild animal exhibits, were staged on the fourth day of that month at the Eternal Autumn Temple 長秋寺 (*Changqiu si*); and parades and wrestling matches were staged at the Bright Joy Temple 景樂寺 (*Jingle si*), across from the colossal Eternal Peace Temple 永寧寺 (*Yongning si*) that dominated the center of the city.¹⁹

The types of competitive entertainments staged by the Northern Wei regime appear to have been very similar to those known from Han times. At the Meditative Emptiness Temple 禪虛寺 (*Chanxu si*) west of the main road outside the northern Daxia gate of Luoyang, a large military review field with an observation tower was used at the end of each year for staging wargames, said to have involved thousands of vehicles and tens of thousands of horses. One year, two noteworthy men, one a member of the emperor’s “Forest of Plumes” cavalry, the other from his “Brave as Tigers” personal guard, showed themselves to be especially skilled wrestlers and weapons-handlers, and were ordered to compete with one another.²⁰ Unlike the semi-private military games organized by Zhuge Rong, however, events such as these were staged by the emperor for public entertainment, as one part of a vigorous urban spectacle culture.

¹⁷ Patricia Ebrey, Scott Pearce, and Audrey Spiro, eds., *Culture and Power in the Reconstruction of the Chinese Realm, 200–600* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), “Introduction,” pp. 26–31.

¹⁸ Wei Shou 魏收, *Wei shu* 魏書 109, p. 2828.

¹⁹ Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之, annot. Fan Xiangyong 范祥雍, *Luoyang qielan ji jiaozhu* 洛陽伽藍記校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006) 1, pp. 43, 53; 2, pp. 132–33.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 5, p. 247.

Popular entertainments sponsored by the southern court at Jiankang at this time, though usually not martial, otherwise shared similar elements.²¹ The well-known “dharma-assemblies without prohibitions (*wuzhe fahui* 無遮法會) staged by Liang emperor Wu openly encouraged social mixing across all classes of people in the capital, and included obvious crowd-pleasers such as the general distribution of food, as well as theatrical Buddhist spectacles involving the veneration of relics. Public lectures on Buddhist scriptures were also offered; to make these more lively, they were often staged as competitive debates.²² But the southern courts overall sponsored a more limited range of activities than did the northern courts, as evidenced by the lack of overtly physical sports and games. These differences in imperial patronage are evidence of a desire by the Liang emperor to develop a somewhat different sort of civic culture, one with a much-diminished role for the military, both as participants and as observers.²³

The more physically vigorous northern style of public entertainments migrated along with the northern ruling class to new urban centers following the collapse of Luoyang in 534 AD. When the Western Wei court completed the construction of its new ancestral temple at Chang’an in 539, it promptly began the tradition of staging popular wrestling events four times per year, at the time of the usual seasonal sacrifices.²⁴ The tradition was carried on into Sui times (581–618), especially in the first month, when wrestling exhibitions and other spectacles were staged from the full moon to the end of the month.²⁵ The Sui court also echoed the southern style of spectacle by promoting Buddhist-oriented public theater, such as the tremendous empire-wide installation of relics during the Renshou 仁壽 reign period (601–604).²⁶ They also continued to stage the all-inclusive “hundred entertainments,” following on from the practice of both the Northern Zhou and Qi courts.²⁷

²¹ The two courts’ ruling styles shared many other elements as well, such as archaizing reforms based on the *Zhou li*; see Scott Pearce, “Form and Matter: Archaizing Reform in Sixth-Century China,” in Ebrey et al., *Culture and Power*, pp. 149–78.

²² Chen Jinhua, “*Pancavasika* Assemblies in Liang Wudi’s Buddhist Palace Chapel,” *HJAS* 66.1 (2006), pp. 45–49; Tian Xiaofei, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Yenching Institute, 2007), pp. 59–65.

²³ Debate competitions probably also did not contribute to the sort of gambling and fighting as those modeled on physical combat.

²⁴ Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 et al., *Zhou shu* 周書 35, p. 615; also Li Yanshou 李延壽 et al., *Bei shi* 北史 32, p. 1174.

²⁵ Wei Zheng 魏徵 et al., *Sui shu* 隨書 62, p. 1483; also *Bei shi* 77, p. 2624 (dated 597 AD); an incident dated 610 AD is given at *Sui shu* 3, p. 74; also *Bei shi* 12, p. 454.

²⁶ Chen Jinhua, *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics* (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 51–62.

²⁷ *Sui shu* 14, p. 342; also *Bei shi* 9, p. 336; another e.g. is at *Sui shu* 15, pp. 380–81.

