

A Uniform System of Elite Sport Development? Interrogating China's Drive for Olympic Glory

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Abstract

This article interrogates the systems and structures supporting China's drive for medals at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. In order to interrogate these systems and structures we draw on a framework of ten key elements identified as imperative to a "successful" elite sport development system. Our analysis of China explores whether we are witnessing a trend towards uniformity in (global) elite sport development systems, or whether room remains for diversity in the development of these systems in different countries. The analysis is informed by data from interviews with senior officials involved in Chinese elite sport development and policy documents related to elite sport in China. The discussion and conclusions focus on the extent to which China's elite sport system mirrors those found in Western nations.

Key words: China, Elite Sport, Globalization, Olympic Glory



Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, there can be little argument about the significance of sport as a politically salient cultural institution. Sport is now a particularly malleable and high profile policy instrument for nations as diverse as Singapore, New Zealand, Japan, Australia, Canada, China and the United Kingdom (UK). Governments increasingly utilise sporting programmes and initiatives to realise an array of objectives in a range of policy arenas. These policy objectives include social inclusion, crime reduction, urban regeneration, raising school standards, reducing obesity and international prestige. The key point is that, today, sport as a cultural institution is a significant contributor to the vitality, vibrancy and international profile of a nation. The focus in this article is on the policy developments contributing to the achievement of international, and especially Olympic, sporting success in China. This is a timely debate for at least three important reasons.

First, although there is a growing literature that explores the experiences of Western nations in their attempts to construct systems for supporting elite (Olympic) athlete development (cf. Augestad, Bergsgard and Hansen, 2006; De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg and Shibli, 2006; Green and Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan and Green, 2008; Jackson, 2006; UK Sport, 2006), we have very little in-depth information in this regard about China (but see Hong, Wu and Xiong, 2005). Second, the decision by the International Olympic Committee in 2001 to award the 2008 Olympic Games to Beijing has heightened interest about the ways in which China develops its elite performers. Third, an analysis of China's attempt to build a successful elite athlete development system, with 2008 in mind in particular, provides a starting point for future research that compares developments in the far east (and especially Asia) with the experiences of Western nations.

One clear point of departure for our analysis in this article is the overarching and strategic role of the Chinese government (one party Communist state). In Western nations, governments have, to a greater or lesser extent, intervened directly in the elite sport development process requiring substantial changes on the part of national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport (for example, professional management, high quality coaching, and talent identification programmes) as a condition of grant-aid. At the same time, NGBs are also expected to realise government policy objectives (such as increasing physical activity) at community and grassroots levels. Thus our analysis provides a basis for further research that considers if and to what extent developments in China mirror experiences in respect of elite athlete development in the West.

Hoberman's (1992, p.194) perceptive analysis of the 'Communist sports "machine"' is instructive here. This analysis alerted us to the ways in which Western governments began to respond to the "phenomenal success of Soviet and East German athletes" (p.193) and how they became increasingly "fixated on achieving [their] own "peak performances"" (p.195) on the international sporting stage. At the same time, Hoberman underscores a significant difference between sport policy interventions in former Communist nations and those in the West. The 'secretive and tightly controlled network of institutions' (p.224) in the Soviet Union and East Germany had one aim: international sporting success. There was scant regard by the governing Communist regimes in Hoberman's analysis – in contradistinction to Western nations - to balance support for elite sport with a concern for mass participation activities. An exploration of the relative salience of this 'balance' forms part of our analysis of China's elite sport development system.

In exploring the experiences of China, this article has one key aim: to contribute to a better understanding of the similarities and differences of policy decisions, priorities and outcomes in under-reported cultural/sporting contexts. The ways in which the governments of Western nations intervene in the sport policy sector was noted above and we might expect that a one party Communist state might differ, at least to some degree. However, although policy interventions may differ, "dissimilar" countries face similar sport policy problems. For example, Hong et al.'s (2005) research appears to suggest some degree of concern in China for the development of mass participation programmes: at the time of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 there was an "intense debate as to whether millions should be spent on the pursuit of Olympic medals or on improving people's physical exercise and health at the grassroots level'

(p.521). Yet, ‘discussion came to an end when the pro-democracy movement failed’ (p.521).

What follows draws on, and extends, the work of Green and Oakley (2001; see also Oakley and Green, 2001) who presented a framework of elite sport development comprising 10 key elements in an analysis of Australia, Canada, France, Spain and the United States. This framework has subsequently been scrutinised, adapted and used by various researchers and in different countries (e.g., Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, The Netherlands and the UK) as an organising model for analysis (cf. De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg and Shibli, 2006; Green and Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan and Green, 2008; Jackson, 2006; UK Sport, 2006). Thus we utilise this framework to analyse whether and/or to what degree China “conforms” to these investigations and applications in Western contexts. Indeed, one of Green and Oakley’s key contentions was that we have witnessed a “diminishing of contrasts’ between the various Western systems for elite athlete development. However, these authors also draw our attention to the concept of ‘increasing varieties’”, which points to the possibility for nuanced differences to emerge. Therefore, our analysis of China seeks also to account for potential divergence (or particularity) in respect of the 10 key elements proposed by Green and Oakley in their analysis of six Western countries: the key 10 elements are:

1. A clear understanding about the role of the different agencies involved and an effective communication network which maintains the system;
2. Simplicity of administration through common sporting and political boundaries;
3. An effective system for the statistical identification and monitoring of the progress of talented and elite athletes;
4. Provision of sports services to create an excellence culture in which all members of the team (athletes, coaches, managers, scientists) can interact with one another in a formal and informal way;
5. Well structured competitive programmes with ongoing international exposure;
6. Well developed and specific facilities with priority access for elite athletes;
7. The targeting of resources on a relatively small number of sports through identifying those that have a real chance of success at world level;
8. Comprehensive planning for each sports needs;
9. A recognition that excellence costs, with appropriate funding for infrastructure and people; and
10. Lifestyle support and preparation for life after sport.

