Interorganisational conflict between national and provincial sport organisations within China’s elite sport system
Zheng, Jinming; Lau, Patrick Wing Chung; Chen, Shushu; De Bosscher, Veerle; Peng, Qi; Dickson, Geoff

Published in:
Sport Management Review

DOI:

Publication date:
2019

Document Version:
Accepted author manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Interorganisational Conflict between National and Provincial Sport Organisations within China’s Elite Sport System: Perspectives from National Organisations


Reference:

Institutional address: Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Faculty of Physical Education and Physiotherapy
Prof. Dr. Veerle De Bosscher
Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Corresponding author: Veerle.de.bosscher@vub.be
Interorganisational Conflict between National and Provincial Sport Organisations within China’s Elite Sport System: Perspectives from National Organisations

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, policy implementation, power
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 remains 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. The research on the interplay between national sport organisations and regional level (i.e., vertical relation) is extremely sparse. 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 relationships (IORs) with certain vertical features, including possible interorganisational conflict, between national sport organisations and their provincial counterparts. Specifically, the study is contextualised within the national-provincial organisations for three sports/disciplines in a major yet largely distinctive elite sport nation, namely China – artistic gymnastics, swimming, and cycling. 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 IOR on China’s elite sport development. The four research questions investigated in 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?
These research questions were identified according to existing literature, most notably Lumineau, Eckerd and Handley (2015). More specifically, Lumineau et al. (2015) comprehensively summarised existing literature on interorganisational conflict and structured existing literature in this field into several specific aspects including specific features and forms, antecedents, management and moderating factors, and consequences of interorganisational conflict.

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”), the various aspects of which have been investigated by a number of researchers (e.g., 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 play a very crucial role, which is described by the General Administration of Sport (GAS) (2008, p. 151) as the “backbone and core”.

In China’s one-party political system, the Communist government’s influence is pervasive. As 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). The relationship between the Chinese national sport organisations (individual sport management centres and sport associations) and their corresponding provincial organisations is
worthy of careful investigation. Although in theory, provincial-level organisations should seek to
serve the interests of their national superiors, provincial organisations are responsible to their
provincial governments rather than GAS or any of the national management centres. The
provincial governments, rather than the national government, are the main funders of provincial
sport organisations and teams. Despite an ostensibly hierarchical relationship between these two
levels, the official relationship is 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 renowned 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

Commented [QP1]: It might be better to clarify here the definition/realm of ‘national and provincial sport organisations’ this
paper is going to investigate. i.e., is it sport management centres, or sport association we are investigating, or is it both (see added
information as an example). The reason is that, although in the
method section, you mentioned the data was collected from both
national management centres and associations, the results and
discussion were mainly, if not only, focused on the management
centres. it might be easy for Chinese readers to understand, but
probably confusing for foreign readers I suppose. Only a small
suggestion. :)
equivalent to two medals at the National Games (GAS, 2008). In addition, each world record performance at the Olympic Games would contribute 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. IORs, 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 the conflict contributes to China’s (medal) performance on the international stage, particularly at 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.

(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. The coexistence of cooperation and conflicting interests between the English National Football Team and the Football Association (FA) and the FA Premier League, represents a salient example of behavioural contradictions.

(2) Temporal dimensions

The conflict between short-term and long-term is a perennial issue for the IORs (Joskow, 1987). Each organisation in this partnership 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. A notable example from the sport field would be the Chinese Football Association’s (CFA) long-term goal of using the Chinese Super League (CSL) to enhance the competitiveness of the National Men’s Football Team which necessitates the systematic cultivation system of young talent vis-à-vis most CSL clubs’ obsession with the purchase of and reliance on competitive and often internationally renowned foreign and experienced domestic footballers, propelled by these clubs’ pursuit of immediate success.

(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 instance, the national teams of table tennis and badminton in China adopt a centralised national team regime according to which athletes of the national teams are required to be based in the national team. In comparison, some non-key sports such as boxing, wrestling and fencing employ a combined national team structure which relies, to a certain degree, on provincial-level teams for the training of national team athletes (Yang, 2012). It is evident that there is a higher degree of rigidity between the athletes and their respective national teams in centralised sports/disciplines. 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.

