PEDAGOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY OF SPORT
eISSN 2450-6605 · Open Access · Peer-reviewed
apcz.umk.pl/PPS · Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

LI, Xinjiang and CHEN, Zhiqiang. Polo as Intangible Sporting Cultural Heritage in China: Historical Development, Contemporary Challenges, and Pathways for Sustainable Safeguarding. Pedagogy and Psychology of Sport. 2026;31:76691. https://doi.org/10.12775/PPS.2026.31.76691

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Received: 04.06.2026. Accepted: 24.09.2026. Published: 18.10.2026.

Polo as Intangible Sporting Cultural Heritage in China: Historical Development, Contemporary Challenges, and Pathways for Sustainable Safeguarding

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Abstract

Polo represents a distinctive form of intangible sporting cultural heritage rooted in Silk Road exchanges and preserved through traditional practices among Tajik communities on the Pamir Plateau. However, modernization has challenged its sustainability. Traditional polo faces declining participation, weakened intergenerational transmission, and the erosion of cultural practices, while modern competitive polo remains constrained by high costs and limited accessibility. These challenges threaten its cultural authenticity and social functions as living heritage. This article examines the historical development and contemporary challenges of polo and proposes a dual-track approach to sustainable safeguarding. It emphasizes protecting indigenous cultural practices while integrating modern polo with cultural tourism, education, and international cooperation. By balancing cultural preservation with contemporary innovation, the proposed framework aims to strengthen community participation, reinforce cultural identity, and promote sustainable heritage transmission. The findings offer practical insights into the revitalization of traditional sports within changing sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: polo; intangible sporting cultural heritage; integration of tradition and modernity; cultural identity; international cooperation; heritage tourism

1. Development of Polo as Intangible Cultural Heritage

1.1 Historical Trajectories of Transmission

1.1.1 From the Han and Tang to the Ming and Qing Dynasties: From Military Training to Aristocratic Recreation

The origins of polo can be traced to the Persian Empire in the sixth century BCE, from which it subsequently reached China through the Silk Road. During the Han dynasty, the

introduction of horses from the Western Regions and state support for horse management facilitated its use in military training to improve cavalry horsemanship, teamwork, and combat readiness. Polo reached its height during the Tang dynasty, when it became particularly popular at court and among aristocratic circles [1]. Emperor Taizong and other rulers reportedly participated in the sport and promoted its use in military training. Tang-era polo featured purpose-built venues, established rules, and participants from different social groups, including women, reflecting aspects of the period's social openness. With subsequent dynastic changes and a decline in cavalry capabilities during the Song dynasty, the sport gradually lost prominence. Although members of the imperial elite occasionally played polo during the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was no longer a mainstream pastime, and its military training function was increasingly replaced by other practices.

1.1.2 Modern History: Olympic Discontinuation and Community-Based Living Transmission

Polo underwent substantial changes within the modern international sporting system. It made its Olympic debut at the 1900 Paris Games and subsequently appeared at several Olympic editions, showcasing equestrian skill and team strategy. Following the 1936 Berlin Games, polo disappeared from the Olympic programme amid challenges associated with venue requirements, high participation costs, and differences in international rules. Its subsequent development became increasingly concentrated in relatively exclusive sporting circles.

In China, polo continued to transmit cultural practices through community-based activities despite its limited presence in international competition. Tajik communities in Xinjiang incorporated traditional polo, or guibazi, into festivals, preserving customary practices such as wooden-bowl water timing and eagle-flute accompaniment. In Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and other regions, equestrian competitions remained part of local celebrations, including Nadam festivities [2]. Meanwhile, modern polo clubs emerged in Shanghai, Beijing, and other cities, adopting international certification systems and organizing commercial competitions. The coexistence of ritual continuity and modern competitive innovation has thus become a distinctive feature of polo's contemporary transmission in China.