As in Han times, some of these spectacles attracted the critical ire of other members of the capital elite. In fact, the desire to record such critiques, and show approval for the authors' moral propriety and courage in offering them, is the primary reason that official historians early in the Tang period (618–907) recorded these spectacles in the first place. Their historiographical concern to denounce public spectacle entertainments was one part of a wider propaganda campaign against the supposed licentiousness of Sui emperor Yang 隨煬帝 (r. 604–618).²⁸ Thus, for example, the mention of seasonal wrestling exhibitions under the Western Wei allowed the Tang historian Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 (582–666) to record a protest by Cui You 崔猷, a conservative member of the prestigious Boling Cui lineage.²⁹ The early-Tang historians who put together the Treatise on Music (eventually included in the Sui dynastic history) discussed the “hundred entertainments” held under the Northern Zhou, but immediately noted that they were called off by emperor Ming 周明帝 (r. 557–560), probably due to similar critical pressure.³⁰ The Tang-court historiographical team working under the director of the Chancellory, Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), recorded in full an especially lengthy memorial by the Sui official Liu Yu 柳彧 condemning the spectacles that were staged as part of the month-long New Year's festival. The memorial is the best-preserved account we have of what actually went on during such events:³¹

Your servant observes that in the capital, and spreading to other regions, on the full moon of the first month crowds throng the streets and fill the alleys, assembling for entertainments or roving in gangs. Pounding drums disturb heaven and flaming torches light the earth; people don animal masks and men wear women's clothes. Actors and acrobats contort their shapes and make strange their appearance. Crassness is taken for pleasure and baseness is used for amusement. Intimates and strangers are seen together, with no sort of avoidance. Tall awnings straddle the streets, and broad tents mount to the clouds. The clothes are gay, the faces painted, the horses and carriages packed tight. Meat and liquor are laid out in profusion, while strings and pipes combine with

²⁸ Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty: His Life, Times, and Legacy* (Albany: SUNY P., 2006), pp. 226–28.

²⁹ *Zhou shu* 35, p. 615; also *Bei shi* 32, p. 1174.

³⁰ *Sui shu* 14, p. 342; also *Bei shi* 9, p. 336.

³¹ *Sui shu* 62, p. 1483–84; abbreviated in *Bei shi* 77, p. 2624. I am indebted to Ian Chapman, “Carnival Canons: Calendars, Genealogy, and the Search for Ritual Cohesion in Medieval China,” Ph.D. diss. (Princeton University, 2007), p. 153, for his translation, which I adapted.

abandon. Assets are exhausted and goods destroyed, all to compete for this one moment. Whole households and their children do not acknowledge noble and lowly; men and women are chaotically mixed, black and plain cloth (that is, monks and laity) are not distinguished.

Base behavior is born of this; thieves and rebels arise from it. That it gradually becomes the custom certainly has this origin; by following low culture there's no telling where one may end. It is not beneficial for moral transformation, and truly harms the populace. I request that a general prohibition be circulated throughout the realm.

The emperor is recorded as having approved the memorial, but the games apparently did not cease, since there is ample record of New Year's wrestling competitions taking place later in the Sui period, with imperial officials in attendance. This of course allowed for the recording of yet another memorial seeking to suppress them, this time by Sun Fujia 孫伏伽, at the very founding of the Tang.³²

Despite such propaganda efforts among imperial officials, imperial patronage of public spectacles and carnivals continued into the Tang period, though perhaps without quite the same level of vigor, and with an increasing shift of emphasis towards more private entertainments.³³ The trend is exemplified by polo, often considered the quintessential sport of the medieval elite.³⁴ Polo, not known to have been introduced prior to the Tang era, is thought to be of foreign origin, while wrestling and the many other public exhibitions of the sixth century, though patronized by non-Chinese (or ethnically mixed) rulers, had well-established precedents going back to pre-Han times. More importantly, polo matches were generally held in private, either amongst the emperor's courtiers, or on dedicated polo grounds at provincial military garrisons. This made them less like the boisterous public wrestling contests and games held on the streets of sixth-century Chang'an, and more like imperial hunting expeditions, or the privately-staged kickball matches of the Han court. As a result, they were not subject to the same broad range of criticism leveled at public spectacles; they involved no undesirable social mixing among the populace, and no context for generalized

³² *Sui shu* 3, p. 74; also *Bei shi* 12, p. 454; Liu Xu 劉詢 et al., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 75, p. 2635.

³³ Charles Benn, *Daily Life in Traditional China: The Tang Dynasty* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 154-74.

