

(SP) GLOBALISATION AND CHINESE SPORT POLICY: THE CASE OF THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT IN THE PEOPLE REPUBLIC OF CHINA (PRC)

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Introduction

The paper locates the PRC's current policy toward global sport and the Olympic Movement 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 Olympic Movement 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; and to what extent can it manage its interaction with sport globalisation.

Methods

In order to answer these key questions 10 quantitative (e.g. trends in PRC membership of international federations and in public expenditure on elite sport) 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 Olympic Movement was selected due to the status of the Olympic Games, the close involvement of the Olympic Movement and host cities with global commercial interests, and the acknowledged role of the Olympic Movement in the globalisation of sport (Wilson, 1994: 356). 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 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

First, the tension between China and Taiwan has been a constant contextual factor shaping China's engagement with the Olympic Movement; second, China views the Olympic Movement and particularly the Olympic Games as an important diplomatic resource; third, the Chinese government has demonstrated a capacity to manage effectively the impact of the Olympic Movement and Olympic values on domestic sport practices, especially in relation to elite development; and fourth, the Chinese government has attempted, with reasonable

success so far, to manage the impact of Olympic commercial interests on Chinese domestic sports practices and elite athletes.

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 Olympic games 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 soccer) 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 athletes, is exercised by the GAOS through its domination of the COC and the domestic Olympic federations. While the enthusiastic commitment of the PRC government to deliver the Olympic Games in 2008 might indicate the powerful ‘reach’ of global sport the Games are 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 sport.

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