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Submission or Revision

On the Embedded Concept of Sport in China

EDMUND W. CHENG

“The Olympics are not an occasions for politics,” the Chinese authorities insisted throughout the 2008 Beijing games,⁽¹⁾ yet the sports development of New China has been a product of political manoeuvres from the outset. Recent issues of *China Newsweek* (*Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan*) reveal this process while describing China’s historical journey into *The Bronze Age, the Silver Age and the Golden Age*,⁽²⁾ – apparently named after the trilogy by the renowned and defiant writer Wang Xiaobo. How China has overcome obstacles and gradually emerged triumphant is another hidden theme.⁽³⁾ The series marks a departure from the host of reports on the Olympics through its examination of the actions of the state apparatus, its focus on the lives of athletes in an evolving socio-economic context, and in offering a heuristic perspective on the dynamics of sport.

State participation in sport is not uncommon.⁽⁴⁾ The point of interest is how and why the state’s monopoly of sport – the so-called “whole-nation support for the elite sport system” (*Juguo Tizhi*) has been developed and sustained in China. *China Newsweek*’s series provides an orderly narrative with accompanying commentary. Immediately after the Olympics, other Chinese media followed up by deliberating over whether *Juguo Tizhi* is appropriate. This review documents how these viewpoints reflect positions and convictions relating to structural reform. Once again, athletic contest serves as a platform for discussing the feasibility and desirability of a political course.

The Bronze Age (1949-1966)

The Bronze Age is divided into two parts. First, China’s top leaders were convinced that athletic participation could demonstrate progress in socialist society. The state began to organise sporting activities and formulate the *Juguo Tizhi*. Benefiting from the political machine, Chinese athletes began to set records. Second, these athletic endeavours were interrupted when the underlying political structure was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Athletes became victims of ideological struggle, and most of their careers were terminated. In summation, it appears that during the Bronze Age the prospect for sport, whether in recession or recovery, was predetermined by the state’s orientation.

In the early Republic’s era, sport was not differentiated from physical education. Mao Zedong focused on the functional role of physical culture in delivering his countrymen from imperialistic and feudalistic hegemony. Little was mentioned of fair competition as in the Western sporting tradition.⁽⁵⁾ Mao’s decision to mandate physical education as a core subject in schools served, however unintentionally, to store up a pool of athletic resources for future use.⁽⁶⁾ With the proclamation of the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission (SPCSC) and the appointment of Marshal He Long as founding minister, the general framework of China’s sport system was established.⁽⁷⁾ The core mission of the SPCSC was to enable athletes to compete with past records and against contemporary counterparts in order to demonstrate the superiority of the socialist regime.⁽⁸⁾ As He Long remarked:

The Chinese people were called “the sick men of the Far East” in the old society. Now Chinese people have to stand up in the world. We should remove this label. Who is going to do this? Athletics can undertake this arduous but glorious task. As Communist Party members, we should devote ourselves to building sport into an aspiration of the Chinese people.⁽⁹⁾

Orthodox discourse coupled with manoeuvring by the leadership quelled intra-party opposition, but funding for sports

1. See *People’s Daily*, 15 February 2008, p. 4; *People’s Daily*, 23 April 2008, p. 3; *People’s Daily*, 4 July 2008, p. 4; *People’s Daily*, 25 July 2008, p. 3.
2. Sun Ran et al., “Bronze Age: Recalling the Development of Sports in New China 1949-1966,” *China Newsweek*, 2 February 2008, pp. 26-60; Chen Yuenyuen et al., “Silver Age: Recalling the Development of Sports in New China 1966-1986,” *China Newsweek*, 23 June 2008, pp. 22-40; Yang Zhongxu et al., “Golden Age: Recalling the Development of Sports in New China 1987-2007,” *China Newsweek*, 4 August 2008, pp.24-47.
3. Supposedly the titles also suggest the gold, silver and bronze medals in the Olympics.
4. See Barrie Houlihan and Mick Green, *Comparative Elite Sport Development: Systems, Structures and Public Policy*, Boston, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007.
5. Mao Zedong, *A Study of Physical Culture*, Beijing, People’s Sport Publishing House Press, 1996.
6. Sun Ran et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
9. Gu Shiquan, *Chinese History of Sports (Zhongguo tiyushi)*, Beijing, Beijing Sport University Press, 1997, p. 87.

was still far from adequate. With the new emphasis on athletics, available resources were pulled into the more promising fields under central planning. Meanwhile, local authorities were responsible for selecting promising children from across the country for intensive training through various sport commissions, academies, and schools. Only state-supported athletic elites could represent the nation in national and international competitions. These procedures and principles formed the basis for *Juguo Tizhi*.⁽¹⁰⁾ Table tennis, gymnastics, shooting, and weight lifting, among others, seized the opportunity to flourish.