³⁴ Liu, "Polo and Cultural Change," pp. 203, 207-8.

gambling, drinking, fighting, and other lascivious “carnival” practices among the wider population.³⁵

The practice of sponsoring competitive spectacles and other public entertainments at the courts of the northern and southern dynasties offers an important window into their highly public, theatrical style of rulership and legitimation, a “bread and circuses” approach to civic governance. It has received considerably less scholarly attention than more private efforts at legitimation, such as textual declarations targeted at a fairly narrow range of scholastics, or ritual sacrifices attended only by courtiers.³⁶ In terms of the actual impact on the social and cultural life of the day, however, this sort of populism was probably a good deal more significant.

COMPETITIVE SPECTACLE IN THE CENTRAL YANGZI REGION

Competitive spectacles were not merely the prerogative of imperial courts. An equally distinctive populist approach, involving the sponsorship of team-based competitive spectacles, can be found among Chinese local elites. The culture of the local military garrisons of the central Yangzi region was sharply different from that of the southern capital at Jiankang, characterized not by refined poetry and Buddhist scholasticism, but by an illiterate or near-illiterate elite who prized violence, vengeance, and personal ties. Xiangyang, the most important garrison of the region’s northern frontier, had an upper class of men who actively engaged not only in military campaigns but also in traditional military pastimes such as hunting, horsemanship, and archery. These men recruited local fighting men as their personal clients, and were in turn avidly recruited by imperial princes, who sought to gain their loyalty as well as their fighting ability to use in the relentless civil wars of the southern courts.³⁷

In this environment, violent competitive spectacles flourished, and appear to have been used by the militarized local elite as a way of promoting and legitimating martial virtues and attracting popular support, in much the same manner as at the northern courts. Especially

³⁵ They were nonetheless still criticized as a waste of time and money and a detriment to the morals of the court.

³⁶ Howard Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the Tang Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1985).

³⁷ Such men are profiled in imperial dynastic histories; for example, Shen Yue 沈約, *Song shu* 宋書 j. 77 and 83; or Xiao Zixian 簫子顯, *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 25 (biography of Zhang Jing’er). For a full study of the culture of these garrisons, see Chittick, *Patronage and Community in Medieval China: The Xiangyang Garrison, 400–600 CE* (Albany: SUNY P., 2010).

distinctive is the development, no later than the sixth century, of two team-based sporting events staged for popular entertainment. One was a kind of tug-of-war called “offering the hook (*shigou* 施鉤)”; the other was boat racing, or “competitive crossing (*jingdu* 競渡).”

The boat races, which eventually evolved into the famous Dragon Boat Festival, have been the subject of a good deal of speculation regarding their origins, much of it trying to link the tradition to the pre-Qin states of Chu, Wu, and Yue.³⁸ There is reason to be doubtful of many of these linkages, which are based on the writings of medieval metropolitan elites who may have had a poor grasp of the events themselves, and who in any case tended to view central Yangzi culture through the lens of classical literary materials in the *Chuci* 楚辭 tradition.³⁹ Even if we acknowledge that the boat races had certain precedents in classical times,⁴⁰ it is equally clear that the specific event called *jingdu* had its own distinctive practices and cultural context whose historical development can be reliably dated only to the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

Evidence points clearly to the central Yangzi as the place where these customs originated. The binome *jingdu*, the only term used for the boat racing event throughout the medieval era (in other words, until the end of the Tang period), makes its first textual appearance, along with the binome *shigou* (for the tug-of-war event), in the earliest layer of a work titled *Jing Chu ji* 荆楚記. This text, written in the mid-sixth century by Zong Lin 宗懷, a native of the central Yangzi city of Jian-

³⁸ Some of the foundational works include Wolfram Eberhard, *Chinese Festivals* (New York: Schuman, 1952), pp. 69–96, and *The Local Cultures of South and East China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), pp. 390–406; Wen Chongyi 文崇一, “Jiuge zhong de shuishen yu huanan de longzhou sai shen” 九歌中的水神與華南的龍舟賽神, *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 11 (1961), pp. 51–119 (English summary: “The Water Gods and the Dragon Boats in South China,” pp. 121–24); Goran Aijmer, *The Dragon Boat Festival on the Hupeh-Hunan Plain, Central China: A Study in the Ceremonialism of the Transplantation of Rice* (Stockholm: Ethnographical Museum of Sweden Monograph Series, 1964).

