

Football, Leadership and Governance – The Case of China

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Aim

The Chinese ambition is to win the FIFA World Cup Final, and Chinese state authorities have acknowledged that the first step is to develop the domestic football industry, and that this will require a complex set of measures (Tan et al, 2016.)

Sports, particularly soccer, constitutes a crucial element of public diplomacy, becoming a concern for entire nations. In China, success in this sport is commented on by the highest levels of political leadership, and initiatives are being launched to develop the sport top-down by the ‘soccer plans’ This context provides a promising arena for studying the workings and potential of managerial intervention in situations in which such intervention is wrought with far-reaching challenges. Traditionally, the quality of a football club is measured by its results, i.e. what happens inside the stadium and on the pitch, and what happens off the pitch and outside the stadium is rarely considered as important.

This paper argues that both objectives require ‘quality’ and the derived research question is whether long-term quality can be achieved by state intervention, leadership and governance. Can Chinese soccer plans be validated against European soccer experience?

- Research question one: What can China learn from European soccer experience?
- Research question two: How can quality off the pitch be measured?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

In this paper, we present an overview of soccer’s development in China following disruption of the status quo thanks to recent initiatives from Chinese political leadership with the aim of establishing key targets for Chinese soccer (Liu et al, 2017).

To problematize is to question the basic tenets of an idea. The *first* aspect focuses on how the government’s *public policy* decisions stimulated football markets. China introduced three fundamental policies i.e. ‘soccer plans’ with various aims, ranging from how to ‘organise the clubs’ to how to ‘encourage foreign investment’. The *second* aspect is the ‘18 Driving Forces Model’, Söderman’s (2017) review of literature (unpublished) which identifies the 18 driving forces that is believed to lead the Chinese national team to win the FIFA World Cup (Tan et al, 2016.) *Third*, behind these drivers, a study of literature reveals some important questions for development of the sport in general and achieving consistently high performance. The ‘grass-roots dilemma’ is often mentioned as the main reason: Why don’t kids play street football anymore?

Research Design and Methodology

As a popular sport football has stimulated a lot of research. However, this research is still not very advanced since the bulk of data sources have been newspaper articles and biographies with trivial but often ambitious approaches. In particular this field lacks in theoretical development. Since our main purpose is empirical namely to develop answers on how China can learn from European soccer experience we will look for existing ‘best practice’? How could we validate the Chinese soccer plans against European soccer experience?

For the next step in our research methodology on European soccer experience we therefore utilised Jarosz *et al.*'s 2015 European Club Association (ECA) Club Management Guide (CMG) – the published results of interviews with 120 European football clubs – and its focus on high-quality management.

Results and Discussion

With the help of a Club Management Guide, i.e. a database produced by the European Club Association (ECA) we made a validation. Since we could not find any other studies addressing similar issues, we conceived a simplified method to make a rough comparison. Our method is summarised in the 12 theses and three hypothetical relations to be tested further. The 'soccer plans' aiming to stimulate soccer development in China is the major form of government top down push.

Conclusion, contribution and implications

The framework we have constructed suggests three hypothetical relations that cover the all-round development of the Western football industry: H1 Playing quality; H2 Leadership quality and H3 Governance and operational quality. Based on Hong and Huang (2014), we can compare the stages of development of Chinese government policy towards sport. Since the 1950s, the organisation of national sport in China has been driven from the top down. Hence, Chinese authorities have heretofore regarded sport as another industry to control. Our contribution is answers to two research questions and a top down theory based on this comparison between the soccer plans and the framework composed of 12 theses

References

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