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Towards Understanding Change-Supportive Organisational Behaviours in China: An Investigation of the 2015 Chinese National Football Reform

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Abstract

This paper investigates the influences of change recipients' supportive behaviours toward the national reform in the Chinese football sector. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews (n=29), which were conducted with change recipients from national and local football associations and commercial football clubs. Drawing on an integrated conceptual framework, the findings suggest that the change-supportive behaviours demonstrated by the change recipients were influenced and incentivised by managerial factors (i.e. management competency, communication channels, participation in decision-making, leaders' commitment to change, and principal support); and contextual factors (i.e. an amenable football environment and the perceived political pressure to change). Three variations of change-supportive behaviours were identified: a) showing understanding of the change but pessimistic about the outcome; b) supporting the change and being willing to take risks; and c) supporting the change and actively seeking alternative solutions.

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Key words: Chinese Football; Organizational Change; Change-Supportive Behaviour (CSB); Political Pressure; Change Process.

1. Introduction

Sport organizations exist in fluid environments with constant change pressure because of the intensively competitive global market, rapid technological innovation, and pressure for return on capital investment (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2002; Cunningham, 2006a, 2009; Fahlén & Stenling, 2019). The management of change process has posed challenges for sport managers because the majority of change initiatives fail (Cunningham, 2006b). Amongst the various reasons that have been identified to explain the failed, or unintended, consequences of organizational change. factors include the timing of change (Saxton, 1995), institutional resistance (Kikulis, 2000; Kikulis et al., 1992), organizational conflict (Zheng, *et al.*, 2019), mistrust or distrust in the organizational setting (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016) and the cost of change (Kihl, Leberman, & Schull, 2010) are particularly noteworthy. However, the lack of consideration given to human experience (e.g. change recipients' readiness for change) in the change process is considered to be the primary reason for the failure of many organizational change initiatives (Fahlén & Stenling, 2019). Moreover, Kim, Hornung and Rousseau (2011) argued that change-supportive behaviour (CSB), or employees' behaviours to support change, despite its importance in an organizational change process, has received little attention in organization studies. In particular, factors that lead to various supportive behavioural reactions as well as the demonstrations of CSB in a non-western sport context remain unclear.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to address the paucity of research on change-supportive behaviour in a non-western sport context. The aim is realized by examining both managerial and contextual factors, and the manifestations of change-supportive behaviours of change recipients during the 2015 Chinese national football reform. An integrative conceptual framework that captures CSB-related managerial and contextual factors and CSB manifestations is applied to underpin the study and address the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: What managerial and contextual factors affected the change recipients' CSB during the 2015 Chinese football reform?

Research Question 2: How was the CSB manifested during the reform?

2. Literature Review: Conceptual Framework

2.1 Change-Supportive Behaviour (CSB): A Panoramic View on the Conceptual Framework

Change-supportive behaviour (CSB) refers to actions employees take to actively participate in, facilitate, and contribute to a planned change initiated by the organization (Kim, et al., 2010). To fully capture the CSB of the change recipients in the 2015 Chinese football reform, this paper draws on an integrated conceptual framework. The framework is comprised of three theoretical components, namely managerial and contextual factors contributed to CSB as well as manifestations of CSBs, which will be detailed below.

The first theoretical component – managerial factor, was inspired by Oreg *et al.* (2011). It is necessary to point out that Oreg et al.'s (2011, p. 466) original model included three parts of organizational change process, which are “antecedents, explicit reactions and change consequences”. The present study critically utilises rather than completely applies the antecedent dimension, and specifically focuses on the intra-organizational and managerial factors which affect change recipients' behaviour. The rationale for the decision not to use the explicit reactions element of the antecedents advocated by Oreg et al. (2011) was that our study examines neither affective nor cognitive reactions. Instead, the present CSB-focused study is solely concerned with supportive behavioural reactions. Concomitantly, explicit reactions are considered too broad for this study. In a similar sense, the last dimension on the change consequences part of Oreg et al.'s (2011) model is not included in this CSB-focused paper either, because of the attention directed to the examination of the manifestations rather than consequences of the CSB. In brief, the elements of explicit behaviours and consequences of

Oreg et al.'s (2011) model are not a feature of this CSB-centred paper because of the lack of compatibility between these two elements and the research objectives/questions formulated.

The second component of the conceptual framework concerns contextual factors that impact change recipients' CSB. Despite the usefulness of Oreg et al. (2011), the model fails to address external factors such as the social, economic and political context in which organizations situated. The role contextual factors play should not be underrated because these factors have the potential to affect the changing organization as well as individuals' decision to resist or accept a change. Therefore, compared to Oreg et al.'s (2011) original model, the component of contextual factors has been incorporated into to the conceptual model as an additional theoretical dimension, which will be expounded later.

The last component of the conceptual framework is the manifestations of the CSB, which refer to the change-supportive behavioural reactions espoused by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002). Despite the mention of "behavioural reaction" in Oreg et al.'s (2011) model, this model did not specify exactly how supportive behaviours could be manifested by change recipients. The three behavioural reactions highlighted by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) serve as a useful typology to examine the CSBs in this study. Originally, there were four behavioural types identified by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), the type of "resistance" is not adopted in the present study because this is not a supportive behaviour. This three-type approach has been applied in existing sport management studies and proves to be a useful lens in examining the CSBs. Examples include Cunningham (2006b), which examined the relationship between demographic dissimilarity and championing behaviours.

