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**Governance of Olympic Elite Sport and Professional
Football in China: Studies on the National Games of China
and the Chinese Super League**

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List of Abbreviations

AFC	Asian Football Confederation
CCDI	Central Commission for Discipline Inspection
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFA	Chinese Football Association
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
CSL	Chinese Football Association Super League
CSSCI	Chinese Social Science Citation Index
EFL	Eastern Hemisphere City Football League
EPL	English Premier League
EREG	Evergrande Real Estate Group
FA	Football Association
FC	Football Club
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
GAS	General Administration of Sport of China
IOC	International Olympic Committee
NGC	National Games of China
PA	Principal-Agent
PG	Provincial Government
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSB	Provincial Sport Bureau
SSCI	Social Science Citation Index

1 Introduction, overall results, and reflection

1.1 Motivation and research problem

The 20th century witnessed astounding progress in modern sport, which expanded from its origins in politically leading, industrialized regions, namely in North America and Western Europe, to become an international social phenomenon and global business (Amara, Henry, Liang, & Uchiumi, 2005; Grix, Brannagan, & Lee, 2019; Manzenreiter & Horne, 2004; Tan & Houlihan, 2012). The process underlying this expansion is particularly salient in two cases—the Olympic movement and football (Amara et al., 2005). At the turn of the twentieth century, China became an important player in globalization processes, which was also reflected in its increasingly active role in the Olympics and football (Fan, 1998; Tan & Bairner, 2010; Xu, 2006). This development and policy focus was not imposed by others; rather, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) chose to highlight and pursue it (Xu, 2008).

There is a general consensus among researchers that the PRC endeavors to symbolically express its overall modernization to the global public as well as to its own citizens through Olympic elite sport and modern football (Connell, 2018; Fan, Wu, & Xiong, 2005; Manzenreiter & Horne, 2007; Preuss & Alfs, 2011). Although there is no democratic tool, such as a public referendum, to legitimize the hosting of the Olympic Games or government involvement in elite sport within the Chinese context, two justifications have been frequently cited by the Chinese authorities: modern sport is an iconic representation of modern China (Dong & Mangan, 2001) and could be employed as an effective vehicle to refute the old image of the ‘sick man of East Asia’ by demonstrating the health and strength of the population (Grix et al., 2019; Tan & Green, 2008; Tan & Houlihan, 2012; Xu, 2008). The central government of the PRC soon recognized that achieving these non-sporting objectives requires internationally competitive performance of Chinese athletes, i.e., targeted elite sport development.

However, the above two examples of Olympic elite sport and football in modern China have demonstrated contrasting performances. In the case of the former, after decades of absence from the Olympic movement, China returned to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1979 and made a successful comeback at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles (Digel, Miao, & Utz, 2003; Xu, 2006). During the course of its politico-economic opening up in the 1980s, China started its catch-up process in the world of sports, with a focus on the Summer Olympics (Tan & Houlihan, 2012; Theodoraki, 2004). The 1990s confirmed these efforts in Chinese sport policy with an increase in China’s

Olympic medal count, placing among the top five countries. From 2000 onwards, China has held a continuous presence as one of the three best-performing nations at the Summer Olympics (Bernard & Busse, 2004; Fan et al., 2005). Modern China reached its apex on home soil at the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, during which the dominance of the United States was challenged since China ranked first at the gold medal table (Junior & Rodrigues, 2019; Zheng, Chen, Tan, & Houlihan, 2019a). Most importantly, after the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympics, the concept of '*Juguo Tizhi*' surfaced and was uncovered as the key factor contributing to China's particularly impressive upswing in gold medals (Hu & Henry, 2017; Zheng & Chen, 2016; Zheng, Chen, Tan, & Lau, 2018). This concept has been precisely and explicitly interpreted. As Zheng et al. (2018, p. 475) noted:

The definition of the concept can be summarized as the government, both central and local governments, ought to efficiently channel the limited resources, including financial, scientific, human and so forth to fully support elite sport development and Olympic success, in order to win glory for the nation.

With regard to football development in China, Manzenreiter and Horne (2007) proposed the term '*footballization of China*' to describe the political use of football as a symbol of modernization of the PRC that is globally understood. Actually, football has already played a prominent part in the emergence of modern China. It has been documented that on October 1, 1949, the date of the declaration of the PRC, the Shengyan football team was invited to Beijing to play and celebrate the establishment of the new communist regime (Dong & Mangan, 2001). This event demonstrated the great desire of the political elite of the PRC to embrace the sport of football. However, in light of its continuing under-performing, *inter alia*, the humiliating failures against the Japanese and the South Koreans, the Chinese national football team has been frequently criticized by the domestic mainstream media as 'cowards' or the nation's 'chronic illness' (Liu, Chen, & Newman, 2019; Tan, Huang, Bairner, & Chen, 2016). Hence, football contributed much less to improving the image of China than Olympic elite sport.

A limited number of articles have attempted to identify the reasons for the contrasting performances of Chinese athletes in Olympic elite sport and football within the Chinese context. Among these, Zheng and Chen (2016, p. 159) noted that the General Administration of Sport of China (GAS), which shoulders the political task of winning glory for the nation, deliberately prioritized individual sports or disciplines that offer '*low investment and quick*

return', most notably, weightlifting, artistic gymnastics and shooting. This insight resonates with Baker, Cao, Pan, and Lin's (1993) and Theodoraki's (2004) arguments that the Chinese sport authorities opted to invest heavily in '*medal-intensive*' sports to achieve rapid success. In doing so, '*high investment but slow return*' team sports, notably football, which was considered the 'stronghold of Western nations', have been neglected (Zheng et al., 2019a). This strategic ignorance of Chinese sport authorities, due to the overriding prioritization of individual sports, resulted in cuts in public funding for Chinese elite football. Therefore, football in China had to follow a different, more market-based logic to develop.

Fan and Lu (2013) pointed out, in their seminal international article on the development of Chinese football, that a process of commercialization of elite football started in the early 1990s. Inspired by the profound reform of the Chinese economy during the 1980s towards globalization, football, as the most popular team sport in mainland China, was unsurprisingly selected as the pioneer of reform in the sport subsystem (Delgado & Villar, 2020; Tan & Bairner, 2010). Unlike Olympic elite sport, which is still governed under a heavily publicly funded structure guided by the principle of '*Juguo Tizhi*', Chinese elite football introduced ambitious reforms to foster and institutionalize a continued development path of commercialization. In 1994, a major step was the establishment of *Football League A (Jia A)* as a professional league. It basically copied the model of team sports leagues in Western countries (Amara et al., 2005; Fan & Lu, 2013). Since then, Chinese elite sport governance has been increasingly separated into two divergent logics, i.e., the centralized, publicly controlled model of sport governance and the more liberal, commercialized model of professional sports with elite football being the leading spectator sport.

