Modifying Tradition: Understanding Organizational Change in Chinese Elite Sport Training at the Grassroots Level

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Abstract: This research examines the organizational change in Chinese elite sport training at the grassroots level, which is perceived as foundational to and crucial for the development of sustainable competitive advantage at the Olympics. Predicted on an in-depth single case study design linked to qualitative research, this study pursued a “thick description” of the process of change in Shanghai elite sport training by identifying the impetus for change and factors moderating the change process. All qualitative data were sourced from semi-structured interviews and official and semi-official documents. Participants included current sport leaders; officials/administrators; senior, including head and non-head, coaches; and renowned Chinese social science scholars who either specialize in or are familiar with the elite sport training scene in general and the landscape at the grassroots level. The key findings, on the basis of organizational change theory, were that the internal and external political pressures are strongly linked to the growing concern about athlete performance management, the alignment of elite sport training with the sport service industry, and limited financial resources; the functional pressures emerge from the broadening of the talent pool of money-consuming sports and newly added Olympic sports; and other fields’ successful practices, the unlimited registration rule, and a virtuous cycle of training contribute to organizational change.

Keywords: China; Olympic Games; elite sport training; organizational change; integrative change model

1. Introduction

Organizational change is a major area of interest within the organizational sciences, prompting Lawler et al. [1] to consider the topic to be at the heart of organizational analysis. It is defined as any planned or unplanned response to internal or external pressures and forces and can be developmental, transitional, or transformational in nature [2]. The organizational science literature supports that so-called radical change from existing “old” organizational template to “new” template is necessary for firms and non-profit organizations alike, in order to realize performance improvement [3,4]. Notably, this complicated and multi-level change process is widespread within both academia and sport organizations. Analogous to business firms competing in different markets, elite sport organizations’ interest in organizational change has burgeoned under the reality that the Olympic medal market is not infinite and not necessarily ever-expanding. Whilst 207 nations participated in the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Summer Olympics, only 59 nations won at least one gold medal (of the 307 available), and only 86 nations won a medal (of the 973 available) [5]. Thus, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) cannot afford to relax, even for a moment, its concentration on the refinement of training for its “diplomats in tracksuits”, especially considering its surprising decline in performance at the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Summer Olympics, the intense competition that lies ahead in Tokyo in 2021, and the high expectations for the Beijing and Zhangjiakou 2022 Winter Olympics [6].

Following institutional theory, the construct of an organizational template in such elite sport contexts should be understood as a regulatory network representing an institutional...
logic that guides the beliefs and cultural practices of social actors of a given organizational system [7–9]. This theoretical concept is often summarized under the notion of governance structures that comprise all institutional regulations for social interactions, thereby determining both incentives and sanctions of social actions [8]. When the underlying institutional logic is purposefully altered toward modified governance structures, a radical organizational change process is then initiated that might lead to a new organizational template. However, the basic question arises as to whether the social system follows this path of change and which institutional factors influence the change process [8,9].

In both dominant and emerging sport powers, training at the grassroots level lays the foundation for producing a successful squad of elite athletes. Thus, organizational change at the grassroots level is of great significance for higher training levels and warrants in-depth study. Unlike in the Western world, as a relic of the planned economy, a traditional bureaucratic and government-led approach was adopted in Chinese elite sport training [5,10]. Youth spare time sport schools (YSTSSs) are fully funded by the government and are positioned at the bottom of the Chinese elite sport training pyramid [11–13]. This overlaps with the view of Zheng et al. [6] (p. 81), who argued that national teams are the “flagship”, provincial teams are the “backbone and core” and grassroots YSTSSs are the “foundation”. In brief, elite sport training at the grassroots level is highly regarded as an essential and fundamental process. Yet, it is strangely neglected by many writers on Chinese elite sport development.

Within the Chinese elite sport landscape, since 2015, the Shanghai Administration of Sports (SAS) has been gradually promoting the integration of social forces into traditional government-controlled elite sport training [14], which was previously only a rhetorical ambition considering that the government’s dominance in elite sport training was supposed to be challenged by the integration of social forces. To elaborate, sport clubs in Shanghai run by social forces are permitted to register with the YSTSSs located in each district, further extending the pool of young hopefuls. For the first time in Chinese history, social forces are being warmly welcomed on a large scale to operate elite sport training per se rather than to simply and directly sponsor elite teams and/or athletes. It has been reported that elite athletes from sport clubs run by social forces won 11 gold medals on behalf of Shanghai at the second Youth Games of the PRC [15].

The aim of this study was to examine the organizational change in Chinese elite sport training with a focus on the grassroots level by identifying the impetus for change and the factors that moderate the change process. Specifically, this research pursues two research questions:

1. What are the impetuses for changing from an old template to a new template?
2. What are the factors that moderate the change process?

