

On the Characteristics of Physical Training Content in Seo Sang-cheon's Writings by Period

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Abstract

Seo Sang-cheon (1903-1950) was a sports leader and administrator who contributed greatly to the development of Korean sports after Japanese colonial era and liberation. And to us, he is known as the first person to introduce weightlifting to Korea. In this paper, through the main contents of the books of the 1930s related to this research topic, including the Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act (1931) and the Modern Iron Stick Movement Act (1934), the main contents of Seo Sang-cheon's books related to physical training during this period, I would like to illuminate the characteristics such as infinite affirmation of the 'body training' and the exposure of disciplined upper body photographs in Seo Sang-cheon's writings related to physical training during this period. On the one hand, contrary to this, I tried to mention the regrets of his writings and political moves emphasizing the 'spirit' after the 1940s. We found that Seo Sang-cheon's early writings were focused on individual physical training, beyond the boundaries of nation and ethnicity. In contrast, his later writings reflect a shift towards thinking of personal physical training in alignment with the development of the state. We believe that this change in his writings demonstrates that Seo Sang-cheon's interests extended beyond physical education into political and social spheres, while also symbolizing a transformation in his perception of the body.

Keywords: *Seo Sang-cheon, weightlifting, physical training, Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act, Modern Iron Stick Movement Act*

1. Introduction

Seo Sang-cheon (1903-1950) was a significant figure in the development of Korean sports during the Japanese colonial period and after liberation. He was active as a sports leader, scholar, social activist, and politician. However, he is most renowned for being the first person to introduce weightlifting to Korea. At that time, many sports disciplines were introduced by foreigners or Japanese, but weightlifting was uniquely

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introduced by a Korean, Seo Sang-cheon. His contributions can be summarized as follows. After graduating from Whimoon High School in Korea, Seo Sang-cheon studied physical education at the Japan Gymnastics School, making him an elite in a field where such expertise was rare in Korea. Upon his return to Korea in 1925, he introduced weightlifting, which he had learned in Japan, and made considerable efforts to disseminate it widely in schools and society. Seo Sang-cheon hoped that all Koreans would be able to improve their weak constitutions and develop strong physical fitness.

This paper aims to highlight the characteristics of Seo Sang-cheon's writings on physical training during the 1930s, particularly focusing on his works, *Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act* (1931) and *The Modern Iron Stick Movement Act* (1934), which are relevant to the research topic. The sources referenced in this study are the reprints published in 1987 and 1995 by Seo Sang-cheon's son, Seo Hyun-soo, former chairman of Ambassador Hotel, and his grandson, Seo Jung-ho, due to the original books being out of print.

There are currently few preceding studies on Seo Sang-cheon. Notable among them are Kim Yong-geun's "A Study on the Life and Physical Education Philosophy of Moon Gok Seo Sang-cheon" and Son Hwan & Choi Jong-gyun's "The Influence of Moon Gok Seo Sang-cheon on the Development of Modern Korean Sports". Kim Yong-geun's paper holds significance as the first in Korea to explore Seo Sang-cheon's life and physical education philosophy.[1] Meanwhile, Son Hwan and Choi Jong-gyun provided a clear summary of the key characteristics of Seo Sang-cheon's influence on modern Korean sports from a historical perspective.[2]

Additionally, Choi Yeo-mi's master's thesis "A Psychohistorical Study on Seo Sang-cheon, a Sportsman during the Japanese Colonial Period" delves deeply into Seo Sang-cheon's active promotion of physical training and the spread of weightlifting following his return to Korea, as well as his controversial pro-Japanese activities during the late Japanese colonial period and his right-wing political actions after liberation. Given Seo Sang-cheon's reputation as the first to introduce weightlifting to Korea, it is understandable that documenting his pro-Japanese controversies and subsequent high-ranking right-wing political activities and leadership in the sports and media sectors would have been challenging.

Jin Hyun-joo's paper "Perception of the Body in the Works of Seo Sang-cheon" is closely related to this research topic. This paper highlights the distinct contrast between Seo Sang-cheon's writings in the 1930s and the 1940s. Due to space limitations, this paper primarily addresses his 1930s works, with plans to pursue further research on his 1940s writings in the future.

