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This item was submitted to Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:

- This paper was accepted for publication in the journal International Review for the Sociology of Sport and the definitive published version is available at https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690217730679.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/26680

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © The authors. Published by SAGE Journals

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Please cite the published version.
Responding to globalisation: the case of elite artistic gymnastics in China

Abstract
This article explores a non-Western nation’s responses to globalisation through an in-depth analysis of elite artistic gymnastics in China over a lengthy time span. The concept of globalisation and patterns of ‘reach’ and ‘response’ act as the heuristic devices underpinning the analysis. Data were collected from a range of documents and from six semi-structured interviews. The trajectory of Chinese elite artistic gymnastics’ responses to globalisation can be characterised as a passive response in the 1950s, a participative response in the first half of the 1960s, a conflictual response from 1966 to the early 1970s, a participative response from the early 1970s to the 2012 Olympic Games, and a passive response, once again, during the Rio Olympiad (post-London 2012). In this way, a nation’s responses to globalisation are seen as dynamic rather than rigid or static. The ever-expanding reach of the international federation-led global system fundamentally demarcates the activities of member states. However, any nation-state has a degree of autonomy when responding to globalisation and in deciding the detailed pathways whereby to pursue success within this system, although in extreme cases, a nation-state can choose to resist this globalising context, largely depending on a government’s attitude towards globalisation and the value the government attaches to it.

Keywords: China; artistic gymnastics; globalisation; politics; responses
Introduction

Artistic gymnastics has been one of the largest contributors of Olympic (gold) medals to China. This research investigates its development from the distinctive lens of a non-Western nation’s responses to globalisation over a lengthy time span. Both domestic factors and international factors have long had a clearly discernible impact on the development of elite artistic gymnastics in China. This suggests the necessity of examining the effectiveness of China’s responses to international artistic gymnastics, a particularly crucial issue for artistic gymnastics as a judged sport discipline, which is necessarily susceptible to exogenous factors, most notably rule making, scoring systems and match arbitration.

The value of this research is threefold. First, most existing research on elite artistic gymnastics is published in Chinese, focuses on domestic policy, structure and system and is overwhelmingly concerned with the contemporary period (i.e. since the 1980s). However, despite the modus operandi of ‘made in China’ and ‘made by Chinese’ in the contemporary era, little is known about whether domestic artistic development has been shaped or influenced by globalisation or about how Chinese artistic gymnastics has interacted with the world. In particular, the commencement and early development of elite artistic gymnastics remain obscure to many readers both outside and even inside China.

Second, the salience of Chinese artistic gymnastics’ interplay with globalisation was further elevated against the backdrop of China’s unexpectedly poor performance at the 2016 Rio Olympics where Chinese gymnasts, for the first time in Olympic history, failed to win a single gold medal (see Figure 1). This prompts the analysis of the factors leading to China’s poor performance and an emphasis solely on
domestic factors would be incomplete. It is noteworthy that the horizontal axis of Figure 1 takes centre stage because of this paper’s focus on Chinese elite artistic gymnastics’ response to globalisation at different times.

Third, the research has academic utility. The bulk of existing research on globalisation in general and, more specifically, much of the sociology of sport literature on globalisation in a sporting context focus on the Western experience while relevant research on non-Western nations in general and on China in particular remains relatively sparse. This asymmetry is incommensurate with the rising geopolitical significance of non-Western nations, particularly China.

In specific terms, this paper aims to answer questions about the character, driving forces and outcome of Chinese artistic gymnastics’ responses to globalisation during different periods in its development in the Communist China from the 1950s onwards. The paper is divided into five sections. Following this introduction, globalisation theses, including global-national interaction, are discussed and, in particular, the framework relating to the patterns of national responses to globalisation acts as the heuristic device framing the analysis. The next section centres on research methods. In brief, data were gathered from two sources: written and online documents, and semi-structured interviews. This is followed by an integrated presentation of China’s responses to global influences and their imprint on Chinese artistic gymnastics at five distinctive different periods, incorporating the impact of globalisation on Chinese elite gymnastics into the broader political context. The article concludes by summarising the salient role of globalisation in relation to elite
artistic gymnastics in China and the trajectory of China’s responses to increasingly
globalising elite artistic gymnastics in this specific case. Deeper analysis of the
domestic and international contexts in which China is positioned is conducted,
incorporating political, economic, diplomatic factors and the role of international
federation (IF) and some nations as the agents for the globalisation of elite artistic
gymnastics and influencing China’s response into the discussion. The concluding
section ends with reflections on the globalisation theses, and on the value of the
present study.

**Globalisation theses**

As Henry (2007: 6) argued, ‘it seemed that globalisation represents not merely a
major feature of the contemporary world but rather the major feature’. Globalisation,
as Miller et al. (2001: 131) suggested, is ‘a process through which space and time are
compressed by technology, information flows, and trade and power relations,
allowing distant actions to have increased significance at the local level’.

This article investigates a nation’s response to the globalisation of a specific
Olympic sport discipline and, thus, falls within the global-local or ‘glocalisation’
theme (Robertson, 1995: 25). Despite globalisation’s ever-growing impact on
domestic policy (Held and McGrew, 2007; Ohmae, 1999), states still enjoy a wide
range of options and nations play a crucial role ‘in facilitating, mediating and
determining the pace of globalisation’ (Houlihan, 2010: 15). The then Secretary of the
United Nations Kofi Annan (2004: 20) argued that ‘... the sovereign State remains a
highly relevant and necessary institution; indeed, the very linchpin of human security’.
However, he added that it is challenging even for the best-organised states to manage
globalisation (Annan, 2004). From this perspective, engulfed in the tide of
globalisation, no single state can be immune from its effects, but is directly confronted with the issue of how to 'respond' to globalisation. Consistent with Skocpol’s (1985: 3-4) emphasis on the importance of ‘bringing the state back in’ and refocusing ‘from society-centred theories to renewed interest in States’, a country’s responses to globalisation take centre stage in this paper.