2. Elite Sport Training in China and an Integrative Model of Organizational Change in Sport

2.1. Institutional Analyses on Chinese Elite Sport Training

The governance structures, governance challenges, regulations, and inherent flaws of Chinese elite sport training are examined in static analyses. These studies are commonly termed institutional analyses [7,16]. More recently, Zheng et al. [13] concluded that the PRC enjoys a well-organized and stratified three-level training system (see Figure 1). Officially established in 1963, when the then Sports Ministry promulgated the Regulations of Outstanding Athletes and Teams [12] (p. 516), it was recognized as one of the most effective training systems in the world and perceived as the core of Juguo Tizhi (precisely and explicitly interpreted as “whole country support for elite sport system”), underpinning the PRC’s continuous presence as one of the three best-performing nations at the Summer Olympics [5,10,17].
Regarding the governance structure, as depicted in Figure 1, provincial sports bureaus (PSBs) run provincial elite teams on behalf of both the General Administration of Sport (GAS), in the vertical direction, and the respective provincial governments (PGs), horizontally [18] (p. 688). PSBs are accountable to their respective PGs rather than the GAS because PSBs are funded mainly by PGs. The interorganizational conflict between PSBs and the GAS and the governance instrument role that the National Games of China play have been carefully examined by Zheng et al. [13]. A more detailed clarification would exceed the scope of this article. In addition, international studies pertaining to Chinese elite sport training have heavily criticized the sacrifice of formal education that would prepare athletes for life outside of sport [19] and the violation of the human rights of child athletes in contemporary China [20]. To summarize, although the general trend in institutional analyses regarding elite sport training in China tends toward rudimentary descriptions, these analyses delineate the basic facts, provide considerable insights, and lay the groundwork for subsequent studies aiming to understand the greater details from a sound theoretical perspective.

2.2. Chinese Elite Sport Training, Social Forces, and Commercialization

Recent evidence (e.g., [6,11,21,22]) has suggested that there have been, to varying degrees, advancements in the commercialization of sports such as football, table tennis, badminton, and volleyball (see Figure 2). As Ma and Kurscheidt [23] (p. 6) noted, from an economic viewpoint, commercialization can be explicitly perceived as a change in the structures of resource allocation toward greater adoption of market mechanisms. Undoubtedly, the commercialization of sport in China needs to be interpreted within its wider political and economic contexts. Since the early 2010s, the continuing economic downturn has compelled the Chinese central government to face the dilemma that the traditional Chinese economy is overly dependent on the manufacturing industry and massive exports [24–26].
Against this backdrop, the new service-oriented growth policy exerted a marked influence on sport development in China. Passive sport consumption was targeted by facilitating the development of professional sports, with football at the center of this strategy [24,27,28]. Following the institutional approach of Kurscheidt and Deitersen-Wieber [29], this policy mix of football and economic policy adheres to the trend of the Western approach to sport governance, taking full advantage of social forces and private funding. Unfortunately, social forces’ involvement in professional football is largely concentrated in the competition system (the Chinese Super League and the AFC Champions League) rather than the training system (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image-url)

**Figure 2.** The interaction among Chinese elite sport, social forces, and commercialization. Source: based on Liu et al. [25], Ma and Kurscheidt [23], and Zheng et al. [6].

For *skillful* social forces (e.g., real estate enterprises that provide soft loans to professional clubs), good performance in the competition system functions as an effective stepping stone to obtain invaluable governmental support, such as tax reductions and preferential policies [26]. In contrast to the situation for the pacesetter of football, a *politically led logic* has left an indelible imprint on the commercialization process of table tennis, badminton, and volleyball in China. Detailed scrutiny by Tan and Houlihan [11] uncovered that a *double-track mechanism* was introduced to legitimize athletes’ and coaches’ substantial income from social forces in order to prevent athletes from going abroad and to enhance their passion for training. Social forces’ involvement is primarily in the competition system in this case since the training system is firmly dominated by governmental entities. In addition, as representatives of China’s traditional “fortress” sports/disciplines, swimming and gymnastics also benefit greatly from commercial sponsorship. In view of all that has been mentioned thus far, research that examines the interaction between social forces and elite training at the grassroots level in China remains relatively uncharted territory.

### 2.3. Theoretical Framework: An Integrative Model of Organizational Change in Sport

Internal and external pressures exist for sport organizations to remain effective in a competitive marketplace [30]. Similarly, Kurscheidt and Deitersen-Wieber [29] conclude that the examination of every sport organization must occur within its institutional environment, which is characterized by the interaction of the political, economic, and sports subsystems of society. Although many single theoretical lenses have been employed to
understand the nature of the change process, Tolbert [31] (p. 12) argues that “organizational phenomena are much too complex to be described adequately by any single theoretical approach”. Hence, Cunningham [32] proposed a more Gestalt-oriented perspective on overall change by merging four theoretical approaches: institutionalism, population ecology, strategic choice, and resource dependence. In particular, Ma and Kurscheidt [16] highlighted the integrative change model’s usefulness in examining organizational change in the Chinese Football Association.