Those early successes, while setting numerous records, bringing home enormous pride, and laying the foundation for *Juguo Tizhi*, did not last long. The SPCSC became a target of attack during the Cultural Revolution. Ideologically, sport competitions were essentially vested in the international arena, and *Juguo Tizhi* was institutionally modelled along Bolshevik lines, which meant interaction with hegemonic capitalists and subordination to the revisionist Soviets.⁽¹¹⁾ These orientations could not be more unacceptable to the Red Guards. Strategically, political figures such as He Long and the *de facto* director of Chinese sport, Rong Gaotang, were obstacles to the Gang of Four's quest for power. He Long was tortured to death, and Rong was imprisoned for a decade.⁽¹²⁾ As a result, the glorious ideal of elite sport gave way to mass physical education to promote the national physique, and the lives of athletes, coaches, and sport cadres became collateral damage.

Nevertheless, it was the sport participants' response to tragedy rather than the tragedies *per se* that truly reveal the attributes of the Bronze Age. For instance, Rong Gaotang, the founding deputy of the SPCSC, was labelled an ultra-revisionist and sentenced to eight years in prison and five years of reform through labour (*laogai*) in 1966.⁽¹³⁾ His first major decision after rehabilitation in 1979 was to withdraw to the backbench to facilitate the long-term development of sport.⁽¹⁴⁾ The first Chinese world champion, Rong Guotuan, could not withstand the accusations of treason, and hanged himself at the age of 31 on 20 June 1968. "I value my honour more than my life," he wrote in his suicide note.⁽¹⁵⁾ Their behaviour demonstrates a form of indoctrinated altruism that was customary in an age when the meaning of individual existence was bound up with duty and position in society. It further reflects the limited range of choices available when an individual's vocation was entirely embedded in an arena monopolised by the state.

In other words, the value of championship lay in for whom it was won, and not in who won it. Leaders' salutes and cit-

izens' honours were temporary expressions of love of country; prolonging them hinged on athletes' complete submission to the state structure. The primary function of athletes was to serve those political objectives. For that reason, all glory vanished when Rong Guotuan's patriotism was challenged. No verdict was necessary; suspicion was enough to ruin him. Suicide became a legitimate choice to restore his value by restoring the fidelity of national athletes. Not only did the sacrifice completely exonerate him, it secured his status as a hero in perpetuity.

Perhaps the Cultural Revolution is still too sensitive of an issue for *China Newsweek* to cover in detail, as a result of which the borderline between the Bronze and Silver Age is blurred. These tragedies truly revealed the humility of that generation of athletes. Chen Jingkai, the first Chinese to break a world record and who went on to break that record nine more times, was prohibited from participating in the Olympics; instead, he was deployed as a bench-worker during the "Ten-Year Catastrophe."⁽¹⁶⁾ While coaching local athletic teams for the rest of his life, he experienced the typical fallout of his contemporaries. Although they were rehabilitated, their youth and hence their utilitarian potential was gone. Most spent their later years in humble circumstances. The prospect of individual athletic endeavour was purely a reflection of national sport development. The striking feature was that individuals had no ability to influence those decisions.

The Silver Age (1966-1986)

The ambiguous boundary between the Bronze Age and Silver Age can be resolved by referring to a change in the nature of sport. In the Silver Age, sport was transformed from a tool for national emancipation to one for international diplomatic recognition. With the successful practice of "Ping-Pong Diplomacy"⁽¹⁷⁾ in the early 1970s, the utility of

10. Sun Ran et al, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

11. Hwang Dongihy and Chang Like, "Sport, Maoism and the Beijing Olympics: One Century, One Ideology," *China Perspectives*, vol. 73, n° 1, 2008, p.12.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 12.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 32. He immediately became the secretary general and then a member of the Central Advisory Committee, the final decision-making body of China in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

15. Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, London, Flamingo, 1993, p. 496.