This study is structured around the integration of the three theoretical components, as summarised in Figure 1. To illustrate, this study aims to examine the managerial and contextual factors that explain and/or influence change recipients' CSB as well as the CSB manifestations

through the case study of the 2015 Chinese national football reform. Next, each of the three theoretical components as well as the rationale for the integration will be elucidated.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

2.2 Managerial Factors Affecting Change Behaviours

Many scholars in sport management have examined the change antecedents (Amis, *et al.*, 2002; Bloyce, Smith, Mead, & Morris, 2008; Cunningham, 2002; Heinze & Lu, 2017; Peachey & Bruening, 2011). Oreg *et al.* (2011) provided a systematic taxonomy to review managerial influence on the change process. This taxonomy consists of three elements: (1) the *change process* (e.g. participation, communication and information, interactional and procedural justice, principal support and management competence); (2) *change content* (e.g. compensation, job design, office layout and shift schedule); and (3) *perceived benefit or harm* (e.g. anticipated outcomes, job insecurity and distributive justice).

2.2.1 Change Process

Change process is defined as the progression of change that is characterised by a disrupted balance and an appearance of conflicts, chaos and/or integration of new ideas until it reaches a new balanced *status quo* (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011). Several common types of practice have been identified in change process that can influence the change recipients' behavioural reaction.

The first type of practice is participation. Participation of change recipients in the change process is likely to create a sense of agency, competence and interpersonal trust over the changing setting (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011). Those who experience high levels of participation throughout the change process tend to accept and support the change. Communication about the change and the quantity and quality of information available to change recipients could also affect their behaviours (Legg, Snelgrove, & Wood, 2016). There is a positive correlation

between the degree of openness and transparency of the change information to the change recipients on the one hand, and the level of support for the change on the other (Skille, 2011).

Interactional justice refers to the level of fairness and the treatment change recipients receive from decision makers (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011). This practice, combined with procedural justice and the procedures employed to implement decisions, can affect employee attitudes towards the change process (Cunningham, 2006a). For example, if a sport organization undertakes a process of restructuring without following a process that change recipients consider reasonable, change recipients are likely to display behaviours resistant to the change. In a similar sense, if the decision-making process for the change is not perceived to be transparent, less supportive behaviours will become evident throughout the change process (Logan & Ganster, 2007).

Principal support is known as the provision of resources such as financial and human resources by sport managers who, as change agents and opinion leaders, facilitate the change (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011). In particular, the amount, efficiency, and time of support provided during the change process could have substantial implications for change recipients' readiness to change (Lawrence & Callan, 2011).

Finally, the degree of competence of the management team perceived by the change recipients in managing the change process can affect change recipients' behavioural reactions. An illustrative example is sport managers' ability to address the issues raised from the change process by creating effective solutions. Failing to adequately address the situation will likely increase the level of change recipients' stress, which will be prone to leading to negative behaviour such as scepticism and demotivation (Vakola, 2016).

2.2.2 Change Content

Change content is concerned with the nature or substance of the change initiative and is an important determinant of change recipients' attitudes towards change (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011). The

actual content that the change entails include the financial compensation recipients acquire during the change process, the new job design, possible different office layout or shift schedule that can impact employees' attitudes and commitment to the change (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011). In general, implications that the change content has on change recipients vary and the reactions of individuals to such changes are often influenced by "how a specific change has touched their lives" (Self, *et al.*, 2007, p. 213).

2.2.3 Perceived Benefit/Harm

Perceived benefit and harm are interpreted as an individual's perception of the change process and determination of if the change outcome is favourable or unfavourable to an individual's wellbeing (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011). Vakola (2016) noted that perceived outcome of the change could affect an individual's readiness to change and concomitantly their behavioural reactions. Bayraktar (2019) argued that there is a positive correlation among the information the change recipients gather throughout the change process and change recipients' understanding of what the change means for their job security and their belief they are being treated fairly. It is also observed that in an organizational change process, a recipient's likelihood to behave supportively is dependent on the opportunities and resources (e.g. time, money and skill) available to them (Ajzen, 1991). For instance, when a participant believes his or her chances of being promoted to a senior manager is generally high based on the perceived information, he or she is more likely to display actions that support the change process.

2.3 Contextual Factors Affecting Change Behaviours

In addition to managerial factors, the external context in which investigated organizations reside can also have an impact on change recipients' change-supportive behaviours. This impact can be broadly viewed as a demonstration of "structure over agency" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. ??). In other words, the institutional context (structure) can transform organizational practices and structure as well as individual behaviours (agency). Prior sport

management studies explored the impact contextual factors have on organizational change process from perspectives such as institutional pressure (e.g. Fahlén & Stenling, 2019; Slack & Hinings, 1992), perceived social pressures to perform or halt the change (e.g. Cunningham, 2007; Legg, et al., 2016), as well as political pressure which can stem from by dependent relationship with other organizations (e.g. Peachey & Bruening, 2011).

Ajzen (1991) claimed that personal beliefs about the social world can influence an individual's intention and thereby his or her actual behavioural engagement. For example, a number of studies suggest that individuals tend to foster the loyalty to others who are important to them by acting in a compliant way (e.g. Jeon & Lee, 2006). In an organizational change context, these beliefs usually originate from either the extra- or the intra- organizational environment (e.g. Oliver, 1991). Extra-organizational norms include institutionalized values and traditions from the community, the political environment, and the socio-economic status of individuals supporting the change (N. P. Pollis & C. A. Pollis, 1970). These norms reflect how most group members behave and therefore lead to acceptance or rejection in a group (Guimond, *et al.*, 2018).

The three elements of Oreg et al.'s (2011) taxonomy of managerial change factors are utilised in this research because they provide an appropriate theoretical lens to delve into the internal managerial reasons behind employees' reactions to change. Contextual factors, on the other hand, provide insights into the external reasons that affect organizational *modus operandi* and structure as well as individual change behaviours.

2.4 Manifestations of Change-Supportive Behaviours

In addition to aforementioned managerial and contextual factors that play an integral part in the change process, manifestations of change-supportive behaviours are also noteworthy. Change recipients can exhibit positive or negative reactions to change. Herscovitch and Meyer

(2002) outlined three types of supportive behaviours that are associated with change commitment: (1) compliance; (2) cooperation; and (3) championing.

