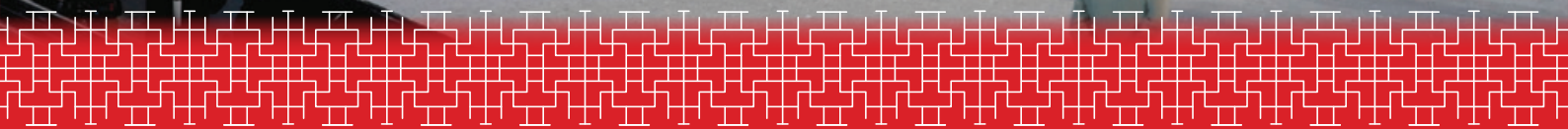




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Aerials Skiing in China

Zhang Li-Wei and Wang Jin

In

Secrets of Asian Sport Psychology

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Tony Morris, and Stephanie Hanrahan



Introduction

Olympic performance is largely determined by the combined influence of physical talent, technical ability and psychological control during competition. Physical and technical abilities are relatively stable factors that do not change from day to day or within a short period of time. However, an athlete's psychological state can change not only from day to day, but also from moment by moment, especially when competing at the elite level. Since the Olympic Games are the highest level of competition in the sports arena, athletes who compete in them experience tremendous pressures in many different ways. The internal pressure on Olympic athletes may originate from perceptions of having invested a great deal of time, energy, dedication, and many resources over a long period for the purpose of achieving Olympic success. External pressure may come from coaches, parents, friends, institutions, fans, and so on. Therefore, often the greatest fears and concerns for Olympic athletes are not related to whether they are prepared for the Games, but rather that they are afraid of not doing well even though their physical and technical skills have reached a superior level.



Li NiNa with Dr Wang

Having well-developed skills alone may not guarantee success because psychological factors play such a significant role in determining whether an athlete can succeed in the Olympic environment. Sometimes, due to pre-competition anxiety, Olympic athletes are unable to sleep well for a month

before the Games start and many who are unable to handle the competition pressure, “choke” or lose concentration. Thus, helping athletes to effectively maintain an optimal psychological state and to master techniques of mental and psychological control has been one of the major challenges and foremost tasks for preparing them to achieve success in the Olympic Games. Since there is only one Olympic champion in each event every four years, the Olympic title belongs to the athlete who is well-prepared in all the aspects that contribute to peak performance. Hence, psychological training is one of the most critical fields in the process of preparing athletes for the Olympics.



Olympic champion Han XiaoPeng with Dr Wang



view video:
*Chinese
Freestyle
Aerials*



view video:
*Freestyle
Skiing Aerials
Men, Turin
2006 (Gold for
Han Xiaopeng)*

The Chinese Olympic aerials teams have produced some impressive performances since the sport gained medal status in 1994, winning eight medals overall (to 2014) including a gold medal from Han Xiaopeng in the men's event and a silver medal from Li Nina in the women's event, at the 2006 Games in Turin, Italy. At the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada, eight Chinese athletes participated in the freestyle skiing aerial events and seven of them made the finals. Li Nina, nicknamed the Snow Princess, again won a silver medal and Guo Xinxin and Liu Zhongqing both won bronze medals. It was no accident that the Chinese team did so well. The excellent performances were the result of the group efforts of the whole team, which included the leadership team, technical coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, and the sport psychology consulting team. The psychology consulting team was credited by the coaches with playing a vital role in ensuring that the athletes used the psychological skills that they had learned, to achieve an optimal psychological state for producing peak performances at the Olympic Games. In this chapter the authors present the psychological training approaches they used to prepare the Chinese team for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games to promote an understanding of psychological training and counselling for elite athletes from a uniquely Chinese cultural perspective.

performances
were the result
of group efforts





Overview of the Psychological Training Program

enhance their
self-confidence
and self-control

The psychological training program ran from December 2008 to February 2010. Our primary objective was to enhance the self-confidence and self-control of the athletes. The program included a series of group seminars to teach basic psychological skills, theme visits and workshops aimed at character and moral development, biofeedback training, development and refinement of competition plans, individual counselling, plus psychological testing and self-monitoring strategies. The psychological training resulted in positive outcomes by helping the athletes to cope with psychological anxiety, improve the consistency of their performances in competition, and improve their thinking skills, which were the three areas identified by coaches as the major psychological challenges faced by the athletes. At the same time, taking into account the athletes' specific perspectives rooted in the Chinese culture, we considered the core values of self-confidence, self-control and self-development for the purposes of establishing good behavioural habits and a positive mindset.

