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DOI:

[10.1016/j.smr.2018.10.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2018.10.002)

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*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Zheng, J, Lau, WC, Chen, S, Dickson, G, Bosscher, VD & Peng, Q 2018, 'Interorganisational conflict between national and provincial sport organisations within China's elite sport system: perspectives from national organisations', *Sport Management Review*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 667-681. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2018.10.002>

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*Interorganisational Conflict between National and Provincial Sport Organisations within China's Elite Sport System* Paper is accepted for publication at *Sport Management Review*

## **Interorganisational Conflict between National and Provincial Sport Organisations within China's Elite Sport System: Perspectives from National Organisations**

Jinming Zheng\*, Patrick Wing Chung Lau, Shushu Chen, Geoff Dickson, Veerle De Bosshcher, and Qi Peng

### **Abstract**

This article examines interorganisational conflict between provincial and national sport organisations in China. The study is underpinned by the literature on interorganisational relationships particularly on interorganisational conflict. The three case studies are artistic gymnastics, swimming, and cycling. The primary data was generated via eleven semi-structured interviews with staff from the relevant national-level sport organisations. Secondary data was sourced from official publications, websites, and influential domestic media. The key finding is that, whilst famed for its top-down bureaucratic system, there is considerable interorganisational conflict within the Chinese sport system. The extent and characteristics of the national-provincial conflict vary between sports. But there is also some consistency regarding the causes of the conflict and the measures adopted to mitigate the tension. Interorganisational conflict provides a useful heuristic for articulating and understanding the interorganisational relationships within the Chinese elite sport system and hence advance elite sport management research.

**Keywords:** conflict, elite sport, interorganisational relationships, Olympic Games, power

### **Highlights**

- Whilst famed for its top-down bureaucratic system, there is considerable

interorganisational conflict within the Chinese sport system.

- The extent and characteristics of the national-provincial conflict vary between sports, but there is also some consistency regarding the causes of the conflict and the measures adopted to mitigate the tension.
- Interorganisational conflict provides a useful heuristic for articulating and understanding the interorganisational relationships within the Chinese elite sport system.

## **Interorganisational Conflict between National and Provincial Sport Organisations within China's Elite Sport System: Perspectives from National Organisations**

### **1. Introduction**

Burgeoning government interest in elite sport is one of the dominant characteristics of contemporary sport development. As Houlihan (2011, p. 367) argued, elite sport success is for many nations an “irresistible priority”. Against this backdrop, many researchers (e.g., Bernard & Busse, 2004; De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek & Van Bottenburg, 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Rathke & Woitek, 2008) have examined the contributions of how elite sport policies are governed. No matter the country, no single organisation has total control of the national sport system and there are often multiple organisations involved in sport policy delivery. A national sport system is an aggregation of interdependent people, interests and organisations. The more coordinated the relationships, the more “integrated” and “efficient” becomes the elite sport system (De Bosscher et al., 2015, p. 360) and this is manifested in the performance of its athletes. Both “horizontal co-ordination at the national level” (De Bosscher et al., 2015, p. 139) and “vertical co-ordination between the national policy level and regions” (De Bosscher et al., 2015,

p. 142) are critical success factors of national elite sport policies. A lack of national-regional coordination may result in inconsistent and ineffective delivery of elite sport policy. For example, Australia's relatively poor medal performance at the 2008 Summer Olympics was at least partially attributed to inadequate vertical coordination (Independent Sport Panel of Australian Government, 2009, p. 60). Vertical co-ordination is also an issue for other nations (e.g., France, Canada and Japan) (De Bosscher et al., 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Yamamoto, 2008). This vertical co-ordination, in many nations, includes the interorganisational relation and interaction between different levels of government organisations.

There is a dearth of empirical research specifically focusing on the interorganisational dynamics within a nation's elite sport system affecting a nation's elite sport success. This gap may limit the understanding of the policy factors affecting elite sport development and success in the elite sport management literature. This study investigates interorganisational conflict between national sport organisations and their provincial counterparts. Specifically, the study is contextualised within the national-provincial organisations for three sports/disciplines (i.e., artistic gymnastics, swimming and cycling) in China, a major yet largely distinctive elite sport nation. Beneath the "simplified" (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 318) veneer of China's national elite sport organisational structure, there are many provincial sport organisations. Provincial sports organisations play a crucial role in contributing to China's elite sport achievements (GAS, 2008), but there is limited research exploring how the national and provincial sports organisations interact and the impact of this national-provincial interorganisational relationship (IOR) on China's elite sport development.

The research questions were developed according to existing literature, most notably Lumineau, Eckerd and Handley (2015). Lumineau et al. (2015) comprehensively summarised

existing literature on interorganisational conflict and structured the literature into several specific aspects including specific features and forms, antecedents, management and moderating factors, and consequences of interorganisational conflict. The four research questions of this paper are:

- 1) Is there any evidence of conflict between national and provincial sports organisations and if any, what are the characteristics of this national-provincial conflict?
- 2) What are the contributory factors to the cooperation or conflict between the national and provincial sports organisations?
- 3) What are the initiatives taken to reduce the conflict, if conflict is evident?
- 4) How does national-provincial relationship impact the nation's elite sport performance?

## **2. Research Context: The Elite Sport System in China**

China's success at the Summer Olympic Games is fundamentally underpinned by *Juguo Tizhi* (translated as "whole country support for elite sport system") (Hong, 2008; Liang, Bao, & Zhang, 2006; Tan & Green, 2008; Yang, 2012). A dominant characteristic of *Juguo Tizhi* is its system, illustrated by a stratified pyramid with three levels (see Figure 1): (child) extra-curricular sports schools at the first level, sports schools at both city and provincial levels at the second level, and specialised provincial and national teams at the third level. Within this pyramid, provincial-level teams are described by the General Administration of Sport (GAS) (2008, p. 151) as the "backbone and core".

[Figure 1 near here]

In China's one-party political system, the Communist government's influence is pervasive. A relic of the planned economy, elite sport in China is a highly politicised policy area dominated by the government, most notably GAS, which is directly accountable to the State Council, and national sports management centres (Hong, 2008; Liang et al., 2006). National Sports

Associations are effectively governed, and often shadowed by their respective national management centres (Zheng, 2015). Although in theory, provincial-level organisations should seek to serve the interests of their national superiors, provincial organisations are accountable to their provincial governments rather than GAS or any of the national management centres. The provincial governments, not the national government, are the main funders of provincial sport organisations and teams. Despite an ostensibly hierarchical relationship between these two levels, the relationship is officially defined as “mentoring” or “supervisory” (Zheng, 2015, p. 153). This structure is likely to enable flexibility and autonomy for the provincial sport organisations.

The National Games of China has a critical role in coordinating the national-provincial relationships. As a development event for the Olympic Games (Hong, 2008), the National Games is the most important lever in securing elite sport investment from provincial-level governments (GAS, 2011). Held every four years, the National Games brings together the elite athletes from all of the provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, as well as some special industries (e.g., People’s Liberation Army and coal mining). Since Jiangsu 2005, all Summer and Winter Olympic sports, disciplines and events have been included and the rules synchronised between the National Games and Olympic Games (GAS, 2008; Liang et al., 2006). Athletes that perform well at the National Games are almost certainly selected in the national team.