Given the limitations of space we concentrate on five of the above ten elements cited by Green and Oakley, namely, elements 1 and 2 (combined for our analysis), 3, 4 and 9. Empirical data from interviews with 32 officials involved in various organisational roles within China’s administrative system for sport inform the ensuing analysis. Interviews were conducted with officials from organisations that included: the General Administration of Sport (GAS); Chinese Olympic Committee (COC); Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG); and six national governing bodies of sport - Chinese Football Association (CFA), Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), Chinese Athletics Association (CAA), Chinese Swimming Association (CSA), Chinese Volleyball Association (CVA) and Chinese Badminton Association (CBA). In addition, 14 interviews were conducted with Chinese sports academics working in China and elsewhere. These data are supplemented by analyses of Chinese government policy documents and media publications.

China’s approach to elite sport development

1. Simplicity of administration through common sporting and political boundaries and a clear understanding of the role of different agencies

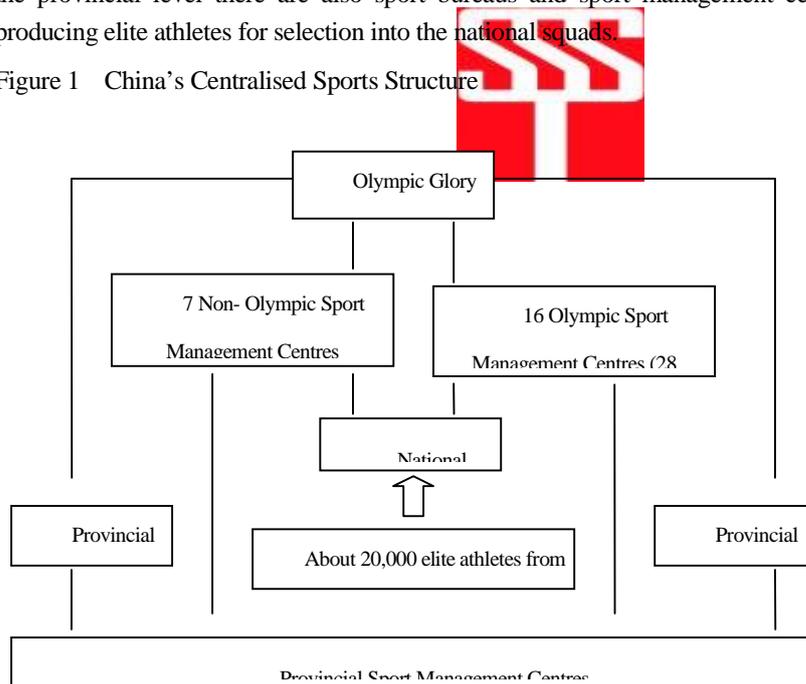
Following the instigation of China’s ‘open door policy’, the National Sport Commission (NSC) held a national sport meeting in 1978 where the State Council not only claimed that developing sport was an important political mission, but also that:

The drive to catch up and even overtake other sporting superpower countries was based on the need for promoting and guiding sport ... [and] the need for establishing a modern superpower of socialism ... We must build up teams of top elite sports personnel because they are the driving force for achieving sports glory in the world and for promoting sport for all at the domestic level (NSC, 1993, p.223).

To reduce personnel expenses and to increase the efficiency of the Chinese government, the NSC transformed its administrative structure so as to manage, more effectively, the development of the country's top athletes. In 1998 the NSC was downgraded to the level of General Administration of Sport (GAS) which delegated its authority in relation to national elite sport selection, and training and competition, to 23 quasi-autonomous organisations, i.e., National Sport Management Centres (NSMCs), and focused on strategic policymaking for sport development (GAS, 1999a, pp.69-75). Each NSMC is usually responsible for up to three sports and in order that NSMC operations were well-managed, the current sport minister, Peng Liu, took over as Director of the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC) and All-China Sport Federation (ACSF). Moreover, due to the vital position of NSMC directors - especially those NSMCs working with the 28 Olympic sports - for carrying out the will and policy of the Chinese government, 'all the directors in these centres were controlled by the Party groups (*dangzu*), the leading group of the GAS' (Yuan, 2000a, pp.125-8).

Figure 1, illustrates China's centralised, simplified administrative structure, and also depicts the common goals ('Olympic Glory') and boundaries of the sporting organisations and supporting agencies involved. The GAS is the dominant organisation here, whose main goal is Olympic glory and which sets the medal quotas for each of the 16 NSMCs working with Olympic Sports. The primary concern of these Centres is to oversee and manage the training and monitoring of national teams (Yuan, 2000a, pp.125). At the provincial level there are also sport bureaus and sport management centres with responsibility for producing elite athletes for selection into the national squads.