Figure 1. Polo competition

1.1.3 Contemporary Developments: National Heritage Recognition and Regional Differentiation

The cultural significance of polo has received increasing official recognition. In 2008, Tajik polo in Xinjiang was included in the second group of items on China's national intangible cultural heritage list, placing its traditional competitive forms and associated customs within the scope of formal safeguarding. Related equestrian traditions in Inner Mongolia and Tibet have also been discussed within heritage protection frameworks [3]. Regional differences have become increasingly apparent. Tajik polo on the Pamir Plateau retains practices involving wooden balls and mountainous terrain, embedded within festive activities featuring eagle-flute music and local dance. Grassland polo in Inner Mongolia is associated with Nadam competitions that emphasize strength and speed. Urban clubs in Shanghai and Beijing, by contrast, emphasize international competition, standardized facilities, and commercial development. These different trajectories illustrate both cultural diversity and the tensions and interactions between indigenous traditions and modern sporting institutions.

1.2 Regional Distribution

1.2.1 Tajik Polo in Xinjiang: Rules and Rituals in a Highland Environment

The rules and rituals of Tajik guibazi are closely connected to mountainous landscapes and pastoral culture. Matches are often held in river-valley meadows above 3,000 metres, with goals marked by stones or piles of cattle dung and boundaries adapted to the terrain [4]. Soft balls sewn from yak hide are used, while relatively simple saddles and stirrups facilitate horse control on steep slopes. Before competition, elders play blessing melodies on eagle-bone flutes, and women circle the playing area carrying naan bread, symbolizing harmony among heaven, earth, and humanity. Riders are expected to observe customary restrictions on excessive competition, including the injunction against scoring after three consecutive strikes. The integration of ecological adaptation, belief, and sporting conventions illustrates the living character of highland heritage.

1.2.2 Northeast China: Surviving Practices Shaped by Military Culture

Although polo traditions in Northeast China have not developed a heritage system as extensive as that in Xinjiang, they retain traces of military culture associated with Manchu riding and archery traditions and later frontier training [5]. In parts of Heilongjiang and Jilin, simplified horseback ball-striking games reportedly use sandbags or cloth balls in open grassland or agricultural settings, emphasizing balance and accuracy. During the Republican period, regional military forces also incorporated polo into cavalry training. Although these practices no longer serve military purposes, the transmission of riding and striking skills during community festivals and pastoral gatherings continues to reflect the region's historical emphasis on martial competence and practical skill.

1.2.3 Central and Coastal China: Commercial Performances and Tourism Development

In central and coastal China, contemporary polo is increasingly associated with commercial performance and tourism. Scenic attractions in Henan and Hebei stage reconstructions of Tang- and Song-era court polo, using historical costumes, commentary, and lighting effects to create immersive visitor experiences. Although such productions reduce the competitive dimension, they reinforce polo's symbolic historical value [6]. In coastal cities such as Shanghai and Qingdao, polo clubs combine standardized facilities and internationally certified coaching with premium leisure and tourism services. Local cultural tourism initiatives also use tournaments and themed exhibitions to promote urban cultural identities. While these activities increase visibility, they raise questions about cultural authenticity and the appropriate balance between commercial objectives and heritage safeguarding.

1.3 Cultural Significance and Social Functions

1.3.1 A Medium of Ethnic Identity: Polo Rituals in Tajik Weddings

At Tajik wedding celebrations, polo is presented not only as a competition but also as a collective ritual that sustains ethnic identity and cultural memory [7]. The groom's and bride's families may organize opposing teams whose riders use decorated horses and traditional mallets. Elements associated with guibazi, including symbolic balls and goal-scoring practices, express wishes for fertility and family prosperity. Elders recount ancestral migration and equestrian life through traditional songs, while the presentation of the ball to the bride's family symbolizes harmony between the two families. Collective participation thereby gives the wedding a broader communal meaning. Young riders' courage and skill also contribute to local assessments of character, reinforcing polo's symbolic role in Tajik cultural identity.

1.3.2 Sporting Characteristics: The Integration of Horsemanship, Tactics, and Teamwork

Polo combines demanding equestrian skills, tactical decision-making, and coordinated team performance. Riders must control acceleration, stopping, turning, and movement while travelling at speed. In Tajik polo, the mountainous terrain requires particularly close coordination between rider and horse, developed through prolonged practice. Tactical effectiveness depends on adjusting attacking routes in response to opponents, including coordinated passing patterns and deceptive movements. Teamwork involves shared tactical planning, nonverbal signals, and the creation of opportunities for teammates [8]. These interdependent skills make polo more than a contest of physical strength: it also expresses judgement, courage, and collective responsibility.

