



China's sports policy and politics in the post-Beijing Olympics era

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There were some debates and predictions before the Beijing Olympics that mass sport would replace elite sport to be the government's major focus after the Games and that the Games would be the last celebration of 'Juguo Tizhi'. However, China's victory at the Beijing Olympics further proved the important role of elite sport in establishing China's international image and in helping to fulfil China's ambitions to be one of the global economic and political superpowers of the twenty-first century.

President Hu Jintao made it clear immediately after the Games that

Sport is the thermometer for the general power of a nation state and the level of social development. The Beijing Olympics has inspired millions of Chinese people and stimulated the development of sport in China. Our ultimate goal is to use sport to improve people's fitness level and improve their living standards. Sport should serve the people's all-round development and facilitate the development of [the] economy. Elite Sport and Mass Sport should advance together to achieve sustainable development.¹

The National Sports Congress in early 2009 emphasised the further development of Chinese sport in three major areas: mass sport; the sports industry; and elite sport in the post-Beijing Olympics era.

Mass fitness

With the urbanisation of Chinese society, improved living standards, increased wages, leisure time and leisure areas, health became a major concern for most urban people.² In 1995 the State Council and the Sports Ministry issued the 'National Fitness for All Programme'. The aim was to encourage people to seek fitness activities and recreation and to make fitness and lifelong physical activity their new lifestyle. The programme was supported by society and was welcomed by ordinary Chinese citizens. According to a survey conducted by the Sports Ministry in 2008, about 340 million people in China participated in physical exercise regularly. The survey showed that, 28.2% of the population (both rural and urban) spent more than 30 minutes on fitness exercises at least three times a week.³

This reinforced the national fitness programme and further developed mass sport. Immediately, on the recommendation of the Sports Ministry, the State Council issued the 'National Fitness Regulations' in August 2009. It consists of 40 articles in six chapters. A brief examination of the document will give us a clear indication of the direction of mass sport in the post-Beijing Olympics era.

Chapter 1 states the 'general rules'. It clarifies the government's responsibility for promoting mass sport and proclaims the citizen's rights to participate in sports. It also indicates the government's desire to let mass sport depend on society. For example, it encourages individuals and organisations to provide financial support for the mass fitness programmes. Article six states that individuals and organisations that donate to national fitness programmes will enjoy tax preferences.

Chapter 2 contains the plans for the national fitness programme. Both central and local government will cooperate in designing fitness programmes and monitoring people's health.

Chapter 3 lists 13 regulations for mass sport. For example, article 12 designates 8 August as National Fitness Day. On that day, every year, sports facilities should be open to the public for free. Article 21 and 22 states that schools should organise hiking, camping, sports camps and other sports activities regularly, and hold a sports meeting at least once a year. Students should have at least one hour per day to participate in physical exercise and fitness activities at school.

Chapter 4 provides measures for mass sport development. Article 28 states that schools should open their sports facilities to the public and charge reasonable fees. Article 29 requires local governments to open parks and recreation facilities to the public for free. Article 32 requires that companies that run high-risk sports businesses, such as mountain climbing, sailing, scuba diving, parachuting and other extreme sports, should be licensed by local sports commissions.

Chapter 5 clarifies the legal responsibility of schools, companies, local governments and sports commissions. Schools that were to violate this decree would be prosecuted. Companies that run high-risk sports without a licence would face a fine of up to 150,000 RMB. Public servants who neglect their duties or abuse their power would face disciplinary punishment or prosecution.

Chapter 6 declares that the 'National Fitness Regulations' would take effect from 1 October 2009.

The 'National Fitness Regulations' demonstrated the Chinese government's determination to provide policy and legal support to mass sport and improve people's fitness level through sport and physical exercise. Its goal was to stimulate the Chinese population to have one of the highest sports participation rates in the world (体育大国). Liu Peng, the Sports Minister, pointed out,

The Regulations have provided legal protection for people who take part in sports activities. It is a remarkable step in raising physical well being. ...It clarifies that citizens have the right to participate in sports and that is the key point. To be healthy and happy are people's basic rights.⁴