Interestingly, these divergent models of Chinese elite sport governance have become increasingly distinct following changes in the dynamics and structure of the Chinese economy. In the early 2010s, a serious economic downturn forced the central government to confront the problem that the economic structure of the past decades was overly dependent on the manufacturing industry and on massive exports (Liu, Zhang, & Desbordes, 2017). New engines of economic reconstruction were identified in domestic demand. Against this background, the services sector became a targeted industry for Chinese economic policy as a less volatile growth driver (Liu et al., 2017; Sullivan, Chadwick, & Gow, 2019; Yu, Newman, Xue, & Pu, 2019).

This service-oriented shift in growth policy has exerted a marked influence on sport policy in China. *The Guidelines on Promotion of Sport Industry and Sport Consumption* (hereinafter referred to as the '*Promotion Guidelines*'), enacted on October 20, 2014, by the

State Council (2014), are commonly considered the cornerstone for the expansion of the Chinese sport industry (Junior & Rodrigues, 2019; Liu et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2019a). The most pressing concern is the government's ambitious target of achieving a gross output of the sport industry exceeding RMB 5,000 bn by 2025, thus consolidating the prime status of sport as a generator of economic development (Liu et al., 2017). Even more importantly, on August 10, 2019, the State Council issued *An Outline of Establishing A World Sports Power*, which explicitly re-emphasized the determination to forge the sport industry as a pillar industry (State Council, 2019).

In light of the fact that the number of Chinese football fans is equal to the entire population of the USA (Yu et al., 2019), Chinese professional football has been identified as a fruitful area for the application of a service-oriented growth policy. On March 16, 2015, *The Overall Plan for Chinese Football Reform and Development* (hereinafter, the 'Overall Plan') was released (State Council, 2015). For the first time in Chinese sport history, football development was dramatically advanced to the status of a national strategy backed by the central government (Peng, Skinner, & Houlihan, 2019). Tan et al. (2016, p. 1456) even referred to football as the 'bellwether of the Chinese sport industry'. Therefore, it could be concluded that the commercialized professional football pathway has been further reinforced by the reconstruction process of the Chinese overall economy, accentuating the divergence of the two models of Chinese elite sport governance. Moreover, it should be highlighted that the traditional model of elite sport governance in China remains stable and co-exists with the emerging governance model of Chinese professional football (Hu, 2019; Hu & Henry, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018).

Hence, the research program underlying the three studies covered in this PhD project aims to better understand the shift in the Chinese elite sport policy by analyzing the described distinct sport governance models. The *guiding questions of this research program* are:

(1) whether the politically-led reforms of Chinese elite sport development induce an increase in the effectiveness and efficiency of national sport governance; and (2) whether the two divergent directions of sport governance models are viable for the future of Chinese elite sport.

This design of the research program is highly topical and consistent with the latest trends in Chinese elite sport governance, as well as with current related research. Specifically, Zheng et al. (2019a, p. 52) asserted that, after the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, China's underlying philosophy evolved from 'maximizing (gold) medal success at the home Olympics in 2008' to 'enhancing the quality and value of Olympic gold medals', indicating

that the ‘strongholds of Western nations’ represented by football have been identified as a new source of Olympic success. Junior and Rodrigues (2019, p. 64) noted that after reaching a peak on their home soil and challenging the USA’s dominant position in the Summer Olympics, the PRC began a new undertaking designed to challenge *Eurocentrism* in the world of football.

The main contents of this PhD project are summarized in Figure 1. In particular, Study 1 lends primacy to the basic structure and logic of Chinese elite sport and sport policy. Echoing the argument of De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, and Van Bottenburg (2015), a national sport system is a collection of interdependent people, interests, and organizations. Moreover, the more coordinated the relationships are, the more integrated and efficient the elite sport system becomes. Although international researchers have already provided ample explanations and offered in-depth insights into the institutions and the drivers behind Chinese Olympic elite sport policy (Hu & Henry, 2017; Tan & Green, 2008; Theodoraki, 2004; Zheng & Chen, 2016), there has been a paucity of research in the Chinese context that has examined the *national-provincial coordination* issue in such a large country. To address this gap, the first research problem and aim of Study 1 are to analyze the institutional relationships between the GAS and the Provincial Sport Bureaus (PSBs) within Chinese elite sport policy.

In addition, the *National Games of China* (NGC) are relatively unknown outside mainland China. They attract roughly the same number of participants as the Olympic Summer Games and are regarded as the highest platform on which provincial elite sport teams compete with each other (Xu & Chen, 2010). This unique sporting event possesses a history of more than half a century and enjoys a considerable following inside mainland China (Li & Fan, 2015). However, neither the international media nor academia takes substantial notice of this unique event. Moreover, the NGC have been discussed in national academic debates, and some researchers have suggested that the success of Chinese elite sport relies heavily on this sporting event to coordinate the related governing bodies (Bao & Li, 2014; Xu & Chen, 2010). Inspired by the national academic debates, the second research problem and aim of Study 1 is to assess how the NGC contribute to the coordination of the public sport governing bodies.