16. Sun Ran et al., *op. cit.*, p. 33. His fall was barely addressed in a short bibliography of the issue.

17. Referring to the exchange of table tennis players between the US and PRC, which eventually led to the restoration of Sino-US relations.

sport was restored. The subsequent triumphs of the Women's Volleyball Team (*nūpai*) brought national enthusiasm to a climax, consolidating the legitimacy of *Juguo Tizhi*, which was credited with these achievements. At the same time, overwhelming success in sports also developed a more interactive and collaborative power structure between the state apparatus, athletes, and people.

The launch of Ping-Pong Diplomacy was the decision of Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, targeting budding Sino-US relations.⁽¹⁸⁾ Their endorsement restored the SPCSC, with Deng Xiaoping as its new minister.⁽¹⁹⁾ In March 1971, the National Table Tennis Team travelled to Japan to participate in the 31st World Table Tennis Championship.⁽²⁰⁾ Whether through mutual agreement or unilateral concession, most of the games ended in a draw. This result facilitated the propaganda bureau's depiction of the ice-breaking tour as "first on friendship, second on competition."⁽²¹⁾ The US Table Tennis Team was granted permission to visit Beijing in April the same year. They were followed by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and then President Richard Nixon.⁽²²⁾ Thus China reopened its door through creative use of sport.

Although the ping-pong team turned the world upside down, the real star of the 1980s was China's volleyball team. A billion Chinese citizens who had never travelled abroad were given a taste of "biting the foreigners" when the six-woman volleyball team won five world championships in succession. The so-called "spirit of the women's volleyball team" (*nūpai jingshen*) – indomitable courage, infinite vigour, solidarity, and flexibility⁽²³⁾ – came at a moment when the country was reconstructing its identity and searching for a new future under the "reform and opening" (*gaige kaifang*) policy. The team became the stuff of legend: "Long live the women's volleyball team!" (*nūpai wansui*), cried the people,⁽²⁴⁾ employing a slogan that had previously been reserved for the nation, the Party, and Chairman Mao. While general living standards in China remained deficient, the team tasted affluence. The people's expectations and the justification for *Juguo Tizhi* hinged on the team. Their coach, Yuan Waiman, enjoyed an unprecedented promotion to deputy minister of the SPCSC, and a brand-new training centre was built in Zhangzhou exclusively for *nūpai*. Even red entrepreneurs such as Rong Yiren and Henry Fok considered donations to *nūpai* legitimate expressions of their love and support of the motherland.⁽²⁵⁾ *Nūpai jingshen* provided the most concrete representation of that most ambiguous concept: national identity.

Neither their ping-pong contemporaries nor the athletes who brought home the first world champion and the first

Olympic gold medal could compare with the popularity and significance of the *nūpai* team. This phenomenon is another trait of the Silver Age – a budding partnership between athletes and people. By portraying the heroic status of athletes and disseminating patriotic sentiment, the state apparatus implicitly delegated the power of interpretation to the mass. Competition *per se*, rather than its deeper implications, was more eye-catching and became more prevalent and relevant. In other words, although the agenda of using sports to barter for national glory was consolidated, the athletics power structure was slightly modified. In the Bronze Age, sport development was based on hierarchical command. No one could dispute the order, or more accurately, no one could consider the possibility of disputing it. Moving into the Silver Age, the belief that every victory or defeat in the international sports arena was a matter of concern to every compatriot brought mass expectation into account and made fame a valuable asset. Only one goal mattered: seize the championship – for individuals, for the state, and for the nation, and that goal could only be achieved through a partnership between the three. Thus, the partnership was a double-edged sword that put pressure on one side and rewarded the other.

That dynamic power structure explains why most of the members of the miraculous *nūpai* team ended up either struggling in the business sector or climbing the political ladder.⁽²⁶⁾ Very few of them continued as sports professionals – the most notable of these is Lang Pang, who crossed back and forth across the border to coach Chinese, Italian, and American national teams.⁽²⁷⁾ Her horizon and autonomy has surpassed that of the former generation of athletes, who stayed in the field through either submission to custom or absence of choice. In summation, individual autonomy for athletes of the Silver Age came only *after* they ceased participating in sport. Even that marked significant progress,

18. Hong Zhaohui and Sun Yi, "The Butterfly Effect and the Making of 'Ping-Pong Diplomacy,'" *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 9, n° 25, 2000, pp. 429 – 448.