Amongst various theses on global-local interaction, Houlihan’s (1994, 2009) concepts of ‘reach’ and ‘response’ to globalisation are relatively structured and sport-specific, and hence heuristic in identifying international influence on domestic policy in a highly globalising context. Figure 2 provides detail on reach and response. ‘Reach’ refers to the depth of penetration of the local culture by the global culture, whereas ‘response’ refers to the reaction of the recipient culture (Houlihan, 1994, 2003, 2015). As Tan and Houlihan (2012: 133) noted, ‘reach’ can be ‘epiphenomena’ which affect domestic policy. It is noteworthy that because the focus of this study is of an elite Olympic sport discipline largely led by the Chinese government, the ‘reach’ relates mainly to the political dimension which, according to Houlihan (1994, 2003, 2015), is linked to the action of the state.

In the one-party political system of China, the Communist government’s dominance permeates almost all areas of life, and therefore, the political dimension fundamentally shapes and influences economic and cultural development. This governmental dominance is particularly evident in elite sport as a highly politicised policy area directly governed and dominated by the government since its inception in the 1950s (Hong and Xiong, 2002). In theory, the Chinese Gymnastics Association (CGA) is an independent non-governmental governing body affiliated to the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG). However, in reality, the National Gymnastics Management Centre (NGMC) is responsible for the management and
development of the CGA (GAS, 2013). The CGA is literally governed, or at least ‘supervised’ by the NGMC and hence ‘nominal’, and there is a high degree of staff overlap, in particular at the senior level between the NGMC and CGA. For example, Chaoyi Luo, as the Director of the NGMC, concurrently played the role of president of the CGA between 2013 and 2017 (China News, 2013). As Lai (2009) summarised, artistic gymnastics follows a state-controlled pattern in China. Therefore, the political dimension is necessarily the focus of this article in relation to reach.

Concerning ‘responses’, there is a continuum comprising different degrees: passive, participative and conflictual. **Passive** response refers to either an enthusiasm for the external culture or an inability to challenge global culture. This can take the form of unmediated reception. The relationship between former imperial rulers and colonies could be a salient example. **Participative** response is the process of negotiation, bargaining, and accommodation involving global culture and local cultures, which indicates sufficient control over resources to provide recipient cultures with leverage. This includes both the penetration of the globalsports products into recipient nations and participative relationship in shaping and mediating external culture. **Confidential** response does not simply rely on the possession of sufficient resources to enable resistance but also a set of values that leads to rejection or attempted rejection of global culture (Houlihan, 1994; Houlihan, 2003). The twenty-five African nations’ boycott of the Montreal 1976 Summer Olympic Games, propelled by South Africa’s apartheid issue, is an illustrative example.

This trichotomy approach to nations’ responses to globalisation in sport is still applied in recent years, albeit with some modification. For example, Houlihan (2015: 569) noted that localisation, ‘cultural adaptation and reinterpretation’ are possible in this participative response and non-governmental international sports bodies, most
notably the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and other IFs, can play a role in shaping the participative relationship. Globalisation of sport is both an outcome and a dynamic process. The tentacles of many Olympic sports have expanded over time to attract increased number of nations with different political systems and economic status, and this globalising elite sport scenario in the contemporary era remains a dynamic process subjected to varying degrees of change.

In the area of elite sport development, international organisations, most notably the IOC and IFs, can exert influence on domestic policy systems (Houlihan, 2009). These international organisations provide appealing competitive arenas for member states and demarcate their activities. Nations are subjected to the rules and regulations of the IOC and corresponding IFs to strive for success within their ruling systems and thereby interact with competing nations. As Houlihan and Zheng (2015: 341) argued, ‘most states, even the wealthy, adopt an elite sport policy that is heavily influenced, if not determined, by the decisions of the IOC on the sports to be included in the summer and winter Games’. The IOC and IFs have locked these nations ‘on to a path from which it is difficult for them to deviate’ (Houlihan and Zheng, 2013: 338). Therefore, these international sports organisations have been the main facilitators and promoters of the globalisation of elite sport in general and that of each Olympic sport.

In addition to nations’ sensitivity to and compliance with IOC and IF decisions or Olympic–standardisation, the impact of globalisation on nation states’ elite sport development is also illustrated by a) the global movement of talent and expertise including coaches, athletes and science amongst nations; b) nations’ pursuit of international influence in international sports organisations, most notably the IOC and IFs of Olympic sports; c) the expanded geographical range of the hosting of sports
mega-events beyond traditional developed Western nations; and d) the prevalence of policy learning and transfer from other nations (Zheng, 2015).

Discussion of globalisation has long been Western-centred. As Maguire (2015: 523) pointed out, ‘we know relatively little about these processes from a non-western perspective, and the implications for global sport of a potential Pax Sinica remain known unknowns’. In fact, the former Soviet Union left an indelible imprint on the establishment and development of elite sport in almost all Communist countries in particular during the relatively hermetically sealed Cold War era. The breakup of the Soviet Union marked a new era and concomitantly, coaches and athletes from the Soviet Union and other Eastern European states started to move around the world, with many migrating to Western countries. Green and Houlihan (2005) noted the substantial impact that the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies have had on sports globalisation in particular in relation to elite sport. In their studies of elite sport development in the UK, Australia and Canada, Green and Houlihan (2005: 19) argued that ‘both the Soviet Union and the GDR (German Democratic Republic), then, were renowned for their highly structured approaches to developing elite performers, which have, arguably, provided a “template” for the subsequent development of elite sport models in Western nations’. This demonstrates that successful nations, in many cases, can also play a role in promoting the globalisation of sport, through the dissemination of international standards and regulations as well as leading ideas, methods and experts.