The sports industry and the commercialisation of sport

After 15 years of development from 1994 to 2009, China has become the world's biggest sporting goods manufacturer as well as one of the world's largest sporting goods markets. According to a report conducted by the China Marketing Research Centre, by 2008, 65% of the world's sporting goods were made in China.⁵ Almost all the world's leading multinational sporting companies have established branches in China. By the end of 2008, there were about 4 million sporting goods factories in China.⁶ According to a report from China Customs, for the period January 2007 to December 2007 inclusive, the export volume of sporting goods increased to 5.097 billion items with an export value of US\$8.081 billion. Compared to the

same period in 2006, this represents a 15.49% increase in volume and an increase of 22.06% in export value.⁷

According to the Sports Ministry, by 2009, the growth rate of China's sports industry was approximately 20% per annum.⁸ In terms of the sporting goods market, recent reports from the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI) and Goldman Sachs & Co. showed that the demand for sporting goods in China is growing rapidly. The Chinese sporting goods market surpassed US\$1.2 billion in sales in 2001 and rose to over US\$2 billion in 2006, faster than the overall growth rate of the Chinese economy as a whole.⁹ The commercialisation and professionalisation of elite sport contributed to the rapid development of China's sports market. Professional sport events, for example, the National Football League, the Basketball League, the Formula One Race and the Tennis Masters Cup all attracted millions of sports fans around the country and created a promising market. From 1994 to 2008, an estimated 6 million spectators annually attended all the professional sport events, producing annual ticket sales of about 700 million RMB.¹⁰ Profits were made from ticket sales, advertising, sponsorship, player transfer, commercial matches, television rights and other commercial venues. The annual total output value of China's professional sport industry exceeded 50 billion RMB in 2007.¹¹

The sports lottery was initiated in 1994 and experienced rapid growth from 1994 to 2008. It played a major part in the Chinese sports industry. The sales revenue of the China Sports Lottery in 1994 was only 1 billion RMB, but this reached 45.6 billion RMB in 2008, an average increase of nearly 27% per annum.¹² The objective of introducing a sports lottery was to provide funding for elite sport and mass sport. In 1998, the Ministry of Finance and the People's Bank of China announced that 60% of the income would be directed to promote mass sport and 40% to elite sport. A report on the distribution of lottery funding conducted by the Sports Ministry in 2004 noted that 1,750 million RMB was channelled to mass sport and 1,190 million RMB went to elite sport.¹³ At the 2009 Annual Conference for the Sports Lottery held in Guangzhou in March 2009, Liu Peng, the Sports Minister, stated that the sports lottery was the 'lifeline' of Chinese sport. He reviewed the achievements of China's sports lottery system and confirmed that the government would continue to support the development of the sports lottery.¹⁴

According to the 'Outline of the Development of Sports Industry and Commerce (1995–2010)' issued by the State Council in 1995, commercialisation is an essential policy for the future development of the sports industry. It emphasised that the sports industry should develop according to market rules and not depend on state investment.¹⁵ The Sports Ministry released the '12th Sport Five-Year Plan (2011–2015)' in May 2011. According to the Five Year Plan, by 2015, the industrial added value of the sports industry would exceed 400 billion RMB (US\$61.47 billion), accounting for over 0.7% of the total gross domestic product (GDP). The industry would provide 4 million jobs and become one of the most important growth areas of the Chinese economy.¹⁶

Elite sport

There was a call after the Beijing Games for reformation of the elite sports system and to abolish the famous 'Juguo Tizhi', the foundation of elite sport. However, immediately after the Games at a press conference held in Hong Kong on 29 August

2009, Liu Peng, the Sports Minister, publicly announced that the elite sport system would continue to perfection.¹⁷ President Hu Jintao also pointed out: 'The government must take advantage of the social function of elite sport and use elite sport to revive the spirit of the nation, consolidate national unity and promote international communication and cooperation'.¹⁸ In addition, China's emerging new nationalism focuses on the revival of the great Chinese civilisation and is a strong force behind the government. The success of China's elite sport has been closely linked to the great goal of 'the Rise of China'. Therefore, in the post-Beijing 2008 era, China's elite sport will take advantage of modern forms of sport commercialisation and the additional money and resources it creates. Together with the traditional 'Juguo Tizhi' and the government's strong financial and administrative support the two systems will co-exist to advance Chinese elite sport.

