"Soft Water" and "Strong Will": The Dialectical Unity of Physical Adaptability and Willpower Development in University Swimming Education—From the Perspective of Bodily Phenomenology

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Abstract: The softness of water precisely constitutes the realm where steadfast determination takes shape. With its formless and resistance-free fluid nature, water creates a perceptual field fundamentally distinct from land-based physical activities. It is within this "soft" environment—where bodily agency is continuously "emptied" and subjected to counter-pressure—that swimmers are compelled to mobilize more intensive volitional resources than in land-based exercises, thereby regaining fundamental control over their bodies. Grounded in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, this paper systematically analyzes the pathways of bodily adaptability in college swimming instruction through three dimensions: the reorganization of "body schemas," the reconstruction of bodily intentionality, and the restoration of the "body-subject" relationship. The study reveals that willpower does not function as an external "virtue" but rather serves as an intrinsic driving force underlying the body's self-reconstruction in response to environmental changes. Research demonstrates that overcoming fear in swimming instruction is not a process of will "conquering" the body, but rather one where "body schemas" regain coherence and comprehensibility in an unfamiliar weightless environment. The formation of willpower should be understood as a self-generating event marking the body's transition from fragmentation to coherence. The fundamental mission of swimming education lies not in cultivating "willpower qualities," but in enabling learners to "reclaim" their bodies within the perceptual field of water—a process where softness and rigidity achieve a dialectical unity in their sensory manifestation.

Keywords: University swimming; Phenomenology of the body; Body schema; Bodily adaptability; Willpower cultivation; Merleau-Ponty

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1.Introduction

Among all athletic disciplines, swimming holds a unique position: it occurs in a natural medium beyond human control. Water—colorless, odorless, soft, and formless—encapsulates everything that enters it in its fluid state. Yet this very environment, regarded as the "softest," often proves to be the most challenging test for swimmers. Beginners standing by the poolside can perform every land-based movement with ease—running strides, jumping leaps, arm strokes—but once their bodies enter the water, all these familiar physical abilities seem to vanish abruptly. Every movement in the water becomes sluggish and unfamiliar; each breath is accompanied by the fear of splashing; every arm stroke loses direction due to the unpredictable buoyancy. With its irresistible "softness," water strikes at the deepest blind spot in the bodily perception shaped by land-based training: when air no longer provides stable feedback to our limbs, do we still possess our own bodies?

Current domestic research on swimming instruction primarily focuses on skill training methodologies, the integration of ideological and political education into curricula, and safety assurance systems. Chengdu University has deeply integrated swimming skill development with quality education elements such as "willpower cultivation and teamwork," while Xi'an Sport University has incorporated ideological and political components—including "patriotic education, the spirit of perseverance, life values, and awareness of rules and integrity" —into its "Swimming and Rescue" curriculum. These practices have keenly recognized the unique value of swimming instruction in fostering character traits. However, theoretical research providing convincing explanations for why swimming strengthens willpower remains insufficient. Existing accounts often resort to conventional narratives like "overcoming fear requires courage" or "consistent training demands perseverance" —which are effective but remain

at the superficial level of discussing willpower as a mere "quality," failing to elucidate the ontological mechanism through which willpower is cultivated in swimming instruction: Why does water, as a "soft" environment, paradoxically better forge a "strong" will?

This article begins by examining the impact of aquatic environments on bodily schemas, analyzes the mechanisms underlying bodily adaptability in swimming acquisition, elucidates the phenomenological essence of willpower development, and ultimately reveals the inseparable dialectical unity between "soft water" and "strong determination." The central argument posits that willpower is not merely an "ethical exercise" appended to skill acquisition, but rather the essential driving force enabling the body to transition from disintegration to reintegration when confronted with heterogeneous environments. When bodily schemas are "emptied" by unfamiliar aquatic conditions, the only viable approach is for willpower to intervene directly within the body, serving as the intrinsic force driving its self-repair and self-reorganization.

2.Theoretical Tools: Core Concepts of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Body and Their Educational Implications

The fundamental reason why Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body provides profound theoretical resources for interpreting swimming instruction lies in its courage to restore the body to its ontological status, transcending the modern Western philosophical tradition that reduces the body to a mere "container" for consciousness. His theory of the "body-subject" breaks the deadlock of Cartesian mind-body dualism—consciousness is not an overarching entity above the body, but a perceptual existence inherent within it; bodily movement is not a passive mechanical response, but an intentional and meaningful engagement with the world.

2.1 The Plasticity of Bodily Schema

Merleau-Ponty employed a highly enlightening concept—the "body schema" —to describe the body's holistic perception and capacity for action within its environment. The body schema is not a fixed physical map, but rather a system through which the body dynamically regulates its relationships with space, objects, and others across various contexts. It constitutes a "perceptual field where perception and meaning are interconnected," continuously updating and reshaping itself with each interaction between the individual and the world. It is precisely because I possess a holistic body schema that I can navigate obstacles while running or adjust my shooting angle when taking a shot—the entire body operates as a cohesive unit in these actions, without requiring conscious, step-by-step instructions.