Figure 1 China's Centralised Sports Structure



In order to ensure high performance sport development was effective and efficient, in 2006 the sport minister mandated the GAS to establish a special team (led by the minister) to regularly inspect the 16 NSMCs in charge of the 28 Olympic sports. The team's primary role was to ensure that government objectives for elite sport, and especially for the Beijing Games, were being met (Liu, 2006). Indeed, according to the vice sport minister, Dalin Cui, the directors of NSMCs in Olympic sports were required to sign contracts with the Chinese government for achieving the Olympic medal quota set by the GAS (Cui, 2004). Generally speaking, if the directors of NSMCs achieve the medal quota, they receive awards or promotion. However, according to a senior official at the National Training Centre for Chinese Sport

Officials, if they fail, at best they face heavy criticism from the GAS Party groups (*dangzu*) and at worst, they will lose their jobs (Interview A, 10 January 2006).

According to the same official, the ethos of the GAS was to equate Olympic medals with employment rewards for the directors of Olympic sport NSMCs (Interview A, 10 January 2006); an ethos that extends to provincial governments. In Shandong Province, for example, 12 provincial sport management centres were established in sports such as track and field athletics and swimming, and resources concentrated on potential medallists in the National Games and the Olympics. In addition, directors of the sport management centres were “encouraged” by the provincial government to sign protocols for achieving their National and Olympic medal quota set by the provincial sport bureau. If directors achieve these quotas they will be financially rewarded (up to 200,000 yuan, approx. US\$23,000). If they fail, however, according to the director of the sport bureau in Shandong Province, they can expect to be dismissed from their position immediately and would not be allowed to take on similar duties for four years (Yu, 2005).

Although provincial sport bureaus adopted the structure and strategies of the GAS in order to win gold medals in the National Games for their respective provinces, there were tensions between the provincial governments and NSMCs. According to a senior official in the Science Research Institute of the GAS, most provincial governments complained about systems set up by the NSMCs because the provincial sport bureaus could not cope with the complex tasks required of them (Interviewee B, 30 December 2005). Thus provincial sport bureaus not only had to adhere to GAS policies, but were also required to co-operate with the 16 NSMCs whose primary objective was not the National games but the drive for Olympic medals in 2008. Indeed, a former director of the sport bureau in Zhejiang Province claimed that “the jobs of these directors of the provincial sport bureaus were directly linked to the number of gold medals in the National Games” (Chen, 2006). And according to the senior official in the Science Research Institute of the GAS, due to the different interests of the provincial and national levels, provincial governments were reluctant to adopt the NSMC system (Interviewee B, 30 December 2005). The GAS acknowledged these tensions and introduced a “double score system” whereby one Olympic gold medal is regarded as equivalent to two National gold medals. The GAS also encouraged more provincial sport officials to take up positions in National Sport Associations and the Chinese Olympic Committee as well as offering them the opportunity to travel abroad once a year in order to enhance their knowledge of management operations.

2. An effective system for the statistical identification and monitoring of the progress of sub-elite and elite athletes

As part of its drive for Olympic glory the Chinese government not only restored and rebuilt the model “borrowed” from the Soviet Union for identifying talented performers but also introduced market-oriented principles in order to re-energise it. Figure 2 illustrates the system in China up until the early 1990s within which the government set up a talent identification system at provincial level, established sport colleges in each province, and charged provincial governments, sport universities, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the trade unions with the development of several Olympic sports. Ranking standards for Chinese sport were aligned with international sporting records and achievement of the standards provides “rewards” for athletes, such as preferential treatment when seeking employment outside sporting circles.

In the early 1990s, most young athletes in the Chinese sport system progressed through these various stages (see Figure 2). However, some young athletes were ‘developed’ outside this system. The “talented sport class” and “schools with sports tradition” were located in the education system, most of which were established in primary and secondary schools. For the most part, “general spare time sport schools” (age 6-14), “key spare time sport schools” (age 11-14) and “sport schools with single Olympic principle” (age 8-14), functioned outside the education system and were supported by the sport sector which oversaw both sports training and academic learning: Unsurprisingly, the quality of academic learning was poor in these institutions.

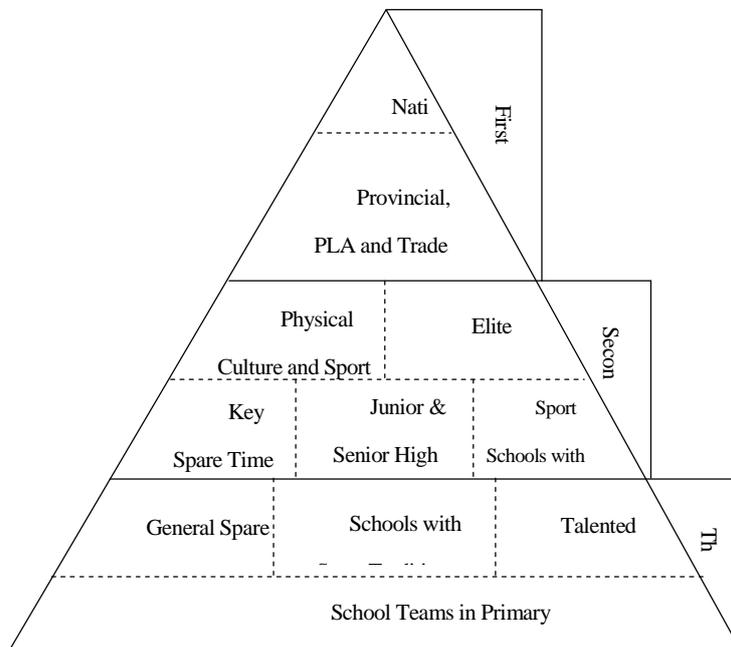
In order to resolve the education problem, “Junior and senior high schools of sport” (age 11-17) were

