

The Current Landscape and Emerging Trends in the Transition of Retired Chinese Athletes to University Physical Education Instructors: A Visual Analysis Based on CiteSpace

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Abstract: Transitioning into roles as physical education instructors in higher education institutions represents one of the most sought-after career pathways for retired athletes in China. A thorough examination of the extant research in this domain facilitates a systematic understanding of its knowledge architecture and developmental trajectory, thereby advancing the systematic optimization and sustainable evolution of athlete transition mechanisms. The study reveals that predominant research themes encompass transitional challenges, strategic approaches to transition, post-transition career development, role adaptation, and psychological adjustment. There exists a strong correlation between research timelines, publication volume, and the implementation cycles of relevant strategy. Geographically, research is predominantly concentrated in the economically advanced eastern coastal and central regions, with markedly fewer studies focusing on the western areas. The focus of research is largely skewed towards popular sports such as football and martial arts, while niche or less mainstream sports receive scant attention. Three major imbalances characterize the research perspectives: firstly, a pronounced regional disparity in research distribution; secondly, an uneven focus on sports disciplines, with most studies confined to descriptive analyses and strategy recommendations, particularly lacking in-depth exploration of the psychological mechanisms underpinning the transition process; thirdly, a methodological imbalance favoring qualitative over quantitative research. Recommendations include: (1) enhancing cross-regional collaboration and interdisciplinary integration; (2) deepening cooperation between diverse sports disciplines and higher education institutions; (3)

establishing a comprehensive research framework and quantitative standards for athlete transition studies; and (4) strengthening research on pre-transition preparation and long-term career development.

Keywords: Retired Athletes; Transition; University Physical Education Instructors; Current Landscape; Emerging Trends

1. Introduction

The transition of retired athletes into university physical education teaching positions is a crucial component of China's sports-education integration policy. This initiative plays a vital role in addressing the employment challenges faced by retired athletes while simultaneously enhancing the quality and structure of physical education faculty in higher education institutions. In recent years, research on this topic has grown steadily, reflecting its increasing importance. Therefore, this study aims to systematically analyze the key research themes and directions within this field, identify current research hotspots, and provide a coherent foundation to guide future academic investigations and inform the development of effective policies supporting the career transitions of retired athletes.

2. Data Sources and Research Methodology

2.1 Data Sources

Relevant literature published between January 2010 and April 2025 was retrieved from prominent Chinese academic databases, including China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang Data. The search employed keywords such as "retired athletes", "university physical education instructors", and "sports-education integration". An initial pool of 56 articles was identified. To

ensure the accuracy and reliability of the study, a rigorous screening process was conducted through careful examination of titles, abstracts, and full texts, resulting in the exclusion of 16 articles that lacked clear relevance to the research domain. Ultimately, 40 highly pertinent studies were selected for in-depth analysis and exported in RefWorks format. These works were systematically analyzed to summarize the current research landscape, including publication years, authorship, institutional affiliations, research hotspots, and thematic directions.

2.2 Research Methodology

This study primarily utilized CiteSpace 6.3.R1 software to perform a comprehensive visual analysis of the bibliographic data. By integrating quantitative metrics with qualitative interpretation, the research dissected multiple dimensions such as publication volume, keyword frequency, and geographic distribution of studies. This multifaceted approach enabled a systematic exploration of the field's research status, emerging themes, and developmental trajectories. Through meticulous content synthesis and logical inference, commonalities and divergences across the literature were distilled and visually mapped, providing a lucid depiction of the domain's scholarly landscape. Finally, the study culminated in precise conclusions and actionable recommendations grounded in the analytical findings.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Publication Volume Analysis

Bibliometric analysis reveals that the evolution of research hotspots and thematic focuses within this field can be effectively illustrated through the annual publication volume trends, which intuitively reflect the dynamic progression of scholarly attention. The compiled data from the selected literature indicate a fluctuating yet overall upward trajectory in the number of publications (see Figure 1), underscoring a pronounced policy-driven characteristic in the research concerning the transition of retired athletes to university physical education instructors. Between 2010 and 2019, the average annual publication count remained below five, signifying that the field had yet to gain substantial traction and was largely absent from the academic spotlight during this period. However, following the joint issuance of the