During the process of preparing the Chinese aerials team over a one and a half year period, we gained a better understanding of the characteristics, challenges and goals of psychological training for elite athletes. We recognised the importance of the establishment of dialectical thought (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialectic>) and Chinese culturally-based, self-confidence, self-control and self-development as the core of our training foci. In addition, we emphasised athletes' good habits and positive thinking approaches as central to our psychological training model. On the basis of our experiences delivering the program, we subsequently proposed a three-level psychological training system for athletes (Zhang & Zhang, 2011).



Figure 1. Psychological Training System for Chinese Athletes

The base level of the system is technique-oriented, teaching basic psychological skills aimed at ensuring the athletes master the techniques and methods of psychological control. Through training, they develop positive psychological and behavioral habits. The second level of the system is knowledge-oriented psychology education. It is designed to help the athletes understand the psychological control techniques according to the basic principles of sport psychology. The third



level of the system is vision-oriented, cultural education covering four aspects; philosophy, history, literature, and art education. It is designed to help the athletes approach their sports career and life journey with appropriate ideological and dialectical methods. At the same time, by being enriched culturally and developing a spiritual mindset, athletes will not simply focus on learning psychological skills; instead, through enhancement at the ideological level and the establishment of optimal behavioural characteristics, they will be more likely to reach their full potential by striving for best performance, continuous self-improvement, and achieving their life-long goals.

Psychological Training Seminars

The purpose of the psychological training seminars was to help the athletes gain basic knowledge of how to properly control their psychological states, improve their psychological well-being, and develop positive attitudes towards life. The psychologists organised a series of 30 seminars, with lectures on specific topics such as self-confidence, self-control, and individual values. These lectures inspired the athletes to take a broader view of their own lives and to perceive things from new perspectives through introspection and reflection. For example, after a lecture about a group of Chinese athletes who turned adversity into triumph, one athlete wrote: “The underlying reason why they could reverse the situation was because they never gave up, even in the most difficult of situations. They maintained a strong belief in their sport, the Olympic Games, and the goals in their life. They devoted their passion, self-confidence, and strong will to their profession. They kept a clear mind, patience, and a positive attitude toward training, and they were determined at every step to move forward and learn valuable experiences from success or failure, staying brave when facing setbacks. Every day’s training is a challenge. When your mind focuses on training, everything becomes full of passion instead of boring. I should learn from them, understand the process, and know how to engage in self-realization.”



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Theme Visits

As the athletes trained in a relatively closed environment for long periods, we introduced strategies to help them broaden their vision, by stimulating their philosophical thinking and providing a new perspective from which to examine their daily training, competition, sports career, and life journey. Teaching specific mental training skills and psychological control techniques, such as relaxation, attentional control, and regulation of emotions, provided them with very beneficial skills but we wished to add another level of the program that would enhance their outlook on their own lives. For this purpose, we arranged theme visits to which the athletes responded very positively (see Table 1).

Table 1. Content and Purpose of the Theme Visits

Date	Content	Aim
June 2009	Visit the Beijing Planetarium	To help athletes to recognise their position in the vast universe, and the lifelong road ahead
Oct 2009	Visit the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing	To inspire the athletes to fight hard for the glory of the country
Oct 2009	Watch 2004 and 2008 Olympic videos	To help the athletes better understand the meaning of their lives from the social values, interests, and noble ideas of others.

Training camps were held regularly at the Beijing Sport University (BSU). In order to create an inspirational atmosphere and to improve athlete motivation for training, during May 2009, all athletes provided a list of their own aphorisms (i.e., brief statements of principles), which were collated and voted on by the group to choose the three most meaningful statements. Three large banners with the statements on them were created and hung on the wall of the training facility. The aphorisms chosen were “Did you work hard today?”, “Opportunities will always belong to those who are well prepared,” and “The difference between success and failure relies on persistence.” Additionally, a slogan written by one of the BSU students, Zhou Dawen, was placed on the wall of the athletes’ apartment, which read, “The secret of success is perseverance.”

the difference between
success and failure
relies on persistence



Thematic Workshops

We organised two thematic workshops, during which we encouraged athletes to discuss and share their thoughts and perspectives, culminating in each athlete giving a presentation to the other athletes.