Compliance refers to the minimal level of support required from change recipients to facilitate the change process (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). It is the change recipients' "instrumental involvement for specific extrinsic rewards" (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986, p. 493). *Cooperation* is known as the behaviours supportive of the change and a willingness to accept modest sacrifices (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). *Championing* is considered the most active change-supportive behaviour. This behaviour is demonstrated by a change recipient's enthusiasm and willingness to considerably sacrifice personal benefits to promote the value of the change to others (Kim, *et al.*, 2011).

In short, the integrated conceptual framework is comprised of three theoretical dimensions, including managerial factors (Oreg, *et al.*, 2011) contextual factors, and the manifestations of CSB (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). While other theoretical perspectives, such as the institutional theory (Oliver, 1991), have the potential to provide an alternative perspective to interrogate the change process, this three-dimensional integrated approach applied could potentially provide a more detailed and diagnostic approach to understanding the managerial and contextual motivators as well as manifestations of the change recipients' supportive behaviours during the change process.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context

This study was conducted against the background of Chinese public sector reform efforts led by the central government (Chinese State Council, 2015). The timeline of the national football reform between 2015 and 2017 can be found in Table 1. In 2015, the national governing body of football (i.e. the Chinese Football Association, CFA) was required to be decoupled from the

superior government body (i.e. General Administration of Sport of China, GASC) to operate as an autonomous organization (Peng, Skinner, & Houlihan, 2019). In the following two years, similar organizational change was sequentially implemented at the local level. To elaborate, 44 provincial-level football associations were also instructed to be separated from corresponding provincial-level sport bureaus to become independent organizations. Additionally, 46 professional football clubs were also restructured according to the CFA policies. Data collection was conducted two years after the change had been announced (i.e. 2017) to ensure that the majority of the local FAs and clubs had been immersed in the change process and concomitantly some changes had taken place.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

A salient characteristic of this change was the new managerial rights endowed by the GASC to the CFA. These managerial rights included a range of change content for both the CFA and its local member associations, ranging from organizational structure, project management, finance and salary control, to human resource and international partnership management (Chinese State Council, 2015). As a consequence of the managerial rights delegated from the GASC to facilitate the change, all employees in the CFA and local football associations were able to choose whether to stay within the CFA or their local member associations and accept the change, or to leave their respective organizations. Should the latter option be selected by the employees, the GASC would reallocate them to an equivalent position in other similar sport organizations affiliated to the GASC (with equivalent salary scale), so there was no financial pressure for those who chose to leave.

3.2 Research Design

This study employed a case study design because it was intended to gain a “holistic understanding of a set of issues, and how they relate to a particular group, organization, sports team, or an individual” (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 119). Yin (2018) suggested that a case study design has distinct value in answering the “what”, “why” and “how” questions, because this research design enables investigators to focus on a case and retain a holistic and real-world perspective. An embedded case study design (Yin, 2018) was adopted for this study because this research does not only focus on the organizational change of the CFA as the main case, but also examines other units of analysis such as local member football associations as well as commercial football clubs in the change setting. Semi-structured interviews were utilised as a data collection technique to gain a deep understanding of the motivators and demonstrations of change recipients’ behaviours.

3.3 Data Collection

A total of 29 semi-structured interviews were performed with employees from the CFA local member football associations and professional football clubs across three top divisions in 2017. The reason that interviews were conducted two years after the reform and not earlier (i.e., in 2015 or 2016) was that the reform process was gradually implemented and there were stakeholders such as provincial-level football governing bodies not involved in the process until 2016 (in some cases, not until 2017) (see Table 1). If interviews were conducted too early, these key stakeholders would have not been able to inform us of their reflection on the reform process. Therefore, two years after the launch of the reform was assumed to be more an appropriate timing. Among these interviews, twelve face-to-face interviews were carried out with the CFA employees, seven video interviews were with staff of provincial football associations, and ten video interviews were with staff of professional football clubs. The majority of participants were over the 40 years old and occupied senior management positions (e.g. directors of departments). Interviewees were predominately male (95%).

Corresponding to the accessibility of interviewees, a mixed sampling approach, comprised of purposive sampling and snowball sampling, was deployed to select interviewees. Purposive sampling is, in nature, a non-probability form of sampling used to locate all possible cases of a highly specific and difficult-to-reach population (Bryman, 2012). A purposive sampling was first applied within the CFA to understand the impact organizational change at the national level. This sampling process was followed by a snowball sampling approach employed based on referrals recommended by the CFA officials to identify interviewees at the provincial level (local member associations and professional clubs) (Bryman, 2012). Table 2 provides a detailed summary of the interviewee profile.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Interview questions were asked in a semi-structured manner, that is, in response to the inquiring process and the informants' behaviour (CITAITON NEEDED, OTHERWISE CONSIDER REMOVING THIS SENTENCE). This approach enabled a natural flow of conversation between the researcher and the interviewee. Each interviewee was asked to reflect on the reform process back in 2015. It was aimed to gain a deep understanding of the change process, the change content and change recipients' individual intentions to support or resist the change. Interviews were digitally recorded and ranged in length from 30 to 120 minutes. For confidentiality reasons, respondents were assigned pseudonyms (i.e. R1, R2, R3, R4...R29). All data were collected in Chinese. They were first transcribed verbatim, and participants were given the opportunity to verify their transcripts for accuracy. Transcripts were then translated into English by the leading author and back translated by the fifth author to ascertain linguistic consistency. The data were finally imported into NVivo 12 for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a three-step content analysis model recommended by Attride-Stirling (2001). This approach was sequential and included the following steps: (1) the reduction or breakdown of text based on the conceptual framework (see Figure 1); (2) exploration of the text for new themes; and (3) integration of themes from both Step One and Step Two. In specific terms, the initial coding process started with comparing and contrasting the interview transcripts. The conceptual framework identified in Figure 1 was used to frame the coding process, which led to a total of seven codes being created by the end of Step One. These codes were (1) communication; (2) management competence; (3) principal support; (4) participation; (5) compliance; (6) championing; and (7) cooperation. Then, the initial coding framework was applied to the textual data to dissect it into text segments and look for new themes that did not fit into the initial coding framework. After the refinement of these themes, further grouping and condensing were conducted until three main themes emerged. The three themes were: (1) managerial factors affecting change recipients' behaviour; (2) contextual factors affecting change recipients' behaviour and (3) variations in change recipients' change-supportive behaviours, as presented in Figure 2. "Trustworthiness" was pursued through meeting standards of confirmability and credibility by using triangulation of data types and respondents, transparency of the methodological approach, as well as member checking of the findings below (Bryman 2012).