³⁹ For example, they came to identify the boats with dragons, an idea rooted in the conception of dragon boats as vessels for the gods in the *Chuci*, as well as the use of “dragon boats” for imperial pleasure outings starting in the Han period. This association was not made with the racing boats (which were more commonly associated with water birds) until the very end of the Tang period. Similarly, though the races were associated with Qu Yuan in writings from the Sui period, the association appears to be a product of literary imagination rather than actual racing performances or rituals, and took centuries to become well-established even in poetic literature.

⁴⁰ For example, there is archeological and textual evidence for the use of boats of this shape and style, as well as for unspecified naval warfare exercises, dating back to the Warring States period; see Cui Lequan 崔樂全, “Zhongguo gudai de longzhou jingdu” 中國古代的龍舟競渡, *Jiang Han kaogu* 江漢考古 1990.2, pp. 91–96; Xia Rixin 夏日新, *Changjiang liuyu de suishi jieling* 長江流域的隨時節令 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), p. 132. Whether or not such boats were used to stage public competitive racing events is not clear; in any event, it does not manifestly change the way we understand the boat racing events held eight hundred years later.

gling 江陵 (modern Jingzhou 荊州), recorded information on the festival practices of the immediate area, and the two binomes may have been adapted from terms used in the local dialect.⁴¹ The Sui-era *Yuzhu baodian* 玉燭寶典, perhaps relying in part on the testimony of *Jing Chu ji*, states that “southern people have boat races (*jingdu*), . . . but in northern boat squadrons it is not seen.”⁴² The discussion in the *Sui shu*’s 隋書 Treatise on Administrative Geography on the customs of the central Yangzi region is more specific, noting that “all the commanderies do [the boat races], but Nanjun (Jiangling) and Xiangyang 襄陽 are the most fervent. These two commanderies also have the pastime of offering the hook.”⁴³ *Fengshi wenjian ji* 封氏聞見記, written ca. 800, says of the tug-of-war that it was “a custom of the Xiang-Han 襄漢 region,” signifying Xiangyang.⁴⁴

The social basis of these sporting events in military subcultures is equally clear. The most fervent practitioners of the two sports were at Jiangling and Xiangyang, which were also the two most important military garrisons of the southern regime, providing the bulk of the troops that put Liang emperor Wu on the throne. The *Jing Chu ji*, or the early-seventh-century annotated version titled *Jing Chu suishi ji* 荆楚隨時記, suggests that the tug-of-war had military origins, and notes that the racing boats were given military names. The evidence strongly supports the notion that both sporting traditions evolved out of military exercises, just as did kickball, wrestling, and other martial arts in earlier times.

Both the tug-of-war and the boat races also shared features with the spectacles of the northern capital, in that they were staged for public exhibition and entertainment. The *Jing Chu suishi ji* account of the tug-of-war shows that it could not have been a privately-held exercise:

⁴¹ Modern versions of the *Jing Chu ji* are all derived from an early-7th-c. annotated version titled *Jing Chu suishi ji*. For a thorough discussion of its textual history, see Chapman, “Carnival Canons,” two appendixes in part 1. For the references to *jingdu* and *shigou*, see Zong Lin 宗懷, annot. Wang Yurong 王毓榮, *Jing Chu suishiji jiaozhu* 荆楚歲時記校注 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1988), pp. 67, 131. The 10th-c. encyclopedia *Taiping yulan* quotes *Yuedi zhuan* 越地傳, which uses the term *jingdu*, but the extant copy of the late Han-era *Yuejue shu*, of which the *Yuedi zhuan* is a part, does not have the passage, and its dating must remain suspect. For the distinctive dialect of the central Yangzi region, see W. South Coblin, “Migration History and Dialect Development in the Lower Yangtze Watershed,” *BSOAS* 65.3 (2002), pp. 529–31.

⁴² Du Taiqing 杜臺卿, *Yuzhu baodian* 玉燭寶典, vol. 885 of Xuxiu Siku quanshu ser. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), p. 61.

⁴³ *Sui shu* 31, p. 897.

⁴⁴ Feng Yan 封演, *Fengshi wenjian ji* 封氏聞見記 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, 1966), j. 6, pp. 9–10.