Workshop 1. *The Universe in My Mind, The Hero in My Heart*

Every athlete has a personal philosophy of life, an individual viewpoint on how to do things and appropriate ways of behaving. The athletes prepared well by carefully finding information and meticulously making PowerPoint presentations and, as a result, they all made animated and impressive speeches. The leadership personnel of the Center of the Winter Olympic Events came to listen to the athletes' speeches and acted as the judges, giving every presentation a score. The athletes' speeches were a great success; not only were they filled with profound ideological content, but also the feelings expressed moved the entire audience. One athlete, a medallist in Vancouver, recalled making the speech with the words, "My deepest memory was last year's theme speech and I remember that I was extremely nervous during my speech. As a result, my speech was ineffective, but it helped me greatly from a psychological perspective. I was able to face such situations in a much calmer manner when I was next given the opportunity." Table 2 shows examples of the presentation topics chosen by the athletes.

Table 2. Presentation Topics for *The Universe in My Mind, The Hero in My Heart* Workshop

Athlete	Presentation Topic
A	When failure comes, the opponent cannot beat you, but you can be beaten by yourself.
B	I want to keep forever the bright red colour of my history.
C	If my teammate can obtain the Olympic gold medal I will support her; If I am closer to the gold medal, I would not hesitate to achieve.
D	If I experience adversity, I have to learn to deal with the setbacks and be brave.
E	Failure is not a destination, it is a precious life experience. It makes us stronger and helps us to have a better life.

The second workshop was based on the theme of *The First-Timer or Re-Participant at the Winter Olympic Games; I Want to be a...* Through this theme we encouraged the athletes to identify an individual theme that inspired them to think about the longer-term implications of Olympic participation. In particular, we guided the athletes to understand the meaning of self-improvement, which can be trained, can be used in competition or life, can be perceived as technical, physical or psychological, can be detailed in nature, can be seen as macroscopic, can be revealed at the critical moment, and can be planted forever in the heart accompanying them

through the rest of their life journeys. Although the subject seemed quite ordinary, it touched the souls of some athletes who had not wanted to face, talk about or think about the topic before. We encouraged them to confront, to think, and to imagine. All the athletes in the theme workshop did this very carefully before writing anything down in preparation for their presentations. Although the presentation topics differed (see Table 3), they all reflected the reality of their self-improvement after seriously considering the significance and interpretation of the meaning of their lives.

Table 3. Themes and Testimonials from Athlete Speeches

Athlete	Theme	Testimonial
A	I want to be a strong woman.	I failed again, again, and again. I experienced numerous stumbling blocks, and then I gradually became a strong person.
B	Challenge myself to achieve difficult goals.	A sports career is a very short part of my life journey, but through my athletic career, I have learned the principles of hard work, strength and persistence. These qualities will positively affect my life in the future.
C	Self-confidence is a life-long quality.	Since self-confidence is a life-long quality, not only would I like to achieve peak performance and honours, but also through preparing for and competing in the Olympic Games, I would enhance my self-confidence not only for the Olympic Games, but also for my future life.
D	My Olympics.	I would like to take this opportunity to make a contribution to my motherland and the community! I also want to be an outstanding and unique individual!
E	Go beyond myself in the face of adversity.	I need to keep a normal attitude toward everything. This is a big step forward in my life. I have to learn to accept what I do not want to accept.

Biofeedback Training

The purpose of biofeedback training was to allow athletes to receive biological information from their own bodies, and thereby help them to perceive the changes in their body and especially to distinguish between tension and relaxation. By doing this, they can enhance their ability to regulate these biological changes and especially to learn to relax, which is important for controlling competitive anxiety and psychological tension, and thus to obtain an optimal psychological state in order to achieve peak performance in competition.

Our biofeedback method involved electromyography (EMG) and we also monitored changes in heart rate, rate of breathing and skin temperature. The first activity required athletes to engage in five minutes of abdominal breathing (the computer screen provided information about their breathing rate and heart rhythm, blue representing the breathing, rate and red denoting the heart rhythm),

followed by 10 minutes of relaxation exercises. Athletes were usually able to master the relaxation techniques after a few sessions and to achieve a relatively stable psychological state. In the final biofeedback training session changes were made to the way in which the feedback was presented. Although the athletes were affected by the changed conditions initially, the effect was small and they were usually able to quickly adapt to the new conditions.