2.3.1. Political, Functional, and Social Pressures

Drawing on institutionalism, Cunningham [32] explained that political, functional, and social pressures contribute to a deinstitutionalization process. First, political pressure arises internally and externally. Internal pressures occur when there are concerns about organizational performance [32] or when the performance of the organization is questioned by internal members. External political pressures are generated by dependencies with external organizations [2]. The practices actualized by external organizations always exert impacts on dependent organizations [33]. Second, functional pressure concerns the efficacy of the technical functions of organizations. The rise of new information usually generates functional pressures to improve efficiency or effectiveness [32]. Third, social pressures are also recognized to be antecedents of the deinstitutionalization process. They determine whether the focal organization is consistent with institutionalized norms and whether institutionalized practices erode or are discontinued [34].

2.3.2. Moderating Factors

Cunningham [32] identified entropy and inertia as two moderating factors that can accelerate or inhibit the organizational change process, respectively. Inertia is introduced by traditional practices, fear of change, and personal investments with the capacity to slow the rate of change within organizations [2,33,34]. By contrast, entropy can be interpreted explicitly as positive energy stemming from supportive attitudes towards organizational change [34].

2.3.3. Value Commitments

Once the organizational change process moves forward, with reference to the notion originally identified by Greenwood and Hinings [35], two types of value commitment emerge. Specifically, if several members are dedicated to the old organizational template and others are inclined to agree with an alternative template, competitive commitment surfaces [33]. When all organizational members are attracted by the new template and unanimous approval to abandon the old template is achieved, reformative commitment occurs [35].

2.3.4. Late-Stage Moderating Factors

In the final stage, Cunningham [32] identifies four late-stage moderating factors that impact the switch to a new organizational template: capacity for action, resource dependence, power dependence, and an available alternative. First, as the name suggests, capacity for action can be interpreted as the focal organization’s capacity to manage the whole change process [16]. Second, as Kurscheidt and Deitersen-Wieber [29] noted, resource dependence is conditioned by the emphasis or negligence of the institutional environment. Third, power dependence is understood as the influence exerted on the switch by internal or external individuals or groups. It is noteworthy that the standstill of the change process could be modified by power dependency [32]. Last, the availability of alternatives refers to the number of new templates that an organization has to consider [33].
3. Research Methods
3.1. Research Design

A qualitative case study is adopted for the following reasons. First, in line with Maitlis’s [36] argument, a qualitative research design is adequate for investigating dynamic processes in organizations that are typically sensitive to individual interpretation. Second, a qualitative case study’s emphasis on gathering thorough and in-depth information on a setting is beneficial to the Gestalt-oriented understanding of organizational change in its social context [2,37]. Three principles of case selection explain the focus on the YSTSS in Yangpu district in Shanghai. First, the YSTSS in Yangpu district is a major supplier of Shanghai elite athletes. Its remarkable performance has even been endorsed by the GAS, and it has been ranked first class among national elite sport training bases [38,39]. Hence, the selection of the YSTSS in Yangpu is congruent with the principle of being “significant” [40] (p. 39). Second, the YSTSS in Yangpu is an eligible “typical/representative” [41] or “exemplifying” [42] case since the SAS and GAS have held it up as a model for the involvement of social forces in the training system [38,39,43,44]. Third, as the spread of COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented restrictions on social engagement and the closure of schools and universities, the principle of “convenience and feasibility” [40,45] is fulfilled because of the researchers’ existing network within the Shanghai elite sport training system, knowledge of elite sport in Shanghai, linguistic proficiency in English, and Chinese and familiarity with the document sources.

3.2. Case Context: The YSTSS in Yangpu District

As illustrated in Figure 3, Shanghai elite sport features a three-tiered pyramid for sourcing and training athletes. At the bottom of the hierarchy, the YSTSS in every district is supposed to develop local sport talent (the third-string team) to support the municipal YSTSS and the team of every sport management center in Shanghai (the second-string team). The YSTSS in Yangpu district was established in 1958 and covers 23 sports/disciplines in total [46]. The average training time for students who are selected into the YSTSS in Yangpu district is approximately 3 h per day. Before the involvement of social forces, internal competitions were normally organized to select the best athletes to participate in competitions on behalf of the Yangpu YSTSS [46]. However, since 2015, athletes from the clubs operated by social forces have also been invited to join its internal competitions. Facing intense competition from these athletes, the YSTSS athletes are expected to devote more energy to daily training to win the few competition qualification spots available. For the sports/disciplines that require enormous investments for training, for instance, equestrian and golf, it currently relies overwhelmingly on social forces. Thus, unlike under the old model, the YSTSS in Yangpu is capable of providing golf players to second-string teams. More importantly, for the new Summer Olympic sports/disciplines, such as rock climbing, the Yangpu YSTSS previously suggested that wrestling athletes accept training in rock climbing. However, with the help of the social forces registered with this YSTSS, several young rock-climbing hopefuls have been brought into the talent pool.
3.3. Participants and Data Collection