In addition, while China has gradually become a major power in international elite sport in particular following its success at the 2008 Olympic Games held in
Beijing, relevant research is incommensurate with this major change. It is timely and necessary, therefore, to review how globalisation can be viewed from a non-Western perspective. Fortunately, there has been a steady growth in the application of the concept of globalisation to sport policy studies including those relating to China. For example, Tan and Houlihan (2012) explored the impact of globalisation on China’s Olympic sport policy. Regarding particular sports, Tan and Bairner (2011) and Houlihan et al. (2010) studied how globalisation has influenced the policies of elite basketball in China, Tan and Bairner (2010) focused on how China manages globalisation in football, while Chen et al. (2012; 2015) examined the impact of globalisation on Chinese sport through the lens of table tennis. However, most existing research has focused on team sports and on the impact of globalisation over a relatively short period of time, particularly, in the case of China, on the most recent period. Our paper addresses significant gaps by placing emphasis on the impact of globalisation on one particular non-team-based sport discipline in a world sports power, and by providing more comprehensive insights which target a longer time span, specifically the development of this sport from its establishment.

**Research methods**

Data were collected from two sources: documents and semi-structured interviews. Documents accessed included printed and online publications issued by the General Administration of Sport of China (GAS), the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC), the NGMC, the CGA, and website information on the FIG. These were accompanied by printed and website output from influential domestic media such as Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), People’s Daily, China News and ifeng,
supplemented by information from foreign media such as the Daily Mail and Reuters, and by academic publications.

Second, six semi-structured interviews were conducted to supplement the documentary data. Interviewees were identified according to their seniority, availability, and relationship with this topic and they comprised a sports scholar in China, a senior official (a department head previously working in the GAS), a vice director of the NGMC, two senior coaches of the National Artistic Gymnastics Team, and a former international judge of the FIG (see Table 1). Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours, covering various sport policy themes such as organisational structure, coaching, athletes, training and scientific support, competitions and international influence and the mastery of rules; foreign factors have been evident in all of these areas at least during certain period(s) of time. Both documentary and interview data were subjected to thematic analysis (Patton, 2002). Back translation was conducted to ensure linguistic consistency after the Chinese material was translated into English.

[Table 1 About Here]

China’s responses to international artistic gymnastics

Our analysis of how Chinese elite artistic gymnastics has reacted to international artistic gymnastics is divided into five sections: the 1950s, the first half of the 1960s, 1966-the early 1970s, the early 1970s-2012, and post-2012. The former four periods correspond to fundamental political epochs in China, including China’s break with the Soviet Union in 1960, the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the gradual recovery of elite sport development and China’s improved relations with a range of
capitalist nations, most notably the USA and Japan, in the early 1970s. All of these landmark political events have had a marked impact on the development of elite artistic gymnastics in China. The final period is identified according to a sport-specific factor, namely China’s sharp decline in medal performance after the London 2012 Olympics.

**Sovietisation (1950s): A passive response**

Like many other Olympic sports and disciplines, artistic gymnastics in China is a relic of the Sovietisation of Chinese elite sport in the 1950s. As the director of the NGMC Chaoyi Luo (2009) summarised, elite artistic gymnastics in China, since its official emergence in 1953 (Xinhuanet, 2008), has been a story of learning from and eventually overtaking the ‘Russian mentor’ (Xu, 2008: 49).

The Soviet Union’s National Artistic Gymnastics Team’s one-and-a-half month visit to China in 1953 signalled the beginning of modern artistic gymnastics in China (Chen, Lu and Li, 1990). The *Soviet Union Artistic Gymnasts Classification Outline with Diagram Illustration* sent by the Soviet team became the template for the subsequent development of Chinese elite artistic gymnasts (Luo, 2009). The National Artistic Gymnastics Team was established in November 1953, following the Soviet system. Centralisation and collective training were two dominant characteristics which have since become longstanding features of elite artistic gymnastics in China.

Further progress based on ‘learning’ from Soviet Union was made through the Chinese national team’s visit to the Stalin Sports Academy in Moscow in the summer of 1955 (Luo, 2009). Top Chinese elite gymnasts were able to access and systematically learn training methods, routine design, gymnastics rules, and sport science (Chen, 2014: 126). In addition, Chinese gymnasts, for the first time, accessed
the FIG’s Olympic rules and went on to promote the FIG’s rules in China. The role of FIG as a facilitator in directing developments was further illustrated by China joining it in 1956. Akin to other FIG member nations, China began to subject its elite artistic gymnastics development to FIG standards. The promulgation of the *Gymnasts Classification Standard System* was another notable example of the Soviet legacy of learning.

The Sovietisation (Hong and Lu, 2012a) of artistic gymnastics in China in the 1950s was embedded within China’s broader political and diplomatic context, and needs to be understood within the context of the ‘honeymoon’ period between the Socialist China and the Soviet Union. Policy transfer from the Soviet Union was congruent with China’s then foreign policy of ‘Leaning to One Side’ (i.e. Leaning to Socialism) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016). The reach of Soviet influence extended into a wide range of Chinese policy domains. Thus, the elite sport system, including the development of elite artistic gymnastics, was predicated on the Soviet model.

Although the domestic political environment demarcated the scope and sources of China’s global involvement within clear Communist-Capitalist boundaries, the Communist government’s emphasis on elite sport development, into which a wide range of political, social and diplomatic functions was projected and which received a significant profile within the Communist government also facilitated the development of elite sport in China and China’s conditional participation in international sports affairs. However, because of the limited economic resources available, China prioritised certain sports and artistic gymnastics was amongst the earliest to be established and supported. All of these those factors helped to create the context in
which to understand China’s overall reception of international elite artistic gymnastics and its close ties with the Soviet Union in the sport’s infancy.

China’s acquisition of FIG membership in 1956 signalled the official start of the country being subjected to the FIG framework and regulations. Although the relationships of Chinese elite artistic gymnastics in this period were largely confined to the Soviet-led Communist bloc, the activities of Chinese gymnasts started to be integrated into the rules and requirements of the FIG, and all of these learning activities and communication were intended to enhance China’s competitiveness on a global scale in events organised by the FIG. This preparatory period laid the foundations for China’s later progress and medal breakthrough at World Championships in the early 1960s.