Another relevant study on Seo Sang-cheon is Choi Chan-wook's 2023 doctoral dissertation, "A Study on Modern Korean Sports Activists," which provides a detailed account of Seo Sang-cheon's achievements and writings as a sports administrator and a high-ranking sports official. [3]

2. Life and Achievements in Sports of Seo Sang-cheon

2.1. Seo Sang-cheon's achievements

Choi Yeo-mi, as previously mentioned, summarized Seo Sang-cheon's achievements in her thesis as follows: "He established the Central Physical Education Research Institute, the first sports research institute in Korea, promoted weightlifting and gymnastics, and trained numerous sports leaders. Notably, he served as the president of various sports organizations, including the Joseon Weightlifting Federation and the Gymnastics Federation, and coined the term 'weightlifting,' laying the foundation for the development of weightlifting in

Korea."[4]

Additionally, Son Hwan and others noted in their paper that Seo Sang-cheon not only developed the All-Joseon Weightlifting Competition but also expanded the perception of sports in Joseon, which had been seen primarily as athletic competition, to include aspects of public health and physical fitness enhancement. They emphasized that the physical training exercises introduced by Seo Sang-cheon did not require special or large spaces and could be easily performed alone, anywhere, at any time. Furthermore, they noted that he introduced general health exercises and basic training methods for athletes, based on the teachings of Eugen Sandow, often referred to as the father of modern bodybuilding.[2]

In addition, one of Seo Sang-cheon's significant achievements, as noted by the researcher, was obtaining approval from the Joseon Sports Association in 1936 to rename the discipline from 'Yeokgi' to 'Yeokdo' This was a remarkable and notable achievement. In other East Asian countries with similar cultural backgrounds, such as Japan and China, the terms '重量挙げ' and '举重' are used, respectively. However, these terms do not incorporate the scholarly and philosophical meaning of the character 'Tao'. This indicates Seo Sang-cheon's deep trust in the positive effects of this discipline on both the mind and body, extending beyond the realm of sports to become part of the philosophical domain.

2.2. Seo Sang-cheon's Life and Writings

Seo Sang-cheon was born in 1902 into a wealthy family in Daegu, graduated from Whimoon High School in Seoul, and completed his studies at the Japan Gymnastics School in 1923 before returning to Korea in 1925. Upon his return, he worked as a teacher at Whimoon High School. However, he was not satisfied with just this and sought to spread and teach the physical training methods he had learned and practiced in Japan. Along with Lee Kyu-hyun and Lee Byung-hak, who studied with him in Japan, he established the 'Joseon Physical Fitness Promotion Research Institute' at his home, where he taught weightlifting theory and methods for physical enhancement and personally practiced them. Feeling the need for broader dissemination of these physical training methods, in 1930, he converted his home into a 20-pyeong gymnasium and renamed it the 'Central Physical Education Research Institute.'

The motivation for Seo Sang-cheon, a young man from a wealthy family, to study abroad in Japan and develop a vision for physical fitness enhancement is crucial. This is well reflected in an article he wrote titled "I Was the Weakest," published in the magazine *Students* in March 1929

"Physical education should be done whenever there is time, not as a lifelong specialty. Therefore, I intended to major in scientific fields. My purpose in going to Tokyo was to study science, but after staying there for a while, their advocacy for physical education moved me greatly. Therefore, I gladly entered the field of physical education and am satisfied today, wishing to recommend this field especially to those who are unhealthy." (Seo Sang-cheon. "I Was the Weakest," *Students*. 1929: 44) .[4]

Reflecting on "the weakness of not only myself but also of Joseon," Seo Sang-cheon initially attended Tokyo University of Physics in Japan in 1922 but transferred to the Japan Gymnastics School in 1923, where he studied and trained in gymnastics, weightlifting, and other physical training methods under Professor Tobashi Junjiro.

After returning to Korea, Seo worked as a teacher at Whimoon High School. While working as a teacher at

the historic Whimoon High School, founded in 1904, Seo Sang-cheon trained Kim Sung-jip, who went on to win South Korea's first medal in weightlifting at the 1948 London Olympics. He also took the lead in promoting and teaching physical training methods and weightlifting nationwide through branches of the Central Physical Education Research Institute. In June 1931, he became a director of the Joseon Physical Education Research Association, and in 1933, he was one of the founders of the Joseon Eugenics Association. In 1936, he changed the term 'Yeokgi' in English as 'Weight Lifting' to 'Yeokdo', emphasizing the internal 'Tao' over merely lifting weights. This could be considered an even more important contribution than introducing weightlifting to Korea for the first time.