In conclusion, sport and politics are inseparable in China. Throughout the 1950s, training healthy and strong bodies for national defence and the building of the socialist state were the major themes. Sport and physical education became an important vehicle for the People's Republic of China (PRC) to build up a 'New China'. They were also closely linked to the PRC's domestic and foreign policies. Sovietisation of Chinese sport brought a well-structured elite sport system to meet the country's political and diplomatic demands. Elite sport was a very useful tool to emphasise the 'Two Chinas' phenomenon in international politics as well as in the sports arena.

During the Great Leap Forward (1957–1962) mass sport and elite sport developed simultaneously for the purposes of producing a healthy and strong workforce in order to catch up in economic terms with the Western developed countries, and also to produce Communist sports stars and champions. Chinese athletes' success at national and international competitions stimulated the growth of nationalism and helped to establish national identity when the People's Republic was still young.

In the first half of the 1960s, China faced the challenges of the Sino-Indian War, the Vietnam War, the cold war and the Sino-Soviet split. National security became the priority. Sports militarism arose in these contexts and mass sport turned into military sport. 'To train all Chinese citizens to be soldiers' (全民皆兵) was the slogan and the practice. During this period, sport also served the PRC's foreign policy which focused on developing its relationships with the newly independent countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Fourth Asian Games and the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF) helped China to win support from, and to establish its leadership in, the Third World. China successfully positioned itself between the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, and changed the political landscape of the world for ever.

The Cultural Revolution began in 1966. At the beginning of the Revolution, the elite sport system and practice was criticised as the soil in which new capitalists and revisionists would grow in Communist China and it was abolished. However, in the middle of the Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s, in order to re-engage with the outside world, sport helped China to develop relations with the USA against the USSR in order to assist in national security. It also helped China to renew its relationship with, and re-establish its leading position in, the Third World. Major sports events happened in the 1970's including the 'Ping-Pong diplomacy'; the Asian-African Table Tennis Friendship Invitational Tournament in 1971; the four Asian-African-Latin American Table Tennis Friendship Invitational Tournaments between

1973 and 1980; the return of China to the Asian Games in 1974; and the return of China to the International Olympic Committee in 1978. They all played political and diplomatic roles to bring China to the centre stage of world politics.

During the Revolution mass sport became a most powerful social force to implement political ideas. The Revolution functioned as an accessible introduction to modern sport in a patriotic and politically unimpeachable form, supported by the full might of the Chinese state. Millions of cosmopolitan city-dwellers and farmers watched and played – most of them had never before participated in any modern forms of exercise. This, in fact, pushed the roots of sport ever deeper into Chinese society. Sport in the Cultural Revolution developed under very complex and unique social, cultural and political circumstances. It is curious that, unlike education, arts, industry and agriculture, on which the Cultural Revolution had a destructive effect, sport successfully survived and even developed.

The 1980s was an era of reform, opening-up, enlightenment and liberation. Together with economic reforms, China's sports policy underwent transformation. The 'Olympic Strategy' was established with the strong support of the 'Juguo Tizhi'. Winning medals on the international sports stage became part of China's quest for power and glory. The nation's 'Medal Fever' and the government's 'Elite Sport First' policy drew criticism and triggered a nationwide debate on the relationship between mass sport and elite sport. Calls arose for the reform of sports policy and practice. The 1980s also saw the beginning of the emigration of elite athletes to foreign countries.

The history of China's participation in the Asian Games and the Olympics from the 1970s to the 2000s has shown the close relationship between sport and politics, and reflected changes in Asian and world politics. The hosting of the 1990 Asian Games and the 2008 Olympics in Beijing not only connected China to the outside world and promoted China's international image, but also stimulated transformation of Chinese society.

In the post-Beijing Olympics era it is likely that, together with the transformation of Chinese society, people will pay more attention to their health, fitness and the quality of their living standards. More people will participate in leisure and sports activities. At the same time, development of the sports industry will provide more facilities, resources and support the development of mass sport as well as elite sport.

Elite sport will continue to develop towards perfection. Firstly, commercialisation and professionalisation of elite sport will provide finance and resources to stimulate further development of popular team sports that the market values, for example, football, basketball, table tennis and volleyball. Secondly, the traditional form of 'Juguo Tizhi' will continue to play its part to support sports that are less likely to be supported by the market but which have potential to achieve medals at national and international sports competitions, for example, gymnastics, diving, weightlifting. The Chinese elite sport system will continue to produce gold medallists for the 2012 London Olympics and beyond. China will remain a sports superpower as well as a world political and economic power in the twenty-first century.

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