Credit: Duncan Rawlinson/flickr/CC-BY-NC-2.0

At the end of each training session, the sport psychology consultants sought feedback from athletes. Following the second session, Athlete B reported that she was not used to abdominal breathing, that it made her chest feel tight, and that she had to take a big breath from time to time (other athletes also reported this). When we checked her EMG results before and after abdominal breathing, we found that abdominal breathing made her more relaxed, that the relaxation persisted, and hence we concluded that the athlete felt uncomfortable because this was a change from her normal breathing patterns. Upon Athlete B's request, we provided additional biofeedback sessions for her. After the third additional session, she no longer felt any tightness in her chest and began to feel more comfortable using abdominal breathing. After the last training session, Athlete B wrote down her feelings about the training: "After the biofeedback training, I felt better and better. I attribute this to the abdominal breathing training. Now when I am nervous about executing difficult technical routines I use abdominal breathing; I feel great and it does have beneficial effects. My breathing becomes stable very

quickly. My breathing stays very stable, almost without any ups and downs. I am just beginning to grasp the breathing technique, so it is not yet completely automatic. I believe that I will be better once I can do this automatically."

Competition Plans

Sport psychologists promote the importance of developing competition plans as such plans represent a crucial step in formulating pre-competition and competition routines. A competition plan should include preparations for coping with potential problems that may occur in competition and for establishing appropriate cognitive and behavioral strategies, including routines and intervention approaches for any unforeseen events during competition. They include such things as measures that need to be taken on the pre-competition day, activities for the night before competition, preparatory activities before competition, specific activities and cognitive preparations after the first round of competition, and so on. Plans for countermeasures to be taken in the event of unexpected circumstances such as competition time changes, harsh weather, teammates performing badly, or poor physical or psychological states before competition, should be included. Through extensive discussions with athletes and coaches based on their practical experiences, we took the following steps to formulate detailed, practical and competition-oriented competition plans.



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STEP 1: Before the Chinese National Championships on January 1, 2009, we helped the athletes to formulate their pre-competition plans and this served as the basis for further developing their competition plans for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

STEP 2: On November 29, 2009, in Changchun City, we helped the athletes develop very detailed pre-competition plans, based on the following principles:

- *Countdown activities should be carefully planned: what to do, at what time, and what to think for every segment of the 24-hour block of time before competition.*
- *Plans should be very specific, including how the athletes should control their psychological state and the way they behave when talking to reporters, coaches or teammates.*
- *Plans should be based on the athlete's existing and already formulated routines, and then revised where necessary.*
- *The closer it gets to jump time, the more detailed the content should be.*
- *The countdown plan for the final 15 minutes before jumping should be brief and clear; all preparations have been well planned so everything should be ready.*
- *Positive words should be used when giving instructions to the athletes.*

STEP 3: On December 8, 2009, in Changchun, we organised a seminar to discuss the competition plans. The sport psychologists and all the coaches participated to refine the pre-competition plans based on each athlete's psychological characteristics. The following is an example of the content of the discussion between an athlete and the coach:

Coach: *“Instructions before competition should be simple. Don’t think too much. You need plenty of time to warm up, and engage in sufficient jumps during the warm-up period.”*

Athlete: *“I need my coach to remind me to prepare early in the transition zone. Before take-off, look at me, encourage me, and give me a high five.”*

look at me,
encourage me,
and give me a
high five

STEP 4: On January 31, 2010, in Changchun, based on the outcomes of the previous six World Cup events in China, Canada and the United States, we modified the pre-competition plans by adding the final element of the plans, which was the most important psychological preparation component.