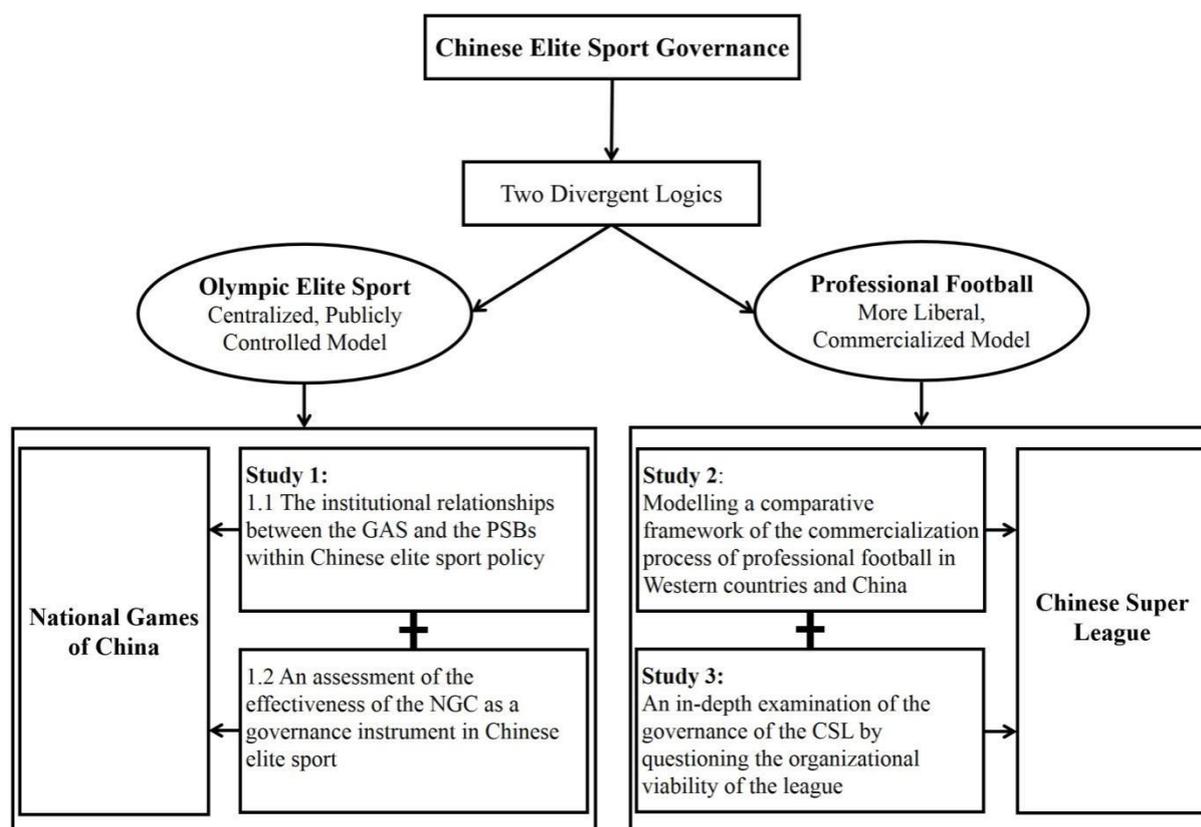


Figure 1. The main contents of the PhD research project.

Study 2 and Study 3 relate to the *Chinese Football Association Super League* (CSL), which is the top-tiered professional football division in mainland China. One clear point of departure for the analysis is the process by which professional football is being commercialized in China. Inspired by the authoritative book chapter by Gerrard (2004) in which the commercialization process of team sports in Western countries is illustrated, Study 2 pursues the aim of reconstructing the institutional characteristics of the commercialization of professional football in China with a view toward establishing a comparative model of the commercialization processes of professional football in Western countries and China. Hence, Study 2 raises the research question of whether there is a distinct ‘Chinese way’ of commercializing football or whether the Western approach has been copied.

As a result, Study 2 clearly reveals the unparalleled Chinese way of commercialization, which follows a *politically-led logic*. One implication of Study 2 is that while advocates praise the commercialization of Chinese professional football as a panacea for resolving all the issues faced during its development, Chinese professional football continues to succumb to governmental control. A more detailed analysis of the governance of Chinese professional football is therefore needed.

Moreover, following the institutional approach of Kurscheidt and Deitersen-Wieber (2011), it has to be stated that a *policy mix* of economic and sport policy adheres to the trend of the Western approach to modern sport governance. However, this approach revolves around the intensified marketization of professional football (and other professional sports), requiring greater autonomy of professional football organizations and less governmental control or intervention. This takes full advantage of the private funding and permits the market to play a predominant role in determining resource allocations. It follows from Study 2 that the governance structure of the CSL must be subjected to careful scrutiny in an attempt to determine the structural barriers that lie ahead in the commercialization process. Hence, the research question and aim of Study 3 is to examine the governance of the CSL by questioning the organizational viability of the league.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The standard paradigm in organizational analysis has expanded to include *new institutional theories* in both economics and management (e.g., Furubotn & Richter, 2005; Milgrom & Roberts, 1992) and in the social and political sciences (e.g., March & Olsen, 2011; Scharpf, 1997). Although sport organization and sport governance researchers have begun to follow this paradigm only recently, it has become increasingly popular for institutional analyses. In addition, Kurscheidt, Klein and Deitersen-Wieber (2003) argued that sport is an inherently interdisciplinary topic that should be approached using a socioeconomic research design. However, a *socioeconomic approach* has primarily been used in studies of the German gym market (Klein & Deitersen-Wieber, 2003), the football World Cup 2006 in Germany (Kurscheidt, 2006) and German sport governance (Kurscheidt & Deitersen-Wieber, 2011). Thus, expanding this approach to the analysis of Chinese sport is original and promising.

Therefore, the socioeconomic approach was employed in an *institutional efficiency analysis* of the Chinese elite sport governance system with a focus on the role of the NGC as a governance instrument. According to the analysis model of Kurscheidt and Deitersen-Wieber (2011), a social system-based institutional analysis coherently precedes an efficiency analysis. Specifically, *social systems theory* could be used in a macro-analysis of the societal embeddedness of Chinese sport organizations. For the efficiency analysis, since the Chinese sport subsystem can be understood as a complex network of principal-agent relationships at the national level, provincial level governmental agencies and so forth, the *agency theory* was employed to assess the effectiveness of the NGC as a governance instrument in Chinese elite sport in Study 1.

The first assumption of agency theory featuring asymmetric information favors the agent, i.e., the agent is always better informed than the principal. Moreover, the assumption of bounded rationality is employed because it is assumed that no individual is omniscient (e.g., Furubotn & Richter, 2005). Based on the usual economic assumption that agents pursue their self-interest, two major types of agency problems prevalent: *adverse selection* (pre-contractual) and *moral hazard* (post-contractual) (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989). The consequences of these problems are called *agency costs*, and they include bonding, monitoring, signalling and residual costs (e.g., Furubotn & Richter, 2005; Shapiro, 2005).

Study 2 could be considered an extension of the authoritative book chapter of Gerrard (2004), in which a framework for understanding the development of team sports as a commodity in Western countries is critically outlined. The following three stages are identified: *regulated professionalism*, *deregulated professionalism* and *commercialism*. With regard to the commercialization process of Chinese professional football, the related constructs and concepts are derived from the academic output of the leading international Chinese football researchers, for instance, Fan and Lu (2013) and Liang (2014, 2017).