China’s fervent enthusiasm for the Soviet artistic gymnastics system and approach, and the near-copying of the Soviet model resonated strongly with the passive response, including the characteristics of near-unmediated reception and a passion for the leading external culture (the sporting system in this case). Although there had been no colonial relationship between China and the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union’s dominant political leadership role, wide and far-reaching influence amongst Communist nations, and almost irresistible sporting attractiveness rendered it the main source of knowledge in the structuring of Chinese elite artistic gymnastics’ in its early phase of development. This also demonstrated a politically dominant, yet very successful sporting nation’s agency in directing the involvement of other nations in adapting to the global system and more specifically, to the globalising context of elite sport.

Communist bloc influence (The first half of the 1960s): A participative response
The Sino-Soviet Split in 1960 signalled the end of the large-scale transfer of learning from China’s Communist ‘mentor’. This was the most significant political event that affected China’s responses to international artistic gymnastics during this period. However, despite the shift in sources of learning and cooperation, the end of the honeymoon period did not significantly impair the development of elite artistic gymnastics in China. China’s consistent quest for elite sporting success and the reinforced and elevated policy status of elite sport (Hong, 2011) secured the government’s continued involvement in international artistic gymnastics competitions held by the FIG and in communications with foreign nations. During this period, China maintained and even enhanced its participation in the increasingly globalised context of elite artistic gymnastics under the auspices of the FIG, which expanded its influence not only to capitalist nations, but also to Communist ones together with many emerging and newly independent states. Chinese gymnasts turned to Eastern European Communist ‘comrades’ such as Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland for learning and collaboration. This inter-Communist relationship had been evident in the 1950s but was elevated in importance after China’s break with the Soviet Union.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, China established links with Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. This further expanded the sources of knowledge and neutralised the negative impact of the loss of Soviet guidance. For example, the Czechoslovakia National Artistic Gymnastics Team which won a silver medal in the women’s team all-around event and included the new Olympic women’s individual all-around champion – Věra Čáslavská – visited China immediately after the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games and gave three performances (Chen et al., 1990). As a result, Chinese female gymnasts, in particular, were able to learn many state-of-the-art
routines, actions and training methods from a leading international gymnast performance. However, in contrast to the passive reception in the Soviet period, China was able to learn in a more critical way and showcase its distinctive advantages in communications with Communist bloc nations. For example, Chinese male gymnasts outperformed athletes from Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in various nation-to-nation competitions in the early 1960s (Chen et al., 1990). Meanwhile, China continued to absorb the advanced methods, routines and approaches of these other nations while simultaneously recognising and maintaining its strengths which allowed it to become more critical and, consequently, more independent of foreign experience. This illustrated the ‘mediating’ and adaptation elements in China’s response to globalisation.

The value of large-scale modelling from and communication with friendly Eastern European Communist nations gradually became discernible, evidenced in the Chinese team’s enhanced competitiveness, symbolised by a historic bronze medal at the 1962 World Artistic Gymnastics Championships (Xinhuanet, 2008).

The expanded reach of FIG-led international artistic gymnastics to China was evidenced by increased participation in the World Championships. And China’s response now became more participative. With the significantly downgraded influence of the Soviet Union, China was able to deepen its bilateral artistic gymnastics relationships with other Communist bloc nations. The artistic gymnastics ‘products’ of these nations were mediated and critically ‘imported’ by China with local accommodation, particularly for Chinese male gymnasts.

_The first half of the Cultural Revolution (from 1966 to the early 1970s): The conflictual response_
All sport, including elite sport, was paralysed during the first half of the ten-year turbulence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Hong and Lu, 2012b). Elite sport no longer enjoyed as significant a profile for the government. Instead, it was repressed, labelled as it was by Chairman Mao Zedong as a capitalist product which was contrary to the interests of the proletariat (Hong, 1999). All training and competitions halted at the end of 1966 because of this perception, elite artistic gymnastics being regarded as ‘Capitalist, Elitism and Non-Proletarian’ (Chen, Lu and Li, 1990, p. 369) by the Central government. China ceased to participate in any activities organised by the FIG which was an illustrative, and to some extent, an extreme example of the country’s response to globalisation and a manifestation of Communist China’s resistance to global artistic gymnastics led by the FIG.

From the perspective of reach and response, the dominant anti-elitist, proletarian, and class struggle-centred philosophy prevalent in China was opposed to elite sport, including elite artistic gymnastics, and globalisation as manifested in the Western-led global elite sport framework. At this point, the domestic political context and set of values led to China’s rejection of and isolation from the reach of global artistic gymnastics family.

More diverse development and the impact of capitalism (from the early 1970s to the London 2012 Olympic Games): A participative response

The development of elite sport gradually recovered from the early 1970s because of a major shift in diplomatic policy and a sea-change in international politics (Hong, 1999). The gradually stabilised domestic political environment, ever-increasing economic wealth of China following China’s economic reform and opening-up policy, and more liberal diplomatic policies of the country formed the context affecting
China’s next response to globalisation. The FIG’s global reach was expanded significantly during this period, with the number of affiliated members rising from 49 in 1961 to 124 in 1996 and 128 (including two associate members) in 2007 (FIG, 2017d).

The support of the Chinese government was once again conducive to the development of elite sport and China’s engagement with the expanding global sport environment. Government support for elite sport reached a new high, and elite sport success became one of the top priorities for the Communist government, evidenced in the publication of a series of landmark policy documents, including the *Olympic Strategy* in 1986 and three versions of the *Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan* (1994-2000, 2001-2010 and 2011-2020). Elite artistic gymnastics was clearly identified as a pioneer and priority sport discipline for achieving elite sport success (Zheng and Chen, 2016). The increased wealth of the nation, propelled by economic reform, facilitated the government’s elevated financial support to achieve China’s burgeoning elite sport ambitions. This made possible a more proactive and effective response to and exploitation of the globalisation of elite artistic gymnastics in China within this period.

In the same period, there was a major shift in the source of Chinese artistic gymnastics’ learning and communication, from Communist countries to capitalist ones, most notably Japan. The Chinese government realised the role that elite athletes can play as sports ambassadors from the example of ping-pong diplomacy with the USA and a significant diplomatic function was injected into elite sport. China’s expanded learning from capitalist nations can be located within the wider political context of its establishment of a closer relationship with the USA and an improved
Sino-Japan relationship, guided by China’s changed diplomatic doctrine, ‘A Horizontal Line, A Big Terrain (Yitiaoxian yidapian)’ (Fardella et al., 2015: 147).