However, the National Games is not the same as the Olympic Games. Provincial organisations are notorious for prioritising performances at the National Games, even if this compromised the longer-term success of their athletes at the Olympics (CCTV, 2013). To provide an incentive for the provincial organisations to also seek Olympic success, the medals won in the Olympics of the previous year are added to the National Games’ medal tally (CCTV, 2009). These transferred medals are referred to as “policy medals” (Wu – previous Head of the

Elite Sport Department of GAS, 2013, quoted in CCTV, 2013). Since 2005, an Olympic medal was made the equivalent to two medals at the National Games (GAS, 2008). In addition, each world record performance at the Olympic Games contributes an additional gold medal to the athletes' provincial teams at the National Games. All these elements seek to reconcile the interests of the national and provincial sports organisations.

### **3. Background Literature**

#### ***3.1 Interorganisational Conflict***

Interorganisational conflict is a common phenomenon within an IOR. An IOR, according to Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos (2011, p. 1108), refer to “a broad array of collaborative exchanges, including strategic alliances, joint ventures, buyer-supplier agreements, licensing, co-branding, franchising, cross-sector partnerships, networks, trade associations, and consortia”. IORs possess various contradictions (Das & Teng, 2000), which inevitably result in interorganisational conflict (Lumineau et al., 2015). Interorganisational conflict has received considerable academic attention (Bradford, Stringfellow & Weitz, 2004; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal & Evans, 2006). Conflicts are an inherent characteristic of IORs (Frazier, 1999). As Deutsch (1973) defined, “a conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur.” It is “the process which begins when one party perceives that another has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his” (Thomas, 1992, p. 265).

Interorganisational conflict can have both functional and dysfunctional implications for organisational performance (Lumineau et al. 2015). Unaddressed or poorly managed conflict is likely to prompt disruptive and dysfunctional consequences (Coser, 1956). For this research, the functional-dysfunctional criterion is whether or not the conflict contributes to China's (medal) performance on the international stage, particularly the Olympic Games.

### *3.1.1 Antecedents of Interorganisational Conflict*

According to Das and Teng (2000), IORs often possess behavioural contradictions (i.e., cooperation vs. competition), temporal contradictions (i.e., short term vs. long term), and structural contradictions (i.e., rigidity vs. flexibility), which lead to interorganisational conflict.

#### *3.1.1.1 Behavioural contradictions*

Cooperation is the pursuit of mutual benefits, collective interests and common goals. Competition refers to organisations' pursuit of their own interest and often opportunistic behaviour at the sacrifice of common benefits and their partners. The symbiosis of cooperation and competition is prevalent in organisations, including sports organisations. For example, within sports leagues, teams compete with each other on the field, but also “pool their resources to be more efficient” (Fulconis, Nollet & Paché, 2018, p. 12).

#### *3.1.1.2 Temporal dimensions*

The conflict between short-term and long-term is a perennial issue for the IORs (Joskow, 1987). Each organisation may attach its own schedule on the IORs (Kogut, 1991). A short-term orientation may result in the prioritisation of immediate results, while long-term orientations necessitate patience and commitment and target long-term outcomes which often require long-term investment and consistency. The tension between the Chinese Football Association (CFA) and the Chinese Super League (CSL) clubs is underpinned by the CFA's long-term goal of developing a world-class national men's team. But the CSL clubs' focus is on immediate or short-term success, which encourages them to import foreign players that are not eligible to represent China (Connell, 2018).

#### *3.1.1.3 Structural contradictions*



Rigidity and flexibility reflect “the degree of connectedness of members with each other in an ongoing relationship” (Das & Teng, 2000, p. 86). For example, the Chinese table tennis and badminton teams utilise a centralised model, which requires national-level athletes to be based in the national team. In comparison, boxing, wrestling and fencing utilise a decentralised model, whereby national-level athletes spend considerable time embedded within provincial-level teams (Yang, 2012). It is argued that excessive flexibility is detrimental because this can erode the ability to exercise strong control and lead to a “weak authority structure” (Das & Teng, 2012, p. 286). This highlights the contributions of rigidity to power structures and power asymmetry. According to Parkhe (1993) and Williamson (1983), rigidity fosters a high degree of commitment, enhances interest alignment amongst organisations involved, and creates a disincentive for opportunistic behaviour.

It is important to note that behavioural, temporal and structural contradictions are not discrete. For example, the temporal contradictions can moderate the relationship between the other two contradictions. Moreover, structural rigidity increases cooperation rather than competition if organisations have a short-term orientation in an IOR. In contrast, a high level of rigidity is likely to prompt intensified competition in the presence of a long-term orientation.

#### *3.1.1.4 Other causes for conflict*

These three contradictions create the potential for inconsistencies in priorities, orientations, pursuits, behaviour and structure amongst organisations. These inconsistencies can cause interorganisational conflict. In addition, trust, organisational interdependency, self-interest, (lack of) reciprocity and power also underpin interorganisational conflict (Babiak, 2007; Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Sotiriadou, Brouwers, De Bosscher & Cuskelly, 2017; Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009). Habib’s (1987) summary provided a wide range of additional “culprits” for

interorganisational conflict, including role deviance, allocation of resources and “fights over scarce resources” (Habib, 1984, p. 38), goal divergence, inefficient and ineffective communication, and a desire for autonomy.

### *3.1.2 Factors to Alleviate the Conflict*

Initiatives to manage and alleviate the conflict (refer Research Question 3) are closely associated with antecedents of interorganisational conflict (refer Research Question 2). For example, efforts to overcome goal divergence, role deviance and inefficient and ineffective communication encourage goal alignment, role clarity and enhanced communication. Hogwood and Gunn’s (1984) suggestion that those in authority should demand and obtain perfect compliance provided answers to address the issue of a lack of power asymmetry raised by Babiak (2007). Moreover, Sotiriadou et al. (2017) corroborated Oliver’s (1990) view that reciprocity plays a vital role in forming interorganisational relationship and hence reducing conflict. Last, Lumineau et al. (2015) noted that repair actions including compromise and switching partners are useful for alleviating interorganisational conflict. In summary, the key mechanisms to alleviate interorganisational conflict: (1) power asymmetry and a clear authority structure; (2) communication including mutual assistance; (3) reciprocity; (4) goal agreement; (5) clear role division; and (6) compromise including switching partners (Babiak, 2007; Coser, 1956; Das & Teng, 2000; Habib, 1984, 1987; Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; Lumineau et al., 2015; Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Oliver, 1990; Sotiriadou et al., 2017).

### *3.2 IORs and Interorganisational Conflict in Elite Sport Literature*

There are studies exploring the IORs within elite sport, but the existing literature emphasises non-government organisations, at the expense of relationships between central/national government and provincial/regional/territorial level (e.g., Lucidarme, Babiak & Willem, 2017).