[They] do the pastime of “offering the hook,” making a splint rope by plaiting, and pulling in opposition, extending over several *li*, shouting and drumming as they drag it.⁴⁵

The *Suishu* account further elaborates:

When the hook first starts to move, everyone has drums to beat time, and the crowd noisily sings songs, shaking and startling things far and near. It is commonly said that they shout and gain victory (*yasheng* 厭勝) this way, and use it to bring about prosperity and good harvests (*yong zhi fengrang* 用致豐穰).⁴⁶

Evidence for the public nature of the boat races is equally clear. The annotations in *Jing Chu suishi ji* note of the boat races that “the provincial generals and local people all watch from the water’s edge.”⁴⁷ And the aforementioned *Suishu* passage writes, more poetically, “Their swift paddles move quickly together, sounds of oar and song echoing across, the noise shaking both water and land, those watching gathered like clouds.” More detailed descriptions in mid-Tang poetry portray the boat races held in southern provincial towns as extensive, loud, and boisterous productions stretching over many days and attended by all classes of local people.

Several other elements distinguish these two sporting events. First, just like events staged at the northern and southern courts, these events were held on festival days. Some editions of the *Jing Chu suishi ji* text record the tug-of-war event in the middle of the first lunar month, a date which is echoed in Tang materials later on; others record it at the beginning of the third lunar month, at the time of the Cold Food festival.⁴⁸ All *Jing Chu suishi ji* versions record the boat races being held on *duanwu* 端午, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. However, we cannot presume from this evidence that either event was always associated with one and only one particular festival day, any more than were wrestling, acrobatics, or gambling. The nature of the festival calendar format, by compelling events to be listed under a single calendrical entry, can generate an artificial sense of fixity to the link between celebratory events and particular festival days. Accounts from the mid-Tang into late-imperial times repeatedly testify that boat races were

⁴⁵ Zong, *Jing Chu suishiji jiaozhu*, p. 67.

⁴⁶ *Sui shu* 31, p. 897.

⁴⁷ Zong, *Jing Chu suishiji*, p. 131. This part of the text may be from the original *Jing Chu ji*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67 (in the first month); alternate version in Zong Lin and Tan Lin 譚麟, *Jing Chu suishi ji yizhu* 荆楚歲時記譯注 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1985), p. 67 (in the third month). *Fengshi wenjian ji* 6, p. 10, offers the first-month dating.

staged at many different times of the year, both at the imperial court and in southern provincial garrison towns.⁴⁹

Second, both activities were associated with warding off evil spirits, a function not explicitly ascribed to the sporting events of the northern courts.⁵⁰ The *Suishu* account indicates that the shouting and drumming during the tug-of-war was done in order to “shout and gain victory” and to “bring about prosperity and good harvests.”⁵¹ The earliest descriptions of the boat races indicate that they involved similar drumming and shouting practices. Prosperity would be ensured by the driving off of evil forces that imperiled the community, through the public display of martial valor and strength, not to mention loud and frightening noises.

The motivation to drive off evil spirits alone would have been a good reason to stage such events on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, which since Han times had been an important date for performing rituals to ward off evil spirits.⁵² Han-era activities performed on that day included the offering of special foods for sacrifice (notably *zongzi* 粽子, bits of meat or other delicacies surrounded by rice and wrapped in a leaf or inserted in a bamboo tube), the preparing of certain medicines, and the wearing of five-color silk and armbands in order to dispel “military calamities” and other malicious spirits.⁵³ Notably, all of these activities were performed by individuals or households; the boat races, by comparison, are the first such protective activity known to have been staged on a widespread community basis, and with an ex-

⁴⁹ *Jiu Tang shu*, j. 16–20, has numerous references to imperial attendance at boat races at different times of the year; at 146, p. 3963, it notes that the races were held in Huainan in mid-spring, rather than mid-summer. Wen, “Water Gods and Dragon Boats,” pp. 87–93, offers a list, compiled from late-imperial gazettiers, with seventeen different dates (ranging from the second to the ninth month) when boat races were held in localities in southern China. The fact that the boat races are only loosely linked to the *duanwu* date means that the ritual and religious associations of the *duanwu* festival, many of which date back at least to Han times, cannot automatically be assumed to also apply to the boat race competition, at least not in early-medieval times. So too the Qu Yuan commemoration, so tightly tied to the purported date of his suicide on 5/5, is belied by the relative flexibility of when the races were actually staged.

⁵⁰ There is no question that practices to ward off evil were staged during carnival-type events; the question is whether the physical competitions themselves had such function. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, pp. 159–60 and 300–1, nn. 53–55, does note the development of more ritualized and mythologized elements of wrestling by Jin times, so it was certainly possible.

⁵¹ A similar practice, with clear apotropaic purposes, was undertaken at the end of the year at the Jiankang estate of Cao Jingzong 曹景宗, a native of the Xiangyang garrison; Yao Silian 姚思廉, *Liang shu* 梁書 9, p. 181; also Li Yanshou 李延壽 et al., *Nanshi* 南史 55, p. 1357.