In 1937, Seo Sang-cheon resigned as a teacher at Whimoon High School. He also withdrew from his involvement with the Central Physical Education Research Institute, which was expanding nationwide, and moved to the Mūdānjiang region in Manchuria, where he managed a farm for three years. This is mentioned by Baek Yong-gi, a former student, in the reprints of Seo Sang-cheon's works published in 1987. The 1942 reprint of *Yeokdo* provides the most detailed account, stating, "The author moved to Mūdānjiang in Manchuria, where he managed a farm for three years to secure the necessary funds for the promotion of weightlifting." Additionally, his biography notes, "In 1937, engaged in agriculture in Mūdānjiang, Manchuria (supporting the independence movement)." [4]

While the specific reasons are unclear, after returning from Manchuria, Seo Sang-cheon began joining pro-Japanese organizations in the 1940s. During the Japanese colonial period, Seo Sang-cheon not only refrained from resistance but also became a founder of the Eugenics Association, a prominent pro-Japanese organization, and joined the National Total Power Joseon Federation. Moreover, in 1939, Seo Sang-cheon became the first Korean sports figure to receive the Physical Education Merit Award from the Japanese Governor-General of Korea. In 1940, he became the second president of the Joseon Weightlifting Federation.

The most significant factor that led to suspicions of his pro-Japanese activities was his appointment as a counselor for the National Total Power Joseon Federation. This organization was considered the epitome of pro-Japanese collaboration, recognized as loyal supporters of Japan. The counselor list included notable figures such as Bang Eung-mo, president of the Joseon Ilbo, Choi Nam-seon, Lee Kwang-soo, and Yoon Chi-ho as directors. After 1941, the Joseon Weightlifting Federation was integrated into the Joseon Sports Association, and his 'Central Physical Education Research Institute' was closed in 1942.

While it is difficult to directly correlate his later actions with his external activities, Seo Sang-cheon's writings published in the 1940s, such as *Yeokdo* (1942) and of *mental and physical training method* (1950), differ significantly from his writings in the 1930s. Mentions of physical training or weightlifting are minimal or entirely absent. Despite the title *Yeokdo*, the book contains little discussion about the weightlifting discipline. In the book, 'Yeokdo' is mentioned only briefly in one of the 16 sections, but the actual content emphasizes 'Mind Cultivation' in gymnastics, martial arts, sports, and weightlifting.[5]

In the book of *mental and physical training method*, published in 1950, the year Seo Sang-cheon disappeared, which was recommended by the Minister of Education, it includes exercises such as National Health Gymnastics, Youth Gymnastics, co-prosperity Exercise Methods, and Weightlifting Techniques. However, more pages are devoted to introducing 'mind-work method' and the mind cultivation practices of famous individuals. Specific sections include 56 topics such as effort, humility, diligence, and cleanliness, with all sections titled 'Yeokdo mind-work method'. This refers to 'Tao' related to 'power,' not the weightlifting

discipline.[3] As such, all of his writings after 1940 primarily focus on the mind. One notable feature of *mental and physical training method* is the inclusion of a photograph of Syngman Rhee and an accompanying tribute at the beginning of the book.

In this regard, Jin Hyun-joo noted in her master's thesis, "Perception of the Body in the Works of Seo Sang-cheon," that while Seo Sang-cheon's early writings focused on individual physical training apart from the nation and state, his later works reflect a shift towards viewing personal physical training as aligned with national development.[6]

3. The emphasis on the body in 1930s writings and the emphasis on the mind in 1940s writings

3.1 Characteristics of 1930s Writings

This chapter aims to examine the characteristics of Seo Sang-cheon's writings on physical training from the 1930s. During this period, he authored only two books, *Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act* (1931) and *The Modern Iron Stick Movement Act* (1934).

Specifically, the characteristics of these works include Seo Sang-cheon's unwavering positivity toward 'physical training,' detailed and practical efforts and traces of training, as well as providing readers with detailed explanations and photographic materials to help them independently learn and develop their physical fitness. Additionally, there is a significant emphasis on showcasing well-trained upper bodies through numerous photographs of himself, his colleagues, and students. This intense focus on the 'body' is rare in sports-related literature from the Japanese colonial period, making these works filled with passion and confidence from a dedicated physical educator.