(4) Other causes for conflict

These three contradictions create the potential for inconsistencies in priorities, orientations, pursuits, behaviour and structure amongst organisations. These inconsistencies will 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 & Cuskelley, 2017; Stern & Gorman, 1969; Tomlinson & Myer, 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 and strategies to manage and alleviate the conflict (Research Question (3)) are closely associated with and often respond to antecedents of interorganisational conflict elaborated above (Research Question (2)). For example, the identification of goal divergence and the lack of goal agreement, role deviance and inefficient and ineffective communication by Habib (1987) would necessitate efforts made to enhance goal alignment, role clarity and communication quality as antidotes to reduce interorganisational conflict. 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 issues raised by Babiak (2007) respectively. 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 can be considered in managing and alleviating interorganisational conflict.

In summary, researchers have suggested many 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; Stern & Gorman, 1969).

3.2 IORs and Interorganisational Conflict in Elite Sport Literature

There are some studies exploring the IORs in the context of elite sport, but the existing literature on IORs in elite sport development emphasises non-government organisations, at the expense of relationships between central/national government and provincial/region/territorial level (e.g., Lucidarme, Babiak & Willem, 2017). Moreover, the limited number of works in the context of sport either focused on IORs rather than interorganisational conflict (e.g., Newland & Kellett, 2012; Sotiriadou et al, 2017; Thibault & Harvey, 1997) or very briefly mentioned the phenomenon of interorganisational conflict in passing (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 this issue and experience of alleviating this conflict.

This research aims to fill these gaps by investigating the characteristics of the 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 all social realities can be quantified. Therefore, critical realism is often compatible with 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.
The aim of this research is not to pursue an apply-to-all magic formula. Instead, this research provides rich detail on interorganisational conflict between national and provincial sport organisations in a salient sport nation where elite sport has long been centralised by government. Thus, the rich insight from the analysis of the Chinese case would provide a good/bad practice to inspire other nations particularly where vertical coordination between national and territorial sport organisations is also an important factor affecting elite sport policy, with the opportunity to critically assess the transferability and critically absorb the lessons based on the peculiarity and uniqueness of their respective 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 heavily 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. 55) 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.

It is noteworthy that Research Question (4) was mainly explored by interviews, although some printed and website sources, based on the aforementioned key word search, revealed some relevant information in certain sport/discipline. The most notable example was GAS’ website release summarising the measures adopted to improve national-provincial cooperation since the 2000s in elite swimming in China and the positive impact on Chinese swimmers’ (gold) medal performances at the Olympic Games, the World Championships and the Asian Games.

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 identified for this study, which were premised on the format of previous studies on interorganisational conflict. 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 have 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 (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 the case of swimming, media information, which had been gathered prior to the interview, reflected a general picture of the trajectory of national-provincial interplay and relationship and some measures contributing to the changes. This contextual information was later raised and verified by interviewees and more in-depth information was provided by interviewee regarding detailed approaches adopted to improve the national-provincial interorganisational relationship.
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 elite cycling in China. Therefore, the mystery regarding the nature, trajectory and factors contributing to the (changed) interorganisational relationship was mainly revealed by interviews. But limited 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 were confirmed by interviewees with key insiders of the NCFMC.

Both document and interview data were subject to thematic analysis (Patton, 2002). Data were mainly coded manually 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

Guba and Lincoln (1994) proposed the concept of trustworthiness as an effective criterion for evaluating the quality of qualitative research, which comprises credibility (similar to internal validity), transferability (similar to external validity), dependability (similar to reliability) and confirmability (similar to objectivity). Concerning this research on inter-organisational relationship in the Chinese elite sport context, the aforementioned triangulation was carefully deployed to ensure the credibility. Additionally, document sources are authoritative and interviewees approached were senior insiders who provided both official and relevant information. The identification of the research questions, research design, data collected, translated, triangulation, and themes and sub-themes identified, and findings and conclusions drawn were all carefully reviewed and agreed by all other members (co-authors) of this research. This maximises the internal reliability, or dependability aspect of the trustworthiness.