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Managerial Factors Affecting Change Recipients' Behaviour

Five managerial factors (i.e. communication channels, participating in decision-making, leaders' commitment, principal support, and management competency) were identified to have affected change recipients' attitudes and intentions toward change when interacting with their management team during the change process. The management team in this case is mainly specific to the CFA.

First, *communication channels* were considered crucial for change recipients. Specifically, creating more channels of communication with the management team in the change process can increase change recipients' readiness for and acceptance towards the change, as noted in the following quote:

The CFA has constantly organized meetings with us since the reform... and I was often invited to these meetings. I felt that we have more opportunities to speak out our minds than before... you can see they (CFA) were making efforts to make some changes, which makes me feel worthwhile to participate in the change... (R14)

R18 echoed a similar sentiment in his/her comment:

Every year (since the reform), the CFA would organize departmental or disciplinary meetings and invite representatives from the counterparts of member associations and clubs to attend... All attendees would sit together, talk about the implementation process and give their honest opinions about what went wrong and how it could be improved. I think it is an example of good practice to communicate regularly with key stakeholders in the change process ... and none of this had happened before...

These viewpoints reflect positive attitudes towards change because these change recipients feel that it is "worthwhile" to be part of the change process and they are valued.

However, some respondents still demonstrated negative attitudes towards the change despite communication between the management team and the change recipients. This was particularly related to the second basic theme – *participation in the decision-making* process.

This factor was notable when the management team dismissed change recipients' feedback without explanation. This led to a heightened level of frustration and resistance towards the change.

Yes, we have more channel to voice our opinions. In fact, these issues were often brought up in those meetings with the leaders... but, it is useless because all the decisions made were top-down I think, and our feedback makes no difference... this is frustrating and not really encouraging for me to further participate in these meetings.
(R19)

Another respondent provided an interesting example to illustrate this point:

Despite the opportunities to provide suggestions, it is a completely different story when it comes to the CFA choosing to adopt these suggestions or not. Just as my old manager said, if he were to offer the suggestion which were made to the CFA at meetings like these ten years ago, those suggestions could have still been of great use today... I think there is no problem for us to speak at these occasions, but if there is no explicit impact afterwards, what is the point? (R13)

The above comments suggest that the respondents' intention to participate or contribute to the change process can be affected by managerial factors. When change recipients felt that their voice is not represented in the final decision-making process, there is a negative impact on their attitude towards change.

The third basic theme concerns *the leaders' commitment* to change perceived by the change recipients in the change process. The commitment to improving Chinese football at all levels, which was demonstrated by the leaders within the CFA, have had an impact on the change recipients' attitudes toward the change, as quoted below:

Football has never been prioritised on the national policy agenda before... This really demonstrates the determination of the leaders in improving Chinese football. We are

very motivated by this level of commitment and support... and because of this determination and motivation, we are more supportive of the change and willing to accept this and that problems during the process... (R3)

This comment highlights the association between managerial commitment and change recipients' attitude towards the change process, illustrated by a positive correlation between the level of leadership commitment perceived in the change process, and the degree of support from employees. R15 explained the significance of leaders' commitment for change recipients:

All of the member associations and clubs are watching the CFA now – how the change is carried out in the CFA, what new regulations have been issued, and other similar areas... as long as the CFA is committed to the change, all of us will follow its steps and undertake our own responsibility to ensure that the change is successful. (R15)

The fourth basic theme – the *principal support* offered by the management team to the change recipients was critical in engaging recipients' participation and, in some cases, in guaranteeing their commitment throughout the change process.

We believe that to ensure local FAs reform a success, the CFA should prepare a systematic supporting policy along with the announcement. Only in this way, we can be confident about the separation of the football governance system from provincial-level governments. However, since 2015, there has not been much support coming from them, except a few actions taken in 2016. (R15)

The quote suggested that change recipients from provincial-level FAs were seeking support from the management team. In particular, change recipients tended to be more confident towards the change when the essential support was furnished. Financial support is particularly important for some organizations to ensure their survival in the reform process. R13 mentioned the benefit of receiving the support:

The CFA has provided some financial support to national youth training base, which includes an annual investment of one million *yuan* into five reserve teams. This support is beneficial for local FAs because we can keep these bases running without disruptions. On the contrary, R17 pointed out the potential “harm” that the change will impose on their organization, especially the reform was devoid of principal support from the leaders:

What we have been doing in the past two years is simply implementing whatever the higher-level superiors asked us to do... other member associations have been receiving investments from their provincial-level governments, but this type of investments has not been a feature of our organization. We even had to “borrow” staff from other organizations to run events at occasions... After this reform ends, we (will) have to “beg on the street”...