For Study 3, the institutional analysis of the CSL mainly follows the *integrative change model* of Cunningham (2002), which incorporates institutional theory, population ecology, strategic choice and resource dependence theory. The underlying rationale for employing this integrative model of organizational change is to provide a more *Gestalt*-oriented perspective on the overall change. This integrative model of organizational change starts with the deinstitutionalization process that is triggered by political, functional and social pressures (Cunningham, 2002, 2009). At this stage, moderating factors, namely, entropy and inertia, can accelerate or inhibit the organizational change process (Cunningham, 2009; see also Legg, Snelgrove, & Wood, 2016).

Once the process goes forward, two types of value commitments occur. If some organizational members cannot overcome the various pitfalls of the former template, and others favor an alternative one, a competitive commitment surfaces (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). In contrast, if all members are disenchanted with the present organizational template, and they pursue a new alternative, the strongest type of reformative commitment exists (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Legg et al., 2016). In the end, four late-stage moderating factors, including the capacity for action, resource dependence, power dependence and the availability of an alternative, are identified by Cunningham (2002, 2009).

1.3 Methodology

Given the diversity of topics and research objects involved, there is no defined methodology for governance analyses. In this work, a static type of analysis or the so-called *institutional analysis* is used to examine the governance structures of Chinese elite sports and the CSL. The related empirical analysis should follow the normative paradigms of the theoretical framework (in particular, Kurscheidt & Deitersen-Wieber, 2011). Since the NGC and the CSL are at the center of the analysis, the previously mentioned studies would qualify as *case studies*. It should be noted, however, that, while the empirical insights are inductive, there is a prominent *deductive component* in the case study approach (see, e.g., Skinner, Edwards, & Corbett, 2014) since the research is not purely exploratory. The research follows well-defined theoretical approaches in an effort to reconstruct and explain governance structures and processes.

According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006, p. 9), case studies as qualitative research feature intense analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time. Most important, however, is how materials are gathered and which materials are used to inform the intended case. Basically, there are two *methods of data collection*, namely documents and interviews (Bowen, 2009; Li, Pitts, & Quarterman, 2008). For the abovementioned three studies, documents play a significant role in data collection. Of course, interviews, particularly semi-structured interviews as outlined by Corbetta (2003, p. 270), are a well-established qualitative method of data collection ‘in which the various topics are dealt with, and the wording of the questions are left to the interviewer’s discretion’. The GAS, the *Chinese Football Association* (CFA) officials and the club investors are identified as potential interviewees whose knowledge and opinions could offer insights into the research questions. However, despite unremitting efforts, semi-structured interviews with these stakeholders are difficult to conduct due to political and business restrictions on freedom of speech, and interviews often lack depth and honesty. As Tan and Bairner (2010, p. 587) noted:

Several of the GAS and CFA officials told him that they regarded him a friend and would tell him more about what he wanted to know if he switched off his recorder. They also reminded him that it is almost impossible for Chinese sport officials to give their real opinions by putting a digital recorder in front of them.

Nevertheless, in other studies, some retired insiders who have worked in the Chinese elite sport system for decades have been included on interviewee lists. Compared to

incumbent high-ranking officials, the retired insiders were thought to have a greater willingness to share information without sensitivity concerns (Zheng et al., 2019a). This point notwithstanding, the documents used in the studies provide substantial information that compensates for the lack of insight obtained through potential interviews that could be questionable regarding depth and honesty. It is also noteworthy that some data were collected from ‘*indirect*’ interviews reported in mainstream media sources and from a number of other articles.

The studies were primarily dependent on *document analysis*, with a focus on Chinese scholarly articles published in Mandarin. The underlying rationales for focusing on Mandarin academic output were that: (1) the NGC and the CSL have been substantially discussed in national academic debates; and (2) the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* (CNKI; <http://oversee.cnki.net>) could be considered a reliable platform for systematic literature research in well-established Chinese academic journals. It is important to stress that the aim of this methodical approach is to employ the data provided in the Mandarin articles rather than to review the national academic output. Thus, the articles are treated in the very sense of document analysis as sources of qualitative data collection. The main reason for this procedure is that national academic articles generally do not meet rigorous international standards. However, these articles can be understood as high-quality documents compared, for instance, to governmental or media reports since only articles of leading peer-reviewed national journals were covered by the document analysis. Thus, the ample observations, facts and figures that were analyzed from a theoretical perspective, developed for the studies, were derived from national academic articles that meet the highest domestic Chinese quality standards.

Apart from the academic Mandarin articles, complementary document analysis was based on information derived from policy documents, website statements from public authorities and mainstream media sources. Media sources in particular added value by enhancing the topicality of the data sources and covering public or publicized opinion (Bryman, 2008).

All document data were analyzed using a *thematic analysis* approach (Patton, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The identification and coding of themes and sub-themes were conducted deductively according to the given categories and defined constructs of the theoretical framework (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The thematic analysis followed Berger’s (2015) *process of reflexivity*, which uses a circular sequence of reading, extracting, challenging and rewriting among the authors. The co-author acted as a ‘critical friend’,

sharing his own understanding and providing alternative arguments (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In addition, relevant international peer-reviewed journal articles were identified through the usual electronic search strategies within *Social Science Citation Index* (SSCI) journals and through other search engines (notably, <https://www.tandfonline.com> which also covers numerous respected non-SSCI journals related to the disciplinary fields of this research, such as sport policy, sport management, and sport sociology). The *snowballing* technique was also used in the search process. Supplementary data, particularly data obtained through *website research*, were gathered in Study 3 to provide the latest data pertaining to the CSL.

1.4 Results

1.4.1 Study 1: *The National Games of China as a governance instrument in Chinese elite sport: An institutional and agency analysis*

Study 1 focusses on the basic structure and logic of Chinese elite sport and sport policy. In most cases, the emphasis of previous research pertaining to the Chinese elite sport system has been limited to *vertical coordination* between the GAS and PSBs (Hu & Henry, 2017; Tan & Houlihan, 2012; Zheng et al., 2018). It is argued that GAS assumes the responsibility for the development and implementation of Chinese elite sport policy. As the main actor, GAS regulates the behavior of the PSBs and provides operational guidance (Hu & Henry, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018, 2019b).

Study 1 attaches more importance to the *horizontal agency relationships* between the PSBs and the *Provincial Governments* (PGs), a factor that has been largely overlooked. Since PGs are the main funders of PSBs and their elite sport teams, PSBs are accountable to their corresponding PGs rather than to the GAS (Zheng et al., 2019b). Hence, it could be concluded that the PSBs are the vital agents within the governance structure of Chinese elite sport and, indeed, that they act in the interest of *two principals*, namely, the GAS (vertical coordination) and the PGs (horizontal coordination).