At the time, Japan was a top gymnastics power, particularly successful in men’s artistic gymnastics. Artistic gymnastics, together with swimming and women’s volleyball, were the most obvious exemplars of the *emulating Japan* campaign, of elite sport in China back then (Interview with a Chinese sport researcher, 8 May, 2013; Interview with the former director of China Sports Culture Development Centre of GAS, 3 June, 2013). China’s learning from Japan in elite artistic gymnastics can be traced back to a Japanese sports delegation’s three-week visit to China in September 1971, led by the Olympic gymnastics champion – Takashi Ono (Chen, Lu and Li, 1990). A wide range of important gymnastics information and knowledge regarding techniques, skills, training, and the latest global trends were introduced to the relatively hermetically sealed China. A succession of communications were orchestrated between 1971 and 1974, illustrated by reference to competitions, held in both China and Japan, between gymnasts representing the two nations, regular visits by Japanese judges and coaches to China to share their expertise with their hosts. In addition to Japan, China also started to establish regular communication with Western countries including the USA, Germany, France, and the UK.

In October 1978, China’s membership of the FIG was reinstated (COC, 2004) and China opened up its elite artistic gymnastics development to the reach and system of the FIG. (It has remained a member ever since). From the 1980s, Chinese elite artistic gymnastics achieved a high degree of independence and self-sufficiency in coaching and training. Nevertheless, beneath this ‘independent’ veneer, globalisation has been consistent in its presence and impact. China’s more proactive, or participative, response to international artistic gymnastics since the 1980s, was most
notably evidenced in the import of world-leading expertise to support weak elements in the country’s elite artistic gymnastics, China’s increasingly explicit and deliberate pursuit of influence in the FIG, and effective adaptation to the external environment most notably through the mastery of new rules.

First, similar to other ‘fortress’ (Hong, Wu and Xiong, 2005, p. 512) sports/disciplines⁵ in China, elite artistic gymnastic success has been overwhelmingly underpinned by world-leading domestic coaches particularly since the 1980s. However, unlike most other successful counterparts, it has been a longstanding tradition for Chinese artistic gymnastics to maintain cooperation with leading foreign coaches in its weaker elements. The most notable example has been the Women’s National Team’s longstanding cooperation with a Romanian-born French coach, Adrian Pop, in the choreographic design of women’s floor exercise (Zheng and Chen, 2016). This cooperation with a foreign coach has borne fruit, evidenced in medal performances including a gold medal at the World Championships and more importantly, China’s gold medal breakthrough in the women’s team all-around event at Beijing 2008 (Interview with a senior official of the NGMC, 13 May, 2013).

Second, the efficient and effective mastery of the FIG’s new rules and the exploitation of the non-maximum scoring system⁶ have also contributed to China’s dominance in artistic gymnastics since the Beijing Olympiad. As the Director of the NGMC, Chaoyi Luo (2009: 254), summarised, ‘the learning, mastering and using of new rules is the heart and soul of the Chinese Artistic Gymnastic Team’. New rules-related issues always take centre stage in the activities of the National Team in the year after the Olympics (CGA, 2012b). As a senior insider revealed:

The study of the new rules is essential to the Chinese Artistic Gymnastics Team, and the Management Centre and the Gymnastics Team places great
emphasis on the nationwide promotion of the new rules. The translated version of the new rules is published and sent to each region as soon as possible. At the central level, national-level judges and coaches of the National Team are required to attend the course at the beginning of the year after the previous Olympic Games and only those who pass the exams at the end of the course can continue their gymnastics work for the new Olympiad (Interview with a former member of Men’s Technical Committee of FIG and previous official of the NGMC, 11 May, 2013).

Third, China started to place emphasis on international influence and representation in the IFs. This was prompted by learning from negative lessons of the past, including many previous cases of controversial scoring and arbitration and disadvantageous rules, most notably the minimum age requirement for female gymnasts, which adversely affected Chinese gymnastics\(^7\) in the 1990s and even earlier (Interview with a senior coach of the Women’s National Artistic Gymnastics Team, 29 May, 2013).

China has gradually increased its influence in the FIG, particularly since the 2000s. During the period 1984-2012, there was always a Chinese member in either the Executive Committee or the Council. Men’s and Women’s Technical Committees are another two key FIG authorities particularly in relation to rule making and changes. China had been consistent in securing one member in the Men’s Technical Committee since 1988 and in the Women’s Technical Committee since 2000 (CCTV, 2008; CGA, 2012a). China’s influence in FIG peaked during the Beijing and London Olympiads when representatives filled the positions of vice president of the Men’s (2008-2012) and the Women’s Technical Committees (2004-2008) (CCTV, 2008).

The hosting of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games not only enhanced the policy prominence of achieving elite sporting success which benefited artistic gymnastics, but also facilitated China’s increased participation and representation in the FIG. This
was achieved both through increased government support for the cultivation of Chinese officials and representatives working in various international sports governing bodies and also the improved relationship between Chinese artistic gymnastics and the FIG by way of frequent communications and collaborations in the lead-up to Beijing 2008 (Interview with a senior official and leader of the NGMC, 13 May, 2013). China continuously had representatives in the FIG which, to some extent, secured the country’s participation in the decision-making process of FIG, with the key roles in the Technical Committees providing certain advantages or, at least, convenience in designing and implementing the rules (Interview with a former member of Men’s Technical Committee of FIG and previous official of the NGMC, 11 May, 2013), despite the fact that FIG is still Western-dominated (Chinese Gymnastics Association, CGA, 2012a).

One direct consequence were favourable rule changes and addressing the difficulty of scoring when applying the newly introduced non-maximum scoring system in the Beijing Olympiad. For example, Chinese female gymnasts are traditionally good at long radius turns in their traditional event of the women’s uneven bars, and these moves were encouraged by the FIG and received high difficulty scores according to the FIG rules for the Beijing Games (Interview with a senior coach of the Women’s National Artistic Gymnastics Team, 29 May, 2013). This rule was formulated by the Women’s Technical Committee of which the vice president during the period 2004-2008 was from China.