19. Chen Yuenyuen et al., *op. cit.*, p. 29. The bibliography of Deng infers that he either served as a fixer for political struggles or as a technocrat to manage new agenda whenever he was brought back to the power centre during the Mao era.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29, 32-3.

26. Yang Zhongxu et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 34-5.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

however, compared with the former generation of athletes who were recruited into, beaten out of, and then restored to the sports arena.

The Golden Age (1987-2007)

The sensation and certainty of the Silver Age were replaced by disappointment and doubt that marked the opening of the Golden Age. Availed of the liberal thinking of the late 1980s, intellectual circles began questioning the relevance of sport and whether the nation could bear unanticipated defeat. The embarrassment of the national team in the Seoul Olympics and the fall of “Ma’s Private Army” in track and field proved that the intellectuals’ foresight. The official interpretation of the series of failures however, was not the unfeasibility of *Juguo Tizhi*, but rather its inadequate capacity. More resources were dragged into the system, ultimately leading to the *tour de force* of the Beijing Olympics.

When China’s economic reform encountered roadblocks in the late 1980s, many Chinese looked to sport as a symbol of China’s prospects. The people’s expectations ended in vain: China dispatched its largest athletic team ever to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, but came home with only five gold medals.⁽²⁸⁾ But the structure did not come under severe scrutiny; only the participants were blamed. As the “Prince of Gymnast” Li Ning recalled, “Chinese of that era needed medals more than sports; the sports authorities wanted a champion instead of an athlete.”⁽²⁹⁾

The results of the Seoul Olympics and public opinion in its aftermath matched the projections of Zhao Yu, author of the reportage *Strong Country Dream*, who had criticised the limited horizon and innate weakness of *Juguo Tizhi*.⁽³⁰⁾ Published in *Dangdai* and widely accessible during the liberal atmosphere of late 1980s, Zhao Yu’s article provoked debate on a subject that had long been taken for granted. On the one hand, the SPCSC condemned the report as outrageous and unconstructive. Claiming that *Juguo Tizhi* had proven to be the most effective way to mobilise athletes’ potential, and the fastest means of constructing a strong nation, the sport giant insisted that the state-centric approach must and would be preserved.⁽³¹⁾ On the other hand, the article’s first paperback edition recorded sales of 150,000 copies,⁽³²⁾ and *People’s Daily* and *Guangming Daily* endorsed the article’s contribution in telling an uncomfortable truth.⁽³³⁾ Should a sports mechanism create more injury than health? Could fair competition replace monopoly in the sports realm? Would athletic academies teach a sport in which China had no comparative advantage? Could

athletics students be allowed a pure enjoyment of sport?⁽³⁴⁾ These questions pinpointed structural constraints. Meaningful discussion or even policy implications might have developed further if not for the wrong timing immediately before Tiananmen.

If Zhao’s article implies a correlation between China’s renaissance and its ideas of sport, then the rise and fall of “Ma’s Private Army” demonstrates the collaboration of patriotic sentiment with state capacity in the Chinese sports realm. Emerging at the fore of a track and field arena traditionally dominated by the United States, Ma Junren’s team brought immediate and far-reaching national attention. With a world record followed by a world championship and then the first Chinese Olympic gold medal in running, the “army” led by Ma won a string of impossible missions.⁽³⁵⁾ His secret of success was built simply and entirely upon *Juguo Tizhi* — the selection of children with potential from cities and the countryside, followed by round-the-clock athletic training.⁽³⁶⁾ But even while everyone was copying his tactics, celebrating his successes, and looking forward to another triumph, a “mutiny” began. The majority of Ma’s women’s team signed a pledge to leave. The women insisted that it was not a matter of distribution of monetary reward or credit; they simply could not tolerate Ma’s authoritarian rule. They wanted to enjoy sport instead of being used as tools.⁽³⁷⁾ Others speculated that Ma’s decision to relocate the training centre and secure new sponsors had affected the benefits enjoyed by his superiors in the provincial sport committee. Support from municipal authorities and new financial sources could not compensate for his diminished political ties in state athletic circles.⁽³⁸⁾ Ma, his superiors, and his team, all fell victim to an intense internal conflict within the monopolised sport system. The outcome was as bad as could have been expected. Rising in stark contrast to the ideal function of sports, the independent petition of these national heroes suffered a