⁵² It also happened to be a time when the rivers were running high and strong, suitable for boat races.

⁵³ Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China: New Year and Other Annual Observances during the Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1975), pp. 289–312.

PLICITLY spectacular and entertaining purpose. In this way, they turned what had been primarily a private ritual observance into a boisterous public festival.

Community-wide protective functions are evident in other festival activities in medieval China; for example, Buddhist monks claimed to be “protectors” of the community at the mid-autumn ghost festival following the rains’ retreat.⁵⁴ The protective function is not otherwise ascribed to competitive sporting events, however, suggesting that the central Yangzi events had a unique cultural context. They would have promoted a distinctive form of protective leadership, one based in the military, rather than the monastery, and offering a defense against evil which was explicitly violent and physical, rather than meditative or prayerful. They suggest a strong kinship with the ritual use of military metaphors and the conceptualization of evil spirits as invading armies, features well-documented in late-imperial cults and with evident roots in pre-Han military rites and blood sacrifices, as well as Celestial Masters apotropaic practices.⁵⁵ The central Yangzi region was known to be a bastion of the Celestial Masters, and remained stubbornly so well after the southern capital elite had embraced the more erudite Lingbao and Shangqing scriptural traditions.⁵⁶ The region’s social and cultural environment appears to have been conducive to the development of militant sporting spectacles as a means of protection.

Third, the nature of these public spectacles means they must have had elite sponsorship. The tug-of-war could have been a rather informally organized affair, but the building of boats, training of rowers, and staging of races would not have just “happened” without men of wealth and influence backing rowing teams and collaborating to organize the event. In the imperial capitals, sponsorship for public spectacles is known to have come from the imperial court, from other members of the capital elite, or from prosperous temples, but none of these were likely sponsors of the boat races. By the late-Tang era imperial officials are known to have sometimes observed and judged the races, but

⁵⁴ Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1988); see also Liu Shufen, “Art, Ritual, and Society: Buddhist Practice in Rural North China during the Northern Dynasties,” *AM* 3d ser. 8.1 (1995), pp. 19–50 (especially pp. 37–45, on rituals).

⁵⁵ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, pp. 43–50 and 67–80 (on pre-Han practices); Steven Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1997), pp. 1–6 (on Celestial Masters); Poo Mu-chou, “Ghost Literature: Exorcistic Ritual Texts or Daily Entertainment?” *AM* 3d ser. 13.1 (2000), pp. 43–44 (on exorcism as entertainment); Paul Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats: The Cult of Marshal Wen in Late Imperial Chekiang* (Albany: SUNY P., 1995), pp. 3–4 (on the significance of military metaphors in late imperial times).

⁵⁶ Michel Strickmann, “The Mao Shan Revelations: Taoism and the Aristocracy,” *TP* 63.1 (1977), p. 37.

they did not serve as financial sponsors of the races, much less of particular teams; they as often sought to suppress them.⁵⁷ It is even less probable that officials from the much less militarily-oriented southern courts would have actively sponsored a physically competitive activity such as boat races. As for temples, the ones in the central Yangzi region (especially at Xiangyang) were considerably less numerous and prosperous than those at the imperial capitals, and in any case would have been unlikely sources of sponsorship for these sorts of violent contests. The most likely sponsors would instead have been local men of money and status who, like their counterparts at the northern and southern courts, were seeking to legitimate their leadership, and advertise themselves to potential military clients, through the sponsorship of competitive public entertainments.

Competitions of this sort have been described as modeling, even highlighting, the hierarchical tensions within a society and offering them a kind of cathartic release. Thus, while acknowledging status differences, and offering them a “theater” in which they could be played out, they ultimately served to release social tensions and integrate the society across social classes.⁵⁸ What we do not know, however, is which members of the local elite sponsored the various boat teams; in other words, what social tensions were being modeled and excised by the competition? Late-imperial accounts of dragon boat races offer many more details about the racing teams of that era, identifying their sponsors (which ranged from local lineages to temple organizations to labor guilds, depending on the era and the locale) and describing their use of identifying colors, flags, cheers, and so forth.⁵⁹ Similarly, the sponsors of each medieval boat team must have represented some organization or group.

Given the nature of central Yangzi society in this period, the most likely basis for racing team sponsorship would have been military units

⁵⁷ See *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji shudian, 1986) 275, p. 695 (Zhang Jianfeng 張建封, “Jingdu ge” 競渡歌), and *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩記 94, p. 1321 (Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫, “Jingdu qu” 競渡曲).