Seo Sang-cheon is highly regarded for being the first Korean to present scientific physical training methods based on Western physiology in these writings. His 1930s works introduced many of the physical training exercises and basic training methods developed by Eugen Sandow, the 'father of modern bodybuilding,' which were considered highly advanced and groundbreaking at the time. What Seo Sang-cheon referred to as physical training would be equivalent to 'bodybuilding' today.

The common characteristic of the two books, *Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act* (1931) and *The Modern Iron Stick Movement Act* (1934), is the intense focus and praise for the well-trained 'body,' as highlighted through numerous photographs of well-developed upper bodies of famous figures and acquaintances. These writings were created not just by fulfilling a set curriculum, but by Seo Sang-cheon actively embracing advanced and scientific theories and trends based on Western physiology alongside his colleagues during his studies in Japan.

For instance, the paper by Son Hwan and Choi Jong-gyun, "The Influence of Moon Gok Seo Sang-cheon on the Development of Modern Korean Sports" (1999), reveals the curriculum of the Japan Gymnastics School that Seo Sang-cheon attended. However, it is believed that the curriculum alone would not have sufficed for mastering Eugen Sandow's physical training methods or Western circuit training theories. It can be inferred that Seo Sang-cheon extensively studied advanced sports journals independently, which allowed him to introduce practical applications of these theories domestically. In summary, Seo Sang-cheon was the first person in Korea to research, practice, and disseminate scientific methods of physical training based on Western

physiology.

Furthermore, Seo Sang-cheon employed advanced scientific theories in physical training along with promotional strategies akin to modern sports marketing. His books consistently included advertisements for his other publications and membership recruitment advertisements for the 'Physical Education Research Institute.'

Examining these promotional materials reveals that the institute was described as "the only institution that actively aims to strengthen the basic physical fitness of the weak, those with indigestion, neurasthenia, and other general health issues, as well as general athletes."

The Central Physical Education Research Institute was promoted as "the only body modification institution in the East, the Gyeongseong Central Physical Education Research Institute," showing an advanced level of marketing strategy, comparable to current sports marketing practices.

For instance, in *Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act*, the first and second pages feature advertisements for Seo Sang-cheon's other books, while the third page includes a photo of his well-developed upper body. The fourth page features two consecutive photos of co-author Lee Kyu-hyun's upper body, showing the difference before and after two years of practicing the physical fitness methods. This effectively serves as a 'before and after' model for research institute membership.

The fifth page showcases a full-body photo of 27-year-old Sandow in peak physical condition. In fact, over half of this book consists of photographs and illustrations explaining physical training methods, with many images of well-developed upper bodies.[7]

In 1934, the first page immediately following the table of contents features a photograph of Seo Sang-cheon's well-developed upper body. This is followed by photos of athletes, including Seo himself, training with horizontal bars. Notably, the book also includes a photograph of Ye Woon-hyung, the president of the Joseon JoongAng Ilbo at the time, exposing his upper body. Ye Woon-hyung was 48 years old at the time. Additionally, the book provides photographic references of Seo Sang-cheon and other skilled individuals training with horizontal bars, guiding readers to learn the correct postures.[8]

The content of Seo Sang-cheon's writings from the 1930s reveals a different aspect from the nationalist physical education thinkers and patriots of the late Joseon period. Unlike the nationalist sports leaders and thinkers of the time, who frequently grappled with questions such as 'Why should we build strong bodies from our weak physiques?' and 'What kind of world should we create with these now robust bodies?', Seo Sang-cheon's writings do not address these issues. Instead, they focus solely on the immediate task and goal of acquiring a strong and perfectly trained body. The ultimate purpose beyond encouraging physical training through the public display of well-trained bodies is not evident in his works from this period.

In other words, Seo Sang-cheon's writings from the 1930s, specifically *Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act* (1931) and *The Modern Iron Stick Movement Act* (1934), lack the nationalist fervor for strengthening the nation through physical training, a sentiment prevalent among many Korean sports figures from the late Joseon period through the period of Japanese occupation.