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

29. C.f., Shu Tai, “The Spiritual Legacy of Beijing Olympics,” *Oriental Outlook*, 28 August 2008, p. 19.

30. Zhao Yu, *Strong Country Dream*, Beijing, The Writers’ Publishing House, 1988.

31. Zhong Weizhi, “Strong Country Dream,” *MindMeters*, 23 July 2007, <http://www.mindmeters.com/arshow.asp?id=2867>.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Yang Zhongxu et al., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

34. Yang Zhongxu et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31; Zhong Weizhi, *op. cit.*

35. Yang Zhongxu et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 35-6.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

complete rejection by public opinion. Considered traitors to their leader and their nation, they were abandoned regardless of their previous achievements. One of the three most prominent members of the team ended up teaching athletics in a county primary school for \$800 RMB per month, while another struggled for subsistence as a mineworker.⁽³⁹⁾ The third, recognising that returning to Ma's team was the only way to continue an athletic career, broke the pledge and resubmitted herself to authority in order to secure a decent living.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Snubbing Zhao Yu's intellectual challenge and the autonomous appeals of Ma's team members, the SPCSC concluded that any drawbacks were caused by the incapacity, not the unfeasibility, of *Juguo Tizhi*, to be resolved through a concrete blueprint and unlimited resources. "The Glorious Olympics Plan" was initiated to ensure an annual expansion of sport funding, an efficient direction of resources to established fields, and a promise of a greater number of gold medals in the upcoming Olympics.⁽⁴¹⁾ This was followed by a wave of outstanding performance in swimming, shooting, diving, table tennis, badminton, gymnastics, shooting, and weight lifting, starting from the late 1990s.⁽⁴²⁾ China increased its gold medal count from 28 in the Sydney Olympics to 32 in the Athens Olympics.⁽⁴³⁾ *Juguo Tizhi* had restored its ability to fulfil national aspirations through acquiring gold medals in the international athletic arena. Successful athletes became icons for national glory, enjoying unlimited monetary rewards and enviable careers. The result has been a striving among parents for the opportunity to send their children to athletic schools, and a yearning for fame and pride, while the state has utilised these accomplishments to trumpet national achievement and consolidated the legitimacy of the regime. Demand from large corporations, the emergence of private athletic schools, and genuine interest from the public are new issues proposed by new actors. Although everyone seems to be satisfied for the time being, an implicit conflict between state control and individual autonomy has emerged. This may be why *China Newsweek* ended its 100-page report with a comment by the famous gymnast Li Xiaoshuang: "My competition is a process of capturing perfection...to an athlete, a gold medal means nothing [but] temporary glory; I emphasise the spirit and virtue of sports."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Towards a New Era? (2008-)

Passionate feelings rose to fanatical levels throughout the Beijing Olympics, provoking significant comment, particularly

in the West, describing the Beijing games as a triumph for Chinese nationalism and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.⁽⁴⁵⁾ There was general agreement that the scale, budget, and enthusiasm surrounding the games were unprecedented and could only occur in today's China. At the same time, many in the West expressed pride that liberal democracy could not and would not apply such great effort to the magnification of national prestige.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Some observers expected a trend toward liberal democratic reform following the Beijing Olympics, as occurred after the Tokyo and Seoul games.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Proxies of the Chinese authorities, however, were annoyed by the foreign media's contemptuous attitude toward their dedication and insisted on pursuing an alternative path.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Zhang Yimou, the eminent film director and impresario of the Olympics opening ceremony, admitted that the arts need patronage.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In his view, artists, like athletes, need to struggle against constraints on their autonomy, rather than enjoying absolute freedom.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Subordination and compromise are therefore tolerable if personal and national interests can be served. In short, the Olympics turned into an occasion for an exchange of manifestoes between the Chinese state and the Western media, blocking channels for communication and discussion from the outset. While there has been debate on grand narratives, a number of Chinese media organisations, contrary to the Western image of serving as mouthpieces for the propaganda bureau, were keen on the undertake a detailed review of the system that produced this glory and pride. Journalists, scholars, athletes, and officials have continued to deliberate on the possibility of reform in sports.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