The core characteristic of bodily schema lies in its remarkable plasticity. It is not a fixed physiological apparatus, but an open structure that self-adjusts and reconfigures itself in response to each environmental challenge. The bodily schema developed in one environment does not automatically apply to a completely different one—this very fact constitutes the fundamental starting point of swimming instruction. For students who have lived on land for over a decade, their bodily schema upon entering water undergoes a sudden disruption: the balance sense, force generation mechanisms, and spatial positioning abilities that function effortlessly on land prove largely ineffective in aquatic settings. Yet this disruption simultaneously presents an opportunity for restructuring: compelled by water conditions, swimmers must engage their willpower far more intensively than on land to rebuild an entirely new system of bodily perception and motor coordination.

2.2 Bodily Intentionality and Balance

Body intentionality differs from Husserl's conceptualization of intentionality at the purely conscious level; it aligns more closely with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on "the specific intentional structure of the living body." The body itself possesses a pre-reflexive orientation—it knows how to catch a ball and how to extend its arms to protect itself before falling. This innate "knowledge" within the body is more primitive and acute than any rational calculation. Shusterman's body aesthetics follows a similar approach, positioning the body as the central vehicle of

aesthetic perception and highlighting the intrinsic value of bodily experience itself.

In swimming instruction, bodily intentionality manifests most directly in the initial interaction between the individual and water: the moment a beginner stands by the water's edge and submerges their body, their bodily intentionality reaches a critical state between peak strength and absolute weakness—it intensely seeks to regain bodily control through muscular stimulation, yet remains most vulnerable to the unpredictable feedback from water, losing its central anchor point. It is precisely here that Merleau-Ponty's insight holds its greatest educational value: when the body's perceptual field is "emptied" by an environment, the will becomes an instinctive force that restores bodily coherence. When bodily intentionality becomes imbalanced, the manifestation of will is not a top-down imperative from consciousness, but rather the body's internal struggle to reclaim itself after deprivation.

3.The Fracture Under "Soft Water": Water as a Heterogeneous Perceptual Field

3.1 The Awakening of Weightless buoyancy and the depletion of bodily trust

The fundamental difference between water and land lies not in greater resistance or restricted breathing, but in its complete destruction of the "basic trust" essential for human survival on land—the stable feedback derived from gravity. A common phenomenon among beginners in swimming instruction is this: in shallow water, the sense of security provided by feet still touching the bottom encourages tentative movements resembling the breaststroke; once pushed into deeper water, even when instructors repeatedly assure that the body will float spontaneously, most beginners' first reaction remains panicking and kicking frantically, attempting to grasp any available fixed object in the water. This instinctive panic stems not from a lack of "knowledge about water," but from a sudden breakdown of bodily trust under the influence of gravity, leading to a crisis of subjectivity.

From the perspective of bodily phenomenology, water erodes the two fundamental perceptual pillars upon which terrestrial bodily schemas rely—stable gravitational feedback and precise spatial orientation. On land, the ground beneath my feet provides firm and predictable support; each contraction of my leg muscles during walking and the corresponding reactive force from the ground form a stable feedback loop. In water, however, this complete force feedback chain is disrupted. The buoyancy of water diminishes the significance of gravity, replacing it with an amorphous thrust that subjects every muscular effort to unpredictable counter-forces. More critically, spatial orientation is lost: terrestrial space uses the ground as an absolute reference frame, with each step anchored within this stable framework; in water, however, all reference frames float with the current. The bodily schema thus plunges into unprecedented chaos—it loses the perceptual "coordinates" upon which it depends for proper functioning.

3.2 The Moment of Fracture in the "Body Schema"

In the complete disorientation experienced in the aforementioned water environment, the swimmer's "body schema" —the integrated system governing holistic bodily perception and motor coordination within the environment—is utterly disrupted. On land, this body schema has evolved into an exceptionally efficient implicit mechanism: when walking, one need not consciously decide "which foot to use" or "where to land"; the entire gait is autonomously and smoothly executed by the body schema. In water, however, this mechanism collapses entirely: even the simplest action like extending an arm forward, which is routine on land, requires engagement of the core lumbar muscles under water resistance, relying on coordinated force transmission from the lower back to maintain consistent propulsion. The familiar coordination among body parts—the arms, torso, and legs—is severed, fragmenting the once continuous "body integrity" into disjointed, uncoordinated components.

The core insight of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of bodily schema lies in this: the bodily schema is not a spiritual governing force suspended above the body, nor is its restoration the result of any rational command. When the bodily schema is obstructed by the dual loss of spatiotemporal positioning in water, the only "repair" method is for the body to re-examine its rhythmic force application within the liquid through continuous struggle—and this very process of exploration signifies the awakening of "will" as an internal bodily force. Will is not an external command to the body, but rather the force that emerges from its deepest core during the rupture of the bodily schema, restoring the body to

its state as a "whole."