Transferability, or external reliability, as Bryman (2016, p. 383) stressed, “is a difficult criterion to meet in qualitative research, since … it is impossible to ‘freeze’ a social setting and the circumstances of an initial study to make it replicable”. Although contextual uniqueness is an
innate characteristic of social phenomena and therefore, complete transferability, or external reliability is impossible to achieve. This research, as noted above, applied a comparative case study design to provide “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 3), on the interorganisational relationships in a major elite sport nation in three representative sports. This in-depth information 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 on the national team’s international performance in artistic gymnastics in China has exercised constructive impact on the National Artistic Gymnastics Team’s (gold) medal performances on the international stage. 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 concurred on the functional role of the lack of interorganisational conflict. As a senior artistic gymnastics official of NAMC and previous member of the FIG 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 the 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 multifaceted. 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). Furthermore, provincial-level teams are divided into several large groups, each consisting of several provincial-level teams. Top swimmers from lagging swimming provinces are thus able to receive coaching from top coaches from other provincial-level teams. 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 official of the NAMC 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 teams’ 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: Notable Conflict with Some Recent Improvements in Priority Events

5.3.1 Characteristics of Interorganisational Conflict

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 & Myer, 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 effective policy implementation through shortening the implementation chain and reducing implementation 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 particularly in but not limited to women’s short-distance track events was also highlighted by the insiders of the NCFMC. As a current official of the NCFMC acknowledged:

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) having 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’ elite sport performance, interorganisational relationship is by no means the solitary factor that explains a nation’s elite sport success. There are many other factors contributing to the national teams’ (gold) medal performances in international competitions most notably at the Olympic Games, such as talent and athlete development, and coaching and scientific support. However, the role of a more harmonious national-provincial relationship should not be underrated and this factor can facilitate or constrain the realisation of other policy factors. For example, a strong tension from the provincial-level teams tends to be a barrier for the national teams’ effective mobilisation of athlete resources of various provincial-level teams and may compromise the control over doping.

Second, the utility of increased power of the national organisations is evident in all three case studies. But there are certain additional factors to be considered which necessitate cautions in making claims of overstating and over-generalising the role of central power. For example, not every nation is characterised by a highly centralised elite sport system and there is a risk that central organisations are incompetent leaders in directing elite sport development where excessive central power may lead to policy failure. Nevertheless, there are observable merits of a (competent) single
authority at the central level which can demand compliance from provincial level and coordinate nationwide resources. As a former GAS department head summarised:

In many sports, the increased power of the national management centre and national teams has mainly had a constructive and positive impact on enhancing provincial-level teams’ cooperation and on national teams’ performance. At least, provincial-level teams’ excessive freedom was conditioned. Although a mutually beneficial relationship where national organisations also provide appropriate reciprocity to provincial-level teams, instead of purely administrative order, have been a new trend, the dominance of national organisations in this power structure is a prerequisite otherwise provincial-level teams are likely to demand excessive reciprocity and pursue self-interest (Interviewee K).

A leading elite sport policy scholar in China and a think tank of GAS concurred with the importance of certain degree of central power in reducing national-provincial conflict in China:

I am afraid that there is no better leader than national sports authorities who can be most devoted to Olympic medal success (at least in China). In China, the phenomenon of national policies [and] local countermeasures [Shangyouzhengce, xiayouduice] is a stubborn issue permeating most policy areas characterised by lower-level implementers including provincial-level organisations’ abuse of their flexibility. So increased central power and the stronger ability of the national superior to control their provincial-level counterparts is all, if not the only, effective solution to this problem (Interviewee A).

In fact, the effectiveness of the identification and establishment of a national authority and increased centralised power is not confined to China. The UK’s notable Olympic gold medal achievements since Sydney 2000 particularly since Beijing 2008 has been widely considered attributable to various policy factors including the organisational reform and the establishment of
UK sport as the national-level leader in elite sport development (Green & Houlihan, 2005). A comparable example would be Australia, and aforementioned Australian Government’s recommendation that the ASC should be a single authority governing (elite) sport development at state level. It is safe to argue that the value of the establishment of a powerful central authority leading elite sport development is recognised by and practiced in an increased number of major including Western nations.