⁵⁸ William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1989), pp. 201–6 (late-imperial boat races); Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, pp. 17–18 (Roman sports); Cutter, *Brush and Spur*, p. 6 (Chinese cockfights).

⁵⁹ Yang Sichang 楊嗣昌, *Wuling jingdu lue* 武陵競渡略, in Tao Ting 陶珽, ed., *Xu Shuofu* 續說郛 (Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1972) 28, pp. 1284–91, translated by Chao Wei-pang, “The Dragon Boat Race in Wu-ling, Hunan,” *Folklore Studies* 2 (1943), pp. 1–18 (note especially pp. 13–17); Rowe, *Hankow*, pp. 201–6; Lewis Hodous, “The Great Summer Festival of China as Observed in Foochow: A Study in Popular Religion,” *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* NS 43 (1912), esp. pp. 75–78.

and family lineages. In practice, these were virtually the same thing, since powerful men typically controlled small fighting units of several hundred to a few thousand men, which then formed the core of the military units drafted by the garrison. For example, Du Yi 杜疑, the son of the inspector of Liang province (in the upper Han River valley), had a fearsome band of 170 “same-heart, dare-to-die (*tong xin gan si* 同心敢死)” fighting men, known as “Du’s Tigercats (*Du biao* 杜彪),” that defended the region against the incursions by Western Wei forces in the late 530s.⁶⁰ His unit was made up of infantry, but similar corps would have been required for naval operations, which were often dependent on the use of small, fast craft.⁶¹ The most likely process for sponsoring a boat-racing team would have been to hand-pick the best men from one’s squadron, outfit them with a boat and appropriate remuneration, and have them train together prior to race day, at which point teams from different family-sponsored military squadrons would have raced against one another.⁶²

From this reconstruction of the social role of central Yangzi sporting events, we can see that, while the function of both the tug-of-war and the boat races as communal rites of protection and prosperity was certainly quite real, their competitive and entertaining aspect was also quite real; it would be a mistake to see their religious and ritualistic functions as somehow more primary or more significant. Modern scholars have presumed that the boat races were essentially the same sort of ritual activity as was performed for the souls of the dead in the Warring States kingdom of Chu, or the “water performances” of Han times.⁶³ Such explanations fail to address why these rituals should

⁶⁰ *Nan shi* 64, p. 1556.

⁶¹ These boats, commonly called *ge* 舸 and described using modifiers such as “light 輕” or “flying 飛,” were staffed with a few dozen men (e.g. *Liang shu* 56, p. 862, and *Song shu* 84, p. 2142) and were used in massed numbers for naval operations (e.g. *Song shu* 84, pp. 2129–47; p. 2142 explicitly mentions the existence of training for naval operations with small boats). The aforementioned *Jing Chu suishi ji* account identifies *jingdu* racing boats as this type. For a translation of a Tang-dynasty description of this type of boat, see Joseph Needham et al., *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 4, part 3: Civil Engineering and Nautics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1971), p. 686, under the description of “flying barques” (Needham’s translation of “*zouge* 走舸,” which refers to their common use as rapid escape craft); the subsequent description of “patrol boats” (*youting* 遊艇) signifies a similar type of vessel.

⁶² A Tang-era mention of such early training for the races, including the use of liquor and meat for sacrifice (no doubt also for consumption!), can be found in Yuan Zhen’s poem, “Competing Boats” 競舟, in *Quan Tang shi* 398, p. 990.

⁶³ Eberhard, *Chinese Festivals*, pp. 69–96. His explanation is widely influential across many different fields; examples include Aijmer, *Dragon Boat Festival* (throughout); Lawrence Schneider, *A Madman of Ch’u: The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1980), esp. pp. 125–57; Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 202; Carol Stepanchuk and Charles Choy Wong, *Mooncakes and Hungry Ghosts: Festivals of China* (San Francisco: China Books, 1991),

somehow have morphed into competitive sports, rather than continuing as a more sober and tightly-controlled sort of ceremony. Wolfram Eberhard tried to avoid the issue by denying the significance of the competitive aspect, claiming that it was merely a “sham fight” staged to facilitate human sacrifice to the gods, an assertion which has been widely repeated in the literature.⁶⁴ But the evidence does not support this at all; in fact, it is clear from the sources that the competitive aspect of the events was central to their significance, not only as a reflection of an agonistic social system, but also for what it would have provided in terms of entertainment value and the likely prospect of gambling. Fighting between rival groups, perhaps leading to serious injury and even death, was certainly one possible outcome of such competition, but the evidence suggests it was less a ritual sacrifice than a violent and disorganized brawl, something familiar to sports fans even today.⁶⁵ The events had ritualized components, to be sure, but we should not over-emphasize that aspect and ignore the fundamentally competitive, martial ethos which gave rise to these sports and formed the core of their enduring popularity.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