co-established by the education and sport systems. The “physical culture and sport colleges” (age 14-17) and “elite sport colleges” (age 11-17) were supported to a large extent by provincial governments. Students graduating from these schools could be rewarded with junior or senior high school degrees and could take advantage of a special Ministry of Education policy when taking entrance exams for senior high schools or universities. This policy amounts to preferential treatment for sporting “stars” when applying for places at certain institutions, and also benefits such as private tuition and payment of tuition fees. In addition, according to a former Chinese athlete from Sichuan Province, students in these schools were eligible for grants up to 200 yuan (approx. US\$23) per month, while some benefit from employment arranged by the provincial government (Interview C, 29 March 2006).

Although the Chinese government invested more money and recruited more young athletes into its selection system, especially at the level of sport colleges, the inefficiency of the Soviet model gradually became apparent. In this respect, Weimin Yuan, a former sport minister in the GAS, acknowledged that “The sport system has, to some extent, been following the Soviet model since the 1950s, which has affected and constrained the development of sport” (Yuan, 2000b, p.187). Yuan’s sentiments were



Figure 2 Sport Selection System in the PRC in the early 1990s



Source: Zhan (1991, p.297)

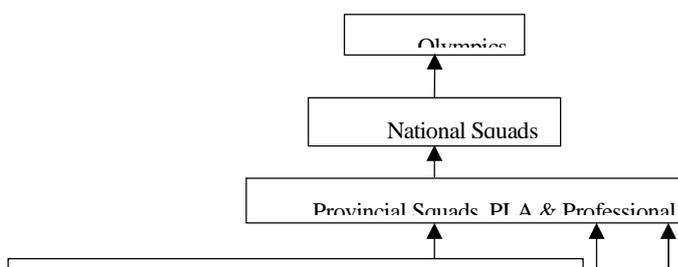
echoed by the current vice minister of sport, who claimed that, “the main point of training young athletes in this selection system was not to increase the quantity of athletes and raise the scale of schools, but to refine the quality and raise the performance of the present talented athletes” (Cui, 2004).

Moreover, with the publication in 1996 of the “Notice of the Evaluation for Developing High Level Athletes’ the government indicated its intention to concentrate resources more forcefully. A number of sport colleges were selected for their good practice and had their financial subsidies increased. In addition, the introduction of an evaluation system for selecting ‘good’ sport colleges not only improved the quality of colleges but also motivated provincial governments to invest more money into their own sport colleges. Due to the positive impact of introducing a competitive mechanism into the system, the government attempted to extend it to all sport colleges, spare-time sport schools and middle schools of sport. By doing so, the government’s aim was to concentrate its limited resources on these target sport schools and colleges in order to produce ever-increasing numbers of top athletes. According to the vice sport minister:

“The National Olympic Base for Training Potential Young Athletes’ named by the GAS would be included in the project of national development and supported as a priority. Government will invest more of the national sport budget in preferential units, priority areas, potential schools and target athletes.... By doing so, these limited resources can be scientifically distributed to the schools and athletes, which will make sure that top athletes are produced” (Cui, 2004).

However, over the past 15 to 20 years this “Soviet model” of talent identification and development has been refined (see Figure 3). Major changes include the introduction of grassroots and professional clubs, the targeting of key sport schools and sport colleges in the selection system, and the introduction of two national-level squads - national squads and Olympic squads - although the details of the talent identification and development system are constantly changing.

Figure 3 China’s Sport Selection System in 2008



The current Chinese classification system for athletes, coaches and administrators is an important element of the overall elite sport system, with salaries for these groups based on their classification ranking. For athletes, a uniform 6-stage ranking system was set and revised every four years (according to world or Olympic records) for individual sports, with specific targets to be achieved in each sport (GAS, 2000a). Taking male 100 metre sprinters as an example, there are 6 stages in the Chinese ranking system: i) international level (10.28 seconds); ii) national level (10.60 seconds); iii) level 1 (10.93 seconds); iv) level 2 (11.74 seconds); v) level 3 (12.64 seconds); and vi) junior level (13.24 seconds) (GAS, 2005). For coaches, there is a 5- stage coach qualification system based on the sporting achievements of a coach's athlete(s): i) national level; ii) senior level; iii) level 1; iv) level 2; and v) level 3 (NSC, 1994b). In addition, a uniform multi-stage ranking system for sport administrators from central government to local government level, and from NSMCs to Provincial Sport Management Centres was also established. These classification systems are indicative of the overall bureaucracy embedded within the Chinese sport system.

