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Globalizing Indian Thought

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# Hindustan Times



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# HT Hindustan Times

## Hindustan Times E-Paper

( <https://partner.hindustantimes.com/ip?newspaper=ht-premium> )

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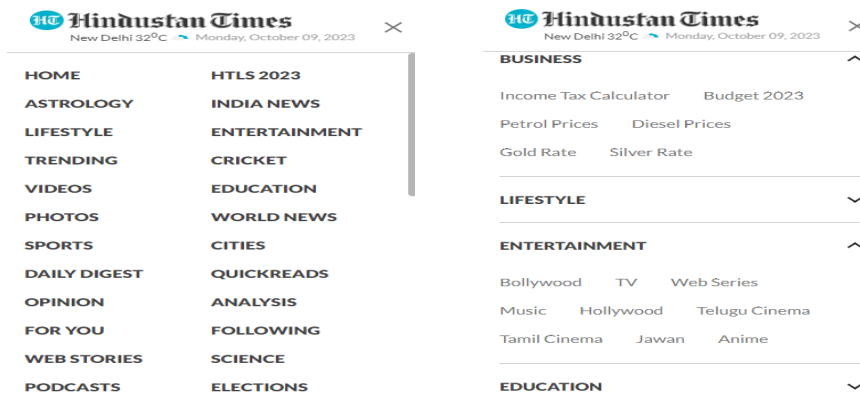
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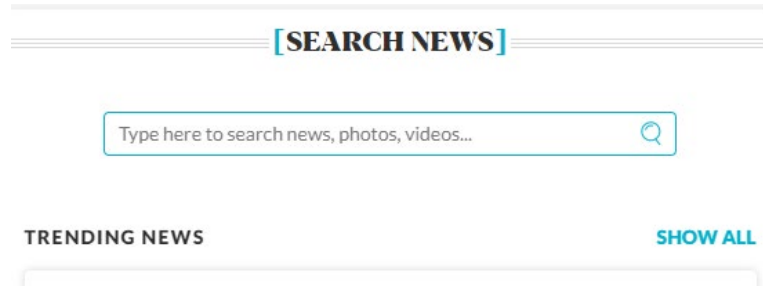
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[ TOP OF THE TABLE ] HOSTS WON 383 MEDALS INCLUDING 201 GOLD

## Regimented system and robust network: The secret behind China's sporting rise

**HANGZHOU:** At the end of the 19th edition of the Asian Games, the medal tally, not surprisingly, has three familiar names on top — China, Japan, and South Korea. The three have featured in the top three in each edition since the 1978 Games and while Japan and Korea have often traded second and third places, China has rarely, if ever, relinquished pole position.

China debuted at the Asian Games only in 1974 — the Games began in 1951 — and it took them two editions to warm up. The 'warm-up' meant a third- and a second-place finish in 1974 (106 medals) and 1978 (151 medals), and once China finished on top in 1982, they have proved an immovable rock.

Hangzhou marked the 19th consecutive Games where Chinese athletes proved to be the best in the continent, amassing 383 medals that make it their second most productive Asian Games. Hangzhou, 2023 when

power in the continent. The domination has once again raised the jaded question: What makes China so good at sports? "That's a tough one to answer. It's the writing a book," said Mark Dreger, a journalist-turned author who has written a book on the subject. Titled "Sporting Superpower - An Insider's View on China's Quest to be the Best", Dreger's book sought to answer the million-dollar question, but getting a granular understanding of the subject demands a deep dive into the Chinese social and cultural ethos where sport is not really a recreational pursuit but an unforgiving national brand-building exercise.

"In the Chinese way of life, sports, business and politics are deeply intertwined. You can't talk about

are 'picked' from primary school by scouts depending on their physical traits and enrolled in government or private-owned clubs to practice a sport. "In most cases, children have no agency. They play what they are told to," Dreger said.

The regimented sports system manifests itself in a fairly robust and widespread network of sports schools that form the backbone of talent pathways. The scouts select children, sometimes as young as six, and put them in a sports school. Each city, on average, has at least one such school catering to a specific sport: diving, gymnastics, and table tennis are most common) or multiple sports. Children typically train there till high school following which they graduate to provincial sports

schools. These can also be

China's national athletes are typically selected from that list," informed Audrey Tan, Executive Director of India-China Economic and Cultural Council.

"There are more than 2000 youth sports schools in China. Among them, as of 2019, 370 have been named national key bases and national bases by the State Sports General Administration. As of now, the situation of sports schools is not great, but their names cannot be corrected at present. At the national sports schools, the final grooming grounds for the athletes, there is an average of one coach for an athlete," she added.

Such a programme obviously entails significant budget outlays and the numbers are mind-boggling. "More than 120 million yuan were used for the Chinese sports delegation and support operations for the Beijing Winter Olympics and Hangzhou Asian Games," Tan said.

ding special project is more than \$1 billion yuan.

"It is no secret that Chinese regimes over the years have seen sports as a medium to assert their soft power status. Beijing 2008 was seen as China's great coming out party to the West while Hangzhou 2022 is a warm-up showcase that the country has truly bounced back from Covid," said Dreger.

In a top-down society such as China, sports development, thanks to its innate linkage with national honour, has always been the state's pet project. Chinese Prime Minister Xi Jinping's interest in football is well-documented, as is his dream for China to qualify for the World Cup, win a World Cup and host a World Cup.

All that may be a long shot, but a manicured football field near Lufan Sports Culture and Exhibition Centre — in a sleep suburb 70km from the city — reflected that ambition.

## Regimented system and robust network: The secret behind China's sporting rise

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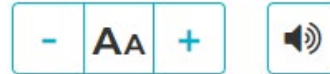
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