STEP 5: On February 13, 2010, before departure to the Vancouver Olympic Village from the Canadian Training Center, the sport psychology consultants made another revision to the pre-competition plans and also provided written feedback to every athlete. An example of a pre-competition plan after five rounds of modifications is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Example of an Olympic Pre-Competition Plan

If ... happens	I will ...
If the bus is late,	On the bus, I need to rearrange my warm up activity sequences and time.
If it snows today	Last night I had already waxed my snow cleats. I have prepared in advance. If snowing is getting worse, I need to wax again. Keep warm, believe in myself, and make judgment without any hesitation.
If it is very windy	I need to keep active, take sports drinks, maintain body energy, patiently wait, warm-up, and do imagery.
If the speed is slow	Wax, tuck body together, don’t change the way of jump, believe in myself, be decisive, and keep calm.
If there is something wrong with my equipment	Stay calm, immediately fix or change the equipment, believe in myself, trust the equipment, then test speed again. Before competition, always examine the safety of the equipment.
If an unexpected thing happens during competition, and I must wait for a long time	Be patient, listen to music, pay attention to what I am doing, keep calm, keep clear in my mind, stay relaxed, and keep my body active. Always keep warm, and wear a jacket. Always be prepared to compete.



Individual Counselling

During the process of preparing for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, the psychological consulting team provided special one-to-one consultation for athletes who were troubled or confused, or were focusing on problems that had occurred in training, competition, or their personal lives. The psychological issues of these athletes included concerns about whether or not they would make the final team selection, issues of low self-confidence, poor attentional control in competition, psychological rehabilitation after injury, coach-athlete relationships, and so on. The main objective of the counselling was to guide the athletes to maintain a positive attitude when facing difficulties and challenges, and to achieve self-confidence, self-control and self-reliance. The benefits of the psychological counselling were obvious and could mainly be seen in improvements in the athletes' attitudes, in their willingness to make more strenuous efforts during training, and in their ability to remain calmer and more focused.

Since the sport psychology consultants were not accredited to enter the competition venues in Vancouver to provide on-site psychological support to the athletes, it was necessary to provide assistance in advance so that the athletes could prepare for competition by themselves. Additionally, the consultants provided the coach on the hilltop and the team doctor with specific suggestions and advice so that they could “read” the athletes and provide them with psychological support during competition based on pre-arranged principles. What follows is an example of how we helped the athletes through one-on-one counselling.



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Athlete A: Counselling for competition

During the World Cup Series in Canada and the United States, which took place during January 2010, just prior to the Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, we assessed Athlete A to determine her ability to compete successfully at the Olympics. The psychological consulting team focused on helping her to develop an appropriate psychological orientation by eliminating her tendency to compare herself with other athletes. When athletes engage in social comparison before competition, they are more likely to experience anxiety that disrupts their attentional focus. We taught the athlete the techniques of how to pay attention to the controllable factors, engage in self-comparison, and maintain a positive psychological orientation. The following are extracts from the counselling records for Athlete A, which are reproduced here with her permission.

January 22, 2010: After the morning preliminary competition, I asked her, “Do you have any problems going into the final?” She replied, “I am now competing against only one particular person,” clearly implying that she was competing with a teammate as her major competitor for Olympic selection. I said to her, “If you compare yourself with others, there are many things you cannot control. If you avoid comparing yourself with others, this will make you more comfortable and more relaxed.” She replied, “Right now I cannot stop making comparisons with others and I have to compare myself to my rivals.” I said to her, “You should pay attention to the controllable factors, compete with yourself, and try to do better than the previous jump.” In the final, Athlete A fell during a jump. When she started to cry I comforted her, “There are more opportunities in the future, don’t give up! The competition is like Microsoft Windows; when one window closes, you can open another one, a better one. Your life is a long journey, and you will continually move on.”



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January 24, 2010: During the post-competition team meeting, Athlete A concluded, “I did not perform well in the competition because I was not bold enough, not decisive enough, and I lacked confidence. I was unable to find a way to control myself.” She went on to explain that she was over-concentrating, which caused excessive nervousness. She over-complicated a familiar skill and as a result became more and more nervous during the competition. She then stated again: “Although my performances were repeatedly poor, I still have the confidence to do well. There is still one more World Cup event. No matter what happens, I will do my best to fully prepare myself. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the sport psychology consultants who encouraged me when I did not do well in competition. Although the psychology consultants did not talk much, at that critical time, their instruction was truly important to me.”

January 30, 2010: This was the last event of the World Cup Series just two weeks before the Vancouver Olympics began. Before Athlete A started jumping I reminded her, “Before jumping, please focus only on the action. You are competing with yourself, not comparing yourself with others.” She nodded her head and said, “Thank you, teacher.” At this competition, she achieved her best performance of the six World Cup competitions, taking first place in the preliminary round and second place in the final. Soon after, Athlete A was selected as a member of the 2010 Winter Olympic delegation. The sport psychology consulting team sent her an “Olympic Message” to congratulate her on her selection and to encourage her future efforts and achievement. Athlete A achieved a personal best performance at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games.