3. Provision of sports services to create an excellence culture in which all members of the team (athletes, coaches, managers, scientists) can interact with one another in a formal and informal way

In order to improve its elite sport system, in 2003, the GAS issued 'The Science & Technology (S&T) Action Project for Olympic Glory' (see Figure 4) in which the government required that each NSMC establish a new division of performance to coordinate coaches, scientists (physiologists, psychologists, nutritionists, therapists) and doctors to provide the optimal service for athletes preparation for the Olympics. Each NSMC was required to establish and develop its own scientific service programmes coordinated primarily by the director of performance in each NSMC (GAS, 2003). The responsibility for the Project rests with a special team directly led by senior GAS staff who set criteria for monitoring and evaluating the programmes undertaken by each NSMC (Yuan, 2003, p.14).

Figure 4 Structure of the Science & Technology (S&T) Action Project for Olympic Glory



From Figure 4, we can see that China has created a scientific training and monitoring structure for its key national squads and is developing indicators for monitoring sport training. The data collected from training and competition is stored in a scientific archive in order to develop crucial indicators and parameters for each athlete in national squads. According to the director of the National Management Centre for Weightlifting, Wrestling and Judo, by using this personalised archive the whole team (including coaches, scientists, technicians and doctors) can not only develop optimal training programmes (e.g. routines, volumes, intensities) for each athlete, but also provide personalised fitness recovery, nutrition supplements, psychological consulting, and medical and information services (Ma, 2006). The same structure and service were established in other NSMCs, such as the Chinese Athletics Management Centre and its efforts were rewarded when Olympic champion Xiang Liu clocked a time of 12.91 seconds at the 2004 Athens Olympics, which equalled the world record set by Great Britain's Colin Jackson (Li, 2006). According to the vice sport minister, "It was the science and technology that helped us to win the gold medals" (Cui, 2005). Cui went on to argue that, "The reason Xiang Liu won an Olympic gold medal was not only due to his head coach, Haiping Sun, but also due to the support from a team composed of more than 20 scientists".

In addition, the GAS set up six national specialised laboratories, (for the monitoring of training, sport psychology, sport medicine, sport nutrition, sport information, and physical training and recovery), and organised a top-level scientific team of 30 of the country's experts to help national squads solve critical problems involved in the "science" of elite sport development (GAS, 2006a). Finally, in order to maximise and integrate all possible sport-related resources, the Chinese State Council (2003) issued "The Action Project for Olympic Technology". This Project is coordinated by the Ministry of Science and Technology and involves institutions such as: the Beijing Municipal People's Government; the GAS; Ministry of Education, Chinese Academy of Science; and the Commission of Science Technology and Industry for National Defence. These institutions invest their own budgets in order to support scientific research and services for Olympic preparation (Shi, 2004, pp.7-8). According to a former director of the Science and Education Department in the GAS, the latter's budget for supporting scientific research and services for the 2004 Athens Games was 48 million yuan (approx. US\$6.14 million) – more than four times the budget for the 2000 Sydney Games (Shi, 2004, p.7).

4. A recognition that developing excellence has costs, with appropriate funding for infrastructure and people

According to the director of the Finance Department in the GAS, the three main sources of income supporting the Chinese sport system are: i) the government sport budget (including national and provincial levels); ii) commercial/sponsorship income; and iii) lottery funding (Zhang, 1997, p.35) (see Figure 5). The government sport budget, as Hao Zhang observes, "was still the main resource for subsidising the sport system, especially in supporting the personnel expenses of sport organisations and institutions, in promoting the aims of Olympic glory, in propping up Olympic sports which have low commercial potential and in securing the construction of the sport infrastructure" (Zhang, 1997, p.44). According to the Statistical Yearbook of Sport issued by the NSC and the GAS, the total sport budget, including national and provincial levels, has almost doubled every five years since 1976. Xinguang Dong, the key author of "The Fitness for All" project issued by the NSC in 1995, pointed out that the proportion of the national and provincial sport budgets invested in "sport for all" programmes decreased from 2.38 per cent for the period 1990-1994 to 1.39 per cent for 1995-1999 (Dong, 2005, p.13). In other words, the Chinese government is concentrating ever-increasing amounts of national and provincial sport budgets in support of its drive for Olympic glory in 2008.

To maintain a large talent pool for selecting elite athletes the government began searching for young athletes from lower socio-economic areas, such as in some of the poorer rural districts and inland provinces. In doing so, China maximised its sport system by linking wealthy sport resources of the south-east provinces to a potentially large talent pool of poorer north-west provinces. For example, a female soccer team in Xinjiang Province was supported by the Shanghai sport training system (Xinjiang Sport Bureau, 2006). Regarding tuition fees, students from lower socio-economic groups had their fees paid by the government while others had to pay for sport training and sport services due to the market-oriented approach adopted by the spare-time sport schools and sport colleges (GAS, 2000b, p.51). In addition, in order to support full-time training at provincial levels, young athletes receive income from their province or city level authority and also receive extra funding when moving up to the national level. For example, according to a senior official in charge of national team training at the Chinese Volleyball Management Centre, each female player in the national squad receives an extra 1,500 yuan (approx. US\$192) per month in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games (Interviewee D, 5 January 2006).