41. Cf. Yang Zhongxu et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

42. Yang Zhongxu et al., *op. cit.*, p. 28-34, 40-2.

43. Barrie Houlihan and Mick Green, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

45. See for instance, Harvey Araton, "In Living Room, a Window Into the Games," *New York Times*, 9 August 2008; Maureen Fan, "For Chinese, A Long-Awaited Occasion of Hope and Pride," *Washington Post*, 9 August 2008; Jane McCartney, "Olympics: the Power and the Glory - China leaves world awestruck," *Times*, 9 August 2008; Jane McCartney, "Olympics: The Power and the Glory," *Times*, 9 August 2008; Jonathan Watts, "Stronger, faster and better - A people's pride in its power," *The Guardian*, 9 August 2008.

46. Thomas Boswell, "Clear Messages in a Colorful Show," *Washington Post*, 8 August 2008; Editorial Board, "Editorial: Beijing's Bad Faith Olympics," *New York Times*, 22 August, 2008.

47. See for instance, Orville Schell, "China's Post-Olympic Challenge," *Business Standard*, 27 August, 2008. Ullrich Fichtner et al., "A Look Back at Beijing 2008," *Der Spiegel*, 26 August 2008.

48. See for instance, *People's Daily*, 10 August 2008, p. 12; *People's Daily*, 16 August 2008, p. 14; *Guangming Daily*, 28 August 2008, p. 5; *China Daily*, 23 September 2008, p. 8.

49. Zhang Yi et al., "Zhang Yimou on the Olympics," *Southern Weekly*, 14 August 2008, p. A1-3.

50. *Ibid.*

Lu Yuanzhen, the director of the review committee of the General Administration of Sport (GAS, formerly SPCSC), implies that tolerance towards track star Liu Xiang's last-minute withdrawal from the Beijing games signified maturity on the part of the general public.⁽⁵¹⁾ "People are turning toward a popular cultural enjoyment of sport instead of a nationalistic pursuit of gold medal," he adds.⁽⁵²⁾ Whether this attitude is reflected in popular discourse is highly debatable, but a group of journalists has latched onto this narrative.⁽⁵³⁾ In addition, the extraordinary success of the Beijing Olympics has produced a favourable environment for reform,⁽⁵⁴⁾ as a number of structural problems in the current system have become evident. For instance, the GAS's dual role of both running and monitoring sports has often led to a conflict of interest.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Scholars and journalists also criticise the outdated professional training system. Under the current mechanism, state-funded professional athletes are denied access to formal education, which makes their post-athletic lives very difficult, and amateur athletes are prohibited from participating in the Olympics, regardless of their talents.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Furthermore, the selective funding and training mechanism has caused unbalanced development between different kinds of sport. Skill-oriented sports in which China has a comparative advantage are promoted over physique-oriented sports, where Chinese people are relatively weaker.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Although numerous functional and conceptual constraints of the system have been addressed, the overwhelming logic of gradualism dominates the deliberation process. Wei Jizhong, the former secretary general of the Chinese Olympics Committee, stresses that China's experience has proved that gradual reform is better than shock therapy.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Any reform in *Juguo Tizhi* is thus likely to tend more toward complementary than replacement.

That paradigm has come under greater scrutiny recently. Hu Shuli, the chief editor of *Caijing* magazine, has proclaimed that now is the right time for the phasing out of *Juguo Tizhi*.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Whether the cost of producing one gold medal is 70 million or 700 million RMB, it is still too enormous for society to bear. Besides, the relative cost of producing a gold medal will inevitably surpass its relative benefit, Hu insists.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Hu enjoys more journalistic flexibility of opinion than the establishment camp. Recognising that the structural constraints of *Juguo Tizhi* will constantly mobilise and inefficiently utilise resources, as in the case of planned economy, Hu advocates a complete renovation of the structure to take account of the genuine economic value of sport. Apart from the utilitarian concerns of this leading Chinese economic magazine, prominent participants in the field are

demonstrating and promoting their alternative paths through a series of reports from influential Chinese journals such as *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang zhoumo*) and *Oriental Outlook* (*Liaowang dongfang zhoukan*).⁽⁶¹⁾ As a basketball player, Yao Ming is unlikely to receive any Olympic gold medals, but he remains an icon for a distinguished Chinese athletic career. Under the current structure, national athletes need to take part in numerous tours and join national competitions typically aimed at raising funds and increasing public exposure. Complete subordination to such practices can only shorten an athlete's professional life and hinder optimal development.⁽⁶²⁾ In Yao's view, "My athletic career is vested in my skills, my economic value, and my resume in the NBA. Being a member of the national team is only one component."⁽⁶³⁾ Personal ambitions will not necessarily conflict with national interests if both sides have the capacity and desire for mutual accommodation. The underlying question is if the authorities can accept negotiation instead of command as their dominant strategy.