2020 *Opinions on Deepening the Sports-education integration to Promote Youth Health Development* by the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Education—which incorporated higher sports institutions as a key component of the new era's sports-education integration reforms—the annual publication volume experienced a modest increase. Subsequently, after the 2022 joint directive issued by the Anhui Provincial Departments of Education, Human Resources and Social Security, and Sports, titled *Notice on Effectively Selecting School Physical Education Instructors and Coaches from Retired Athletes of Anhui's Elite Sports Teams*, the publication volume surged dramatically, reaching its peak in 2023. This pattern vividly illustrates the strong correlation between scholarly interest in retired athletes' career transitions and the intensity of policy initiatives. Although there was a slight decline in publications in 2024, the research momentum remains appreciable.

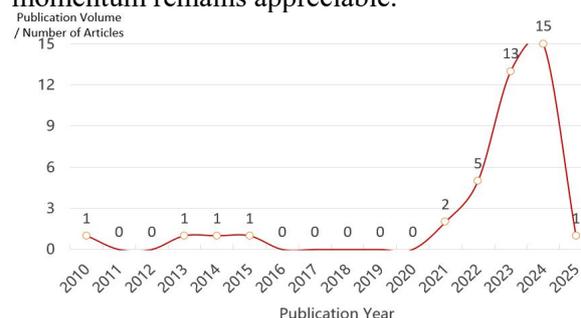


Figure 1. Annual Publication Trends in the Research Field of Retired Athletes Transitioning to University Physical Education Instructors in China (2010–2025)

3.2 Analysis of Key Research Keywords

In the keyword co-occurrence network, the size of each node and the prominence of its label correspond to the frequency of the keyword's appearance, while the centrality of a node reflects its significance within the network. The number of connecting lines between nodes indicates the strength of the relationships among keywords. As illustrated in Figure 2, the clustering map of this research domain yields a modularity value $Q = 0.7686$ (greater than 0.3) and a silhouette score $S = 0.9661$ (exceeding 0.7), signifying a well-defined and convincing cluster structure. The network comprises 104 nodes and 219 edges, with a density of 0.0409, indicating relatively sparse connections—likely attributable to the nascent stage of this research field and the limited interdisciplinary integration

to date. Table 1 highlights that keywords such as “sports-education integration”, “physical education instructors”, “transition (career transition)”, “role transformation”, “psychological adjustment”, and “practical challenges” exhibit high centrality values, reflecting their prominence and widespread scholarly attention. Notably, “sports-education integration” closely associates with terms like “physical education instructor system”, “career transition”, “optimization strategies”, and “opportunities (challenges)”, underscoring these as core thematic concerns within the field. Additionally, significant nodes such as “physical education instructors” maintain co-linear relationships with “practical challenges” and “higher education institutions”, further delineating key research foci. These frequently occurring and tightly interconnected keywords

collectively illuminate the prevailing research hotspots and thematic directions in the study of retired Chinese athletes transitioning into university physical education teaching roles.

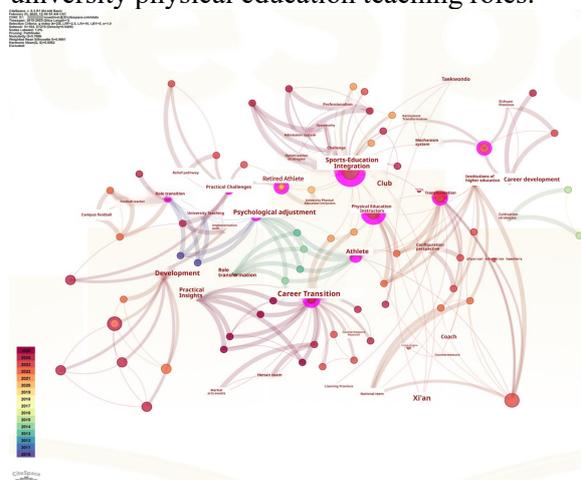


Figure 2. Keyword Co-occurrence Network

Table 1. Keyword Frequency and Centrality

No.	Keyword	Frequency	Centrality	First Appearance Year
1	Sports-Education Integration	13	0.62	2021
2	Physical Education Instructors	11	0.60	2021
3	Retired Athletes	36	1.00	2010
4	Career Transition	6	0.37	2021
5	Practical Challenges	5	0.04	2023
6	Role Transformation	3	0.18	2010
7	Psychological Adjustment	3	0.03	2010
8	University Physical Education Instructors	3	0.15	2022
9	Optimization Strategies	3	0.10	2022
10	Countermeasures	4	0.05	2020