With regard to commercial/sponsorship income, the director of the GAS's Finance Department stated that 'the government encouraged every sport unit to exploit their resources not only to support themselves, but also to maintain the whole sport system' (Zhang, 1997, p.55). Indeed, Zhang claims that 'The Chinese government was using its tangible and intangible sports assets to generate more income to support sport development' (p.44). Zhang also drew attention to the increasing importance of market principles: 'the good image of Chinese elite sport was a very valuable intangible asset for the government and sport community. Therefore, adopting a market mechanism to exploit and market this intangible sports asset was a vital mission for our sport system at every level' (p.49). Under this policy, market promotion divisions were established at almost every level in the sport system, and especially at national and provincial levels (see Figure 5).

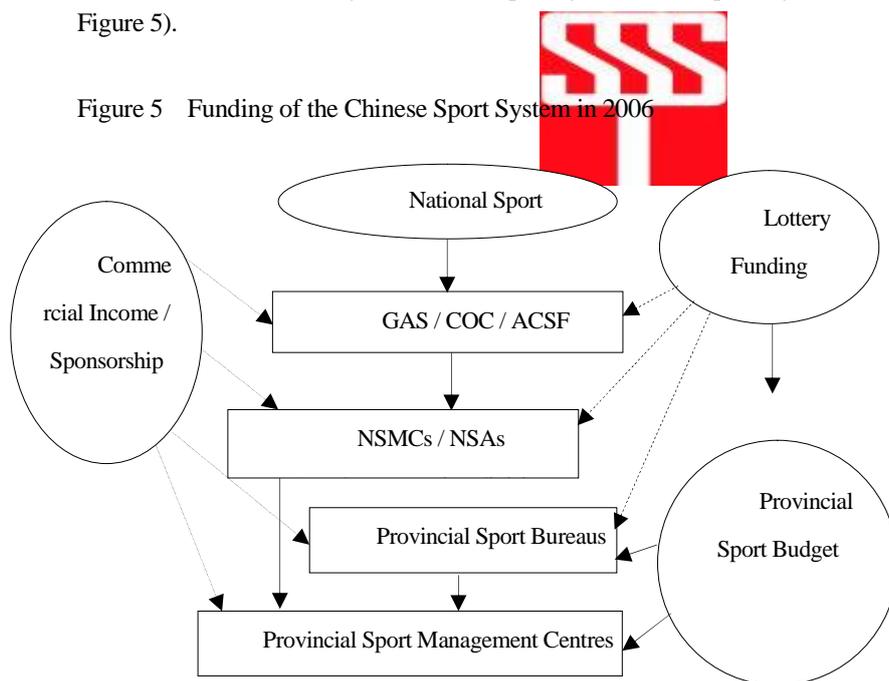


Figure 5 Funding of the Chinese Sport System in 2006

With regard to lottery funding, according to 'The Regulation for

Issuing Sport Lottery from 1994 to 1995", the lottery system was introduced initially to fund international and national mega-sports events (NSC, 1994a). In 1998, "The Temporary Regulations for Managing Sport Lottery Funding" was published by the GAS, the Financial Department (Treasury) and The People's Bank of China. These Regulations emphasised that 'the official rights for distributing the lottery funding belonged to the GAS, who decided that 60% of the funding was for investing in the "Fitness for All" project and 40% was for supporting the "Olympic Glory" project'(GAS, 1999b, pp.99-101). According to a

GAS report on lottery funding allocations in 2004, some 1,190 million yuan (approx. US\$152.27 million) was allocated for elite sport, and 1,750 million yuan (approx. US\$223.92 million) for mass participation sport.

From Figure 5, we can see that total funding for the Chinese sport system in 2005 was 21.7 billion yuan (approx. US\$2.8 billion) and that most of the funding was invested in elite sport development, according to 2006 GAS Statistical Yearbook of Sport (GAS: 2006b). Although China's national sport budget (1,369,690,000 yuan, approx. US\$ 179,009,349) was less than 16 per cent of the total income of the Chinese sport system in 2005, through the introduction of new policies, the government succeeded in generating more income from commercial sources/sponsorship (6,430,690,000 yuan, approx. US\$ 840,448,299) and lottery funding (3,167,665,000 yuan, approx. US\$ 413,992,691) to subsidise the sport system, and especially the elite sport system. The new policies supported the establishment of market promotion divisions/companies at all levels of the sport system and also enabled the creation of the lottery. Moreover, by creating the National Games, the government also encouraged provincial governments to invest their own sport budgets (10,745,730,000 yuan, approx. US\$ 1,404,395,252) into the development of elite performers.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our main aim in the preceding sections was to contribute to a better understanding of elite sport policy processes and decisions in China as the country builds to the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008. In this section we consider this evidence in the light of findings from nations in the West. In this respect, almost 15 years ago, Hoberman (1992, p.198) posed the following question: "are Communist regimes more likely than other political systems to develop and glorify athletic achievement?" Analyses of Western liberal democratic nations suggest that a reasonable answer to Hoberman's question must be no - albeit with a caveat. The caveat is that Hoberman's description of the extreme "dehumanizing" effects on athletes of Soviet and East German systems of elite development are not apparent in the research conducted to date that explores elite development systems in the West. However, a recent analysis of China's 'brutal system' over "55 years to help some 100 Olympic medallists to climb to the top" (Hong et al., 2005, p.519) provides a stark reminder of the potential ramifications of prioritising elite sporting success. The key issue for consideration in the remainder of this article concerns the identification of similarities and differences between China's system for developing elite athletes and nations in the West.