In fact, China’s increased voice in the FIG in particular at the Beijing and London Olympics reflected the GAS’s and its predecessor, the Sports Ministry’s, deliberate strategy, explicitly stated in the *Strategic Olympic Glory Plan 1994-2000* and in the latest version of 2011-2020. Indeed, the GAS started to strategically strive
for increased representation and voice in IFs including the FIG considerably earlier than the strategy came to fruition in the 2000s. ‘Try to occupy a position in the IFs of all of the 18 key sports’ was ‘an important supplementary element of the Olympic Glory Plan’ in the 1994-2000 version (Sports Ministry of China, 1995). This was reiterated in the 2011-2020 version (GAS, 2011). Thus, China’s ambition to enhance its influence in international sports governing bodies has been consistent with strategic policy decision-making for at least two decades.

In summary, during this period, the reach of the FIG was significantly expanded and there was notable progress in the process of the globalisation of elite artistic gymnastics. China combined global communication and mutual learning with the maintenance and consolidation of its own strengths, and proactively participated in international gymnastics activities governed by the FIG, normally reacting promptly and effectively to exogenous changes and trends having returned to the FIG family in 1978. More importantly, rather than either resisting or totally failing to change this FIG global system, China gradually became able to influence the system and benefit domestic elite artistic gymnastics development through leverage most notably in relation to rule making. In some cases, in particular the Beijing Olympics, China was able to negotiate with the FIG to favour the traditional advantages of Chinese gymnasts’ moves and routines. Thus, we would describe China’s response during this period as largely participative in character.

Decline at Rio 2016: A passive response

Chinese artistic gymnastics then underwent a roller coaster ride from the great successes at Beijing 2008 and London 2012, to a sharp decline (two bronze medals only) at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in 2016. The political context largely remained
unchanged in this period. Indeed, elite sport had retained its significant position for the Chinese government and artistic gymnastics’ priority status remained intact. The economic boom helped to maintain considerable government investment in elite artistic gymnastics.

In addition to the retirement of the golden generation, the lack of experience and weakness in psychological preparation and adjustment of inexperienced young gymnasts, (Chaoyi Luo, Director of the Gymnastics Management Centre, 2016, quoted in CCTV, 2016b), globalisation played an important role. The increasingly disadvantageous influences of globalisation, and China’s lack of effective responses, constituted one of the main reasons for the poor performance at the 2016 Games in particular for a judged sport discipline. China’s ineffective and slow response to changes and new trends in international artistic gymnastics is evidenced in the following three ways.

First, China’s power in the FIG was, to some extent, eroded. Although China retained its representation on the Executive Committee and the Men’s and Women’s Technical Committees, senior and more influential officials including Gao Jian (a FIG Executive Committee Member from 2008 to 2012) and Yan Ninan (a FIG Women’s Technical Committee Member from 2000 to 2012, with the status of First Vice President of the Committee between 2004 and 2008), were replaced with new and relatively less experienced faces (CGA, 2012a; FIG, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). Moreover, China lost its vice presidency in the Women’s Technical Committee, downgraded to ordinary committee member.

Although the change was not drastic, it was still able to create difficulty for China to maintain its influence in new rule making. Chinese elite artistic gymnasts became increasingly vulnerable to biased scoring, conservative routine designs that
are unwelcomed (GAS, 2016a, 2016c) by international judges, and restrictions on China’s traditional routines and skills. At Rio, judges tended to be fastidious when scoring on China’s traditional advantages, while European and American gymnasts’ strengths were encouraged by the new rules.

Chinese gymnasts are particularly good at turns. However, the FIG has kept rectifying the rules to restrict China’s advantages. In the Rio Olympiad, the new rule stipulated that more than three turns within a routine lead to deduction. The requirement for the angles of turns also became extremely fastidious. Europeans still hold the discursive power and voice inside the FIG … Taking our advantage events women’s uneven bars and men’s parallel bars as instances, somersaults and flying in women’s uneven bars, which are the expertise of European and American gymnasts, are promoted by the FIG, while our strength of long radius turns are subjected to very harsh and strict assessment by judges according to the new rule. Concerning men’s parallel bars, turns became a new trend appreciated by the FIG, while China’s advantage arm-based skills became unvalued (Jin Baocheng, a senior Chinese sports commentator, quoted in CCTV, 2016e).

Second, China’s response to this ever-changing and increasingly unfavourable global context tended to be inactive and inadequate. There was a general consensus amongst GAS that China’s lack of innovation, compared with other nations, was the main culprit. The then Director of GAS, Liu Peng, admitted, in the press conference summarising China’s performance at the 2016 Olympics, that ‘rule changes in certain sports (most notably artistic gymnastics and shooting) had also had an impact on training and China’s participation’ and ‘China realised that it had not kept up with overseas developments and innovation trends, and failed to understand and master the new rules and trends accurately and adequately’ (CCTV, 2016d).
As a beneficiary of the non-maximum scoring system since the Beijing Olympiad, China still held to the dominant philosophy of pursuing high difficulty routines. Chinese gymnasts had attempted the highest levels of difficulty, but this led to a lack of quality execution, in particular on the part of inexperienced debutante gymnasts, and China’s falls and mistakes far exceeded those of its major rivals (He, 2017). During a media interview after the Rio Olympics, the Director of the NGMC, Chaoyi Luo (2016, quoted in China News, 2016) admitted that Chinese elite gymnastics coaches and athletes ‘did not fully master the scoring requirements of the FIG, which led to an incorrect direction and focus in the training’, and that China had failed to balance difficulty, quality and individual artistic expression.