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Psychological Testing

As part of the psychological training program, all team members took Chinese-language versions of the *Sport Self-confidence Scale* (SSC; Vealey, 1986; Zhang, & Mao, 2009), the *Athlete Burnout Questionnaire* (ABQ; Raedeke & Smith, 2001; Zhang & Mao, 2009), and the *Short-form Profile of Mood States* (POMS; Grove & Prapavessis, 1992; Zhang & Mao, 2009; Zhu, 1995) on three occasions each (December 2008, August 2009, December 2009). Group scores remained within the normal range and did not vary significantly over the three testing sessions on any measure, indicating that self-confidence and mood remained stable, and that the athletes did not experience symptoms of burnout.



Credit: Duncan Rawlinson/flickr/CC-BY-NC-2.0

Self-Monitoring

One of the primary goals of psychological training is to foster in athletes an ability to effectively engage in self-monitoring of thoughts, emotions and behaviours, and eventually to develop the skills required for their self-regulation. To this end, during a training camp held in Quebec, Canada during August 2009, athletes filled out a daily Psychological Training Diary (see Table 5).

Table 5. Psychological Training Diary

Name: _____	Date: _____
1 = I did very badly; 5 = I did very well	
Self-Test Item	Evaluation
Before training, I used positive words to encourage myself	1 2 3 4 5
I set clear and specific objectives	1 2 3 4 5
I met challenges, and I controlled my emotions	1 2 3 4 5
I paid attention to controllable factors	1 2 3 4 5
After training, I used positive words to encourage myself	1 2 3 4 5
Today I accomplished the pre-established plans	1 2 3 4 5

We gave individualised written feedback to athletes based on their diary entries. An example of the feedback reads, “You have done a good job by setting clear and specific goals, but it seems that there is room for improvement in the areas of self-control of emotion and paying attention to controllable factors. As we have discussed before, retaining a championship title is a more difficult task than winning the title for the first time, so I would like you to remember that not being afraid of failure is more difficult than daring to succeed in any situation. When you are successful, your family, friends, the media, coaches, teammates, your opponents, and everyone else around you will treat you differently. Amid the praise and admiration, can you remain calm and maintain normal attitudes? I hope you can be like the sea: No matter how many rivers pour in, the sea still has the same tides and wave formations. If you want to go beyond your limit, you must become an ordinary person again!”

Evaluation of the Psychological Training Program

The consensus among sport psychologists is that the evaluation of the effectiveness of psychological training programs is challenging and complex, and thus should be conducted in multiple ways (Si, 2006). Hence, we combined evaluative feedback from several sources in order to judge the effectiveness of the program, using information gleaned from the perspective of objective performance data, perceptions of the athletes and the head coach, and the personal reflections of the sport psychology consulting team.

Objective Perspective

We recruited three substitute athletes to evaluate the competition performance of the participating Chinese athletes at the 2010 Winter Olympics Games. All three athletes watched the preliminary and final competitions, evaluating performances objectively on a 1 (performed very poorly) to 5 (performed very well) scale. The evaluations showed that in the preliminaries, the average rating of the eight athletes who competed was 3.87 points, a little above their normal performance levels, and the average level of the seven athletes competing in the finals was 4.38 points, well above their normal performance (see Table 6). The performances in the finals improved compared with the preliminaries. This showed that the performances of the athletes at the 2010 Winter Olympics were generally better than their normal performances, which was indicative of psychological stability.



view video:
*Li takes off
for silver*

Table 6. Performance Assessments of Chinese Aerials Team at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games

Athlete	Prelim Jump	Prelim Score	Final Jump	Final Score
A	FDF; DFF	4.33	DFF; DFDF	5.00
B	LFF; FFF	3.67	LFF; FFF	4.33
C	FDF; DFF	4.33	FDF; DFF	4.67
D	LFF; FFF	4.00	FFF; LDFF	4.00
E	FDFF; FFF	3.33	FDFF; FFDF	4.67
F	FDFF; DFFF	4.33	FDFF; DFFF	4.00
G	FDFF; DFFF	4.00	FDFF; DFFF	4.00
H	FDFF; LDFF	3.00	–	–
Mean		3.87		4.38

Note: Compared with normal performance levels, 1 = performed very poorly; 2 = performed poorly; 3 = performed at normal level; 4 = performed well; 5 = performed very well

Athlete Perspective

Immediately prior to the 2010 Winter Olympics Games, we invited the athletes to sum up their perspectives on the psychological training program that they had experienced. The following are examples of the thoughts of the athletes.