3.3 Classification of Sports Disciplines in the Research

Among the analyzed literature, the majority of studies do not specify particular sports disciplines. However, among those that do explicitly identify sports, the disciplines mentioned include football, basketball, table tennis, badminton, swimming, athletics, martial arts, gymnastics, boxing, wrestling, judo, volleyball, and winter sports (e.g., skiing, skating). Notably, only football, boxing, martial arts, and winter sports have been the subjects of dedicated, specialized research. In contrast, the remaining sports are typically included merely as part of broader surveys encompassing multiple disciplines, without undergoing detailed analysis or in-depth investigation.

3.4 Geographic Distribution Characteristics of the Research

Among the 40 included studies, 13 explicitly

specify their research locations, categorized by provinces, autonomous regions, or municipalities directly under central government jurisdiction, as detailed in Table 2. For the remaining 27 studies that do not clearly indicate specific research areas, classification is based on the authors’ institutional affiliations, with the distribution summarized in Table 3.

Table 2. Distribution of Explicitly Identified Research Locations (n = 13)

Research Region	Number of Studies
Sichuan	2
Henan	2
Guangdong	2
Yunnan	1
Liaoning	1
Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	1
Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region	1
Hubei	1
Hunan	1
Tianjin Municipality	1

Table 3. Distribution of Research Literature by Authors' Institutional Provinces (n = 27)

Research Region (Author Affiliation)	Number of Studies
Jiangsu	5
Henan	5
Shandong	4
Beijing	2
Jilin	2
Shaanxi	2
Guangdong	1
Hubei	1
Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region	1
Anhui	1
Xizang Autonomous Region	1
Liaoning	1
Yunnan	1

3.4.1 Distribution of research regions

For the purpose of analyzing the geographic distribution of research, studies without explicitly stated research locations were represented by the authors' institutional regions and combined with those that clearly identified their study areas. The consolidated distribution is presented in Table 4. The principal provinces conducting research in the field of retired athletes transitioning to university physical education instructors are Henan (accounting for 17.5%), Jiangsu (12.5%), Shandong (10%), and Guangdong (7.5%), indicating a notable level of activity and emphasis within these regions. Following closely are Yunnan, Liaoning, Hubei, Sichuan, Jilin, Shaanxi, Beijing, and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, each comprising 5% of the studies, reflecting a moderate foundation and scholarly interest in these areas. Conversely, regions such as the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and several others each contribute only a single study (2.5%), underscoring a markedly low degree of research attention in these locales.

3.4.2 Characteristics of geographic research distribution

The concentration of research predominantly lies within the economically advanced provinces of eastern and central China, while the western and more remote regions remain conspicuously underrepresented. This disparity reflects regional imbalances in resource allocation and research investment. Such uneven geographic distribution is likely influenced by a confluence of factors including varying levels of economic development, the degree of emphasis placed on

sports, policy orientations and governmental support, population size, the density of higher education institutions, and overall economic strength. For instance, provinces such as Henan, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Guangdong command a disproportionately large share of research output, largely attributable to their status as prominent sports powerhouses with substantial populations of retired athletes, abundant university resources, and robust economic foundations. Moreover, Henan's extensive network of higher education institutions provides ample opportunities for retired athletes to secure teaching positions, thereby attracting scholarly attention and fostering research in this domain. Jiangsu, in particular, has advanced this agenda through policies such as the *Employment Placement Measures for Retired Athletes*, which explicitly prioritize the recruitment of outstanding retired athletes by universities, thereby facilitating policy implementation and the accumulation of practical case studies, further solidifying the province's research base.