Regarding how and which material was gathered to inform the empirical case, the data collection rested on 13 semi-structured interviews and on document analysis. For the semi-structured interviews, a combination of “judgmental sampling” [47] and “snowball sampling” [48] was utilized to identify potential “insiders”. Judgmental sampling guaranteed that interviewees (e.g., the deputy director of the SAS, the director of the training department, and the senior coaches of the YSTSS in Yangpu district) could provide abundant first-hand information. Then, the snowball sampling strategy was added on the basis of the recommendations of the interviewees. Table 1 provides more detail on interviewees’ identifiers, organizations, and positions.

The interview schedule was consistent with the two research questions. It also allowed for triangulation (of the responses) among interviewees from different backgrounds. All interviewees gave consent and signed a translated Chinese version of the ethical checklist. All 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese, and unlike in Tan and Bairner [22], all participants were receptive to the use of recording devices. This was permitted because there were no political or business restrictions on freedom of speech concentrating on the ideological correctness of the topic. Interviews lasted in duration from 30 min to 2 h.

As “windows onto social and organizational realities” [42] (p. 560), official and semi-official documents from relevant governing bodies (e.g., the GAS, the SAS, the YSB) and from influential Chinese national (e.g., Xinhua News Agency, People.cn) and local Shanghai (e.g., Xinmin, Eastday) media made up the secondary data. Additionally, Chinese scholarly articles published in Mandarin on Shanghai elite sport training were retrieved through the China National Knowledge Infrastructure, the national equivalent of the Web of Science. Although these academic articles, peer reviewed by Chinese experts, do not meet international standards of methodological rigor and their general style is more essayistic without precise heuristics [18], they provided ample observations, facts, and figures that were analyzed through the theoretical lens developed here.
Table 1. Profiles of the interviewees.

| Interviewee Identifier | Organization                        | Position                                                                 |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A                      | Shanghai University                 | Professor of Sport Management Studies, one of the most renowned sports researchers in mainland PRC |
| B                      | Shanghai Sport University           | Professor of Sport Studies with expertise in elite sport training in Shanghai |
| C                      | Suzhou University                   | Professor of Sport Studies with expertise in elite sport training in the Yangtze River Delta |
| D                      | YSTSS in Yangpu District            | Director of the training department                                      |
| E                      | YSTSS in Yangpu District            | A senior coach who has served the Shanghai Team for more than 10 years    |
| F                      | YSTSS in Yangpu District            | A coach who has served the YSTSS for more than 5 years (female)           |
| G                      | YSTSS in Yangpu District            | A senior coach who has served the YSTSS for more than 10 years Head of the youth training department |
| H                      | SAS                                 | Deputy director responsible for Yangpu elite sport training             |
| I                      | Sports Bureau of Yangpu District    | Deputy director responsible for elite sport training                      |
| J                      | Social sport club registered with the Yangpu YSTSS | Club owner |
| K                      | Social sport club registered with the Yangpu YSTSS | Club owner |
| L                      | Social sport club registered with the Yangpu YSTSS | Club owner |
| M                      | Social sport club registered with the Yangpu YSTSS | Club owner |

3.4. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Prior to analyzing the data, all participants were offered a copy of the transcripts for verification and correction [49]. The qualitative data analysis process conformed to the thematic analysis approach [50]. Back translation was conducted for all non-English data to ensure the quality of the data. Interview transcriptions were compared to the audio recordings to check for any inconsistencies. Furthermore, the identification and coding of the themes were performed deductively on the basis of the given categories and well-defined constructs of the theoretical framework [51]. The thematic analysis closely followed the process of reflexivity [52], with a circular sequence of reading, extracting, challenging, and rewriting across the project team.