Formerly the most deified national hero and now the coach for the American volleyball team, Lang Pang's experience is both symbolic and controversial. According to Lang Pang, Americans honour the participation process while Chinese are only concerned with the outcome; Chinese willingly obey any absurd order from their superiors, while Americans have a greater capacity for making an independent judgment on whether to follow an order or not.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Her

51. Ma Changbo et al., "Reform or Not; How to Reform: Persisting and Perfecting the Sport System," *Southern Weekly*, 28 August 2008, pp. A2-3. See also Shan Xu, "Only a Few Minutes," *Oriental Outlook*, 28 August 2008, pp. 10-13.
52. Ma Changbo et al., *op.ct.*, pp. A2-3.
53. See Shan Xu, *op. ct.*, pp. 10-13; Shu Tai, *op. ct.*, pp. 18-20; Lei Li, "Column: A Changing Sport Narrative," *China Newsweek*, 1 September 2008, p. 82; Chen Yiwu, "Who doesn't want to be present at the Olympics?" *Southern Weekly*, 28 August 2008, p. D26.
54. Editorial Board, "Editorial: Viewing Olympics from a Hundred Years' Perspective," *China Newsweek*, 1 September 2008, p. 2.
55. Ma Changbo et al., *op.cit.*, pp. A2-3.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. Hu Shuli, "Editorial: The right time for *Juguo Tizhi* to fade out," *Caijing*, 1 September 2008, p. 18.
60. *Ibid.*
61. See for instance, "Cover Story: Legacy of the Olympics," *Oriental Outlook*, 4 September, 2008. "Cover Story: Towards a Confident China," *Southern Weekly*, 28 August 2008.
62. For instance, immediately after the Summer Olympics, the gold medalists were sent to Hong Kong to perform. A number of them became ill, and one even fell during the trip. See *Ming Pao Daily*, 1 September 2008, p. A04.
63. Li Yan et al., "New Possibility of Sport: Yao Ming's team," *Southern Weekly*, 28 August 2008, p. A5.
64. *Ibid.*

comments, like Yao's example, reveal a cleavage between Western liberal values and Chinese collective custom. However ambiguous and dubious these generalisations about culture and athletic spirit might be, they powerfully and effectively dominate the current discourse.

This Oriental-Occidental cleavage reveals a fundamental premise for China's sport renaissance. Although the embedded ideal of sports is national emancipation, the target audience has always included foreigners. This is not a contradiction in terms, but rather signifies that genuine salvation requires external recognition. The strategy of not making indigenous martial arts (*wushu*) an item in national competitions as long as it is not an item in the Olympics is thus understandable.⁽⁶⁵⁾ The Chinese state and public have thus given heavy weight to foreign responses throughout the games.

The debate also highlights the correlation between reviewing state involvement in sport and initiating structural reform in China.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Of course, the underlying cause and objective of these media critics are quite similar to those of the state, i.e. fulfilling a national dream separate from the single-minded pursuit of liberal democratic values, while allowing the path and content of that dream to go beyond the dictates of official stand and state structure to celebrated freedom of expression and autonomous decision-making. Essentially, they differentiate the interests and prestige of a nation from the prerogatives and rights of a nation's citizens, and advocate the latter as a feasible and desirable middle course. •

65. Susan Brownell, "Training the Body for China," Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995 pp. 51-55.

66. See Hu Shuli, "Editorial: The right moment for *Juguo Tizhi* to fade out," *Caijing*, 1 September 2008, p. 18; Editorial Board, "Editorial: Viewing Olympics from a Hundred Years Perspective," *China Newsweek*, p. 2. ; Editorial Board, "Editorial: Desiring a Matchless Future for China," *Oriental Outlook*, 4 September 2008, p. 7; Li Hang Peng "Editorial: Heyday, Nation and Future," 28 August 2008, *Southern Weekly*, p. A01.