1.3.3 Economic Potential: Heritage-Based Cultural Tourism and Intellectual Property Development

As a distinctive form of intangible sporting heritage, polo offers opportunities for cultural tourism and locally branded cultural products. In Tashkurgan County, Xinjiang, polo festivals combine traditional competition, folk performances, and handicraft markets, potentially generating demand for accommodation and catering. Coastal polo clubs pursue a different model through international events, training programmes, horse rental, and specialized equipment services. Polo motifs have also been incorporated into cultural and creative products, including decorated mallets and historically themed commemorative items [9]. Such activities

may generate resources for safeguarding, provided that commercial development remains responsive to community cultural priorities.

2. Principal Challenges to the Development of Polo Heritage

2.1 Discontinuities in Intergenerational Transmission

2.1.1 Shortages of Skilled Coaches and Young Participants

The transmission of polo heritage faces simultaneous shortages of experienced instructors and younger participants. Traditional expertise is often conveyed through apprenticeship and oral instruction, but many senior practitioners are ageing and have limited experience in formal curriculum development. In modern polo, internationally accredited coaches are concentrated in major-city clubs and may be unaffordable for local heritage organizations. High costs of horse care and playing facilities restrict youth access, while migration from pastoral areas reduces the pool of potential successors. In cities, widely accessible sports such as football and basketball also compete for young people's attention.

2.1.2 Endangered Skills: Traditional Mallet-Making and Horse Training

The potential disappearance of specialized craftsmanship presents a further threat. Traditional mallets are described as being fashioned from materials such as bone and mulberry wood through multiple stages of shaping, carving, and finishing; their curvature and weight influence striking accuracy [10]. As older craftspeople retire, industrially manufactured products increasingly replace labour-intensive traditional methods. Traditional horse training is likewise vulnerable: preparing horses for mountainous terrain and competitive play requires prolonged work to develop endurance, responsiveness, and coordination. Commercial pressures favouring efficiency may therefore undermine embodied knowledge and the culturally valued relationship between riders and horses.

2.1.3 Declining Participation: From Community Practice to Exclusive Recreation

Polo historically involved broad community participation in some pastoral regions, supporting social interaction and collective identity. Social and economic change has narrowed this participation. Migration, reduced access to grazing land and horses, and high costs have limited opportunities for ordinary residents. Contemporary urban polo is often associated with affluent social networks, with substantial membership fees and equipment expenses in cities

such as Beijing and Shanghai [11]. This shift risks detaching the sport from everyday community life and reducing a living cultural practice to a marker of elite status.

2.2 Tensions Between Policy and Resources

2.2.1 Land Constraints: Agricultural Land Conversion and Polo Ground Development

Land-use regulation creates significant obstacles to developing polo facilities. Traditional matches require extensive open space, while standardized modern grounds occupy large areas and may trigger complex agricultural land conversion procedures. In Tajik communities in Xinjiang, proposed facility expansion may involve collective grazing land, multiple administrative approvals, and compensation for affected herders. Urban developments face additional costs associated with land classification, acquisition, and construction. These constraints can leave heritage practitioners with skills but without suitable spaces in which to transmit them.

2.2.2 Financial Constraints: Limited Safeguarding Funds and Uneven Commercial Investment

Polo safeguarding faces a dual funding problem. Public heritage budgets are limited, and activities requiring horses, specialized facilities, and continuing maintenance are expensive. The article describes a local funding application that received only 30% of its requested allocation, preventing planned apprenticeship subsidies and documentation work [12]. Commercial investors, meanwhile, often prioritize events, tourism performances, and membership services that promise faster returns rather than long-term skills transmission. This mismatch may weaken core heritage practices even where polo-related commercial activity is expanding.

2.2.3 Inadequate Standardization: Horse Registration and Competition Rules

A lack of coordinated standards is identified as another constraint. The article highlights gaps in horse registration, veterinary documentation, breed identification, competition procedures, and the certification of coaches and referees. Traditional regional conventions concerning striking techniques and fouls may differ from international rules, while externally trained officials may lack familiarity with local cultural practices. The absence of mutually intelligible standards can complicate interregional competitions and international participation, although safeguarding policies must avoid eliminating meaningful regional variation.