Table 4. Geographic Distribution of Research in the Field of Retired Athletes Transitioning to University Physical Education Instructors in China (n = 40)

Research Region	Number of Studies	Percentage (%)
Henan	7	17.5
Jiangsu	5	12.5
Shandong	4	10
Guangdong	3	7.5
Yunnan	2	5
Liaoning	2	5
Hubei	2	5
Sichuan	2	5
Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region	2	5
Beijing	2	5
Jilin	2	5
Shaanxi	2	5
Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	1	2.5
Anhui	1	2.5
Xizang Autonomous Region	1	2.5
Hunan	1	2.5
Tianjin Municipality	1	2.5

3.5 Research Directions

3.5.1 Transition studies within the context of sports-education integration

The implementation of sports-education

integration policies has ushered in novel opportunities and challenges for retired athletes transitioning into university physical education instructors, emerging as a focal point of contemporary research. Scholarly attention predominantly centers on how the effective enactment of these policies can streamline pathways for retired athletes to enter academic teaching roles, enhance relevant policy frameworks and institutional safeguards, and ultimately elevate the success rate of their career transitions. A subset of studies[1-8] delves into the pragmatic difficulties faced by exemplary retired athletes in their teaching careers and explores potential alleviation strategies. Additionally, other investigations[9-13] examine the evolving demand for retired athletes within universities under the sports-education integration paradigm, alongside how these athletes can better adapt to the pedagogical and training demands of higher education physical education, thereby fulfilling the requisites for high-caliber sports educators.

3.5.2 Studies on transition challenges

A considerable body of research[14-19] concentrates on the challenges encountered during the transition process and corresponding countermeasures. These studies identify key impediments including academic qualifications, skill sets, knowledge reserves, professional competencies, teaching role positioning, mindset towards transition (role identity), and the robustness of policy and institutional support. Regarding academic credentials, prolonged athletic training often results in limited time for cultural and academic learning, culminating in comparatively lower comprehensive educational attainment that falls short of university faculty recruitment standards. In terms of skills, although athletes possess exceptional specialized sports abilities, these are often narrowly focused—particularly in less mainstream disciplines—creating a mismatch with the broader pedagogical demands of university physical education instructors. Professionally, there is a deficit in educational theory and teaching capabilities, hindering the transformation of athletic expertise into effective instructional competence. Concerning transition mindset, a tension exists between the flexibility of university recruitment processes and the traditionally insular employment perspectives held by athletes. Furthermore, retired athletes face significant hurdles in obtaining teaching

certifications and navigating the rigorous university recruitment examinations. Collectively, these issues underscore a structural incongruity between the specialized, long-term athletic training that shapes athletes' competencies and the multifaceted requirements of academic teaching positions.

3.5.3 Transition strategy research

In response to the challenges encountered during career transitions, extant studies [20-22] propose a variety of remedial strategies. These primarily focus on enhancing the support mechanisms and training systems tailored for retired athletes—such as designing specialized cultivation and training programs that align with their unique characteristics to facilitate swift adaptation to university teaching roles. Additionally, the establishment of comprehensive transition support policies is emphasized, including the refinement of selection and recruitment procedures for transitioning instructors and the strengthening of collaborative efforts between educational and sports authorities. Further elaboration is given to bolstering professional education, continuing education, mental health literacy, social support, and encouraging retired athletes' self-improvement and personal development post-transition.

3.5.4 Career development strategies

Research within this domain extends beyond the immediate challenges of transitioning to explore multifaceted dimensions such as policy safeguards, social support, and career advancement strategies. Regarding the professional development of retired athletes post-transition, relevant literature[23-25] delineates four strategic dimensions. These include advocating for the construction of university faculty teams that strategically integrate the institution's distinctive sports programs to leverage the unique strengths of transitioning instructors; fostering collaborative efforts to enhance skill training during the transitional phase; and promoting a non-uniform development model guided by individual advantages and specialties. Moreover, several studies [26-30] contend that the career development trajectory of retired athletes turned university physical education instructors should aim for holistic growth. This encompasses cultivating effective communication skills, deepening theoretical knowledge, and proactively enhancing competencies in teaching,

research, and career planning. They further recommend that universities provide targeted instructional training, research mentorship, and career planning support to facilitate sustained professional growth within the higher education sports sector.