4. Findings

4.1. Internal and External Political Pressures

Our first research aim was to determine the impetus for the change from an old template to a new template. According to the integrative change model proposed by Cunningham [32], we took three antecedents into consideration: political, functional, and social pressures. Political pressures primarily comprise two types: internal and external pressures. Regarding the internal political pressures, a senior coach inside the Yangpu YSTSS commented:

“Before the involvement of the social forces, our athletes admitted a lack of motivation and a feeling of sloth. Negatively influenced by the One-Child Policy, they, including the students from outside provinces, were largely spoiled by their parents and grandparents. The majority of the time, I had to make a phone call to their parents, kind of pleading with them again and again to bring their children here for three hours of training after school. I have no choice since my monthly salary and annual bonus are closely related to the performance of the athletes that I train. By convention, an internal selection is held to choose the athletes who are eligible to participate in the municipal competition on behalf of the Yangpu YSTSS. As far as I am concerned, this internal selection is meaningless”.

(Interviewee E).

Apparently, for the YSTSS in Yangpu district, internal political pressures arise when there are issues with performance. As the key internal stakeholder of the YSTSS, coaches
are unsatisfied with the status quo of athletes’ performance management. Further, external political pressures occur on the basis of dependencies with other organizations. On 20 October 2014, the Guidelines on Promotion of Sport Industry and Sport Consumption (hereafter the Promotion Guidelines) were enacted by the State Council; they are commonly considered the milestone signaling the take-off of the Chinese sport industry [6,25]. The most pressing attention is given to one of its ambitious targets, i.e., to achieve a gross output of the sport industry exceeding RMB 5 trillion by 2025 [6], consolidating the prime status of sport as an economic development generator.

In December 2017, the Guidelines on the Promotion of Elite Sport Training were enacted by the joint efforts of the GAS and the Ministry of Education, which emphasized the salience of the involvement of social forces in elite sport training [53]. More importantly, on 2 September 2019, the State Council issued the Outline of Sport Power Construction. Within the outline, the determination to establish the sport industry as one of the pillar industries was explicitly re-emphasized [54]. Notably, all three policies demonstrated that mass sport participation is rediscovered in the Chinese sport landscape, not only to tackle public health issues but also because of the private business of sport clubs [25]. As Interviewee J argued:

“In seeking to cope with the acute structural imbalance between sporting goods manufacturing and the sport service sector, policy No. 46 (Promotion Guidelines) encourages the numerous social forces to set up and run sport clubs. We insist that there is no conflict between developing the sport service industry and elite sport training. These two are not mutually exclusive. Instead, we uphold that, broadly, elite sport training and the sport service industry could be well aligned. We require the YSYSS in every district to allow the registration of social sport clubs. If social sport clubs identify young hopefuls during their daily operation, they can provide them to the YSYSS in the corresponding district and further broaden the talent pool, which is vital for the construction of sport power”. (Interviewee J).

Additionally, a suspicion regarding the governing bodies’ generally positive attitudes towards the involvement of social forces arises from the fact that after successfully challenging the dominance of the USA at the Summer Olympics, the PRC started to scale back its support for elite sport, much as Sweden did [55] (p. 343). However, Interviewee B provided a clarification on this suspicion when highlighting the limited financial resources for elite sport development in Shanghai, which was also confirmed by Interviewee H and Interviewee I:

“Compared to the old times, we are carrying much more burdens on our heads. Currently, the actual expenditures on catering for the athletes are almost 10 times greater than before. The travelling costs are even approximately 50 times. This does not mean we are prepared to cut down the financial investment in elite sport training. This situation will definitely not happen in the foreseeable future. What we really need is to make full use of the social forces”. (Interviewee B).

Hence, the conclusion here is consistent with Houlihan and Zheng’s [55] (p. 343) argument that once governments identify elite sport success as a policy objective, they are locked into a path from which it becomes increasingly difficult to deviate. External governing bodies, for instance, the SAS and YSB, are willing to align the development of the sport service industry with elite sport training. Social forces are also expected to rescue governing bodies from the conflict between the increasing costs of elite sport training and limited financial resources. Hence, the YSTSS in Yangpu district was under external political pressure from other organizations to permit the registration of sport clubs operated by social forces.

4.2. Functional and Social Pressures

The YSTSS in Yangpu district has never effectively channeled young hopefuls to the second-string teams in two types of sports/disciplines, reflecting, to some extent,
a functional defect (Interviewee D). The first type is sports/disciplines that require an enormous investment in training, for instance, equestrian and golf:

“The YSTSS in Yangpu district has constantly suffered from a reserve shortage of equestrian and golf talents. However, one fact that cannot be ignored is that an increasing number of equestrian and golf clubs operated by social forces have emerged in Shanghai. The only technically feasible way for the Yangpu YSTSS to address this functional defect is to absorb the young hopefuls who were trained at the equestrian and golf clubs run by social forces. In contrast, social forces are always eager to be recognized as “legitimized” members of the YSTSS capable of participating in municipal competitions on behalf of the YSTSS. If they are strong enough, the gold medals they earn will bring them a good training reputation”. (Interviewee A).