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’s (2015) research which advocated the significance of national co-ordination and vertical 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, 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 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 vs. 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 sport 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 and the evaluation of the usefulness of IORs/interorganisational conflict theses mainly from the management literature. Compared to existing research in the context of elite sport, 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 rather than the generic IOR. Therefore, this research is likely to provide more nuanced and specific insight on the identification and management of the conflict issue and how interorganisational conflict influences the formation and implementation of elite sport policies, compared to extant research. The insight provided is thorough, which, premised on the integration of existing wisdom on interorganisational conflict by various scholars, particularly in relation to the aspects of the causes for interorganisational conflict and initiatives to alleviate the conflict, is likely to provide a relatively integrated theoretical gateway for the analysis of this issue in elite sport development or even other sport spheres. Specific aspects of the conflict issue are not a feature of existing studies in the sport area. Compared to De Bosscher et al. (2015), this paper provides rich empirical insight reifying the characteristics, causes and impact of interorganisational conflict on elite sport performances, and the effective measures to reduce the conflict, based on the analysis of specific policy documents and approaches in three
sports/disciplines in China. All these contribute to the advancement of the elite sport literature by providing relatively detailed empirical insights on addressing one of the critical factors for elite sport success, i.e., vertical interorganisational coordination.

From the methodological perspective, previous research on broad interorganisational relationships (rather than conflict specifically) and vertical coordination is predominantly based on Western experience, while this research complements and advances the (elite) sport literature by providing insights from a major Oriental nation in both geopolitical and (elite) sport terms. Moreover, compared to, for instance, Sotiriadou’s (2017) research which focused on the single case of tennis in Flanders, this research adopted a comparative case study approach and hence the sport coverage is broader and the comparative elements are more salient.

Concerning the broad interorganisational conflict literature, the previously largely discrete wisdom, particularly on antecedents for and initiatives to reduce the conflict was summarised and organised into a coherent and integrated pattern to underpin a more thorough analysis of these two aspects of interorganisational conflict in this research. For example, although Das and Teng’s (2000) three-contradiction (behavioural-temporal-structural) approach was very illuminating in analysing factors leading to interorganisational conflict and provided inspirations to manage and reduce the conflict, there were also issues in relation to trust, reciprocity, power structure, organisational dependency, resources, role deviance, communication and goal divergence that provide powerful gateways to understand interorganisational conflict. These additional insights were proffered by varying scholars rather than Das and Teng (2000).

In practical terms, the findings of this research can encourage other nations, particularly those harbouring an ambition in elite sport success and those with a similar problem of vertical coordination between different levels of sports governing bodies, and relying on the resources of
territorial organisations for elite sport development, for example in Russia, France, the UK, Japan and Australia, to consider how relationships between national and regional/provincial organisations impact national elite sport success. The aim of this research, consistent with the nature and complexity of social phenomena and the critical realist philosophical position adopted, is by no means to seek a magic formula for managing interorganisational relationship/conflict that naturally applies to all nations covering all sports/disciplines. However, the findings from the Chinese context can provide other nations with both experience on good practice and mirrors to reflect on and address some negative lessons. Thus, this research is likely to help practitioners better manage elite sport development in their respective nations. Specifically speaking, elite sport policy makers of various nations can at least consider and reflect on, (some of) the following questions and assess the compatibility of these issues with their respective national and sporting contexts:

(1) “Does our national elite sport system rely on territorial sport organisations? Is there any conflict between national sport organisations and our territorial counterparts?”

(2) “If there is any conflict, does this conflict impair our nation’s (gold) medal performances on the international stage most notably at the Olympic Games?”

(3) “What contribute to the (destructive) conflict? Are there conflicting priorities (orientation) between national and provincial sport organisations? What is the quality of the communication between national and provincial levels? Are sufficient resources allocated to provincial-level organisations and which authority is responsible for the allocation of resources most notably financial resources? What is the nature of the employment of athletes and coaches in the national squad (contractual, temporary transfer or political affiliation)?”
(4) “If detrimental national-provincial interorganisational conflict is evident, should we establish a single national authority with the dominant power to command territorial counterparts’ compliance and cooperation? Is it necessary to further enhance the communication between national and territorial organisations and what are the effective mechanisms that can enhance this communication? If territorial-level organisations and teams are rigidly resistant or incompetent, would it be feasible for national sport authorities to switch partners, such as skipping the territorial level to directly working with grass-roots schools/clubs for talent recruitment, or even seeking support from other sports/disciplines?”

7. Conclusions

This research provides rich insights into the interplay and conflict between national and regional/territorial sport organisations by virtue of an in-depth scrutiny of the Chinese context. While it is undeniable that the findings, or the Chinese experience, may be relevant to other nations, readers including both elite sport practitioners and scholars are cautioned to interpret and apply the findings of this research with care by fully considering the uniqueness of their respective national settings. China is a big nation where elite sport has long been prioritised and centralised, “advantages” which are true for China may not be features in most other nations. 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, by critically referring to the result of this research mainly focused on China. Comparative studies involving more national contexts and larger number of sports/disciplines can certainly enhance both the IOR/interorganisational research and elite sport management practice, and thus highly recommended for future research.
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.