3.5.5 Role transition and psychological adjustment

The process of role transition and psychological adjustment centers on the cognitive restructuring, identity crises, and adaptive strategies involved as athletes metamorphose from “competitors” to “educators”, constituting one of the most prominent research foci within this field. Relevant studies[31-37] emphasize that successful role transition necessitates overcoming linguistic barriers by cultivating robust written communication skills and transforming sports-related cognitive frameworks. Furthermore, psychological recalibration following career shifts is imperative, alongside the establishment of sound pedagogical philosophies and the enhancement of theoretical knowledge and research capabilities. Cultivating harmonious and egalitarian instructor-student relationships emerges as a critical psychological adjustment task for retired athletes assuming university physical education roles. This entails a paradigm shift from a competitive sports coaching mindset toward one that embraces the promotion of mass sports participation, thereby aligning with the educational objectives of collegiate physical education.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

The scholarly discourse surrounding the transition of retired Chinese athletes into university physical education instructors predominantly revolves around several key themes: transitional challenges, strategic responses to transition, post-transition career development, and the psychological and role adjustments inherent in this transformation. The research primarily focuses on sports disciplines such as football, martial arts, and boxing, with geographic concentration in provinces including Henan, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Guangdong.

An integrative analysis reveals a pronounced policy-driven research trajectory within this domain. The temporal patterns of academic inquiry exhibit a strong coupling with policy

cycles, characterized by phases of policy stimulation, explosive growth in scholarly output, and sustained attention. However, this dynamic has engendered issues of homogenized policy interpretation and convergence in proposed countermeasures.

Three salient imbalances permeate the research landscape: First, a stark regional disparity manifests, with a dense concentration of studies in the eastern and central provinces, while western and less developed regions remain underrepresented. Economically advanced and sports-strong provinces dominate the research discourse, overshadowing contributions from less affluent areas. Second, there exists a disproportion in the focus on sports disciplines; research predominantly targets policy-favored sports such as football and winter sports, as well as culturally significant disciplines like martial arts, whereas niche sports such as weightlifting and wrestling remain insufficiently explored. Third, methodological imbalance is evident, with qualitative approaches prevailing over quantitative analyses. Most extant studies remain at the descriptive and prescriptive level, lacking in-depth exploration of underlying psychological mechanisms and the construction of professional identity during transition. Theoretical frameworks remain underdeveloped, signaling an urgent need for more robust and mature conceptual models.

4.2 Recommendations

4.2.1 Addressing research gaps in sports powerhouses

Regions such as Shanghai and Zhejiang, characterized by robust economic development and outstanding competitive achievements in disciplines like swimming and badminton, remain conspicuously absent from current investigations into university transition pathways. Leveraging the Yangtze River Delta integration policy, future research should explore mechanisms for cross-regional collaboration. Similarly, Fujian Province, renowned for its strengths in badminton and weightlifting and notable success in popularizing these sports, could capitalize on its cadre of distinguished retired athletes to promote these disciplines within academic institutions, thereby establishing cooperative platforms that foster mutually beneficial outcomes. For western regions, research should integrate ethnic traditional sports, exploring transition models

that meld intangible cultural heritage with university curricula, necessitating policy support and interdisciplinary collaboration.

4.2.2 Deepening research on collaboration between diverse sports disciplines and universities

Targeted studies should be conducted by synthesizing the demand for specialized talent across universities in various regions, the distinctive competitive profiles of these areas, and the unique characteristics of retired athletes' sports disciplines. Such nuanced analyses will elucidate regional needs for retired athletes in specific sports and uncover the particular demands and strengths inherent in their transition processes. This approach will furnish policymakers with more precise data to inform decision-making and broaden the spectrum of viable career pathways for retired athletes.

4.2.3 Promoting interdisciplinary research

Future inquiries ought to integrate perspectives from education, psychology, sociology, and related fields to construct a comprehensive research framework and establish concrete evaluative criteria for athlete transitions. Employing psychological assessments and standardized measurement tools can facilitate the evaluation of retirees' psychological adaptation to new professional roles. Based on identified challenges, tailored mental health intervention programs can be devised to support their well-being.

4.2.4 Enhancing pre-transition preparation and long-term career development research

It is imperative to formulate supportive policies and vocational preparation programs that assist retired athletes in navigating the critical phase from "athlete" to "university instructor". Such initiatives should aim to align individuals with suitable physical education teaching positions and expedite their acclimatization to academic environments, potentially through the establishment of shared resource centers for sports educators. Regarding long-term career trajectories, research should focus on leveraging athletes' sports-specific advantages and personal attributes to cultivate their research capabilities and pedagogical innovation, thereby fostering sustained professional growth within higher education.

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