Gong [56] (p. 447) remarked that many Chinese have taken to the idea that winning is everything and have contributed to a gold medal fever that strengthens the PRC’s nationally sponsored elite sport system. Against this intense background, it is critical for social sport clubs to qualify for competitions and win gold medals to survive. In addition, with regard to the newly added Olympic sports/disciplines, Interviewee F commented:

“For example, the rock climbing, the YSTSS in Yangpu district deliberately proposed a strategy that encourages wrestling athletes to train in rock climbing in the meantime. However, the effectiveness of this countermeasure is always in doubt. Our organizational goal is to provide young talent to the upper level. Indeed, we are faced with pressure to broaden the talent pool of newly added Olympic sports/disciplines”. (Interviewee F).

In summary, the YSTSS in Yangpu district faces functional pressures pertaining to broadening the talent pools of money-consuming sports/disciplines and newly added Olympic sports/disciplines. Regarding the last antecedent of social pressures, consistent with Zheng and Chen’s [5] (p. 162) finding, we observed the public’s desire to raise the quality of Olympic gold medals to be significant. It is critical to achieve a breakthrough in internationally influential sports/disciplines, inter alia, the collective ball sports, mainly football, basketball, and volleyball [57]. Social pressures push the YSTSS in Yangpu district to rely on the training provided by sport clubs run by social force to further enlarge the talent pool:

“Sometimes, we feel embarrassed when encountering the discussion of whether China is a major sports country or a world sports power. It is evident that the public is currently highly concerned about the quality of gold medals. For example, the public is very satisfied with the performance of women’s volleyball. Indeed, what we can do is try to extend the talent pool of internationally influential sports/disciplines as far as we can. Under these circumstances, the numerous sport clubs run by social forces are warmly welcomed to register with the Yangpu YSTSS”. (Interviewee D).

Although the PRC reached its apex on home soil at the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, the public’s expectations regarding Chinese elite sport has increased, and people are eager to witness breakthroughs in international influential sports/disciplines [58,59]. As an explicitly official response, Hu Jintao, the then president of the PRC, explained the necessity of transforming from a major sports country into a world sports power [59]. In particular, for football, in 2011, the football-mad vice president Xi Jinping publicly expressed his three wishes regarding Chinese football development: for the Chinese men’s national football team to qualify for another World Cup, for the PRC to host a men’s World Cup, and for the Chinese men’s national football team to win a World Cup [60]. Xi’s three wishes bear an uncanny resemblance to the three wishes with respect to the Olympics proclaimed in Tientsin Young Men in 1908: first, that athletes would be sent to participate in the Olympic Games; second, that Chinese athletes would win an Olympic gold medal; and third, that China would host the Olympic Games [12]. In summary, social pressures with respect to the quality of gold medals that are highly endorsed and strongly supported by PRC leaders were uncovered as an important antecedent.
4.3. Moderating Factors Aiding the Change

Successful practices pertaining to the involvement of social forces in fields other than sport were mentioned as potential aids to a successful transition to the new model. Specifically, the thought behind this insight was as follows:

“Within the Chinese economic landscape and in the setting of economic prosperity, the involvement of social forces did not jeopardize our economic growth and instead was perceived as an effective approach to ensure political stability for preventing massive unemployment and labor unrest. Returning to the elite sport training domain, we are confident that the involvement of social forces in grassroots sport training is trouble-free”. (Interviewee I).

The same opinion was held by Interviewee D, who argued that the Yangpu YSTSS clearly knew that the involvement of social forces in elite sport training at the grassroots level was inevitable given social forces’ vital role in the general economic reform (Interviewee D). Echoing Ma and Kurscheidt’s [16] finding, positive or successful experiences from other domains or areas always function as essential drivers of the transition from an old template to a new template.

Another entropy factor that aided the change process was the unlimited registration rule made by the SAS. The main content of the unlimited registration rule was clearly introduced by Interviewee D:

“To be honest, for our Yangpu YSTSS, sometimes we are nervous that we cannot recruit the strongest social sport club. You may think if the social sports clubs are located in Yangpu district, they must register with our Yangpu YSTSS. No, you are wrong! There is no limit; they could complete the registration procedure in the Changning, Minhang, Jiading districts as they like”. (Interviewee D).

In addition, the positive attitudes held by the social forces who set up the sport clubs acted as the last entropy factor. Borrowing from Grix and Carmichael’s [61] notion of a virtuous cycle of sport utilized to conceptualize the underlying philosophy of current elite sports development investment, the concept of a virtuous cycle of training is proposed on the basis of the interpretation of Interviewees K, L, and M:

“We are absolutely eager to complete the registration procedure in the YSTSS in Yangpu district. This practice signals that we are eventually recognized by the governmental agency and we are part of their plan, their blueprint for the future of elite sport training. The direct benefit of registration for us is that we could obtain opportunities to compete on behalf of the Yangpu YSTSS. If we are lucky enough, one gold medal earned by an athlete who was trained in our club is the best advertisement”. (Interviewee K).