If we look at the first of the key elements of elite sport development considered earlier, that is, "Simplicity of administration through common sporting and political boundaries", the outstanding feature of the Chinese system is the sheer dominance of the Chinese Communist Party and the central state. The design of "three in one" or "two in one" agencies was paramount in the state's construction of a centralised and simplified political and sporting administration that underpins the country's system for elite sport development. For example, the GAS, the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC) and the All-China Sport Federation (ACSF) all report to the sports minister, and the National Sport Associations (NSAs) and National Sport Management Centres (NSMCs) are under the control of one organisation: the GAS.

When we consider elite sport systems in the West what we find is that there is an increasing body of research (in particular, see Houlihan and Green, 2008) that points to government intervention and "control" of elite sport development. However, a finer grained analysis suggests that even in well-established systems - such as those in Australia and Canada, as well as in more recently established systems, e.g. the UK - where governments have created centralised sporting agencies, national elite sport institutes and centres, contractual funding agreements and selective prioritisation of sports for support (cf. Green and Houlihan, 2005), the degree of control evident in China is tempered by the political and cultural philosophy inherent to liberal democratic nations. The example of Canada perhaps provides us with the sharpest evidence in this respect.

In Canada, the federal government's drive for Olympic glory began as long ago as the late 1970s (Macintosh and Whitson, 1990). Yet, despite such an overt and long-standing emphasis on winning Olympic

medals, not only did Canada struggle to realise its elite sport ambitions it also suffered national ignominy at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. The Ben Johnson doping affair led to a series of reviews and inquiries into the ways in which Canadian government intervened in the sport sector. One of the most influential of these reviews (known as the Best Report) criticised Sport Canada (the country's leading sporting agency) for "exercising excessive day-to-day control and direction over sport organizations" (Canada, 1992, p.192). The Dubin Inquiry, commissioned to investigate high performance sport and doping in Canada following the 1988 Seoul Olympics, concurred with the Best Report, and argued that the federal government's manipulation of, and over-concentration on, elite sport was too excessive. Moreover, Dubin claimed that there was a moral crisis in high performance sport in Canada (Dubin, 1990).

The upshot of this national hand-wringing over the ways in which Canadian elite athletes were developed, supported and funded led to a national summit on sport in 2001. This involved a consultation process, with six regional conferences held where all interested parties, including national sporting organisations, athletes, provincial and federal governments, and academics debated the way forward for the Canadian sport system. It is highly unlikely, if not impossible, to imagine a scenario in China where such an open and wide-ranging debate would take place regarding levels of government intervention into elite sport development. For example, there has been little if any open dissent regarding the ways in which the Chinese state has put in place a system for "hoovering-up" hundreds of thousands of young athletes who have little chance of Olympic success. According to Fan Hong (2008), in 2004, there were nearly 400,000 young boys and girls training at more than 3,000 sports schools throughout China. "Yet just 5 per cent reach the top and 95 per cent of these young athletes leave their sports schools with no formal primary and secondary education qualifications – only broken dreams".

The second element of China's elite sport system explored earlier was that of talent identification and development. For Fan Hong (2008), "China has one of the most effective systems in the world for systematically selecting and producing sporting talent from a very young age". This system was created in the early 1960s when the Sports Ministry issued the "Regulations for Outstanding Athletes and Teams". There is little denying then that China has put in place a quite staggering system of talent *identification*. Yet, whether or not the young athletes that become embroiled in this system receive sufficient *development* is a moot point. In short, what evidence we do have points to a 'selection system [that] is brutal and is the core of the "whole country support for the elite sport system" (Hong, 2008). At the heart of this system are the hierarchy of sports schools and methods for the identification and monitoring of talented athletes in each National Sport Management Centre. Again we find similarities with western nations' attempts to construct optimum frameworks within which athletes might be identified and developed.

In the UK, for example, over the past 10 years over 600 specialist sports colleges have been established alongside the creation of a UK-wide network of elite sport "institutes". While the colleges retain a clear educational focus at the same time as attracting talented young athletes, the elite sport institutes have the explicit aim of aiding the development of elite performers. Once again, however, these establishments operate in a political and cultural climate wherein the over-exploitation of an athlete is considered reprehensible. This is not to argue that talent identification and development regimes, for some athletes at least, in the UK are without criticism.

Indeed, for a former chief executive of the British Athletic Federation (now UK Athletics): "Nobody cares what happens to them [young athletes] if they aren't successful. Nobody seems to be asking the question at all about how people put together their lives when they have failed to make it through the talent ID [identification and development] process" (quoted in Green, 2006, p.231) Although there are some concerns in the UK, then, we do not appear to have the same degree of evidence of "disregard" for young athletes who have been discarded from the system as is evident in China. As reported in the *Observer*, Matthew Pinsent, the four-time Olympic rowing gold medallist, visited China in 2005 "and was horrified at seeing child gymnasts pushed through the pain barrier, and in the case of one boy, being beaten by his coach" (*Observer Sport Monthly*, 2006, p.55).