2.3 Conflicts Between Markets and Cultural Values

2.3.1 Excessive Commercialization and the Erosion of Authenticity

Commercial tourism can threaten authenticity when traditional polo is reduced to a short staged performance. Some attractions reportedly omit blessing ceremonies and tactical play, replacing them with choreographed riding and photo opportunities. The substitution of fluorescent props for traditional wooden mallets and the use of performers without relevant heritage expertise further distance presentations from established practice [13]. Although such spectacles may entertain visitors, they risk obscuring the cultural memory, community relationships, and embodied skills through which polo functions as living heritage.

2.3.2 Internationalization and Unequal Influence over Competition Rules

International polo is shaped by established rule-making bodies, including the Hurlingham Polo Association and the Argentine Polo Association. Their approaches to grounds, equipment, and match procedures may differ from the locally adapted forms of Chinese traditional polo. For instance, standardized equipment and playing surfaces may not accommodate the soft saddles, shorter mallets, or uneven terrain associated with highland practices. Adjusting traditional techniques solely to meet external competition requirements may diminish their distinctiveness. International engagement therefore raises questions about whose rules and cultural knowledge are represented in the sport.

2.3.3 Public Misconceptions: Museum Display versus Living Heritage

Public understandings of polo heritage may emphasize static exhibitions and historical spectacles rather than continuing social practice. Visitors encountering mallets and saddles only behind glass may assume that polo belongs exclusively to the past [14]. Without opportunities to observe craftsmanship, meet practitioners, or participate in appropriate activities, heritage displays can reinforce this misconception. Effective living-heritage safeguarding instead depends on community involvement, intergenerational learning, and opportunities for traditions to adapt to changing circumstances.

3. Pathways for the Sustainable Safeguarding of Polo Heritage

3.1 Reconstructing Systems of Transmission

3.1.1 Developing a Three-Tier Participation Structure: Professional Coaches, Amateur Participants, and Young People

A sustainable transmission system should involve professional instructors, amateur participants, and young people. Universities and heritage organizations could jointly offer courses combining traditional techniques and contemporary coaching, while senior practitioners contribute through apprenticeship to maintain continuity. Community clubs and online networks could support affordable practice and informal competitions. Schools could introduce age-appropriate polo-related activities, including horse care and mallet-making, to strengthen cultural awareness [15]. The article cites a school-based initiative in Tashkurgan that reportedly involved several hundred students. Coordinating these three levels may help address the shortage of future practitioners.

3.1.2 Revitalizing Skills through Practitioner Workshops and Digital Archives

Skill revitalization requires both active practice and systematic documentation. Dedicated practitioner workshops could provide senior craftspeople with space and funding to teach mallet-making, horse training, and other techniques through direct apprenticeship. Carefully considered material innovations could improve usability without erasing characteristic forms. Digital archives employing three-dimensional scanning and motion capture could record decorative patterns, training gestures, and striking techniques, while interactive platforms could support remote learning. The article describes a pilot digital museum in Inner Mongolia containing more than 500 minutes of demonstrations and attracting substantial online engagement.

3.1.3 Broadening Participation through Women's and Youth Polo

Expanding participation across age and gender groups could strengthen the social base of polo heritage. Adapted equipment, appropriately designed women's competitions, and culturally meaningful presentations may increase accessibility. The article cites a Tibetan women's polo team in Diqing, Yunnan, as an example of combining sport with local cultural

expression. For young participants, smaller grounds, simplified rules, shorter matches, and family activities involving horse care or traditional crafts could reduce barriers. School-based polo culture weeks and practitioner talks could likewise stimulate sustained interest.

3.2 Coordinating Policy and Resources

3.2.1 Innovative Land Policies: Integrating Heritage Safeguarding with Sports Land Use

Addressing land constraints may require flexible arrangements that accommodate both heritage and sporting functions within existing planning requirements. Multi-use polo cultural parks could combine traditional training spaces with modern competition areas, viewing facilities, and exhibitions while retaining characteristic grassland landscapes. Flexible land tenure arrangements and collective participation in facility management could reduce initial financial pressures. Where appropriate, village collectives could contribute land-use rights in return for revenue supporting heritage safeguarding.