“It is understandable that parents always try to find a reliable training organization for their kids. Undoubtedly, a gold medal strongly signals that we are reliable and effective, and we can provide the best training as the gold medal winner received it before. Anyway, we are eager to help the Yangpu YSYSS make the change”. (Interviewee M).

Hence, the virtuous cycle of training holds that training success leads to recognition by the parents; this, then, boosts revenues, leading to the sustainable development of sport clubs, in turn ensuring devotion to elite sport training at the grassroots level. This virtuous cycle of training offers insight into club investors’ positive attitude, which serves as the last entropy factor for the change process.

4.4. Reformative Commitment and the Late-Stage Moderating Factor

As Cunningham’s [32] model illustrates, when all organizational members reject the current template and favor a new alternative, reformative commitment, the strongest type of commitment to change, occurs. Returning to the focal organization, all of the organizational members of the YSTSS in Yangpu favor the new alternative to involve social forces. This reformative commitment is evidenced by the coaches’ and director’s confidence that the YSTSS in Yangpu enjoys advantages that social sport clubs cannot duplicate:
“Compared to the sport clubs run by social forces, we do have a competitive advantage; for instance, we are free of charge and even offer lunch and dinner, which are also free. By contrast, the sport clubs outside are profit-driven. They always in pursuit of profits and charge the parents a lot annually.” (Interviewee G).

“For most parents, the greatest concern is about potential sporting injuries. Here, in the Yangpu YSTSS, we can provide the most experienced doctor who guarantees the best treatment of athletes if any injuries occur”. (Interviewee D).

Regarding the capacity for action, one of the late-stage moderating factors, interviewee D commented:

“It is relatively easy for us to implement the transition. The registration procedure costs nothing. It is always convenient to invite the best athletes from social sport clubs to participate in our internal selection”. (Interviewee D).

In brief, as illustrated in Figure 4, the key findings can be summarized as follows: political, functional, and social pressures are the key impetuses for organizational change in Chinese elite sport training at the grassroots level; the internal and external political pressures are strongly linked to the growing concern about athletes’ performance management, the alignment of elite sport training with the sport service industry, and limited financial resources; the functional pressures emerge from the broadening of the talent pool of money-consuming sports and newly added Olympic sports; the social pressures originate from the public’s expectations of increased Olympic gold medal quality—expectations that are highly endorsed by the leader of the PRC; other fields’ successful practices, the unlimited registration rule, and a virtuous cycle of training contribute to the rapid pace of organizational change; and reformative commitment occurs given the competitive advantages that the YSTSS enjoys with respect to the free of charge and provision of professional health treatment.

Figure 4. A summary of higher and corresponding lower order themes.
5. Discussion

In the last 30 years, Chinese elite sport has undergone increasing organizational change in the practical field. Most notably, the National Aquatics Management Center proposed a “Big National Team” to further reinforce collaboration between national and provincial teams [6] (p. 89). However, compared with the organizational change characterized by incorporating social forces on a large scale, the proposal for a “Big National Team” is less radical. With regard to Chinese elite sport training at the grassroots level, the relatively smooth transition to a new template is inextricably interwoven into the trajectories of Chinese economic revival. Meanwhile, echoing Ma and Kurscheidt’s [16] finding, positive or successful experiences from other domains or areas (e.g., economic reform) always function as essential drivers of the transition from an old template to a new template. In the same vein, following the institutional approach of Kurscheidt and Deitersen-Wieber [29], the policy mix of football and economic policy adheres to the trend of the Western approach to sport governance, taking full advantage of social forces and private funding.

A consistent theme running through many of the general and sports-specific analyses of contemporary China is the apparent contradiction between “policy rhetoric” and “on the ground reality” [6,16]. In the sport field, despite the policy rhetoric of a balance between elite sport and mass sport, the latter has often been sacrificed for the former [6]. This situation aligns perfectly with Brunsson’s [62] picture of an “organization of hypocrisy” where official “talk” is decoupled from actual “action”. The organizational change in Chinese elite sport training at the grassroots level is arguably the most salient policy area on the government agenda. Impressively, this study confirms that the organizational change at the grassroots level is not rhetorical. In particular, for the money-consuming sports/disciplines and newly added Olympic sports/disciplines, social forces are expected to rescue YSTSS from the conflict between the increasing costs of elite sport training and limited financial resources.