In vertical coordination, the actual goal of the GAS is closely connected to the Olympic strategy of winning glory for the nation (Hu & Henry, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018). The PSBs are expected to supply young elite talent that helps the GAS to achieve its targeted goal, while the PSBs pursue self-interest in obtaining (gold) medals at the NGC (Bao & Li, 2014; Xu & Chen, 2010), resulting in the formation and implementation of the NGC strategy.

The horizontal coordination draws upon *bureaucracy theory*, and it is assumed that PSB officials are incentivized by pay, power and prestige rather than social welfare (e.g., Mueller, 2003). The number of (gold) medals obtained at the NGC by the respective

provincial elite sport teams is the only criterion for promotions or increases in salaries (Bao & Li, 2014; Xu & Chen, 2010). From the perspective of the PGs, the (gold) medal count at the NGC is perceived as a symbolic expression of their productivity to relevant stakeholders. To motivate PSB officials, who are their agents, the PGs, as principals, want to reward behavior that contributes to good sporting performance at the NGC and to punish behavior that contributes to poor results.

In summary, the unique NGC are positioned and employed as a governance instrument in Chinese elite sport because the (gold) medal count is the prime indicator for most actors (GAS, PSBs and PGs). However, given the *double principal-agent relationship* of the PSBs with the PGs, the GAS creates governance structures that are vulnerable to inefficiencies and misincentives.

The complicated interaction among these agencies has resulted in adverse selection of the provincial elite sport teams that compete on the highest domestic platform of the NGC, the displacement of resources for mass sport, and moral hazard behavior of sport officials. Nevertheless, the NGC was not found to be responsible for these negative consequences. However, the NGC should return to its initial idea of positioning a place for presenting young athletes and the national sporting culture, bringing people together through the language of sport. The fundamental and overall insight of Study 1 is that Chinese elite sport policy is encouraged to reform and to innovate its *monitoring system* on the basis of multidimensional criteria.

1.4.2 Study 2: Doing it the Chinese way: The politically-led commercialization of professional football in China

Following the three stages (regulated professionalism, deregulated professionalism, and commercialism) identified by Gerrard (2004), the commercialization process of team sports in Western countries has been delineated in Study 2. Since the late 1970s, the emergence of media-driven logic in Western countries has propelled profit-making to the foreground of football (Andrews, 2004; Gerrard, 2004). The commercialization process of Chinese professional football, in contrast, adheres to a logic resulting from an *exogenous policy shift*, not an endogenous change in market structures. It could be argued that the politically-led logic guided the transition from government-owned work unions to the ‘*restricted capitalism*’ found by Amara et al. (2005, p. 203).

To further compare the aforementioned media-driven logic with politically-led logic, the following characteristics are analyzed: policy mix (according to the concept of Kurscheidt

& Deitersen-Wieber, 2011), official versus actual goal setting, club identification, resources and power dependency, attitudes toward fan clubs, club culture and deviant activities. As mentioned, within the Chinese setting, the *socialist* economic subsystem is mixed with the highly government-interventional sport subsystem. However, in Western countries, the policy mix is interpreted as the interaction of the *free-market* economic subsystem with a self-governing sport subsystem (Kurscheidt & Deitersen-Wieber, 2011). For actual goal setting, the CFA gives primacy to the success of the national team, whereas utility maximization is perceived as the first objective in media-driven logic.

According to Crawford (2004) and Morrow (2003), the main theme of Western professional football club development could be understood as the interplay between its economic and social aspects. In contrast, under the great pressure of fulfilling the assigned political task, the development of Chinese professional football clubs can be considered, to some extent, to be based on economic and political aspects. Moreover, Western professional football club development adheres to a media-driven logic and strives to increase revenue from various sources, including the media groups, investors and supporters. However, in China, development has largely occurred thanks to soft loans with the backing of private (corporate) actors as the dominating source of funds.

Unsurprisingly, because Chinese public governing bodies are sensitive to non-governmental organizations, football authorities adopt a more sensitive attitude toward fan clubs than Western countries. In terms of club culture, Chinese professional football clubs are based on geography, unlike Western professional football clubs, which are based on community. Finally, deviant activities (match-fixing, gambling, and manipulation by organized crime) associated with professional football emerged globally during the football commercialization process, but in Chinese football development to a comparatively high extent.

1.4.3 Study 3: Governance of the Chinese Super League: A struggle between governmental control and market orientation

Study 3 presents an in-depth analysis of the governance structure of the CSL, mainly assisted by the theoretical models of Cunningham (2002) and Kurscheidt and Deitersen-Wieber (2011). The current governance model of the CSL was found to still fit its former classification as '*restricted capitalism*' proposed by Amara et al. (2005, p. 203) pertaining to the forerunner League A, i.e., that power and authority in league governance still reside centrally in a governmental agency. Consistent with Fan and Lu's (2013) conclusion,

organizational reform has not touched the most fundamental aspects of the Chinese sport system. The CSL is still beset with governance problems resulting from divergence in goal setting, organizational inefficiencies and compliance issues.

Nevertheless, in terms of the club's governance level, Evergrande FC violated norms in pursuing the creation of new values. Specifically, in contrast to other long-standing state-owned or collectively owned clubs, Evergrande FC is purely a privately owned professional club. This innovation has been recognized as a way to facilitate the spread of an element of *capitalism* among Chinese professional football clubs. In subsequent years, many professional clubs were purchased by wealthy private (corporate) actors, as in Suning Group's takeover of Jiangsu FC.

Drawing support from the integrative change model of Cunningham (2002), Study 3 revealed the following: (1) the moderating factors of entropy and inertia offset one another; (2) organizational change is constrained by the existence of competitive value commitments and a shortage of reformative commitment; (3) there is a lack of unanimously approved new templates, leading to an incapacity for action; and (4) only the *State Council* and/or the club owners have the potential to revive the reform process. However, the State Council currently does not exert any pressure on the GAS and CFA officials to facilitate the organizational change in the CSL. For the club owners, it is difficult to unite because of their divergent interests. Thus, as emphasized in the subtitle of Study 1, the current governance of the CSL reflects a continued and unstable 'struggle between governmental control and market orientation' because the change process to a new organizational template is stuck halfway.