In addition, this literature focuses more on IORs (e.g., Newland & Kellett, 2012; Sotiriadou et al, 2017; Thibault & Harvey, 1997), rarely and only very briefly mentioning interorganisational conflict (Girginov, 2016; Yamamoto, 2008). For example, one of the nine Pillars of the critical success factors in the Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) model (De Bosscher et al., 2015) is concerned with horizontal and vertical co-ordination (largely overlapping the interorganisational relation between different levels of organisations) of elite sport policies. Although the authors discussed and evaluated this phenomenon in several nations, they provided limited detail on the specific characteristics, driving forces and effects, and policies and measures concerning coordination and its link to conflict.

This research aims to fill these gaps by investigating conflict between the national and provincial sports organisations in China; the factors underpinning the national-provincial conflict; the initiatives undertaken to reduce the conflict; and the impact of the national-provincial relationship on the nation's elite sport performance. This is also instrumental in advancing elite sport management and policy research by providing in-depth insights into vertical IORs, a largely neglected factor of elite sport success.

## **4. Research Methods**

### ***4.1 Research Paradigm and Research Design***

A “critical realist” (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 2) research paradigm was applied whereby the main knowledge of this research (i.e., policy factors influencing elite sport success and the role of IOR/interorganisational conflict) is assumed to exist but to be only “imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms and the fundamentally intractable nature of phenomena” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Social phenomena are complex and not always well suited to quantification. Therefore, critical realism complements an interpretative

epistemology and qualitative research strategy which relies on “non-numerical analysis to provide understanding” (Gratton & Jones, 2010, p. 32).

A comparative case-study (Carmel, 1999) approach examines three sports/disciplines – artistic gymnastics, swimming, and cycling. These three cases were “chosen deliberately on the basis of specific significant attributes” consistent with Denscombe (2007, p. 39), namely their relevance and importance at the Summer Olympic Games (i.e., having 34, 14, and 18 events respectively at Rio 2016) and data accessibility from documents, website sources, and interviews. This resonates with the issues of “convenience and feasibility” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 41) in case selection. Furthermore, these three sports/disciplines are representative of the three-tiered sport categorisation in China: artistic gymnastics, a “fortress” (Hong, Wu & Xiong, 2005, p. 512) and one of China’s most successful sport disciplines; swimming, a “potential advantage” (Yang, 2012) sport discipline with prominent policy salience but fluctuating success in international competitions; and cycling, a non-traditional “lagging” (Yang, 2012) sport in China. Therefore, these three sports/disciplines are “typical/representative” (Stake, 1995, p. 4), or “exemplifying” (Bryman, 2016, p. 62) cases with significant comparability.

Contextual uniqueness is an innate characteristic of social phenomena and qualitative studies, and therefore, instead of pursuing absolute transferability or generalisability of qualitative findings, “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 3), or the thoroughness and in-depth information of a culture and context is highly advocated by social science researchers most notably Bryman (2016) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) for research predicated on a critical realist position. This also explains why case studies are often used in qualitative research, which facilitate the provision of rich detail and thick description to form a database for other researchers and practitioners to consider. However, it is worth noting that the contextual

uniqueness does not minimise the similarities and transferability from one context to another. Therefore the careful and systematic selection of cases that are more likely to provide lessons and experiences for other contexts is highly valued, although complete transferability is almost unachievable for social phenomena.

Thus, the aim of this research was not to pursue an all-powerful formula explaining interorganisational conflict between national and provincial sport organisations. Instead, this research provides detailed description of the interorganisational conflict between national and provincial sport organisations in China, a powerful sport nation where elite sport has long been centralised by government. This provides the opportunity for researchers and practitioners to critically assess the transferability and absorb the lessons based on their contexts. Moreover, the three cases studied in the context of China can provide other nations with specific and comparative insight on the management of this conflict in different types of sports/disciplines with varying levels of policy status and of success.

#### ***4.2 Data Collection***

The data collection relied upon documents and semi-structured interviews. Documents accessed included print and online publications issued by GAS, the National Gymnastics Management Centre (NGMC), the National Aquatics Management Centre (NAMC), the National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre (NCFMC), the Chinese Gymnastics Association (CGA), the Chinese Swimming Association (CSA), and the Chinese Cycling Association (CCA). Contextual information was also sourced from academic publications including books and journal articles by eminent Chinese sports scholars. The vast majority of these documents were written in Chinese and were translated by the researchers to English. Back translation was conducted by two English-language-major postgraduate students to ensure the quality of translation before they

were subject to formal coding and analysis. These data were complemented by data from influential domestic media most notably China Central Television (CCTV) and China Daily, ifeng, People’s Daily and Xinhua News Agency. These mass-media outputs have particular value in enhancing the “representativeness” (Bryman, 2016, p. 555) of a data source. This data was identified through a combination of key words (in Chinese): “provincial-level teams”, “national–provincial rapport/tension/harmony/dissonance”, “National Games of China”, and “GAS” and the names of the three relevant sports/disciplines.

Additionally, eleven semi-structured interviews were carried out with senior stakeholders of China’s elite sport system. Participants were recruited via a two-step sampling strategy. First, “judgemental sampling” (Blaikie, 2010, p. 178) was applied to identify the potential interviewees for each sport/discipline to ensure that prospective interviewees were capable of providing substantial first-hand and in-depth information. These included senior officials (including director/vice director, team leader, and head and non-head senior coaches) for the corresponding sports governing bodies and national teams of three sports/disciplines; senior insiders in GAS at the general level; and policy experts/think tank. Next, a “snowball sampling” (Goodman, 1961) approach was incorporated where more people were invited to participate in the research on the basis of interviewee recommendations. This combined sampling strategy resulted in a total of eleven semi-structured interviews (see Table 1): three “insiders” working at the general level (one sport policy scholar and think tank of GAS and two former GAS department directors), and eight case-specific interviewees conducted with officials and senior coaches working inside the sport management centre and national team of the three sports/disciplines.

[Table 1 near here]

The interview schedule closely followed the original research questions, which were premised on those used in previous studies on interorganisational conflict (e.g., Lumineau et al., 2015).

Exemplar questions included:

**Characteristics of the interorganisational conflict.** “How would you describe the relationships between the national team and the provincial-level teams?” “Can you provide examples?”;

“How do provincial-level teams contribute to the success of the national team?”

**Contributory factors to the cooperation or interorganisational conflict.** “What are the factors behind this ‘harmony’ or /conflict?”;

“How is the National Games of China changing national–provincial relations within your own sport?”

**Initiatives to alleviate the interorganisational conflict.** “What has been done to improve the relationships between the national and provincial levels?”

**Impact of the interorganisational conflict.** “How has national-provincial conflict impacted the performance of the national team’s performance on the international stage?”.

A translated Chinese version of the ethical checklist was provided to all participants. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and were recorded digitally with interviewees’ consent. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. Interviewees were given a copy of interview transcripts for verification and correction. Back translation was also conducted to ensure linguistic consistency. All interview transcripts were translated and 301 pages were generated.