However, according to the findings of this study, making use of social forces does not indicate that the PRC is preparing to scale back its financial support for elite sport in the same manner as Sweden [55] (p. 343). This study is in line with Houlihan and Zheng’s [55] judgement that once governments identify elite sport success as a policy objective, they are locked into a path from which it becomes increasingly difficult to deviate. There is a general consensus among researchers that the PRC endeavors to symbolically express its overall modernization to the global public as well as to its own citizens through Olympic success [6,16]. However, although more closed than most developed countries, the PRC operates in a “world of internet and global satellite news”, indicating that the country will be “known as it is, not as it wishes to be”; this leads to a constant stream of negative press regarding its previous poor image, poor human rights record, and autocratic governance [63].

Corroborating the insight provided by Zheng and Chen [5], the expectations of the public regarding increased Olympic gold medal quality are reasonably straightforward. In the pursuit of the efficient enhancement of China’s (gold) medal performance, Chinese sport authorities rationally concentrated their limited resources on “low investment and quick return” sports or disciplines, that is, the “medal-intensive” sports or disciplines [5,6]. By stark contrast, the significance of “high investment but slow return” sports or disciplines was deliberately undermined, leading to a severe loss of public financial support for many team ball sports in a range of provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities. With the incorporation of social forces, the pool of youth hopefuls for the team ball sports could be expanded on a large scale in the foreseeable future.

This study makes academic contributions and has practical utility. Concerning its theoretical value, together with Ma and Kurscheidt’s [16] research, this study further extends Cunningham’s [32] model to the Chinese setting. Given China’s ever-rising geopolitical profile in the world and the longstanding prominence of its elite sport, the extension into the Chinese context is essential. Unlike Ma and Kurscheidt’s [16] research, which details unsuccessful organizational change in the Chinese Football Association, this
study provides a detailed examination of a smooth transition in Chinese elite sport training at the grassroots level. Notably, during the process of reflexivity [52], a circular sequence of reading, extracting, challenging, and rewriting, the Chinese case's close relationship with elite theory should arouse attention. Traditionally, elitism is deeply rooted and hence influential in many East Asian societies such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore [6] (p. 15). Although this integrated change model has already incorporated four theories, the possibility of the inclusion of elite theory should at least be taken into consideration. As discussed previously, organizational phenomena are much too complex to be described adequately by any one theoretical approach [31] (p. 12). The fact that elite theory has already been mentioned or utilized by researchers (e.g., [6,60]) in the Chinese context cannot be ignored.

Drawing support from Zheng and Chen’s [5] findings, the PRC’s approaches to sustaining its competitive advantage at the Olympics reflect Porter’s [64] (p. 147) revelation that advantage can be sustained if its sources are “widened” and “upgraded”. The involvement of social forces in elite sport training at the grassroots level could be perceived as a type of expansion in terms of “widening”.

In practical terms, the implications of this research are threefold. First, this study provides a case of successful organizational change that is likely beneficial to practitioners seeking to initiate change or development in their department or organization. Second, for other countries engulfed in the “global sporting arms race” [65], this research provides detailed information on the dynamic change in the PRC’s elite sport training at the grassroots level, which has been neglected by international scholarship. Organizational change at the grassroots level can stimulate the main competitors to consider if proactive actions need to be taken to combat the potential challenge. Third, for the social forces that want to work in the sport service industry in mainland China, the competitive advantage of the YSTSS should not be underestimated. Operated within a government-administered and government-financed framework, training at the YSTSS is free of charge, which is arguably attractive to customers.

6. Conclusions

This ad hoc systematic research examines the process of change in Chinese elite sport training at the grassroots level by identifying the impetus for change, and factors that moderated the change process from a sound theoretical perspective. The value of this research is at least threefold. First, as noted above, this research fills a gap pertaining to the examination of the change process in elite sport training in China. Second, this study contributes to the growing area of organizational change research by an extension of the integrative model of organizational change developed by Cunningham [32]. Third, this study may provide a more convincing and sobering picture reminding the main competitors of PRC’s rise and the concomitant impact on their overall performances. It also contributes to the comparative elite sport management literature by investigating the deliberate strategies and specific approaches adopted by the PRC to sustain its competitive advantage in the tide of the “global sporting arms race”.

This study comes with some limitations that, in turn, provide perspectives for future studies. First, it shares the limitations of all qualitative studies that emphasize contextual uniqueness, meaning that the aim of this research was not to seek an all-powerful formula that rigidly and mechanically applies to all contexts. Indeed, this research focalized a “thick description” of the organization change process in Shanghai elite sport training. This inherent nature provides the opportunity for researchers and practitioners to critically assess the transferability to and absorb the lessons for their own contexts. Second, future studies are encouraged to give prominence to provincial elite sport organizations in China through comparative case studies to provide richer knowledge and further advance this research stream.
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