3.2.2 Diversifying Funding: Public Subsidies, Private Capital, and Charitable Foundations

A diversified funding model should combine public leadership, market participation, and philanthropic support. Targeted subsidies could prioritize facilities, practitioner allowances, and research on endangered skills. Tax incentives and concessional finance might encourage tourism enterprises to allocate part of their revenue to safeguarding [16]. Charitable funds could support apprenticeships and appropriate innovation. The article describes a grassland polo development fund in Inner Mongolia that reportedly supported more than 20 transmission projects over three years and generated employment opportunities. Such arrangements could distribute costs while protecting long-term cultural objectives.

3.2.3 Developing Standards for Polo Competition and Horse Training

Locally appropriate standardization should involve heritage practitioners, sports specialists, and legal experts. Proposed Chinese polo competition rules could address venue

dimensions, the use of traditional and modern equipment, and procedures that recognize customary rituals. A complementary horse-training code could consider the physiological characteristics of local breeds, including Pamir and Yili horses, and establish guidance on care, training, and competition readiness. The article also proposes recognition of culturally significant practices within event evaluation and cites a pilot standardization initiative in Xinjiang. Any such framework should balance safety and interoperability with the preservation of regional diversity.

3.3 Integrating Cultural Safeguarding and Market Development

3.3.1 Balancing Authenticity and Visitor Experience through Workshops and Demonstrations

Heritage tourism products could combine participatory workshops with carefully contextualized sporting demonstrations. Visitors might make simple mallets, learn basic riding skills, or assist with horse grooming under qualified supervision. Demonstrations should retain meaningful ceremonial and tactical elements rather than presenting polo solely as spectacle. Structured audience participation could improve engagement without displacing local practitioners. The article reports an Inner Mongolian attraction combining carving workshops and culturally themed matches, with a stated visitor satisfaction rate of 92%.

3.3.2 Strengthening International Representation of Chinese Traditional Polo

Greater international recognition could be pursued through cooperation with regions that share related equestrian traditions, including parts of Asia and the Middle East. A proposed traditional polo alliance could develop competition guidance that accommodates variable terrain and recognizes rider–horse coordination while maintaining appropriate sporting safeguards. International invitational events could provide opportunities to test these approaches and foster dialogue with relevant sporting bodies [17]. The article cites cooperation between Xinjiang and Central Asian countries as a potential model. Such initiatives should emphasize reciprocal cultural exchange rather than simple replacement of existing rules.

3.3.3 Deepening Public Education through School Programmes and Heritage Study Tours

Public education is essential to expanding awareness of polo as a continuing cultural practice. School programmes could combine historical knowledge with safe, age-appropriate activities, including lectures, supervised horse encounters, and the making of simplified equipment. Heritage study tours could incorporate visits to training grounds, interviews with practitioners, and observation of competitions. Introductory youth participation schemes may encourage further learning. The article describes pilot polo culture weeks in Inner Mongolia and reports high levels of student involvement and parental satisfaction. Education can thus connect future practitioners with the communities and knowledge systems sustaining the tradition.

4. Conclusion

As a form of intangible cultural heritage with substantial historical and cultural significance, polo requires approaches that combine safeguarding with sustainable development. This article identifies three interrelated priorities. First, transmission systems should be strengthened through coordinated professional, amateur, and youth participation, practitioner workshops, digital documentation, and more inclusive opportunities for women and young people. Second, policy coordination should address land-use constraints, diversify financial support, and develop standards sensitive to local cultural practices. Third, cultural and market objectives should be reconciled through authentic participatory tourism, international dialogue on competition rules, and sustained public education. Future implementation will require collaboration among public institutions, commercial actors, heritage practitioners, and local communities. With appropriate safeguards, polo can remain a living cultural practice while contributing to local development and intercultural exchange.

Funding: Research Project of the China Bandy Association, “Research on the Sporting Culture of Polo along the Oasis Silk Road” (Grant No. 24CBF006).

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