It is noteworthy that the focus of this research was on the national-level perspectives because (1) there are a very large number of provincial-level regions in China and hence it was difficult and largely infeasible to collect thorough provincial-level insight across a range of

provinces and to achieve equal data size amongst provinces; (2) it was easier to expand the interview network at the national level because of the researchers' connections and central level interviewees' higher degree of willingness to cooperate; and (3) both printed and internet documents at the national level tended to be more systematic and easily retrieved compared to their provincial-level counterparts. An additional reason is that a focus on the national level is more consistent with this research's objective of interrogating the impact of the national-provincial relationship on the national teams' elite sport performance (refer Research Question 4).

### ***4.3 Data Analysis***

Data triangulation techniques were employed (Denzin, 1970). Cross-checking was conducted between documents and interview transcripts. Document information had been mainly gathered prior to the interviews (for contextual information), with certain supplementary document information sourced after certain interviews. No contradictions between documents and semi-structured interview data were evident.

There tended to be more document information available concerning artistic gymnastics and swimming, which received relatively more considerable government and media attention. In swimming, media information, which had been gathered prior to the interview, provided some commentary on national-provincial conflict whilst hinting at some underlying causes and possible remedies. These were later verified by the interview process.

There were also cases where document data were sourced after particular interview(s) to bolster and reify respective interview data. The most notable example was *The First Outline of the Teaching of Artistic Gymnastics* in 1987, which was mentioned by one interviewee, but the interviewee failed to recall much detail. However, inspired by the interview, more substantial supporting information was found in the gymnastics-specific historic summary book published



by GAS. Document information further justified this event's role as an additional example to corroborate the themes of effective coordination and clear role division within the code of contributory factors to limited interorganisational conflict in Chinese artistic gymnastics.

In comparison, there was a lack of document information directly related to the national-provincial relationship in the case of cycling. Therefore, insight regarding the nature, trajectory and factors contributing to the (changed) IOR was mainly generated via interviews. But document sources still provided certain additional information bolstering interview data. For example, media sources noted the National Team coaches' direct recruitment of grass-root-level young talent from other sports and later development and achievements of these talented cyclists, which was subsequently confirmed by NCFMC interviewees.

Both document and interview data were subject to thematic analysis (Patton, 2002). Data were mainly coded physically by the first author with the assistance of four postgraduate students. Responding to Ryan and Bernard's (2003) suggestion of the importance of the elements of research questions and theoretical framework/underpinning in establishing themes, the theme identification process of this research was largely premised on the four dimensions of the interorganisational conflict, namely the characteristics of, contributory factors to the interorganisational conflict, initiatives taken to alleviate the conflict and consequences and impact of the conflict. Responses for each individual question were grouped together, and similar and different elements, as suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), were examined in relation to national-provincial relation/conflict. "Within-case" (for each sport/discipline) and "across-case" (Ayres, Kavanaugh & Knafl, 2003, p. 871) (between three sports/disciplines) comparisons were also conducted. Data were then reread and positioned within "compatible" themes. Hand-written colour-coded diagrams and time lines with diagrammatic indications were used to identify

emergent trends and findings within each theme (Dickson, Arnold & Chalip, 2005). These themes and sub-themes were reviewed by two co-authors of this paper.

#### ***4.4 Trustworthiness***

The researchers relied upon a number of techniques to maximise trustworthiness of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Transcriptions were compared to the audio recordings and reviewed for any inconsistencies in an individual's responses. Trustworthiness of interpretations was enhanced by using participants' quotations to support the interpretation. Results are expressed tentatively in recognition that predictions or generalisation are not a natural consequence of qualitative research (Stiles, 1993). Transferability is difficult to claim because, as Bryman (2016, p. 383) stressed, "it is impossible to 'freeze' a social setting and the circumstances of an initial study to make it replicable". Nevertheless, the in-depth information extracted from the three comparative case studies can form a rich database for other researchers and elite sport practitioners in other national and sports contexts to assess and critically refer to.

### **5. Findings: Interorganisational Conflict in Three Sports/Disciplines in China**

#### ***5.1 Artistic Gymnastics: Limited Evidence of Interorganisational Conflict***

##### ***5.1.1 Limited Interorganisational Conflict***

Artistic gymnastics represents a salient example of the smooth and cooperative national–provincial relationship characterising a prioritised and very successful sport discipline in China (Interviewee C; Interviewee B). There was very limited evidence of conflict between the NGMC and the National Artistic Gymnastics Team, and their provincial-level counterparts. A senior artistic gymnastics official stated:

The NGMC and the National Artistic Gymnastics Team have almost absolute control over provincial-level teams regarding the implementation of the *Olympic Glory Plan* and

of *Olympic Strategy*. The role of provincial-level teams is to serve the national team's goal of being successful at the Olympic Games and at the World Championships. There is almost no conflict between the national team and the provincial-level teams (Interviewee B).

### *5.1.2 Contributory Factors to the Limited Interorganisational Conflict*

The relative lack of national-provincial conflict described is predicated on the NGMC and the National Artistic Gymnastics Team's dominant positions and powers relative to provincial-level teams. This dominance and power over provincial-level teams is a consequence of the Communist China's emphasis on elite artistic gymnastics since the early 1950s (Chen, Lu, & Li, 1990, Lu was the first captain of the Chinese National Men's Artistic Gymnastics Team in the 1950s). The national team's control over top gymnasts in China is also illustrated by reference to top elite gymnasts' overwhelming reliance on the national team for training. Unlike in some other sports, gymnasts of the team, when not undertaking international and domestic competitions, spend almost all of their time training intensively in the National Base of GAS in Beijing even when preparing to represent their corresponding provincial-level teams at the National Games of China (Interviewee E). This is an illustration of the minimal-dependency relationship whereby the training of top elite gymnasts is not reliant on provincial-level teams. Combined, these all echo the condition that national artistic gymnastics governing bodies can "demand and obtain perfect compliance" (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). From Das and Teng's (2000) perspective, there is a high degree of bureaucratic rigidity between the national artistic gymnastics governing bodies and their provincial-level counterparts.

The "policy medal" scheme at the National Games provides provincial teams with substantial reciprocity for the national team's capability of winning a considerable number of

Olympic (gold) medals, and hence enables the agreement on and pursuit of a common goal, namely China's success at the Olympics. This goal alignment is further promoted by effective coordination and clear division of role involved in the implementation process, reflected by two illustrative examples: (a) the issue and implementation of *The First Outline of the Teaching of Artistic Gymnastics* in 1987; and (b) China's prompt nationwide mastery of the new rules for artistic gymnastics issued at the beginning of each new Olympiad prior to the Rio Olympiad (Zheng, Tan & Bairner, 2017). The *Outline* was promoted to all provincial-level teams and grassroots-level extra-curricular sports schools and sports schools, in 1988 and 1989, through nationwide top-down study and learning activities organised by central authorities and involving coaches of the national team as well as provincial-level coaches and coaches in (extra-curricular) sports schools. The impact has been that artistic gymnastics' routines and moves, coaching philosophies and training methods have been standardised and unified from the very basic level, consistent with the requirements of the national team. The *Outline* "provided the blueprint for the training methods for elite artistic gymnasts in China the impact of which is profound for current elite gymnasts and coaches in China" (Interviewee H). The roles of each level of organisations including those of the national governing bodies and provincial-level organisations regarding who decided, who led, who cooperated in implementation and who promoted to the lower level were clear and sequential (Chen, Lu, & Li, 1990).