1.5 Discussion and conclusion

Chinese elite sport governance has been a long-standing, elusive research topic, with both international and domestic scholars and practitioners being ambiguous in their understanding of its tenets and logics. Moreover, it has repeatedly and for a long time been a topic of debate that has not led to any accepted consensus. Given this lack of clarity in the academic literature on the theoretical and institutional foundations of Chinese elite sport governance, it is a fundamental contribution of this PhD research project to have demonstrated that Chinese elite sport governance is increasingly following two divergent paths: one involving the *traditional model of sport governance* in China and the other modelled after *commercialized professional sport*, with elite football being the leading spectator sport. In other words, the traditional bureaucratic and government-led approach, a relic of the planned economy, exists on the one hand, whereas increasing market orientation has surfaced on the other. With this

key insight in mind and scrutinizing the national academic debate over Chinese elite sport governance, this PhD research moreover makes an original empirical contribution by conducting three case studies: (1) the NGC research focuses on the basic structure and logic of Chinese elite sport and sport policy while first introducing the NGC into the international journal literature beyond historical reviews; (2) the research on the commercialization process of Chinese professional football not only provides a comparison between Western countries and China, but also develops a generalized model of commercialization processes that may serve as a reference for further theoretical research on the blurry concept of commercialization; and (3) the CSL research is the first international study in which the governance of the league is analyzed in greater institutional detail, based on a sound socioeconomic framework.

In addition, the PhD research showed that, in the context of the Chinese elite sport system, it is imperative to analyze the institutional relationships between the national and provincial sport organizations for at least two reasons. First, beneath the unified façade that is projected to the global public, there is a Gordian knot pertaining to the *multiple-agency, triangular relationships* of the PSBs with the PGs, the GAS and the other PSBs—a crucial institutional problem of Chinese elite sport governance that has not been detected in previous literature. Second, the PRC is far from being alone in confronting national–provincial tensions. For instance, in Canada, the relationship between provinces and the federal government might be even more challenging (Houlihan & Green, 2007). Hence, the NGC study may serve as a point of reference for a better theoretical understanding of such complex agency relationships in national sport governance structures beyond the case of the Chinese sport system.

Regarding the adverse selection of the provincial elite sport teams that compete on the highest domestic platform of the NGC, the National Aquatics Management Center first proposed the establishment of a ‘*Big National Team*’ to strengthen the interaction between national teams and provincial teams (Zheng et al., 2019a, p. 89). The ‘Big National Team’ would shoulder the responsibility for coaching and supporting elite athlete from every province irrespective of an athlete’s age. From the standpoint of the PSBs, this proposal is welcome because they consistently bear responsibility for nurturing and training provincial elite athlete and rewarding athletes with large sums of money when they win (gold) medals (Houlihan & Green, 2007). For most of the elite athletes who do not win medals, PSBs are the sole governmental agency that pays their wages and pensions. PSBs are therefore under

great financial pressure. The establishment of the 'Big National Team' would substantially relieve the financial burden on PSBs, especially when athletes are in training.

Although this PhD research focused on elite sports, a further important implication relates to the development of mass sport participation. Thus, it was evidenced how amateur sports suffered a long time from negligence in Chinese sport policy resulting in lacking resources and promotion. However, the latest edition of the NGC, which was held in Tianjin under the slogan of a '*Healthy China*', may be seen as a turning point which has sparked further thoughts on the asymmetrical development of Olympic elite sport and mass sport and, even more broadly, on the 'China puzzle' of falling happiness among the population in a rising economy (Brockmann, Delhey, Welzel, & Yuan, 2009). In the setting of economic prosperity, a lack of physical activity and several health-related issues have yet to be resolved (Zheng et al., 2019a). Particularly important is the attitude of the central government toward these problems. In 1949, Mao Zedong, then president of the PRC, acted as a policy advocate and critically commented that 'the country is being drained of strength; the people's health is declining with each passing day' (Xu, 2008, p. 1). At the time, mass sport represented the overriding priority within the Chinese government. However, since 1979, when China re-entered the Olympic movement, mass sport was often sacrificed for Olympic elite sport despite the policy rhetoric of a balance between mass and elite sport (Zheng et al., 2018); in other words, mass sport was a secondary concern (Fan et al., 2005; Zheng et al., 2019a). From the standpoint of the GAS, winning glory for the nation, following the principle of 'Juguo Tizhi', became the order of the day, and anything else was considered a distraction from the main goal.

Not only against this background of mass sports, but also regarding Chinese elite sport governance, the outlook on sport development in China is divided. Many emerging risks and challenges confront Chinese elite sport, including the surprising decline in performance at the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympic Games and the intense competition that lies ahead at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics that were postponed to 2021 due to the Corona crisis. There are also high expectations for the Chinese winter sport performances at the Beijing and Zhangjiakou 2022 Winter Olympics (Zheng et al., 2019a), while, still, the attitude of GAS toward mass sport remains comparatively reluctant. In short, on the one hand, China's success in Olympic elite sport fueled the new 'global sporting arms race' (De Bosscher et al., 2015). On the other hand, Chinese elite sport competes with other countries to stay competitive in the 'global sporting arms race', adding impetus to the imbalance between Olympic elite sport and mass sport already under way. Moreover, Chinese elite sport

governance must confront the negative influences exerted by the one-child policy and the lack of educational opportunities for elite athletes.

With regard to football development in China, Study 2 and Study 3 revealed that there currently is a distinct '*Chinese way*' of *commercialization* that follows a politically-led model. Moreover, Chinese football authorities favor typical European models of professional football governance with Chinese features, i.e., more central control. These conclusions trigger additional thoughts on the underlying rationale for the existence of a *policy-practice split*. The 'Promotion Guidelines' were enacted and delivered by the State Council; this policy stipulated that the institutional independence of league clubs needs to be guaranteed and that the position of the CFA needs to be adjusted from a micro level to a macro level (Zheng et al., 2019a). However, in the presence of a deeply entrenched, top-down political culture and an authoritarian political system, the 'Promotion Guidelines' have not been implemented. Long-standing governmental control seems to continue to act as an impediment to the commercialization of Chinese professional football.

It is remarkable though and unusual in contemporary China that this governance failure is publicly disclosed at the highest level of policy-making. Notably, on October 31, 2016, Gou Zhongwen, former deputy mayor of Beijing and a senior engineer in the information industry, was promoted to the directorship of the GAS (Sina News, 2016). On March 8, 2019, five years after the implementation of the 'Promotion Guidelines', Gou delivered a withering evaluation of Chinese football development at the *Great Hall of the People* in Beijing and admitted that Chinese football is still plagued by a lack of organizational change in its governing bodies and that the 'Promotion Guidelines' had not been implemented as planned (Sina News, 2019).