The lesson learnt was that ‘the less satisfactory results from specific sports (most notably artistic gymnastics) reminded us that no one can rely on past glories and keep winning without further efforts’, as the then Director of GAS and Chief of the Chinese Delegation at Rio de Janeiro 2016, Liu Peng, remarked in Xinhua News Agency (quoted in Reuters, 2016). This directly highlighted the complacency of Chinese elite artistic gymnastics in the aftermath of London 2012. The then FIG president, Bruno Grandi, also explicitly stated during a media interview that Chinese gymnasts had failed to advance with the times and their team was lagging behind that of Japan in imagination and creativity, with China remaining ‘trapped in a robotic style of training’ (Daily Mail, 2016).

Third, a nation’s elite sport performance is increasingly conditioned by other nations’ performances. The intensification of international competition has become a feature in international elite artistic gymnastics, occasioned by a burgeoning number of nations investing in this sport discipline. The number of participating countries at Olympic artistic gymnastics competition rose from 29 at Barcelona 1992, to 42 at
There has also been a further increase in the number of national federations in the FIG, from 128 in 2007 to 148 in 2017 (144 affiliate and four associate, FIG, 2017e). On the one hand, this manifested the FIG’s success in further promoting the globalisation of gymnastics, but, on the other, posed new challenges for traditional artistic gymnastics superpowers including China.

The strongest threat and challenge came from Japan and the UK in China’s traditional men’s events, particularly the men’s team all-round (Japan and the UK won gold and silver respectively in Rio, ahead of China). Regarding the women’s events, the USA exercised its ‘hegemony’ in almost all six events, while Russia began to recover from its low point at the Beijing Games. Moreover, the FIG encouraged the participation and, more importantly, development in expertise in individual apparatuses (CCTV, 2012), which benefited a range of nations less capable of establishing holistic competitiveness in team and individual all-around events. The impact was highlighted by the progress or revival of countries such as the Netherlands in men’s horizontal bar and women’s balance beam, Greece in men’s rings, Brazil in men’s floor exercise and rings, Switzerland in women’s vault, and North Korea in both men’s and women’s vaults, further limiting China chance of success. For the first time in history, China failed to win a medal in any of the ten individual apparatus events at Rio 2016 (the only two medals coming from the men’s and women’s team all-around). In brief, China was ineffective in addressing the challenge from a wide range of competitors. As the then Director of GAS Liu Peng reflected on the overall performance of Chinese delegation, which was applicable to elite artistic gymnastics,

China misjudged the situation and underestimated challenges and difficulties at Rio de Janeiro 2016…There have been a mounting number of nations
valuing and heavily investing in Olympic medal success. As a corollary, the
standard for international elite sport has been elevated and the competition has
become increasingly intense. We have not done well in understanding and
catching up with the intensification of competition and rapid development of
international elite sport, and in following an internationally leading and new
training and athlete management method. We lag behind in training ideas and
philosophy, method innovation and management (quoted in COC, 2016).

Although the exogenous environment was challenging and, to some extent,
disadvantageous, China’s ineffective response was more decisive. Confronted with
the further expanded reach of the FIG on a global scale and ever-intensified global
competition, China failed to change or effectively adapt to the changing international
elite artistic gymnastics environment in the aftermath of London 2012, thereby
demonstrating Chinese artistic gymnastics’ passive response to the globalising context
of the FIG-led high-performance artistic gymnastics. This is most notably manifested
by China’s lack of innovation and ineffectiveness in evaluating global context, rival
nations development and in catching up with the global trends. China’s passive
response at this period was characterised by a lack of proactivity, by relative
‘inability’ (Houlihan, 2015: 569) to change the external environment led by the FIG
and by ineffectiveness in adapting to this changing environment.

Conclusion

The trajectory of China’s responses to international elite artistic gymnastics has been
dynamic rather than static or rigid, following a thread encapsulated as passive-
participative-conflictual-participative-passive. Each stage has its distinctive features
regarding the character and driving forces of China’s responses to international
artistic gymnastics, and these varying responses have led to China’s varying
performances at each stage (see Figure 1). For example, China’s participative response in the 1960s differed in characteristics and scope from that during the period between the early 1970s and 2012, as illustrated by China’s limited degree of global involvement (mainly confined to the Communist bloc with limited exposure to the FIG-led competitions and little negotiating power within the FIG) in the former period. Another manifestation was China’s more unmediated reception and overwhelming tendency to copy others, propelled by a fervent passion for an irresistible leading sports system leading to its passive response in the 1950s vis-à-vis a lack of ability to change and adapt to the ever-changing external environment.

Regarding reach, the IF (FIG) and successful nations’ role should be noted. As the international governing body leading the development of elite artistic gymnastics and making rules of the competitions at the Olympic Games and the World Championships, the FIG is the most important facilitator in promoting the globalisation of high-performance artistic gymnastics across the world. It fundamentally influences the direction of elite artistic gymnastics development in its member states, in particular those harbouring the ambition to succeed on the international gymnastics stage. The reach of the FIG has extended significantly from the 1950s to the modern era, and its global influence is still growing rapidly, as evidenced by the significant increase in the number of its affiliate members and the number of nations participating in gymnastics at the Olympic Games. In most cases, throughout the course of the development of elite artistic gymnastics in China since the country became a FIG member in 1956 (with the exception of the Cultural Revolution period), China subjected itself to the scope, or reach, of FIG-led artistic gymnastics activities within which the nation can pursue excellence and realise a wide
range of policy objectives in relation to sport. This has necessitated interaction
between globalisation and the responses of China’s elite artistic gymnastics.

However, a state can maintain a certain degree of autonomy in choosing a
detailed pathway towards responding to this increasingly globalising context while
simultaneously striving for success. A common practice is learning from others,
particularly successful nations which is a thread that runs through the development of
elite artistic gymnastics in China (with the exception, once again, of the first half of
the Cultural Revolution). Significant influences have been the Soviet Union in the
1950s, Czechoslovakia in the 1960s (for women’s artistic gymnastics), Japan in the
early 1970s (for men’s artistic gymnastics) and Romania (for women’s floor exercise
in the contemporary era). In particular, the Soviet model, as a highly successful
‘template’, left an indelible imprint on many Communist countries, including China,
and later, on the approach of many Western countries’ to the development of elite
artistic gymnastics. Therefore, in addition to the fundamental role of the IOC and Ifs,
successful countries have acted as facilitators in disseminating both FIG standards and
leading methods and thoughts, and hence promoted the globalisation of specific sports.