The importance of financial support was concurred by another interviewee:

For those economically well-developed provincial-level divisions, the separation of the football system from the government is not a puzzling problem. However, for us, it is quite challenging because we are often short of financial resources. Hence, when we do not receive sufficient support from the management team, I do worry about our survival in the change process. (R19)

This respondent’s feedback accentuated the challenging situation with which provincial-level football associations are confronted. To elaborate, while some organizations are able to function well after the separation, others are more dependent on the continuous support from the management team to maintain their survival. The beneficial and/or harmful outcomes of change also have directly affected change recipients’ confidence about the change.

The last basic theme is associated with the *management competency* perceived by the change recipients during the reform. To elaborate, interview data revealed that the perceived competency to lead and manage the change process can affect the recipients' attitude towards the change. This was highlighted by Respondent 6 who stated that:

Previously, the management team was a bit unorganized and unspecialised and now, the fact that more specialised employees have been recruited to the relevant posts has enabled the overall competency and efficiency to be significantly enhanced. This change was what the managers had promised in the beginning of the reform and its realisation is very assuring and motivating for us to be part of this course... (R6)

By comparison, another respondent highlighted his/her concern with management competency:

Our leaders have set up this rule of "banning any forms of signing fees" which makes me think it is too amateur an action. Although the intention is undoubtedly good for the transfer market (to avoid immoderate investment), when reading these policies, you just cannot help wondering about the competency of the people responsible for making them and worrying about the future... (R26)

It is also evident from the interviews that individuals in their respective fields may perceive management competency differently. For example, R6 felt motivated to participate in the change programme because he/she felt that the management team is improving its competency in managing football affairs, whereas R26 was more sceptical about the change because of the perceived lack of management competency.

When compared with Oreg, *et al.*'s (2011) taxonomy (see Figure 1 above), the main difference of this study lies in the fact that perceived leaders' commitment to change by the change recipients was often mentioned. That is, the more committed the leaders perceived to the change, the more supportive change recipients are towards the change. This finding supports previous research that has shown that if leaders of the organization are willing to

devote resources (e.g. human or financial) to the change initiative, change recipients are more likely to believe that the change will succeed and therefore are willing to participate (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018).

The factor of leaders' commitment is not new in organizational studies. For instance, Cunningham (2006a) and Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) previously espoused the positive impact of commitment on the consequences of change recipients' behaviours. Interestingly, although the change content mentioned by the respondents (e.g. the change in policies, organizational structure, and ways of interacting with other stakeholders) was different from what Oreg, *et al.* (2011) outlined in their taxonomy, what was evident in the data was the marked impact of these changes upon the recipients' attitude towards change. It is also observed from the data that individual change in the attitude towards the reform is in accordance with their perception of the benefits and harm derived from the change process. In specific terms, when the change recipients reckoned that the change process was conducive to their individual career, they tend to express a positive attitude towards the change.

4.2 Contextual Factors Affecting Change Recipients' Behaviour

Two contextual factors associated with provincial-level governments and/or the central government (including the GASC and State Council) were identified to have influenced change recipients' behaviours: an amenable football environment, and the perceived political pressure to change.

The first basic theme describes how *the amenable environment*, namely, a welcoming and healthy football development atmosphere affected change recipients' behaviour, as shared by Respondent 25:

From what I see, the domestic football environment has become healthier and it makes me want to continue working in this field. The previous large sum of capital investment certainly was appealing, yet it inflated the (capital) bubble dangerously. The CFA did

not allow this to worsen and has formulated relevant policies in a timely way to intervene and safely guarded the development... (R25)

R25 pointed out that the football environment had become much healthier under the leadership of the CFA, which led to his continuing support for the change process. Respondent 10 made a similar comment:

The reform has prompted many changes in the past years. I think that we are following the right direction. For instance, the emphasis on youth training and directing clubs to invest immoderately have made the football environment healthier than before. (R10)

The central government, particularly with its reform policy, has created an appealing and facilitative contextual factor, which motivated change recipients to engage in the change process, as Respondent 11 stated:

When the *Reform Plan* was released in 2015, I was feeling so encouraged. I believe that it is the prime time for Chinese football as well as my own career. Since President Xi is so supportive of football development, I believe that politicians working in provincial-level governments will take the same interest in developing football and create more opportunities for us. (R11)

The second theme, the *perceived political pressure to change*, more specifically, the perceived necessity to align with the central government/Party's (Communist Party of China) change goal, was another finding that emerged from the data. This finding demonstrates that the change recipients' supportive behaviour is influenced significantly by political interests:

As member associations, we have to comply with the CFA to be decoupled from the government system – there is no negotiation. Our leaders required our member associations to start the change process in 2016. However, because of various difficulties most notably the shortage of money and staff, we were just not able to start then... there was considerable pressure on us. (R17)

As the senior manager of a provincial-level member association, R17 felt the political pressure to change. In response to this political pressure, he had limited choices but was pressured to lead the change in the member association following the command of the central government. Another respondent commented on a different aspect, which prompted a positive perception of the control over the change:

... we need to be careful with what we choose... For a club member, no matter how the reform turns out, we have to adhere to the direction of the national policy. We are a state-owned club, and state-owned clubs always comply with the Party. The CFA follows the Party as well. Everybody shares the same direction, and this is why we choose to support the reform and we will continue doing so in the future... (R20)

This respondent's feedback is not unique.

To be honest, I think that member associations are quite political oriented. Let me give you an example. In the past, whenever the CFA decided to promote new football programmes and no matter whether it is in our benefit or not, we never hesitated to follow them (the CFA) and provided the best support we could... This time, it is the same. (R13)

A key insight that emerged from the findings was that respondents interpreted supporting the change as a way of demonstrating their political orientation. It was found that change recipients perceived political pressure to support the change, but no explicit consequences were indicated should they choose not to support the change process.