Athlete A: At critical moments I should know the right thing to think and what psychological state I should attain, especially when I plan to a jump for the first time. If I am in a state of panic and fear in regular practice, I should know how to control my psychological state to reach an optimal level. The program helped me to develop these skills.

Athlete B: I feel that I have improved a lot in many different areas through the psychological training. Now I can control psychological problems, pay attention to the controllable factors, keep calm and think rationally when facing challenges.



view video:
*Liu takes off
for bronze*

Athlete A: Psychological training has helped me gain a new understanding and perspective on the meaning of life and think about issues more critically with a brand new perspective. No matter what difficulties or challenges I encounter, I will no longer feel fear and helplessness, whether in competition or my normal life. I feel very good about that.

Athlete B: The program has helped me to control my psychological and emotional states well, and to think about the positive aspects of myself.

Athlete A: I keep my concentration by not being distracted by external stimuli before or during training. I follow the pre-competition and competition plans to deal with any situations, including adverse situations that need to be overcome, with a strong will and determination.

Athlete B: The pre-competition plans are very important, not being distracted by little things, being firm in my faith, and treating the competition seriously and with respect.

Athlete A: The theme speeches, individual counselling, and developing a game plan were all very helpful to me. I feel I should also participate in group discussions more in order to analyze and identify my own weaknesses. Sometimes, when the team leaders were here, I could not speak my true perspectives, instead I said some common, superficial things; neglecting the real issues in such a way that prevents me from solving the problems.

Athlete B: I would like to engage in more activities that can help us improve our ability to face the public. Then when perform in front of a lot of audiences, we could effectively regulate and control our psychological states.

Athlete A: I feel that besides receiving psychological training, we need to engage in more honest dialogues, and be given the opportunity to speak truthfully in order to really solve the problems that occur during competition.

Coach Perspective

The sport psychology consulting team asked Mr Ji Dong, Head Coach of the Chinese team, to provide his feedback and evaluation on the implementation and effectiveness of the psychological training programs. He wrote the following in his evaluation.

“The sport psychology consulting team provided an effective psychological training service, which included not only theoretical knowledge, but also psychological training methods. Besides that, the leader and members of the psychology consulting team actually became part of the team by training and working together with the coaches and athletes in practice and competition. By working at the front line of training and competition, the psychology consultants were able to get first-hand information and receive valuable feedback from the athletes. Over a long period of time working with the team, they were able to successfully integrate the theoretical knowledge into practical training, combining them effectively. In particular, Professor Zhang Liwei stood at the highest jumping platform to provide psychological instruction and counselling to ease the fear of the athletes and enhance their self-confidence.



Credit: Campbell/flickr/CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0

In preparation for the competition, the psychological consulting team revised and developed the pre-competition and competition psychological plans many times. Eventually, the consulting group made a detailed final plan that took into account the full range of potential challenges and difficulties the athletes might face in competition. Finally, they developed a personalised program for each athlete. The results of the psychological training were fully reflected in the excellent performances of the athletes at the 2010 Winter Olympics. Specifically, a total of eight Chinese athletes participated in the Games, of which seven entered the finals; all seven athletes finished in the top eight in the final, with one winning a silver medal and two winning bronze medals. We truly appreciate your excellent work and the support you extended to our teams. We sincerely hope that your psychology consulting team will continuously support us and provide your excellent service to our teams in preparation for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games.”



view video:
*Guo takes off
for bronze*



Professor Zhang presenting ... and with the athletes.

Personal Reflections

realise their
full potential

We applied a humanistic counselling approach, based on Maslow's self-actualization theory (Maslow, 1943) and Rogers' psychological counselling principles (Rogers, 1989). Rogers pointed out in his book, *A Way of Being* (translated into Chinese by Zhang, Zhu, & Yuan, 1987), "As long as we can create a sincere coexistence, mutual understanding, an atmosphere of mutual respect, there will be a miracle. Everyone can change from rigid into flexible, from static to dynamic, from dependent to independent, and gradually realise their full potential." Rogers also noted that the success of treatment is not primarily dependent on the treatment techniques, but on whether the treatment has a certain attitude, and he further emphasised that the clinician should be sincere, unconditional, positive, caring and empathic toward patients.