Chinese society certainly did not have the same sort of agonistic emphasis as ancient Greek and Roman society. Its political leadership did not undertake the erection of enormous monuments to sport on anything like the scale of the Coliseum or the Circus Maximus, and

pp. 44–45; Susan Brownell, “Chapter 7: Sport,” in Wu Dingbo and Patrick D. Murphy, *Handbook of Chinese Popular Culture* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 177; Xia, *Sui-shi jieling*, pp. 129–50.

⁶⁴ Eberhard, *Chinese Festivals*, p. 76. His assertion is repeated by most of those cited in the previous footnote, also in N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1983), p. 34.

⁶⁵ Testimony to the spontaneous brawling that accompanied the races is found in Tang poems (e.g. *Quan Tang shi* 275, p. 695) and widely observed in late imperial races (e.g., Chao, “Dragon Boat Race,” pp. 6–7, 13, 17–18; Hodous, *Great Summer Festival*, p. 78).

⁶⁶ Consider a modern parallel of a foreign anthropologist’s attendance at high-school football games in some parts of the United States. Observing that the events open with prayer, the anthropologist may conclude that the games are essentially religious rituals making offerings to God. This characterization would be too narrowly framed; some participants and observers might think of the games this way, but the vast majority would be there for purposes other than absolution. Similarly, our understanding of the social and cultural role of the boat races can benefit from a broader interpretation, not in order to deny their religious aspect, but to illuminate the relationship of that aspect with other aspects of society. See Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1973); Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1996). I thank my colleague Michael Jerryson for his insights on this issue.

its dominant literary tradition stressed hierarchy and harmony over open competition, rarely praising the sort of physical competitiveness celebrated by Mediterranean authors.⁶⁷ For this and many other reasons, the comparison with classical Mediterranean societies must be a limited one. Nonetheless, it does help to draw our attention to the important roles that sporting entertainments can play in society, and how the study of them can illuminate important aspects of political and civic culture. In the case of medieval China, the history of sport offers us a window into some of the diverse possibilities that developed in Chinese society, ones which continued to influence Chinese popular culture thereafter.

One implication of this study is that spectacular public entertainments, including but not limited to competitive ones, served as a hallmark of China's medieval period. They represent an ostentatious, public-oriented style of rulership that reached a certain pinnacle in the late-fifth and sixth centuries, when they were avidly sponsored by the northern courts at Pingcheng, Luoyang, and Chang'an, as well as (in somewhat different guises) by elites at both the southern courts at Jiankang and southern provincial garrison towns. Many of these traditions were continued under the Sui empire, but then were increasingly discouraged (though by no means eliminated) in the Tang period. The pattern appears to mirror an earlier cycle from the Warring States into the early-Han period, when competitive public games such as kickball initially flourished before being gradually transformed into a more private court-sponsored ritual under Han imperial rule.⁶⁸

A second important point of this study is to note the extent to which these entertainments showed significant cultural and geographical variation. Rather than merely mapping the obvious north-south divide, this variation shows further significant differences between courts and provinces. Thus, with regard to competitive team sports, the developments in the central Yangzi area were stronger and more distinctive than in either the northern or southern capitals. These developments

⁶⁷ Jason König, *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2005).

⁶⁸ Explaining why competitive spectacle events should have risen to a new peak of popularity during the early-medieval period is beyond the scope of this article. My own sense is that it is a particular hallmark of societies in which personal patronage, and the quest for skilled clients, is the primary form of social organization. My forthcoming book, *Patronage and Community in Medieval China*, establishes this relationship especially concerning the Southern Dynasties period; I see parallels not only with the classical Mediterranean, but also with the regimes of early-modern Southeast Asia (see Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680: Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds* [New Haven: Yale, 1990]). However, this hypothesis obviously requires a good deal more study.

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were spurred not only by the region's prevailing military subculture, but also by its lack of a single preeminent patron on the order of the northern or southern court. With a more fragmented local society, local elites ramped up competitive military exercises into spectacular entertainment, in an effort to make the fractious and agonistic nature of their society into a kind of virtue. The sustained popularity of the boat races in southern garrison towns all the way into the late-imperial period (and even to the present) offers potentially important insights into some of the underlying structures of southern Chinese society.