In the history of modern Korean physical education, there are aspects that conflict with the inherent spirit of physical education, but nationalist elements were often emphasized. For instance, in the late Joseon period, school physical education centered around 'military gymnastics' to develop students' military and physical strength as part of efforts to strengthen the nation. This approach was also prevalent in private schools.[9]

During the period of Japanese occupation, 'sports festivals' were imbued with nationalist elements, including speeches, slogans, and patriotic songs before and after the events, as well as the intent to enhance national strength and foster a sense of independence through the programs themselves. Additionally, numerous non-school organizations held sports festivals aimed at promoting national consciousness during both the late Joseon period and the occupation period. [10]

3.2 Characteristics of 1940s Writings

However, Seo Sang-cheon's writings from the 1940s do not exhibit any educational objectives related to awakening the public's national consciousness or strengthening the nation through physical education. This distinguishes his works from other nationalist physical education activities of the time.

In general, research on school physical education during the late Joseon period and the period of Japanese occupation often critiques the overly militaristic focus on 'military gymnastics,' noting that this approach overlooked the true purpose of physical education due to the constraints of the era. Yet, from a nationalist perspective, this aspect is sometimes positively evaluated.

In contrast, Seo Sang-cheon's two books from the 1930s focus solely on the development of healthy physical fitness and the creation of a perfect body as the most important issue. However, the fact that Seo Sang-cheon, despite being a school teacher, established a personal research institute to promote physical training methods and organized weightlifting competitions, dedicating himself to the task of nationwide physical training, could be seen as an expression of patriotism. Although not explicitly mentioned in these books, it is possible that for Seo Sang-cheon, the task of developing a healthy physique was inherently tied to patriotism during the period of Japanese occupation.

Moreover, the efforts of Seo Sang-cheon and his colleagues to promote physical training for the entire nation are, in themselves, commendable. The tireless efforts of Seo Sang-cheon to disseminate physical training methods seem to have borne fruit nearly 100 years later, as evidenced by the current fitness craze and the widespread practice of body profile photography in Korea. Reflecting on the physical training programs led by Seo Sang-cheon in the 1930s reveals that his spirit of the times was remarkably ahead of its time. Seo Sang-cheon played a pivotal role in changing the traditional Confucian society's aversion to physical training by promoting a positive attitude towards a well-trained body.

However, when examining Seo Sang-cheon's writings from the 1940s, it is disappointing to see a significant departure from his earlier works in the 1930s. Specifically, Seo Sang-cheon's physical education philosophy, which had previously focused on the 'body,' shifts to a theory that emphasizes the importance of the 'mind' in governing the body, with a strong focus on the significance of 'mind' rather than physical training. Despite the emphasis on the importance of 'mind,' there is a noticeable lack of references to patriotism or national loyalty during the period of Japanese occupation.

Jin Hyun-joo, in her master's thesis "Perception of the Body in the Works of Seo Sang-cheon," noted that while Seo Sang-cheon's early writings focused on individual physical training separate from the nation and state, his later works reflect a shift towards viewing personal physical training as aligned with national development. [6]

There is a possibility that these writings from the 1940s are somewhat related to Seo Sang-cheon's involvement with pro-Japanese organizations and his subsequent activities in politics and the media.

4. Conclusion

Seo Sang-cheon pursued a major in physical education in Japan with the intention of transforming not only himself but also many others in Joseon from a state of physical weakness. In Japan, he studied gymnastics, weightlifting, and various physical training theories and practices based on modern physiological principles.

To further support the dissemination of these physical training methods, Seo Sang-cheon published works such as *Modern Physical Fitness Promotion Act* (1931) and *The Modern Iron Stick Movement Act* (1934).

These 1930s writings actively adopted and conveyed the theories of figures like Eugen Sandow, often referred to as the father of modern bodybuilding. As a result, these writings exhibit a bold characteristic for their time, marked by an unwavering positivity toward well-developed bodies and numerous photographs of well-built upper bodies. However, in our view, from the perspective of nationalist physical education during the late Joseon period and the Japanese colonial period, we find it somewhat disappointing that these writings focus solely on physical training

In contrast, Seo Sang-cheon's writings from the 1940s show a sudden shift from a focus on the 'body' to an emphasis on the 'mind.' This change is difficult to separate from his involvement with pro-Japanese organizations during the period of Japanese occupation and his far-right political activities after liberation.

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