But a nation’s elite sport development and its responses to a globalisation of
elite sport are fundamentally directed by its own values and its attitudes towards
globalisation. While the focus of this article is on a specific country’s response to
globalisation, the importance of the actions of any state in framing a nation’s direction
and character of response cannot be underrated. Political and diplomatic conditions
and events, including China’s ‘attachment’ to the Soviet Union, the Sino-Soviet split,
the Cultural Revolution, ping-pong diplomacy, China’s improved relations with
capitalist countries, the introduction of the reform and opening-up policy, and
Beijing’s success in bid for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, combined with
significantly increased national wealth, have all exerted far-reaching influence over China’s response to international elite artistic gymnastics. The most significant, and perhaps extreme, manifestation of China’s conflictual response to globalisation resulted, of course, from exogenous factors during the first half of the Cultural Revolution.

Although ostensibly these factors might seem to be less significant in serving as constraints in the global involvement of elite artistic gymnastics in China in the contemporary context, this fact alone is another illustration of the impact of a more liberal political and diplomatic context, and improved economic conditions. China’s most recent decline at the 2016 Olympic Games and its largely ineffective response to the ever-changing global context can be attributed more to sport factors. Despite the high degree of consistency in Chinese government’s material support for elite sport in general and elite artistic gymnastics in particular, factors associated with other domestic sports factors also influence the character and outcome of a nation’s response to globalisation. In April 2017, in the wake of the relatively poor performance of the entire Chinese delegation, the GAS replaced the head coaches of the national teams of those sports that had experienced a sharp decrease in gold medal performances at Rio; these included artistic gymnastics, shooting and badminton. In the case of artistic gymnastics, the head coach who was dismissed had steered Chinese elite artistic gymnastics for 20 years (ifeng, 2017). Clearly these measures were prompted by the GAS’s lack of satisfaction with the leadership of these sports. Indeed, the GAS has long been committed to the *Invite In and Go Out* (Zheng, 2016: 595) policy, according to which global communication and accurate and timely understandings of global trends are overriding requirements for all Olympic sports teams. Compared to sports such as athletics, cycling and swimming which, to varying
extents, have followed international trends and exploited external factors to achieve success or, at least, progress in recent years, artistic gymnastics had tended to be more hermetically sealed and lagged behind in terms of global vision with regard to training and management philosophy and methods. For this, the leaders and key coaches of the NGMC could hardly be absolved from responsibility.

Houlihan’s (1994) notions of the reach of and response to globalisation has utility in analysing the trajectory of elite artistic gymnastics in China and, in particular, China’s varying responses to international artistic gymnastics. All three types of response, namely passive, participative and conflictual, are evident in the development of elite artistic gymnastics in China since its inception. However, our research transcends the relatively discrete nature of three types of responses in Houlihan’s (1994) original identification of the pattern of globalisation. More specifically, a full coverage of the development of elite artistic gymnastics in China suggests that nations’ responses to globalisation in the context of elite sport development are dynamic rather than rigid or static.

This article analyses the trajectory of the impact of globalisation and of a non-Western nation’s response in terms of attitudes and strategies/approaches to the performance of a particular, yet significant, Olympic sport discipline through an in-depth case study covering a lengthy time span. States need not be passive recipients of globalisation in an elite sport context and how to establish and more importantly to maintain competiveness in a particular sport by effectively reacting to and exploiting globalisation and for a substantial period of time is both appealing and challenging to any state that values elite sport success, in particular against the backdrop of the intensified ‘global sporting arms race’ (Oakley and Green, 2001, quoted in De Bosscher et al., 2008: 13). Therefore, this article may provide some useful insights
regarding why different responses are manifested by different countries at different periods from a non-Western perspective, and more importantly how a country that desires elite sport success can effectively respond in order to optimise its performance and avoid performance decline because of choosing an inappropriate response.

Notes

1. The distinction between gymnastics and artistic gymnastics should be clarified. Although often used interchangeably, it should be noted that gymnastics is a sport comprising three disciplines including artistic gymnastics, rhythmic gymnastics, and trampoline (International Olympic Committee, IOC, 2016). Consistent with the IOC terminology, this article focuses on artistic gymnastics only and therefore rhythmic gymnastics and trampoline are not included.

2. In this article, ‘China’ refers to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), established in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party. Periods prior to this are not covered.

3. Taking cultural, political and economic definitions together, despite slight differences, there is a general consensus that the Western world includes the 28 member states of the European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA), the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Statistics Norway, 2017). Accordingly, non-Western nations refer to Asia, Africa, Latin America, Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand and non-EU/EEA European nations.

4. In this article, international artistic gymnastics refers to the global context of high-performance, or elite, artistic gymnastics activities and competitions (most notably the Olympic Games and the World Championships), led by the FIG. The Olympic Games is the most significant stage for international artistic gymnastics.
5. China’s six fortress sports/disciplines at the Summer Olympic Games are: diving, weightlifting, artistic gymnastics, table tennis, shooting, and badminton.

6. The non-maximum scoring system refers to the reformed code of points system introduced by the FIG and applied in all FIG-led artistic gymnastics competitions including the Olympic Games and the World Championships since 2006. Different from the ‘Perfect 10’ code adopted prior to 2006, according to which a single routine could obtain a maximum score of 10.00, the non-maximum scoring system comprises the E-score (execution) and D-score (difficulty). Because D-score is open-ended, in theory, gymnasts can obtain unlimited points. But in practice, the range of the scores for single gymnastics routines of top eight gymnasts at the Olympic Games is largely between 14.000 and 16.5000, with variations amongst different apparatuses.

7. Because of training methods and physical characteristics, Chinese female gymnasts tend to achieve peak performance at a very young age (often below 16) and experience a sharp decline in performance thereafter, largely because of their physical development. Therefore, the FIG’s rule that gymnasts competing in the Olympic Games must be at least 16 years old has been particularly detrimental to China’s competitiveness in female events.
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