Considered as the "heart and soul" (current head of the NGMC – Luo, 2009, p. 254) of the national team, the nationwide top-down rule learning and mastery process is mature, effective, and step-by-step. As a senior coach of the national team introduced:

First, the FIG new rule was translated and introduced by senior staff including those Chinese members and judges working in the FIG who are involved in the compilation of

the new rule. Then leading national coaches congregate to comprehend and share their views on the rules. After a certain degree of consensus amongst leading national team coaches is reached regarding the understanding of rules, NGMC organises rule learning courses and all national-level judges and coaches are required to attend the course and pass the compulsory examinations. Then there are courses and examinations similar to those used at the national level for provincial-level coaches, often delivered through various learning activities organised by both the national team and various provincial-level teams ... There is efficient top-down dissemination from the national level to the provincial level and effective communication between these two levels (Interviewee H).

In addition to the clear and effective role identification and task specification, the effective communication between officials, coaches and judges at different levels, led by the NGMC was also reflected from this quote.

### *5.1.3 Impact of the Limited Interorganisational Conflict on the National Team*

The largely “harmonious” national-provincial relation within artistic gymnastics contributed to the success of the national team. As an ex-senior official of NAMC pointed out:

A “symphonic” national-provincial relationship enables the National Team to make full use of the gymnastics talent and resources nationwide, and hence underpins Chinese National Artistic Gymnastics Team’s glorious journey thus far and particularly our achievement of being the most successful artistic gymnastics nation during the Beijing and London Olympiads (Interviewee E).

Other interviewees agreed that a lack of interorganisational conflict had positive effects. As a senior artistic gymnastics official of NAMC and previous FIG member highlighted, “provincial-level teams’ cooperation and support and the smooth relationship between the national level and

its provincial counterpart has been a critical guarantee for Chinese National Artistic Gymnastics Team's notable achievements on the international stage, particularly in men's team event" (Interviewee B).

## ***5.2 Swimming: From Strong Conflict to An Improved National-Provincial Relation***

### *5.2.1 Evidence of Interorganisational Conflict*

In the past, China's provincial-level teams were more influential than the national team. They were often reluctant to send top swimmers and coaches to the national team, sometimes because of athletes' and coaches' unwillingness to train as part of the national team with its inferior facilities and resources (Shang – the Vice Director of the NAMC, quoted in Bai, 2011, p. 38).

### *5.2.2 Contributory Factors to Conflict and Initiatives to Reduce Interorganisational Conflict*

The improved relationship since the 2000s was predicated on the increased central power and increased control by national authorities over provincial-level swimming organisations and teams, following the *119 Project* which emphasised athletics, swimming, rowing, sailing and canoeing to serve China's gold medal ambition at Beijing 2008 (Interviewee G). The centralisation of the Chinese National Swimming Team was achieved through the replacement, at the end of 2002, of what was previously a loosely federalised national team with a regular national team led by the NAMC (Bai, 2011); through the National Team's concomitant leadership role in managing top elite swimmers' training (the average annual training time for swimmers in the national team is approximately 340 days, Interviewee J); and through national team's stronger control to prevent doping, because provincial-level teams and provincial-level training are the *de facto* hotbed for doping in China and particularly so for swimming (Yuan Weimin, previous Head of GAS, quoted in Yuan, 2009, autobiography). Propelled by the pursuit of short-term success in domestic competitions for provincial-level organisations, a wide range of provincial-level teams relied on

drugs for performance enhancement (Interviewee G), sabotaging the long-term and holistic interests of the National Swimming Team. This is a manifestation of the contradiction issue in an IOR derived from one party's opportunistic behaviour driven by a short-term orientation or psychology. This doping issue was further exacerbated by the lack of rigidity and hence national organisation's limited control over provincial-level organisations in the old system.

The centralisation process effectively eroded the influence of some powerful provinces and eradicated the "separatist warlord" regime dominated by influential provincial-level teams (Bai, 2012). Thus, by establishing the dominance of the national team as the single authority, the rigidity between the national governing bodies and their provincial-level counterparts was strengthened, and accordingly the flexibility, or self-interest of provincial-level swimming teams has been increasingly conditioned by the objectives, activities and control of their national-level superior. The dependency on provincial-level teams in training was also reduced, as a result of the national team's direct and dominant role in training national team swimmers independently of provincial-level teams' influence. As the National Swimming Team Leader stressed:

The implications of the establishment of a regular National Swimming Team were multi-faceted. Since swimmers of the National Team are required to be stationed in the National Team base for almost 340 days a year, the NAMC and the National Team has been able to tighten the control over their behaviour. Provincial-level teams' control over these athletes has been significantly eroded. Top elite swimmers in China have become significantly more "attached" to the National Team (Interviewee G).

However, increased centralisation was not synonymous with an autocratic "dictatorship". On the contrary, the elevated leadership of the NAMC and the National Swimming Team facilitated national team-led communication and coordination rather than hierarchical separation (GAS,

2012a). This is most notably illustrated by the establishment of a “big national team” and by the national-team-led collective training for reserve swimmers of provincial-level teams. Concerning the “big national team”, a senior official of the NAMC summarised as follows:

Within the old system, the national team was an isolated training unit. In comparison, the “big national team” transcends the narrow meaning of the previous national team and extends the scope of the national team. In other words, this is a reintegration of resources, because all of the resources, including people and materials, that are available to and willing to serve the national team across China are included in the scope of the national team. Previously, there was no direct relationship between provincial-level teams and swimmers in the national team after these swimmers were sent to the national team by provincial-level teams. The “big national team” has strengthened the links and interactions between the national team and provincial-level teams. Provincial-level teams are more willing to cooperate with the National Team, and the National Team also considers the long-term benefits of varying provincial-level teams in decision making, making provincial-level teams feel that they are empowered (Interviewee G).

It is therefore evident that the establishment of a “big national team” has facilitated increased mutual trust, communication, and mutual assistance in training, coaching and athlete development. In the collective training, national team coaches guide young coaches and swimmers from provincial-level teams (GAS, 2013). In addition to developing world class swimmers (e.g., Olympic champion Ye Shiwen) and coaches of Olympic champions (e.g., Xu Guoyi and Liu Haitao), collective training has also improved elite swimming in provinces that have not been historically successful (e.g., Henan and Anhui). These provinces were deliberately chosen as collective training venues (Interviewee I). The home team can send two coaches and



eight reserve swimmers to the collective training, as compared with one coach and four reserve swimmers for other provincial-level teams (CSA, 2011). Various provincial-level teams have also benefited from this “big cake” made by the National Team. A reciprocal relationship between the national and provincial swimming organisations is evident.

