

GLOBALISATION AND CHINESE SPORT POLICY: THE CASE OF THE ELITE BASKETBALL IN THE PEOPLE REPUBLIC OF CHINA (PRC)

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INTRODUCTION

The paper locates the PRC's current policy toward global sport (basketball) in its historical context. Three phases are identified – withdrawal/isolation, manipulative engagement and, most recently, enthusiastic engagement – which have been shaped to a significant extent by internal ideological shifts, for example from internationalist socialism to cultural isolation, and by external diplomatic concerns, for example the dispute with Taiwan. It is within this historical socio-economic context and utilizing selected theories from within the broad literature on globalization that China's current relationship with the global basketball is analysed. Held et al's (1999) conceptualisation of globalisation provides the major theoretical framework for the analysis. Held et al identify three schools of thought regarding globalisation: hyperglobalisers, sceptics, and transformationalists. A central debate between these three schools is the extent to which the state is capable of managing its relationship with global pressures. In order to analyse the behaviour of the Chinese state we adopt Houlihan's (1994: 370) concepts of 'reach' and 'response' which focus attention on global actors and pressures external to the country and state (reach) and the capacity of states to determine their response. The key research questions are: to what extent did/does the Chinese government have a choice in its relationship with sport globalisation; to what extent can it manage its interaction with sport globalization and in what ways does the Chinese government seek to manage its relation with sport globalization.

METHODS

In order to answer these key questions 10 quantitative (e.g. trends in PRC membership of international basketball federations (FIBA, ABC) and in public expenditure on elite basketball) and 7 qualitative indicators (e.g. policy towards the movement of elite athletes abroad and towards high earnings) have been identified (Tan: 2006: 25). Engagement with the global basketball was selected due to the status of the World Cup and Olympic Games, the close involvement of the elite basketball and host cities with global commercial interests, and the role of the FIBA in the globalisation of sport. Data were collected from a number of sources including official government documents, news media, a series of 32 interviews with Chinese officials from key governmental organizations, such as the General Administration of Sport and from a range of key quasi-governmental organisations such as the Chinese Basketball Management Center (CBMC), Chinese Olympic Committee and the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, and interviews with 14 Chinese sports academics from inside and outside of China.

RESULTS

There are two main findings in this research. First, the Chinese government has demonstrated a desire and a capacity to manage the impact of the global basketball on domestic sport practices, especially in relation to elite basketball development. Second, the Chinese government has attempted, with reasonable success so far, to manage the impact of commercial interests on Chinese domestic basketball practices, elite basketball players and professional basketball clubs.

DISCUSSION

According to this research, China did demonstrate the capacity to exercise choice in its relationship with sport globalisation as illustrated most clearly by its withdrawal from the FIBA and most international sporting contact

during the “Cultural Revolution”. However, the enthusiastic embrace of capitalism following the ‘open door’ policy introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 has not only made a return to sporting (cultural) isolation less likely but also much more difficult. As regards the management of its relationship with sports globalisation the PRC faces increasing tension, first, between the priorities of commercial sports and national sports objectives (especially in basketball) and second, between the emergence of highly paid and internationally mobile sports ‘stars’ and the centrally controlled (GAOS) elite development system. However, the capacity of the PRC to manage its engagement with global sport should not be underestimated. Political control remains strongly focused on the GAOS reinforced by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party while administrative control, particularly over individual basketball players and professional basketball clubs is exercised by the GAOS through its domination of the COC and the Chinese Basketball Association (named Chinese Basketball Management Center). While the enthusiastic commitment of the PRC government to delivering the 2008 Olympic Games might indicate the powerful ‘reach’ of global sport the Olympics is a temporary event and one whose impact may yet be effectively managed and contained leaving little lasting impact on the organisation and character of Chinese elite basketball.

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