4.The Formation of "Resolute Will": Will as the Body's Self-Repair Mechanism

4.1 The Emergence of Will at the Point of Fracture

If we adhere to the traditional qualitative interpretation framework, willpower is seen as a psychological trait that can be cultivated and honed, with physical education tasked at refining this quality through repeated training. However, from the perspective of bodily phenomenology, this approach not only contains theoretical flaws but also obscures the true nature of willpower development in swimming instruction. Willpower is not an innate quality but rather an "internal impulse" spontaneously arising when the body confronts heterogeneous environments. In swimming instruction, this manifests as follows: when a learner falls into water and struggles to prevent the collapse of their collective bodily schema, they realize they are the sole agent capable of initiating a "repair action" — "I must keep swimming" and "I cannot surrender." This imperative does not stem from some authoritative will faculty issuing a "persevere" directive; rather, it represents the body-subject's most direct and authentic form of resistance when facing loss of control.

4.2 The reconstruction of the inspiration-exhalation rhythm as the body's intentional center

The most phenomenologically rich moment in swimming instruction is undoubtedly guiding students through the struggle process during breathing exercises. While breathing appears to be a straightforward technical matter—when to turn the head, inhale, and enter the water—the students' perceptual experience involves the complete reorganization of their bodily coordination. When students choke on water due to delayed breathing, the fear manifests as a systemic response: tense muscles, stiff limbs, and a lowered center of gravity. Yet once a student successfully completes a breath—even just once—the entire bodily experience undergoes a qualitative transformation: the body seems to "awaken" in the water, and the arm strokes gain unprecedented power.

From a phenomenological perspective, the reason lies in breathing—as the most fundamental life rhythm—which serves as the sole "pendulum" and "anchorage" within the chaotic perceptual field of water. When the body schema as a whole breaks down, breathing becomes the only bodily process that swimmers can still stably perceive and control. A successful breath provides the entire body with a central point of mental focus; other actions can revolve around this center to form a new sense of wholeness. The manifestation of will in this critical moment of breathing is most evident: breathing is not merely the acquisition of a technical skill, but rather the arrival of a moment when the body truly "becomes itself."

5.Dialectical Unity: How "Soft Water" Forges "Resolute Will"

The above analysis has revealed the true relationship between "soft water" and "strong will": they are by no means an accidental external connection, but rather a dialectical unity of mutual generation and shaping. Water represents the most suppliant and constrained environment; yet it is precisely this extreme "softness" that makes the will emerge as an "internal repair mechanism" through which the body responds to environmental changes. Water does not actively "resist" —it neither blocks you directly like a basketball defender nor performs aggressive movements like a combat opponent. It simply exists there. Its formless "softness" constitutes a profound humiliation to all land-based thinking characterized by "control": every method of bodily control learned on land becomes irrelevant here.

It is precisely within this extreme state of "impossibility of control" that swimmers are compelled to fully unleash their willpower. In the water, will does not function as a conscious directive to execute a task—it is pushed beyond the limits of our physical capabilities. This chain of reasoning reveals the educational significance of swimming instruction: the irreplaceable value of swimming in cultivating human willpower lies not in the difficulty of the technique itself, but in how the "softness" of water amplifies the deepest tension between the learner's desire for control and the reality of losing it, thereby highlighting the most intense clash and response of will as the body's

self-healing mechanism.

The dialectical unity of "softness" and "firm determination" is given a more profound interpretation within the analytical framework of this paper: willpower is not an external, rigid confrontation with "softness" —the water's gentleness may cause loss of control, yet this very loss compels the body to exert far greater control than on land. When a swimmer overcomes all fears and finally floats effortlessly in the water, that sense of lightness and freedom miraculously embodies the most powerful form of "firmness" —not an external, aggressive rigidity, but a stable and resilient inner strength that arises from within the body. In this state, "softness" ceases to be the enemy of willpower and becomes the essential condition for its establishment; "firmness" is not merely the outcome of conquering softness, but rather a new manifestation of bodily existence forged through the refinement of softness itself.

6.Conclusion

This article introduces Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body into a field previously overlooked by sports training and educational research—the philosophical inquiry into how "soft water forges firm determination." Through the systematic application of core concepts such as "body schema," "body image," and "body-subject," the paper reveals a fundamental dimension absent from prior empirical studies: the formation of will in swimming instruction is not an externally imposed moral edification, but rather an internal force that drives the body—from passive decline to active reorganization—when confronting the "softness" of the heterogeneous environment represented by water.

The fundamental educational value of swimming instruction extends beyond equipping every college student with a survival skill. Its greater significance lies in the cognitive journey toward mastering swimming: students not only reorganize a completely new bodily schema but also achieve a profound awakening of bodily agency—reclaiming their bodies from deprivation. Willpower serves as the internal force driving this "reclamation." On water, the seemingly opposing forces of "softness" and "firmness" are unified through this process of reclaiming bodily autonomy.

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