### *5.2.3 Impact of the (Alleviated) Interorganisational Conflict on the National Team*

Concerning the impact of the improved national-provincial relationship, all the changes contributed to China’s notable (gold) medal increase at the Olympic Games, at the World Championships, and at the Asian Games (GAS, 2014). As an NAMC official and the team leader of the National Swimming Team summarised:

The impact of the national-provincial relation on the national team’s activities and performances has been clearly discernible. I think many would ascribe our very poor performance at Sydney 2000 to the often compromised national team activities and the conflicts by provincial-level teams, in addition to the notorious doping issue which was also, in part, due to provincial-level teams’ strong influence over national team swimmers. However, the improved national-provincial cooperation and the establishment of the Big National Team paved the way for Chinese elite swimmers’ notable success between 2011 and 2015 and unprecedented gold medal achievements at London 2012. This success at the national level further boosted provincial-level teams’ morale to serve the National Team. Moreover, we have established clear advantage *vis-à-vis* Japan at the Asian Games regarding gold medal performances, to which the increasingly smooth national-provincial relation and the national team’s increased ability to mobilise swimming resources nationwide has been a key contributory factor (Interviewee G).

In return, provincial-level teams benefit via the “policy medal” transfer system at the National Games. For example, at the 2013 Liaoning National Games, Zhejiang Province won 35 gold medals and ranked 7th in the gold medal table (vs. 16 gold medals and 11th position in 2009). Swimming contributed 25 gold medals to the delegation in 2013, of which ten were “transferred” from the 2012 London Olympics, because of the four Olympic gold medals won by Sun Yang and Ye Shiwen, and two world record-breaking achievements. This is another illustration of the utility of reciprocity in forming a more cooperative IOR and mitigating the tension.

### ***5.3 Cycling: Significant Conflict with Some Recent Improvements in Priority Events***

#### *5.3.1 Characteristics of Interorganisational Conflict*

Cycling here refers to track cycling. Road cycling is highly professionalised and commercialised, with limited government involvement (Interviewee D). In general, elite cycling provided a notable example of strong national–provincial conflict and of resistance from provincial-level teams to the national team. As a senior insider of the Chinese National Cycling Team explained:

Detrimental competitions between provinces have impaired the interests of the national team. Many provincial cycling teams prioritise their National Games performance over the interests of the national team. There are provinces backing elite cyclists in China, even in the national team. In order to minimise distractions, such as potential injury risks, derived from training in and competing for the national team, provincial-level teams (particularly in the past) often refused to send top cyclists to the national team (Interviewee D).

#### *5.3.2 Factors Contributing to Interorganisational Conflict*

The limited power of the central governing body and of China’s National Cycling Team *vis-à-vis* substantial support in some provincial-level divisions is noteworthy. Provincial-level team

cyclists and coaches can obtain more substantial financial and even political rewards provided by provincial-level governments than by the national team; and they therefore tend to prioritise the National Games, which has led to cyclists' often superior performances at the event compared to more "reserved" performances for the national team (Interviewee D).

Problems with organisational interdependency are illustrated by the national team's heavy dependence on provincial-level teams for athlete management (a regular national team based in Beijing, which was also a recent reform, is only applicable to women's short-distance track events), for training (a dispersed training system for non-key events relies on provincial-level facilities and coaches), and for a combined coaching system which temporarily employs a large number of coaches from provincial-level teams immediately prior to major international sports events (Interviewee F). This flexible national team regime also revealed the lack of rigidity in this national-provincial IOR.

Chinese cycling's sporadic Olympic medal performances provided very limited reciprocity that can be actually transferred to provincial-level teams at the National Games. This failed to effectively propel provincial-level teams' morale to cooperate with the National Cycling Team. Instead, driven by a concern about distractions and injury risks when training in and competing for the national team, many provincial-level teams often refused to send top cyclists to the national team. This again demonstrated a certain degree of flexibility within the national-provincial relation in the case of cycling (structural contradictions). This reluctance was also a manifestation of provincial-level cycling governing bodies' lack of trust in the national team. Conversely, the National Team was also conservative in provincial-level team coaches' competency. As the previous head coach of the National Cycling Team explicitly pointed out:

The vast majority of cycling coaches come from relatively poor rural areas (where education is a scarce resource). They are limited in their horizons, learning abilities, knowledge and comprehension regarding daily communications, task completion and ways of communicating with cyclists, and accurately understanding the intentions and essential merits when learning from French coaches in daily training. More importantly, most national team cycling coaches tend to lack holistic and long-term vision and are thus often parochial by pursuing short-term interests of their own cyclists from the same provincial-level team, at the sacrifice of the interests of the national team (Interviewee D). Hence, there is a lack of mutual trust particularly “competence trust” (Tomlinson & Mryer, 2009) between the national and provincial teams. Moreover, provincial-level cycling coaches’ pursuit of short-term and parochial interests demonstrates the negative impact of a short-term orientation in prompting interorganisational conflict in an elite sport context.

### *5.3.3 Initiatives to Reduce Interorganisational Conflict*

Some measures have nevertheless been taken mitigating the national-provincial conflict in the last decade. GAS’ great ambition at Beijing 2008 (for both traditional and non-traditional sports/disciplines) increased the Chinese National Cycling Team’s financial sufficiency and its centralised power in, albeit not exclusively, the prioritised women’s short-distance track events. The National Team, through National Team-led collective training in Beijing and the recruitment of regular contract-based coaches instead of temporary coaches from provincial-level teams, strengthened the control over top cyclists in women’s short-distance track events, and reduced dependency on provincial-level teams particularly for training and coaching.

In the early 2000s national-team coaches visited grassroots-level sports schools in several provinces to recruit young talent. This was undertaken because provincial-level teams were

reluctant to recommend more “processed” and experienced talent already enlisted by provincial-level teams (Interviewee F). Young athletes, including later Olympic (gold) medallists Gong Jinjie and Guo Shuang, were recruited from other sports most notably athletics, directly entered China’s national team from provincial-level grassroots sports schools at a very young age, skipping the provincial team level, and were later sent to train overseas in Switzerland. This was a demonstration of the merit of shortening the chain and reducing dependency (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). From the perspective of initiatives to reduce interorganisational conflict, this was an illustrative example of switching behaviour and the National Cycling Team’s compromise (Lumineau et al., 2015; Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011). In this case, the National Cycling Team collaborated with provincial-level athletics teams and sports schools for young talent recruitment instead of its direct subordinates of provincial-level cycling teams, because of the latter’s resistance.

#### *5.3.4 Impact of the Interorganisational Conflict on the National Team*

The effects of these proactive measures are clearly discernible. Although the previously strong national-provincial conflict had been largely destructive, the improved relationships paved the way for China’s gold medal breakthrough in Olympic cycling in women’s team sprint at Rio 2016. As a senior coach of the National Team commented: “if there were no conflict between national and provincial cycling authorities and teams, Chinese National Cycling Team’s overall competitiveness should have been stronger and the medal performances at the Olympic Games and UCI World Championships should have been better” (Interviewee F). However, the utility of various steps taken that contributed to the improved national-provincial relationship was also highlighted by NCFMC insiders:

The improved relationship and the centralised approach in women's short-distance track events made substantial contributions to China's gradually improved medal performances in the world. If the previous national-provincial configuration and provincial-level teams' strong influence and resistance to the national superior still existed in these prioritised women's events, the notable medal increase at London 2012 and Chinese female cyclists' ability to win an Olympic gold medal would have been impossible (Interviewee D).