Given the political power dependency of professional football in China, this raises even more the question why the clearly expressed political will is not executed. The above-discussed theoretical insight that the Chinese elite sport system is fraught with multiple agency problems rather explains inefficiencies in the national sport governance, but not necessarily a blockade of the football reforms. In addition, the governmentally controlled CFA officials as public sport administrators can be assumed to be incentivized by pay, power, and prestige according to bureaucracy theory (Mueller, 2003). Again, this is more an argument for possible inefficiencies and bureaucratic failure. However, if the policy formulation and governance signals from the central government as the highest principle in the public agency relationship are ambiguous, then, the CFA administrators lack a strong

incentive for taking action. Thus, the consistency of the politics and policy of football reforms in China warrants further reflections.

From such a policy perspective, in total, 50 points are explicitly listed within the ‘Overall Plan’ (Liu et al., 2019). These points include the following highlights: (1) the removal of the CFA from the jurisdiction of the GAS; (2) a guarantee of the institutional independence of league clubs and adjustment of the position of the CFA from a micro level to a macro level organization; (3) the forging of a national football team that will win glory for the nation; and (4) a requirement that professional league clubs support and actively cooperate with the promotion of the national football team (State Council, 2015).

The first two points listed above are obviously consistent with the ‘Promotion Guidelines’. However, it could be argued that points three and four unintentionally reinforce the existing lack of success in the organizational change of the governing bodies. From the standpoint of football officials, promoting the under-performing national football team has evolved into a political task, particularly owing to the emphasis on ‘winning glory for the nation’. Moreover, this political task has been propelled further by President Xi Jinping’s three personal wishes directly relevant to Chinese football, namely participating in the World Cup, hosting the World Cup and winning the World Cup (Delgado & Villar, 2020; Tan et al., 2016). The question then becomes how to effectively and efficiently achieve this political task. As the top-tier league for supplying and reserving football talent, the CSL is undoubtedly the most valuable vehicle for performing this political task.

In addition to the ‘Overall Plan’, the political task of promoting football development had already been demonstrated by the latest ‘Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan: 2011-2020’, which was published by the GAS on May 17, 2011 (GAS, 2011). Within the outline, the main task of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics includes the mission to significantly enhance the overall performance of team sports. Therefore, this set of policies, including the latest Olympic glory plan and the ‘Overall Plan’ specific to Chinese football development, is deemed the foundation upon which the governing bodies GAS and CFA could tighten their control over the CSL to achieve their political tasks, showing that the implementation of the ‘Promotion Guidelines’ is not a pipe dream. Yet, the points (1) and (2) of the ‘Overall Plan’, i.e., basically, granting the CFA and CSL more autonomy, would undermine the political and administrative control over the CSL. Incentivized by bureaucratic goal-setting, the CFA officials are hence reluctant to pull out of GAS’s jurisdiction and leave more freedom for action to the CSL clubs as stipulated by the mentioned points (1) and (2). Interestingly, the CFA searches for alternative institutional solutions faced with this

uncertainty in the interpretation of the political will expressed by the football policy plans. In addition, it has to be noted that official and actual goal-settings often fall apart in Chinese policy-making as Study 3 revealed for the governance structure of the CSL.

The alternative strategy of the CFA appears to be establishing a ‘friendship relationship’ between the CFA and the dominating CSL club, Evergrande FC, an observation already briefly mentioned in Study 3. More accurately, this type of relationship could be interpreted as a *‘business alliance’* (Hunt, Lambe, & Wittmann, 2002). Such an alliance can be defined as collaborative efforts between two or more firms that pool their resources in an effort to achieve mutually compatible goals that neither could achieve alone (Byun, Leopkey, & Ellis, 2019). In this context, as a kind of specification of the general bureaucratic incentives of pay, power, and prestige, Delgado and Villar (2020) uncovered three fundamental motifs relevant to the CFA: *reputation, pride, and image*. That is, these motifs include that the CFA endeavours to instrumentalize the CSL as a mirror to reflect the wider flourishing society; sources of national pride being in great demand; and an image of a winning national football team needing to be forged.

In practice, these three central motifs have been largely accomplished with the strong support of Evergrande FC. First, the spending on football talent without consideration of the cost led by Evergrande FC has elevated the CSL to the status of a serious competitor on the worldwide players’ market. For instance, at the 2018-2019 winter transfer, Evergrande FC expended the most money, followed by Chelsea from the *English Premier League* and AC Milan from Italian *Serie A* (Chinadaily Sports, 2019a). To some extent, purchasing power in acquiring high-profile football players provides an index for the economic aspect of the envisioned globally powerful society. Second, on November 9, 2013, Evergrande FC honoured the first Chinese professional football club in 23 years to be crowned champions of the *Asian Football Confederation Champions League* (Chinadaily Africa, 2013). On November 21, 2015, Evergrande FC won its second Asian title within three years on behalf of China (Chinadaily English, 2015). The honour won by Evergrande FC, particularly its victories over its South Korean and Japanese counterparts, evoked great national pride. Unsurprisingly, due to these excellent athletic performances, Evergrande FC has outshone the under-performing national football team. Finally, regarding the image of a winning national football team, Evergrande FC has ‘handed over’ an increasing amount of football talent to the national football team, including *Elkeson*, the first nationalized player who is not of Chinese heritage (Chinadaily Sports, 2019b).

Overall, the three guiding goals for the CFA have been largely achieved with the strong support of Evergrande FC. From the standpoint of the CFA, it would be highly beneficial to continue the ‘business alliance’ model in the future. Regarding the interests of Evergrande FC, *resource dependence theory* is insightful to understand their position. According to which, organizations as an open system rely on other organizations within their environment and are not self-sufficient in terms of critical resources (Byun et al., 2019; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In the Chinese context, in line with Tan et al. (2016), the main resources are firmly controlled by the state. Private actors, such as corporations, are required to establish a good relationship with the government if they are to gain access to resources. Hence, from the standpoint of Evergrande FC, it is necessary to establish a good relationship with governmental agencies, including the CFA. Thus, Marcello Lippi, the prominent previous coach of Evergrande FC, was recruited by the CFA to shoulder the responsibility of managing the Chinese male national football team. However, it was reported that three-quarters of his salary was paid by Evergrande FC (Xinhuanet Sport, 2016). Meanwhile, Xu Jiayin, the president of the parent company of Evergrande FC, has become the world’s wealthiest real estate tycoon (Chinadaily Business, 2019). This is a further indication that the vehicle of the football club and the ‘business alliance’ with the CFA is paying off for the Evergrande group.