During the process of counselling the athletes we fully recognised that they were elite performers rather than patients and that the issues that needed to be resolved were performance concerns and not pathologies. Their challenge represented a process of seeking self-actualization by continuously overcoming self-limitations and a range of psychological barriers. Therefore, Rogers' counselling philosophy became particularly applicable. In the counselling practice, we deeply appreciated his principles of non-directive therapy, active care, empathy, and sincere exchange of ideas to obtain athletes' trust, to open the windows to their soul, and to help them to cope with difficulties, setbacks, and continuous self-development in ways that would have a lasting effect.

Long-Term Benefits for Athletes

Our sport psychology consulting team not only focused on the athletes' psychological training and competition, but also showed great concern about their personal long-term development. During training periods at the Beijing Sport University, for the long-term development of these athletes, we invited academic instructors whose expertise was in areas other than physical education and sport science to teach the athletes and coaches academic subjects such as Chinese languages and English twice a week. The athletes showed great interest in studying these subjects. We believe that in the process of helping the athletes with their psychological training, our concern for their overall well-being and future careers reflected our passionate support for these athletes.



Credit: Ji Dong

As a group, the psychology consultants were older than the athletes and coaches, but we did not hesitate to help the athletes with such things as carrying heavy skis at the airport. We were not only university professors, but also the athletes' friends. Our job was to provide psychological training and counselling, but we also willingly and diligently shoveled the snow on the mountains, repaired the landing slope, and engaged in other training-related work together with the athletes and coaches on days when it was snowing. We provided our athletes and coaches with numerous lectures and counselling sessions giving them professional psychological suggestions and advice. In the process, we discovered so many impressive and commendable qualities and actions of these athletes, coaches, and team managers. We made contribution to this team, but we also gained a lot through our consulting experience. We experienced icy, snowy and bitterly cold weather as low as minus 34 degrees Celsius, and unfortunately witnessed athletes suffering excruciating ligament ruptures. We heard the cries of grief of those whose Olympic dreams were shattered, and listened to athletes as they expressed their fears about their injuries, and their longing for success. There was an athlete who was born on the same day and same year as the son of the first author. By spending more than 10 days with this athlete, the author developed a better understanding of what is pain, what is dedication, what is worry, what is a dream, and what is self-transcendence.



Credit: Ji Dong

Helping the athletes prepare for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games was a grant project approved by the Chinese Olympic Committee. Our psychology consulting team signed a contractual agreement with the Chinese Olympic Team, identifying that the central mission of our consulting work was to ensure success for the Chinese Olympic aerials athletes. In addition to helping the athletes to achieve peak performance through psychological training, our non-contractual task and long-term goal was to help them engage in self-improvement and self-development in order to achieve their life-goals and find happiness on their life-long journey. The Olympic Games take place every four years, but we wanted to help the athletes to continuously achieve their dreams and, in doing so, to actualise our own dreams by increasing our psychological knowledge and enhancing our competence in consulting with elite athletes.



Credit: Ji Dong

Psychological training for elite athletes is undoubtedly one of the most important processes for helping them achieve peak performance in high level competition. Each psychology consultant has unique ways of providing training and counselling based on the particular athlete's psychological characteristics and unique situation. Because every athlete is different, a psychological training program should be tailored to individual needs for the best outcome. With this principle in mind, our psychology consulting team developed consulting programs that were multi-layered and diverse, yet deeply rooted in the Chinese culture. Since our athletes had lived in China their whole lives, their ideology, beliefs, value system, ways of thinking, behaviors, visions, dreams, psychological characteristics,

and personality traits were strongly influenced by Chinese culture. We intentionally designed our programs to take into account the characteristics of the Chinese culture while integrating Western psychological consulting approaches. Based on the excellent performances of the Chinese aerial skiing athletes at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, it is concluded that the psychological training approaches we provided for our athletes were successful. It is our hope that these culturally-sensitive psychological training approaches will benefit athletes, coaches, practitioners, and sport psychology specialists in the future.

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19	The first author delivers a seminar to the athletes, courtesy of Zhang Liwei
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