Indeed, in addition to the improved medal performances on the international stage, the number of Chinese cyclists qualified for the Olympic Games and reaching the top eight in men's track events and women's non-short-distance-track events has also increased rapidly.

## **6. Discussion**

Considered collectively, the three case studies make clear that the extent and characteristics of the complex national-provincial conflict vary. Artistic gymnastics in China is characterised by a relatively "harmonious" national-provincial relationship. Conflict between national-provincial relationships in swimming has declined because of enhanced centralisation and reciprocity. This increased "symphony" in swimming is more characterised by a national-led cooperative model. The development of cycling is constrained by national-provincial conflict because of strong resistance from provincial-level teams. Some progress was made in enhancing the cooperation and mitigating the tension after Beijing's successful Olympic bid in 2001. A distinctive feature of cycling compared to artistic gymnastics and swimming is the evidence of switching collaboration partners and the use of compromise. This distinctiveness is possibly related to the relative significance and popularity of cycling in general in China and the power of the national cycling organisation relative to other traditional (e.g., artistic gymnastics) and important (e.g.,

swimming) sports/disciplines in China. Table 2 highlights the similarities and differences between three sports/disciplines in relation to the four aspects of interorganisational conflict.

[Table 2 near here]

Despite the differences, the results illustrate the significance of certain factors in contributing to the interorganisational conflict and suggest some effective initiatives taken to alleviate the conflict: (1) *a powerful single authority at the national level with power to command and the attractiveness to attract the compliance of provincial-level organisations*; (2) *role clarity amongst the organisations of different levels and national organisations' reduced dependency on provincial-level organisations*; (3) *increased mutual assistance and reciprocity to more effectively facilitate the positive outcomes of the interplay between the national and provincial-level sport organisations*; and (4) *the ability to leverage a national competition structure as a platform to facilitate reciprocity*.

There are two issues worthy of clarification. First, despite the substantial impact of the (reduced) national-provincial interorganisational conflict on the national teams' performance, interorganisational relationship is not the sole factor impacting a nation's elite sport success. However, the contribution of a positive national-provincial relationship should not be underrated. An absence of interorganisational conflict can also facilitate the realisation of other policy factors (e.g., doping control).

Second, the utility a powerful national organisations is evident in all three case studies. The efficacy of increased centralised power is not confined to China. The UK's notable Olympic gold medal achievements since Sydney 2000 is associated with the establishment of UK Sport as the national-level leader in elite sport development (Green & Houlihan, 2005). Mentioned earlier, there is also the Australian Government's recommendation that the ASC should be the single

authority governing (elite) sport development at provincial level. The establishment of a powerful central authority is recognised by governments and practiced in an increased number of major Western nations. This research's support for a centralised approach comes with a few caveats. The first is that not every nation or sport will be well suited to a centralised system. Context will always matter. Second there is a risk that if the central organisation "gets it wrong", then policy failure is almost certain. Third, this research does not suggest that centralisation should permeate every stage of elite sport development.

This research has both academic contributions and practical implications for elite sport management and policy development. In academic terms, the findings of this research complement and further advance some existing research on organisational relation in elite sport development. For example, this research echoes many of Sotiriadou et al's (2017) observations of the importance of a common goal, reciprocity and clear role divisions in propelling a more cooperative IORs, and the detrimental effects of the prioritisation of an organisation's self-interest. For De Bosscher et al's (2015) research which advocated the significance of national (vertical) co-ordination and horizontal co-ordination, this research provides detailed reification by analysing a major elite sport nation characterised by a vertical bureaucratic elite sport system. Moreover, this research provides further justification buttressing the Australian Government's recommendation that the ASC should be a single authority governing (elite) sport development at state level with a strong coordination towards provinces/territories, which was also stressed by De Bosscher et al. (2015). This power asymmetry, or centralised power structure, could effectively avoid flexibility and role deviance issues.

Regarding the specific contributory factors to interorganisational conflict and potential strategies that can be adopted to alleviate the conflict, this research highlights the role that



rigidity/flexibility and long-term versus short-term orientation play in contributing to conflict and possible function of compromise, a competition leverage to facilitate reciprocity in alleviating the conflict, beyond aforementioned factors such as reciprocity and goal alignment noted in existing literature. In specific terms, even compromise is used in certain sports in China for the national organisation to alleviate the conflict, which can provide other nations with an additional option. A leverage of a competition of the National Games and various mechanisms used to achieve goal alignment and reciprocity are also an important insight from the Chinese experience, which may inspire other nations.

However, the value of this research transcends the confirmation of existing research. Compared to existing elite sport research, most notably Babiak (2009), Newland and Kellett (2012), Sotiriadou et al. (2017) and Thibault and Harvey (1997), this research is more focused on interorganisational conflict involving government organisations. Therefore, this research provides more nuanced argument about how interorganisational conflict influences the formation and implementation of elite sport policies. This insight provides a theoretical platform for the analysis of interorganisational conflict between sport organisations at all levels. This paper provides detailed insight reifying the characteristics, causes and impact of interorganisational conflict on elite sport performances, and effective measures to reduce the conflict. Considered collectively, these factors advance the understanding of vertical interorganisational coordination. In addition, although Das and Teng's (2000) three-contradiction approach (behavioural-temporal-structural) illuminated many of interorganisational conflict studies, there were also issues in relation to trust, reciprocity, power, organisational dependency, role deviance, communication and goal divergence.

In practical terms, the findings of this research can encourage other nations, particularly those with provincial/territorial elite sport infrastructures (e.g., Russia, France, the UK, Japan and Australia) to consider how relationships between national and regional/provincial organisations impact national elite sport success particularly by scrutinising the four research questions of this study. Consistent with the nature and complexity of social phenomena and the critical realist philosophical position, this study did not seek to provide a universal truth explaining interorganisational conflict between national and provincial sport organisations. However, given the findings from this research, elite sport policy makers of various nations are encouraged to reflect on the following questions: 1) To what extent is the national elite sport system reliant on regional or provincial sport organisations?; 2) To what extent does conflict characterise the national-provincial relationship? 3) To what extent is this conflict functional or dysfunctional in terms of facilitating (gold) medal performances in international competitions, particularly the Olympic Games?; 4) To what extent is nature of the conflict dependent on communication quality, resource scarcity, or the employment characteristics of athletes, coaches and other relevant staff?; and 5) To what extent would creating an all-powerful national authority enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the national high performance network?

