

The Autonomization Of Chinese Sports Organisation: The Case Of Professional Football Management System

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Football is a pioneer in Chinese sports since it has been subjected to a series of market-oriented reforms. The paper aims to investigate the evolution of the interaction between the primary stakeholders in professional football in China over the past 20 years, with emphasis on the issue of autonomy, in a broad economic, political and cultural context.

The key research questions are thus as follows:

1. What is the degree of autonomy of the current Chinese Football Association (CFA)?
2. Has there been any evolution of the level of autonomy of the CFA with regard to the government?
3. If such a notable evolution has occurred in recent years, what are the main driving forces?

Two complementary theoretical approaches, stakeholder theory and the theory of autonomy (Chappelet, 2010; Geeraert, Mrkonjic & Chappelet, 2015), are taken for the analysis of the data. Despite the importance of the theory of autonomy and stakeholder theory in sports governance, there is no research employing the autonomy theory to explain and evaluate the action of the main stakeholders shaping the sports system. Surprisingly, there has been no research into the evolution of the governance between the major stakeholders in the Chinese football system, and ways in which their interactions have shaped the football system. On the one hand, some of the previous research focuses on how the Chinese football policy and system have developed in the context of historical evolution since 1949 (Dong & Mangan, 2001) or the evolution of the governance system in the context of globalization (Amara et al., 2005) or to what extent and how the Chinese government has attempted to deal with its relationship to global sports (Tan & Bairner, 2010). Other research (Liang, 2014) employs a mainstream stakeholder approach in the context of Chinese football club governance, especially from a club's perspective. The focus of the study is on the relationship between the structure and the reality on the ground; since no previous research has been conducted in this field with this focus, it is essentially exploratory in nature.

The study adopts a critical realism view which accepts an objective reality free of independence of mind, while at the same time accepting the influences of cognition. In this regard, stakeholder theory holds a clear identity of critical realism, with an understanding of 'real' structures. In addition, stakeholder theory attempts to capture the nature of actors and structures by virtue of paying attention to the continuously changing structure-agency: agency at one point could become a structure for the next action. Autonomy theory is also useful for the study as it attempts to analyze the interactions between diverse stakeholders in the sports system in order to understand the nature of their actions and how they operate.

The empirical analysis adopts a longitudinal single-case approach, based on semi-structured interviews and documentary materials. The perceptions of diverse stakeholders were reviewed in order to understand the nature of their actions and how they operate. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were subject to coding and analysis, which were undertaken with a thematic content analysis approach. In our study, 5 interviews were carried out with the government officials from Sports Ministry, the CFA, the provincial level sports department and the provincial football association. In addition, 9 interviews were conducted with interviewees from the professional leagues, clubs, players, the media and fan. Academics were also interviewed. The official documents include yearbooks, official regulations, official statistics, reminiscences, and reports or regulations from the official websites of Sports Ministry, COC and CFA. They are authoritative and can offer us triangulating accounts. On the other hand, a considerable amount of sport information is presented in media formats. In order to triangulate the data, media reports are taken from various sources.

The results suggest that the autonomy of the CFA does change over the last 20 years. From 1992 to 2003, the CFA enjoyed more autonomy. The football management reform, internationalization and commercialization had played a role in the increasing level of autonomy. However, the player's quest for individual freedom, commercial pressures and governmental intervention had curtailed actual autonomy of the CFA. From 2004 to 2014, the CFA's legal autonomy declined, attributed to pressures from stakeholders. However, the changing level of financial, political and pyramidal autonomy cannot be identified. Commercial pressures, corruption and personal connections curtailed actual autonomy of the CFA. Based on the Chinese case, it could shed light on other major emerging countries, raising the question of the pertinence of the European idea of sports autonomy in the 21st century.

References

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