The findings suggested that the recipients' change-supportive behaviours were also attributed to contextual factors. The data from this study identified a generally positive attitude towards the idea of football reform because it was considered beneficial to the overall football development in China. In other words, an amenable environment created by the Chinese

government had boosted change recipients' confidence in supporting and participating in the football reform. Moreover, another distinctive factor was identified to have led to the change recipients' supportive behaviours, namely, the perceived pressure to align with the political agenda of the government. The data demonstrated that change recipients who perceived a necessity to conform to the central government or the CCP's change goals were more likely to support and engage in the change process. The Chinese government's policy agenda represents the Party's ideology, which has a long tradition of high levels of political intervention in the operations of governmental or non-governmental sport organizations. As a result, this political pressure was a critical factor that determined the change recipients' decision to support the change.

4.3 Variation in Change Recipients' Change-Supportive Behaviours

The third organizing theme identified is the variation in change recipients' change-supportive behaviours. Supportive behaviours of change were demonstrated by: (1) showing understanding of the change but pessimistic about the outcome; (2) supporting the change and being willing to take risks; and (3) supporting the change and actively seeking alternative solutions. The first supportive behaviour was characterised by change recipients' awareness of the politically correct nature to accept the change but a relative lack of confidence about the implementation of the change. This is explained by the different challenges faced by the change recipients as noted by Respondents 17 and 19:

We understand that the reform is good for Chinese football development and of course I am happy to see some changes in the football system. However, things can be rather complicated in China because the economic conditions in each province vary considerably. For us, we have always struggled financially. All we can do is to implement what we have been told to do... Once separated from the government, we probably can no longer survive. (R17)

I am supportive of the change because it is good for our country's football development. However, the idea of football associations to be separate from government is daunting because once we are separated, we are no longer the authority and we will be like a civil organization with no power... Anyway, I suppose that this is the reform trend in our country and all we can do is to strive to comply with the policy. (R19)

Although both R17 and R19 demonstrated an understanding of the change and were ready to promote whatever changes required by the senior management team, they had reservations on the prospect of the reform because of a lack of support and of resources, and a certain level of uncertainty about the future. The deprivation of power and authorities that accompany the change also increased a sense of insecurity among the change recipients. The rigid implementation of the change content, irrespective of its value to their own organization, was a powerful indication that passive compliance with the change policy had occurred in the change process.

Change recipients who were *supporting the change and were willing to take some (not considerable) risks* were representative of the second type of supportive behaviour of the change. Almost all participants demonstrated their understanding of the football reform because it was considered beneficial for Chinese football, some respondents even expressed their willingness to take risk:

... football has never been prioritised on the national policy agenda before ... this reform is inexorable... Although we are all exploring in this journey without knowing where the future heads, we do support the change programme and are willing to take any risks and challenges for a better future... (R3)

The willingness to "support the change" and "take any risks" in the process demonstrated change recipients' commitment to supporting the change. However, this is not synonymous

with the consistency in their willingness to support the change. Respondent 26 resonated with this issue:

My boss has invested more money in the club these two years because he believed that the national policy would be a good drive for the development of Chinese football. However, now they are starting to question if this is a good investment because there is almost zero turnover of investment which is a negative sign for an enterprise in the long term. The national policy (the reform plan) was supposed to be beneficial for clubs, yet somehow, we have not been able to “taste the sweetness”. (R26)

Although R26’s comment raised suspicions that clubs may be seeking short-term benefits rather than providing long-term support for the change, this view highlights that there is a general consensus that the senior management should devise a mechanism of reciprocity that recognises and awards supportive behaviours. There was a belief that a failure to do so increased the risk of reduced commitment to the change process.

The final form of supportive behaviour was *supporting the change by taking considerable risks and actively seeking alternative solutions* when problems occurred. Compared to the previous two types of reactions, this form of supportive behaviour appeared to be the most engaged behaviour in the change process because change recipients were demonstrating more enthusiasm and willingness to champion the change, rather than passively comply with the orders from the senior management team. When exchanging views on common challenges of establishing reserve teams in clubs because of the lack of talent resources, a club manager commented how he sought innovative ways to champion the change:

Despite our support for the reform, it was very difficult to implement the policy (establishing reserve teams)... Our potential young players are based in schools and because we cannot communicate with the education system directly, we decided to write a proposal to the local government and ask them to coordinate with local schools.

And it is actually working... We now manage to launch conversations with local schools to promote a joint project on youth team development. (R24)

Respondents gave another example to illustrate their support, as highlighted by the comment below:

There are approximately ten member-associations in my region, and many of us are striving to support the reform. Some places even subsidise football development with money earned elsewhere. We are in deficit of 80,000 to 100,000 yuan now, but these are “normal”. We all should sacrifice something for our country. (R14)

Among the three types of change-supportive behaviours identified in the findings, the first type was the least supportive behaviour of change recipients. Despite being pessimistic about the change outcome, recipients acknowledged the “need” or “obligation” to conform to what they were asked to do in the change process. There was no initiation in their actions; rather, it was the compliance that prompted the supportive behaviour. This form of change-supportive behaviour mirrors what Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) suggested as the *compliance* behaviour (see Figure 1).

The second type was associated with a higher level of cooperative behaviour. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) suggested that change-supportive behaviours are demonstrated by a willingness of change recipients to take risks, as such, this was seen as *cooperation* behaviour (see Figure 1). Cooperative intentions were mostly driven by the change recipients’ perceived personal benefit associated with the reform. This personal benefit can be sourced from the positive development of Chinese football which would provide them with reciprocity, or more broadly, the advancement of their individual career. Although the reform may be characterised by short-term risks and challenges for these change recipients, there was a willingness to accept these risks and challenges.