Thirdly, while this research centres on the national level, future research is encouraged to pay more attention to the insights from the provincial level 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 value and compatibility of qualitative approaches in underpinning elite sport policy research, the incorporation of certain quantitative elements underpinned by statistical analysis and surveys with a broader range of stakeholders such as coaches and athletes can further advance the research.

References


China Central Television (CCTV). (2009). *Who will win the last 18 gold medals of the National Games? The final competition day will complete the gold medal table configuration.* Retrieved from http://sports.cctv.com/20091027/101000.shtml


Table 1. Profiles of the interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee number</th>
<th>Organization(s)</th>
<th>Position(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Beijing Sport University</td>
<td>Professor of Sport Studies, the Editor of the Chinese Version of Olympic Encyclopaedia, one of the most renowned sports researchers in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG)</td>
<td>A former member of Men’s Technical Committee of FIG and a senior “insider” of Chinese elite artistic gymnastics (retired)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>GAS, China Institute of Sport Science (CISS), National Basketball Management Centre and Chinese Basketball Association (CBA)</td>
<td>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)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre and National Cycling Team</td>
<td>Former head coach of the National Cycling Team and a current official of the National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>National Gymnastics Management Centre</td>
<td>An official previously working in the National Gymnastics Management Centre (retired)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>National Cycling Team</td>
<td>A senior coach of the National Cycling Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>National Aquatics Management Centre and National Swimming Team</td>
<td>Team leader of the National Swimming Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>National Artistic Gymnastics Team</td>
<td>A senior coach of the National Artistic Gymnastics Team who has served the National Team for more than 20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Beijing Sport University and National Swimming Team</td>
<td>A swimming coach at Beijing Sport University and a coach of the National Swimming Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>National Swimming Team</td>
<td>An Olympic gold-medal coach who has served the National Team for more than 15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>China Sports Culture Development Centre of GAS, China Sports Museum and China Olympic Museum</td>
<td>Former Director of China Sports Culture Development Centre of GAS, China Sports Museum and China Olympic Museum (retired)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Highlights of the four aspects of interorganisational conflict in artistic gymnastics, swimming and cycling in China.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport/Discipline</th>
<th>Evidence and characteristics of national-provincial interorganisational conflict</th>
<th>Contributory factors to the (lack of) interorganisational conflict</th>
<th>Initiatives to alleviate the interorganisational conflict</th>
<th>Impact of the interorganisational conflict on elite sport performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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’ behaviour  
(2) Provincial-level teams’ pursuit of self- | (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 | (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 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycling</th>
<th>(1) High degree of interorganisation conflict particularly in previously non-priority events</th>
<th>(1) A lack of goal alignment</th>
<th>(1) Increased power of the national team particularly in women’s short-distance track events</th>
<th>(1) Previously strong national-provincial conflict being largely destructive and constraining Chinese elite cyclists’ performance at the Olympic Games</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Certain improvement in alleviating the national-</td>
<td>(2) Provincial-level teams’ prioritisation of short-term self-interest (short-term orientation)</td>
<td>(2) Reduced training dependency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interest and short-term orientation e.g., use of doping</td>
<td>(3) Communication and cooperation, increased mutual support and reciprocity, and goal alignment</td>
<td>(3) Relatively limited power of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Dependency on provincial-level teams for training</td>
<td>and elite swimmers pertaining to the national team</td>
<td>(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</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the below-Japan (gold) medal performances at the Asian Games</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Improved national-provincial rapport contributing to Chinese elite swimmers’ recovery since Athens 2004 and notable gold medal achievements between 2011 and 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial conflict particularly in women’s short-distance track events</td>
<td>the NCFMC and the national team compared to provincial-level teams</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Organisational interdependency and a high degree of flexibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) A lack of actual reciprocity available to provincial-level teams</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) A lack of mutual trust</td>
<td>(3) Increased rigidity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Switching partners and compromise:</td>
<td>(5) Increased reciprocity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Championships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Certain improvements in national-provincial relationship paving the way for China’s significantly improved medal performances in priority events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Increased diversity of provincial-level teams preparing top elite cyclists for the national team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>