Hence, in a striking contrast to the conflicts between the CFA and professional football clubs that occurred during the commercialized phase of *Football League A* (1994–2003) (Amara et al., 2005), the new decade of the successor league CSL witnessed the establishment of the discussed ‘business alliance’ between the CFA and Evergrande FC. However, this close relationship to the benefit of both parties does not facilitate organizational changes in the CSL. In contrast, it obviously is a barrier to reforms that could have the potential to result in less governmental control of the CSL.

Finally, it has to be noted that the three studies in the scope of this PhD research concentrated on the governance structures in Chinese elite sport and professional football. Thus the insights and evidence of this research program are limited to the policy and supply side of elite sport development in China. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that two further studies are related to the PhD project and will focus on *fan surveys*, i.e., analyzing the demand side of the CSL. The data collection was conducted as part of the PhD research; however, the results could not yet be published within the planned timeline. These studies are works in progress under the titles: ‘Supporter attitudes toward league governance in emerging football markets: Evidence from fans of the CSL’ (currently under revision) and ‘Attendance

determinants of active soccer fans of the CSL: A survey study' (to be submitted for publication in due course). Thus, follow-up research has already started to overcome the limitations of the three studies presented in this PhD manuscript. Namely, the demand side of Chinese sports and football fans need to be empirically studied. The mentioned survey is a first attempt in this future direction of research.

But still, the policy and supply side warrants further attention of academics. Among other fruitful areas of research, future studies may build upon the multiple agency relationships that were detected and analyzed in this PhD research. Numerous questions arise with regard to solving these agency problems. In the conclusion of Study 1, a couple of research directions were already suggested that may help to develop governance instruments to balance the interests of the involved agents. Following the above discussion on professional football, moreover, research is needed on effective strategies to revive the organizational change process of professional football in China. Generally, sport development in China and the Chinese elite sport system remain a relevant and dynamic area for diverse research interests in the disciplinary fields of sport policy, sport governance, and sport management alike.

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2 Articles on the three studies

2.1 Study 1: *The National Games of China as a governance instrument in Chinese elite sport: An institutional and agency analysis*

Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2019). The National Games of China as a governance instrument in Chinese elite sport: An institutional and agency analysis. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 11(4), 679–699.

DOI: 10.1080/19406940.2019.1633383

2.2 Study 2: *Doing it the Chinese way: The politically-led commercialization of professional football in China*

Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2020). Doing it the Chinese way: The politically-led commercialization of professional football in China. *Journal of Global Sport Management*.

DOI: 10.1080/24704067.2020.1753332

2.3 Study 3: Governance of the Chinese Super League: A struggle between governmental control and market orientation

Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2019). Governance of the Chinese Super League: A struggle between governmental control and market orientation. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 9(1), 4–25.

DOI: 10.1180/SBM-11-2017-0070

3 Publications and academic biography

3.1 List of publications

Peer-reviewed journal publications

- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2020). Doing it the Chinese way: The politically-led commercialization of professional football in China. *Journal of Global Sport Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2020.1753332>
- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2019). The National Games of China as a governance instrument in Chinese elite sport: An institutional and agency analysis. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 11(4), 679–699.
- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2019). Governance of the Chinese Super League: A struggle between governmental control and market orientation. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 9(1), 4–25.
- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2019). Research on Chinese Super League governance reform based on the organization change theory [in Mandarin]. *Journal of Physical Education*, 26(6), 57–62.
- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2018). German football governance and its inspirations [in Mandarin]. *Journal of Physical Education*, 25(1), 61–67.
- Ma, Y. (2017). Several issues on Sino-German football school cooperation [in Mandarin]. *Sport Science Research*, 38(4), 93–97.

Notes:

Journal of Physical Education is the only sport-specific, peer-reviewed academic journal governed by the Ministry of Education of the PRC. *Sport Science Research* is the only official journal governed by the Shanghai Sports Bureau, PRC, and also peer-reviewed.

Chapter in handbook

- Ma, Y., & Zheng, J. (forthcoming). Commercialization of sport in China. In H. Fan, & Z. Lu (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport in Asia*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Work in progress

- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2020). Football is not a good thing: A critical analysis of the Chinese Communist Party's willingness to revitalise Chinese football. *Asian Journal of Sport History & Culture* (under the first-round review).
- Ma, Y., Brandt, C., & Kurscheidt, M. (2020). Supporter attitudes toward league governance in emerging football markets: Evidence from fans of the Chinese Super League. *Sport in Society* (under revision for resubmission to the second-round review).
- Kurscheidt, M., & Ma, Y. (2020). Attendance determinants of active soccer fans of the Chinese Super League: A survey study. *Sport Management Review* (in progress for paper submission).
- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2020). A preliminary study on German team sport governance [in Mandarin]. *Journal of Physical Education* (under the third-round review).
- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2020). Retrospective examination on German professional football [in Mandarin]. *Journal of Physical Education* (under the first-round review).
- Ma, Y., & Kurscheidt, M. (2020). German football referee governance and its inspirations [in Mandarin]. *Journal of Physical Education* (under the third-round review).

Conferences

- Kurscheidt, M., & Ma, Y. (2018, September). *Attendance of active football fans in China: Evidence of a survey study*. Paper presented at the 26th European Association for Sport Management (EASM) Conference, Malmö, Sweden.
- Kurscheidt, M., & Ma, Y. (2017, November). *Attendance determinants of active soccer fans of the Chinese Super League: A survey study*. Paper presented at XVII International Association of Sport Economists (IASE) Conference, Shanghai, China.

3.2 Academic CV

Yang Ma (ORCID: 0000-0002-2304-1206) is an associate professor in sport governance at the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, People's Republic of China. His research interests reside in sport governance in China in general and Chinese football governance in particular.

Academic Background

11.2013-12.2019 Doctoral Candidate, Department of Sport Governance and Event Management, University of Bayreuth, Bavaria, Germany

09.2012-03.2013 Exchange Master Student, Department of Sport Governance and Event Management, University of Bayreuth, Bavaria, Germany

09.2010-06.2013 M.Ed. in Sport Sociology and Humanities, Shanghai University of Sport, Shanghai, PRC

09.2006-06.2010 B.A. in English, Huangshan University, Anhui Province, PRC

Professional Experience

Since 12.2019 Associate Professor in Sport Governance, School of Sports Science and Physical Education, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Chengdu, PRC

03.2019-12.2019 Lecturer in Sport Governance, School of Sports Science and Physical Education, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Chengdu, PRC