The final type is the most supportive behaviour identified in the findings. According to Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), this type of behaviour can be defined as championing (see Figure 1 above), which is a demonstration of change recipients' strong intention and enthusiasm to support the change by championing the change process. These recipients were not only ready to take risks, but also willing to actively undertake responsibility of what they were asked to do. From the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, these change recipients demonstrated a passion for the change by actively seeking solutions when problems take place. They did not await instructions to solve problems. Instead, they capitalised on the resources available to them to champion the change agenda.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to examine the managerial and contextual factors leading to change recipients' behaviours, as well as provide insight into the manifestations of the change-supportive behaviours during the 2015 Chinese football reform. To date, the factors leading to various change-supportive behaviours and the manifestations of these behaviours have remained an understudied terrain. By analysing the change-supportive motivators and behaviours, this paper contributes to theory on change-supportive behaviours in two ways. First, it identified managerial and contextual factors, which led to the change-supportive behaviours. This contribution provides a deeper understanding of the human experience in the change process and how various factors can positively or negatively affect individual behavioural reactions. In particular, the data provide a novel explanation for change-supportive behaviours – the pressure for change recipients to align with the political agenda of the ruling Communist Party.

Second, an integrated conceptual framework was developed to shed light on those managerial and contextual factors that influence the change process and the manifestations of

change-supportive behaviours. This framework also synthesised Oreg *et al.* (2011) and Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), which combined to highlight the challenges and complexities with which the organizational change process can be confronted within a non-western political context.

This research has noteworthy practical implications for sport managers to consider when implementing change. The aforementioned integrated conceptual framework advanced in this research provides sport managers with a change management tool to understand, assess and facilitate the change process. Specifically, by understanding how managerial factors can facilitate positive attitudes towards change, sport managers can create opportunities for the voice of employees to be heard throughout the change process. Moreover, for sport managers implementing similar reforms among other Chinese sports organizations, it is worthy of considering engaging change recipients in the decision-making process and providing timely and sufficient support for them to overcome the challenges in the change process.

This research has identified a number of possibilities for future research. First, the presented conceptual framework developed can be applied in different cultural and political contexts to determine if it captures the vagaries and complexities of change in different settings. It is also recommended that future research evaluates the interrelationship among managerial and contextual factors, and manifestations of CSB using quantitative data to further explore the causal relationships between each of the CSB influencers and the individual manifestation type. Second, a more in-depth exploration of psychological factors that influence change recipients' attitudes and behaviours throughout the change process would be effective in informing change managers in establishing support for the change process. This exploration could be timely because more businesses are expanding rapidly into new markets (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007) and concomitantly, there is a growing recognition that successful change requires change

managers to pay attention to the psychological well-being of employees throughout the change process (Kim, *et al.*, 2019).

This research is not immune from limitations. First, because the sensitivity of the topic, to approach personnel who had ‘resisted’ the reform was not within the realm of possibility. Therefore, the interviewees participated in this study were those who were supportive of the reform. However, the impact of this limitation has been alleviated by capturing the variations within the change-supportive behaviours and analyzing the reasons why certain change recipients were not fully optimistic about the reform. Second, given the case-study design, data from this study can only reflect the change recipients’ attitudes and behaviours at a certain period of time during the change process. Finally, considering the relatively distinctive Chinese context, the transferability of the findings are limited, which is an innate feature of the case study design.

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Table 1. The timeline of the 2015 Chinese national football reform.

Year	Reform Agenda
2015	<p>March: (1) The <i>Reform Plan</i> was released.</p> <p>(2) The overall reform commenced.</p> <p>Source: Chinese State Council (2015).</p> <p>August: (1) The CFA reform plan published.</p> <p>(2) Organizational change started in the CFA</p> <p>Source: Chinese Football Association (2015).</p>
2016	<p>(1) <i>Suggestions on Local Football Associations' Reform and Adjustment</i> was promulgated.</p> <p>(2) Organizational change commenced in provincial-level football governing bodies</p> <p>Source: Chinese Football Association (2016).</p>
2017	<p>January:</p> <p>(1) The National Football Management Centre was annulled.</p> <p>(2) The CFA became the one and only autonomous national football governing body</p> <p>Source: Xinhuanet (2017).</p>

	<p>March:</p> <p>(1) <i>The CFA 2020 Action Plan</i> was published;</p> <p>(2) The CFA, provincial-level football association and clubs were further restructured.</p>
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Table 2. A summary of the profile of interviewees.

Organizations	Interviewees
The Chinese Football Association (12) <i>(Code names: R1-R12)</i>	Senior managers in the General Administration Department (1), International Relations Department (1), Planning and Legal Department (2), Communication Department (1), Market Department (1), Community Development Department (1), Youth Football Department (1), Event Management Department (1), Women's Football Department (1), National Team Administration Department (1) and Professional League Office (1)
Province-Level Member Football Associations (7) <i>(Code names: R13-R19)</i>	North region (2)
	South region (4)
	West region (1)
Commercial Football Clubs (10) <i>(Code name: R20-R29)</i>	Chinese Super League clubs (7)
	China League One (2)
	China League Two (1)