## **7. Conclusions**

This research provides rich insights into the interplay and conflict between national and regional/territorial sport organisations with China's elite sport network. This research only includes three sports/disciplines in one nation and therefore care must be taken when extrapolating the findings to other settings. Corresponding to this, future research is encouraged to further explore the IOR/interorganisational conflict in a wider range of nations pertaining to different political regimes, geographical features and economic conditions, and in more

sports/disciplines. Comparative studies involving more national contexts and larger number of sports/disciplines would benefit both the interorganisational and elite sport literature.

A second consideration is predicated on the “vulnerability” of sport to a nation’s fundamental political, economic and cultural contexts. Elite sport is fundamentally embedded into the broader political, economic and social backdrop of a nation. Thus, research on IOR/interorganisational conflict amongst elite sport organisations should always consider not just the sporting context, but also the wider political, economic and social contexts. Moreover, personal conflict and connectedness may also play an important role, in addition to the structural organisational elements on which this research focuses.

Thirdly, while this research centres on the national level at the expense of provincial level perspectives, future research is encouraged to pay more attention to provincial sport organisations through either case studies (for certain provinces and certain sports/disciplines) or comparative studies (if practical and feasible) to provide richer knowledge and further advance this stream of research.

The final suggestion for future research is related to methodological advancement. Despite the contribution of qualitative approaches to elite sport policy research, the incorporation of quantitative measures using a larger sample of participants (e.g., coaches and athletes) is highly recommended.

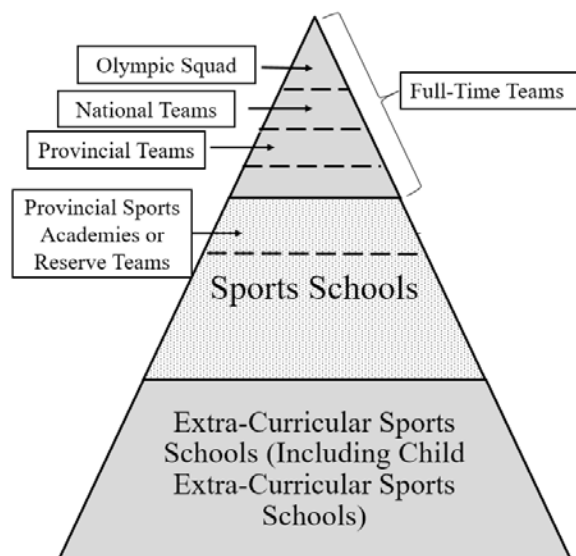


Figure 1. The pyramid of elite sport athlete production and training in China.

Sources: GAS (2008, p. 151); Hong, Wu & Xiong (2005, p. 516); Liang, Bao and Zhang (2006, p. 81).

Table 1. Profiles of the interviewees.

<b>Interviewee number</b>	<b>Organisation(s)</b>	<b>Position(s)</b>
A	Beijing Sport University	Professor of Sport Studies, the Editor of the Chinese Version of Olympic Encyclopaedia, one of the most renowned sports researchers in China
B	Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG)	A former member of Men's Technical Committee of FIG and a senior "insider" of Chinese elite artistic gymnastics (retired)
C	GAS, China Institute of Sport Science (CISS), National Basketball Management Centre and Chinese Basketball Association (CBA)	A previous senior official of GAS and former director of CISS, former director of the National Basketball Management Centre and the vice director of CBA (retired)
D	National Cycling and Fencing	Former head coach of the National Cycling

	Management Centre and National Cycling Team	Team and a current official of the National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre
E	National Gymnastics Management Centre	An official previously working in the National Gymnastics Management Centre (retired)
F	National Cycling Team	A senior coach of the National Cycling Team
G	National Aquatics Management Centre and National Swimming Team	Team leader of the National Swimming Team
H	National Artistic Gymnastics Team	A senior coach of the National Artistic Gymnastics Team who has served the National Team for more than 20 years
I	Beijing Sport University and National Swimming Team	A swimming coach at Beijing Sport University and a coach of the National Swimming Team
J	National Swimming Team	An Olympic gold-medal coach who has served the National Team for more than 15 years
K	China Sports Culture Development Centre of GAS, China Sports Museum and China Olympic Museum	Former Director of China Sports Culture Development Centre of GAS, China Sports Museum and China Olympic Museum (retired)

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Table 2. Characteristics of interorganisational conflict in artistic gymnastics, swimming and cycling in China.

Sport/Disci	Evidence and	Contributory factors to	Initiatives to	Impact of the
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<b>pline</b>	<b>characteristics of national-provincial interorganisational conflict</b>	<b>the (lack of) interorganisational conflict</b>	<b>alleviate the interorganisational conflict</b>	<b>interorganisational conflict on elite sport performance</b>
Artistic gymnastics	Limited interorganisational conflict and high degree of national-provincial cooperation	(1) Power asymmetry: The dominant power of the NGMC and the national team (2) Minimal-dependency in areas such as training (3) High degree of rigidity (4) Goal alignment and reciprocity: The prioritisation of Olympic success (5) Effective coordination and communication (6) Clear role division	Not Applicable	Constructive: Contributing to and guaranteeing Chinese National Artistic Gymnastics Team's leading position on the international stage
Swimming	(1) Previously: Evidence of conflict and provincial-level teams' resistance (2) Reduced national-provincial interorganisational conflict	(1) The relative lack of dominance of the NAMC and the national team over provincial-level teams (2) Provincial-level teams' pursuit of self-interest and short-term orientation, e.g., use of doping (3) Dependency on provincial-level teams for training	(1) The establishment of a regular national team to strengthen the power of the NMAC and the national team (2) Increased rigidity between the national team and elite swimmers pertaining to the national team (3) Communication and cooperation, increased mutual support and reciprocity, and goal alignment	(1) Previous conflict impairing the interests of the national team and being a culprit for the doping incidents and the national teams poor (non-medal) performance at Sydney 2000 and the below-Japan (gold) medal performances at the Asian Games (2) Improved national-provincial rapport contributing to Chinese elite swimmers' recovery since Athens 2004 and notable gold medal achievements between 2011 and 2015

				(3) Provincial-level teams benefiting from the improved performance of the national team, evidenced in some provincial-level teams' notably increased (gold) medal numbers at the National Games
Cycling	(1) High degree of interorganisational conflict particularly previously in non-priority events (2) Certain improvement in alleviating the national-provincial conflict particularly in women's short-distance track events	(1) A lack of goal alignment (2) Provincial-level teams' prioritisation of short-term self-interest (short-term orientation) (3) Relatively limited power of the NCFMC and the national team compared to provincial-level teams (4) Organisational interdependency and a high degree of flexibility (5) A lack of actual reciprocity available to provincial-level teams (6) A lack of mutual trust	(1) Increased power of the national team particularly in women's short-distance track events (2) Reduced training dependency (3) Increased rigidity (4) Switching partners and compromise (5) Increased reciprocity	(1) Previously strong national-provincial conflict being largely destructive and constraining Chinese elite cyclists' performance at the Olympic Games and World Championships (2) Certain improvements in national-provincial relationship paving the way for China's significantly improved medal performances in priority events (3) Increased diversity of provincial-level teams contributing top elite cyclists to the national team

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