The third element of China's elite sport development system interrogated earlier was the provision of an environment where athletes, coaches, managers and scientists can work together. In China, "*Juguo tizhi*" or the "whole country support for the elite sport system", channels all resources for sport in the country into elite sport and effectively produces hundreds of thousands of young elite athletes in a short time in pursuit of ideological superiority and national status (Hong, 2008). More specifically, the establishment of six national specialised laboratories for training and monitoring athletes, sport psychology, sport medicine, sport nutrition, information services and physical training and recovery, is characteristic of the construction of an optimum system for elite sport achievement. In addition, resources from nine institutions (including the Chinese Academy of Science, the GAS, and the Ministry of Education) have been pooled together, with each institution investing its own budget towards supporting scientific research and services in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games.

A salient example of such a dedicated and overarching approach to the construction of holistic support services in the West is that found at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra. The recent establishment of the "AIS Hub" demonstrates the Australian federal government's continued commitment to the AIS and elite sport. An important rationale for investment in the AIS Hub, which integrates a range of sports sciences under one roof, was that it provides a much needed boost to Australian elite sport and the need to continue this investment in, according to the Minister for the Arts and Sport, "an increasingly competitive environment" (quoted in Collins and Green, 2007, p.9). Thus, the dominant discourse around elite sport in Australia provides a legitimating climate within which the federal government continues to fund elite sport with little evidence of a significant voice for the mass participant to lobby for a change in sport policy priorities. This has, to a certain extent, also eliminated discussion surrounding how such funding may otherwise be allocated to benefit not only more diverse groups in the community but also the general population as a whole (Collins and Green, 2007). Collins and Green's analysis provides us with an interesting comparison inasmuch as that it is evident in both Australia and China that these countries' respective governments appear to have, at best, a lack of interest in mass participation sport and, at worst, a complete disinterest.

The final element of elite sport development considered was an exploration of the argument that developing sporting excellence has financial costs, and that that these costs are high (cf. UK Sport, 2006). In China, investment in supporting elite sport achievements comes from three main sources: the government (national and provincial), commercial (including sponsorship), and lottery funds. Of the latter, some 40 per cent goes towards the country's "Olympic Glory" project, and especially for supporting competition schedules. And, as Fan Hong (2008) observes, in the 1980s China's "Olympic Strategy" stressed that all available resources for sport in China should be concentrated on elite sport. Consequently, in terms of funding, elite sport consumed 80 per cent of the state's sports budget. The sources of income for elite sport development found in China reflect those found in many western nations (Houlihan and Green, 2008).

The case of New Zealand provides us with a pertinent example of the pace of change in today's global "sporting arm's race" (Oakley and Green, 2001). The rapid increase in funding of the country's leading sporting agency – Sport and Recreation New Zealand or SPARC – and the subsequent allocation of resources to NSOs and other sporting bodies has resulted in SPARC attaining an influential position in the elite sport sector due to its increasing level and control of resources. Funding is provided direct to NSOs from SPARC for the purpose of achieving both increased participation levels and improved elite performance, with the achievement of key priorities and targets a key aspect. Since 2001-2002 funding for NSOs has increased significantly, with money targeted specifically at high performance within NSOs increasing from NZ\$7,123,440 in 2001-2002, to NZ\$11,491,300 in 2004-2005 (Sport and Recreation New Zealand 2002, 2005). The key difference here then between China and New Zealand is that although the New Zealand government has targeted increasing amounts of national funds towards the goal of Olympic glory, there remains much more of a concern to provide other (grassroots) levels with programmes for sport and recreation than appears to be the case in China.

To conclude, the picture is mixed when considering whether we are moving towards a uniform model of elite sport development between eastern and western nations. Without doubt, over the past ten years, ample evidence has emerged to suggest a large degree of similarity between the different elements or components that make up elite sport systems in the West. What this analysis of the Chinese system reveals is that there is also a remarkable degree of similarity in the mechanisms in place in China with those utilised in nations as diverse as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand and the UK (Green and Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan and Green, 2008).

What is clear, is that in all countries except perhaps the United States, once a government has decided to invest in supporting the drive for Olympic glory it is difficult to turn from the path chosen or to divert resources away from what is the increasingly costly business of elite sport development. One of the most notable differences between the Chinese example and the different western cases explored is the sheer scale of the “whole country support for the elite sport system” in China. One other notable difference to the western cases highlighted in this analysis is what might be termed the “dark side” of Chinese elite sport. Concerns regarding the plight of the thousands of discarded athletes “thrown out” of the talent identification system, the disregard for young athletes’ education (Hong, 2008), and the reports of aggressive treatment at the hands of coaches (Observer Sport Monthly, 2006), are indicative of the potential for ‘unseemly’ consequences resulting from such a demanding and severe approach to the development of the country’s elite athletes. The scrutiny of such practices remains an important task for all involved in elite sport development as, in the inexorable rush to win the global sporting arm’s race, countries in the east and west are committing ever-increasing resources (financial and human) for the realisation of a fleeting moment of Olympic glory.

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Notes:

1. There were 45,191 students in Physical Culture and Sport Colleges (including Sport Schools with Single Olympic Principle) and 1,567 students in Elite Sport Colleges in 2001.
2. There were 272,975 students in General Spare Time Sport Schools, 85,856 students in Key Spare Time Sport Schools and 13,459 students in Junior & Senior High Schools of Sport.
3. There were 19,899 elite athletes in provincial squads.
4. There were 5,033,813 students in Schools with Sports Tradition in 2001.

Source: GAS (2002)



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