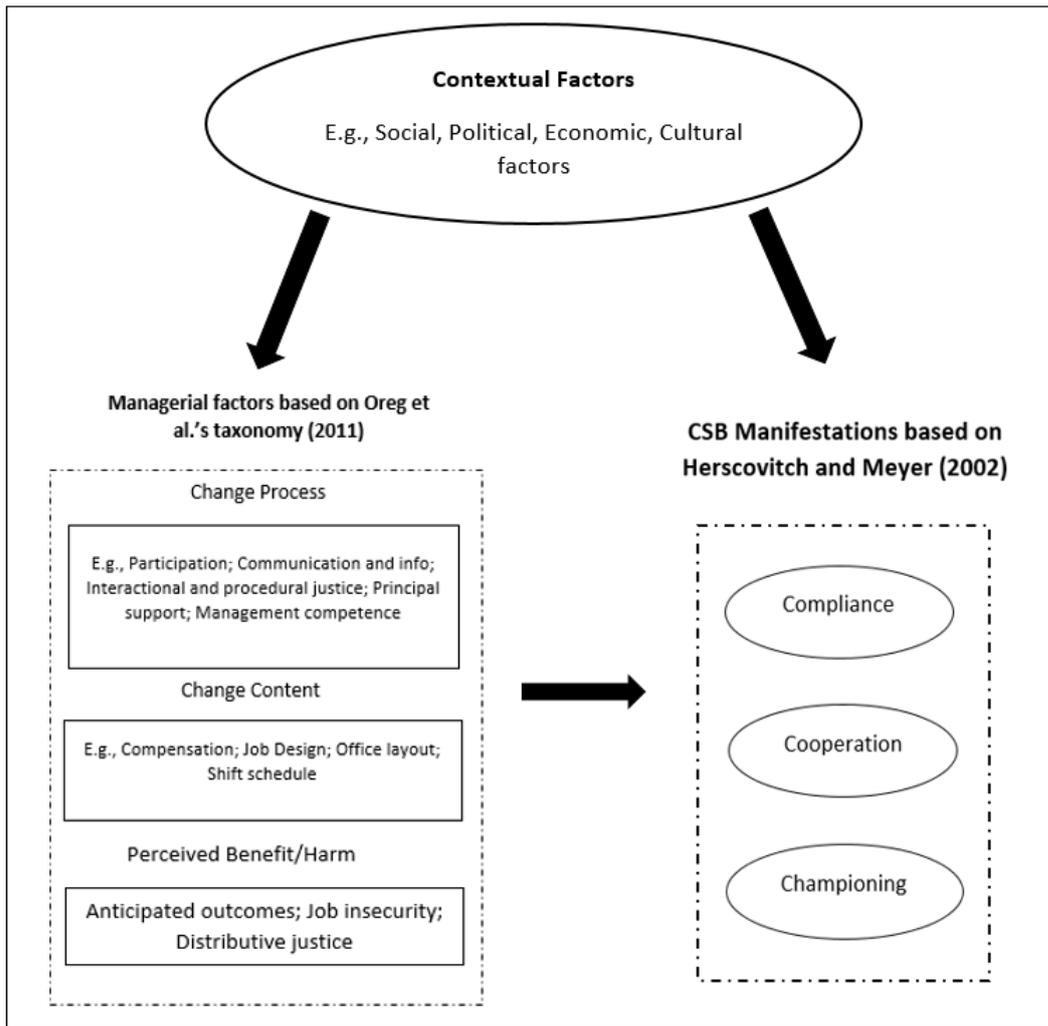


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Change-supportive behaviour-related contextual and managerial factors, and the manifestations of change-supportive behaviour.

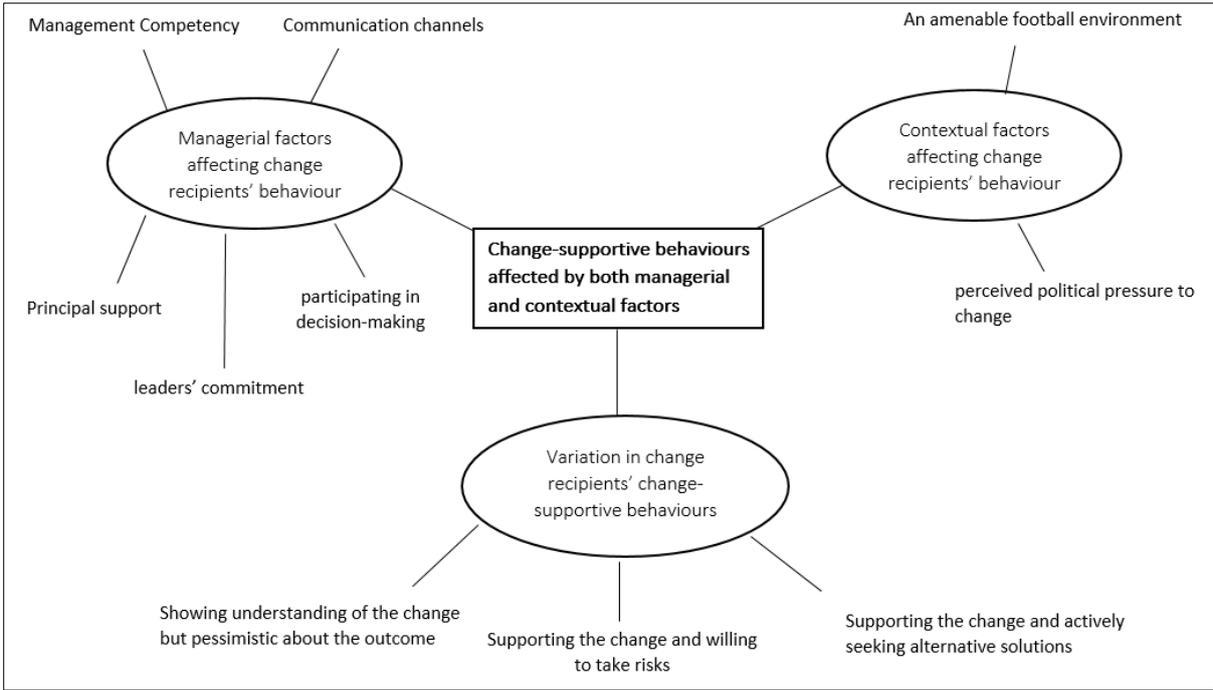


Figure 2. Thematic network illustrating change-supportive behaviours affected by both managerial and contextual factors.