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The Development of Elite Cycling in China: 1992-2012

Abstract

By analysing China's approaches to elite cycling, this article seeks to answer the question 'why the bicycle kingdom fails to produce any Olympic cycling champion?'. Many factors could explain China's lack of medal success on the international stage, ranging from the limited degree of organizational specialization, problems regarding the quantity and quality of domestic coaches, to the lack of influence in the international governing body and more importantly the tension between the National Team and provincial teams. However, there have been a series of developments contributing to China's notable progress in cycling in the 2000s in general and in the London Olympiad in particular the most important of which were the recruitment of world-leading coaches and the organization of overseas training. All these culprits and positive developments are discussed, not only to explain China's overall poor medal performance in cycling at the Olympic Games yet with some gradual progress in recent years, but also to provide a representative through which China's approaches to many non-traditional and less successful sports could be understood. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted, accompanied by comprehensive document analysis derived from official documents and website information of associated sports governing bodies and influential media in China.

Keywords: China; elite cycling; sport policy; poor performance; recent progress

Introduction: Limited success and peripheral position

The development of elite cycling in China can be traced back to the Nationalist period before the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The delegation sent to the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games included one cyclist.¹ However, the overall competitiveness of Chinese cycling in the world is insignificant and its contribution to China at the Olympic Games is very limited. It is the only Olympic sport with at least ten Olympic gold medals at a single Olympic Games in which China has not yet won a gold medal. In addition, Chinese cycling is a good illustration of gender imbalance, or rather, the underperformance of male athletes in China. Since the medal breakthrough in Sydney 2000, China has continuously won at least one medal in Athens 2004, Beijing 2008 and London 2012 (see Table 1) and all the six medals come from female events. Of particular note is Chinese female cyclists' emerging group advantage in short-distance track events,² which has become a fledgling market for China. In comparison, Chinese male cyclists can hardly build advantage in Asia and they struggle for Olympic qualifications.³ Consequently, women's cycling, especially women's short-distance track cycling, is officially identified as 'potential advantage',⁴ while men's cycling is identified as 'lagging'.

(Table 1 about here)

This article seeks to introduce China's approaches to the development of elite cycling, a non-traditional yet gold-medal abundant Western-dominated sport. More importantly, this article attempts to analyze both the reasons leading to China's longstanding poor performance in cycling on the international stage and those contributing to China's significant progress in certain events since 2000. Generally speaking, relatively less systematic government support at the central level, the tension between the National Team and provincial teams, the narrow talent base of the traditional three-level training system and the limited development of non-government-led cycling, the limited quality and quantity of domestic coaches, a lack of competition opportunities and China's very limited influence in international cycling are perennial stumbling blocks

hindering the development of elite cycling in China. However, several effective measures have been taken and the fruit has become increasingly discernible in the last decade in general and in the London Olympiad in particular. Most notable examples include a more focused funding strategy and national team structure, the adoption and promotion of international communication most notably overseas training and the recruitment of leading foreign coaches and more importantly steps taken to mitigate the tension between the National Team and provincial teams or dilute the negative impact of provincial rivalry and the prioritization of provincial interests. In addition, the last decade has witnessed notable developments of commercial and professional cycling in China.

Research Methods

This article harnesses a combination of semi-structured interviews and documents for data collection. First, four semi-structured interviews were conducted and the interviewees included current and previous senior officials of the General Administration of Sport of China (GAS), renowned sports scholars in China, senior officials of the National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre and senior coach of the National Cycling Team. Substantial information was gathered from these interviews, each often lasting more than one hour. Interviews were accompanied by comprehensive document analysis derived from official documents and website information of associated sports governing bodies most notably GAS, Chinese Olympic Committee (COC), the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre, the Chinese Cycling Association (CCA) and the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), in combination with influential media in China such as China Central television (CCTV), Xinhuanet, People.com.cn, Sina, iFeng and so forth.

2000 was a milestone for Chinese cycling as Chinese cyclists achieved Olympic medal breakthrough at Sydney 2000. 2000 also marked a new era for Chinese cycling, since which China has consecutively won medal in cycling at the Olympic Games and the salience of cycling has been gradually elevated. The period before that was a good point of comparison. However, it

is also noteworthy that although China's breakthrough in Olympic cycling did not become discernible until the 2000s, some approaches adopted in the 1990s had laid a foundation for the subsequent progress. Therefore, the period 1992-2000 was selected as the focus of this article with the primacy given to the period 2000-2012. Another rationale for choosing 1992 as the starting year was that the quality of the three Olympic Games prior to 1992 had been significantly discounted by boycotts.

Perennial problems

Less systematic government support at the central level: Organizational structure

Previous to the reform of the Sports Ministry into GAS in 1998, cycling had fallen within the same governing body with a non-Olympic sport of motorcycling, in the charge of the Cycling and Motorcycling Management Centre under the Sports Ministry.⁵ The degree of specialization for cycling was limited. The organizational reform of the Sports Ministry and the restructuring of management centres after the stagnant performance at Atlanta 1996 opened a door for cycling in China. The National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre was established in the early 2000s, which became the national governing body for cycling in China. However, the range of the responsibility of the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre far surpasses its name. In fact, it is the national governing body for five Olympic sports, covering the responsibility of cycling, fencing, equestrian, modern pentathlon and triathlon.⁶ The rationales for amalgamating these five sports into one Management Centre were:

'First, all these five sports are highly European sports. They are not China's traditional advantages. Second, there are overlaps between these sports. For example, triathlon contains cycling and modern pentathlon includes fencing and equestrian. Considering the limited scale of these sports, it is not appropriate to establish an independent management centre for any of them'.⁷

The degree of specialization has increased as the distinction between Olympic and non-Olympic sports has become clear. However, cycling still fails to enjoy an independent management centre. The sharing of administrative leadership, personnel and resources with four other vastly different Olympic sports inevitably weakens and dilutes the support for and resources available to cycling. In nature, what the 'limited scale' referred to above intimates is the relatively peripheral position of cycling in China. This also reflects, at least, GAS' less systematic support for cycling in comparison to many 'fortress' Olympic sports. With the development of cycling in China and the increase in workload, the Cycling Department inside the Management Centre and the National Team are often understaffed.⁸

The Cycling and Fencing Management Centre is led by GAS and is required to implement fundamental policies such as *the Olympic Glory Plan* and the 'Invite In and Go Out' strategy. In terms of less fundamental and more cycling-specific issues such as training, competition schedules and international communication, the Management Centre enjoys a high degree of autonomy as long as it does not violate the basic principles of GAS. There are two units inside the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre that directly govern the development of cycling in China: the Cycling Department and the National Cycling Team.⁹ Chinese Cycling Association (CCA), as the only legal organization representing China in the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI),¹⁰ is nominally a social organization registered in the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China.¹¹ However, the development of cycling especially elite cycling is largely a government responsibility in China and the CCA is virtually another brand of the Cycling Department of the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre.

The interesting relationship between the national cycling governing body and provincial counterparts is also noteworthy. At the provincial level, full-time cycling teams have been established in the vast majority of provinces in China,¹² led by corresponding provincial governing bodies of cycling. Although provincial cycling teams are expected to serve the needs of the National Team, provincial cycling governing bodies are affiliated to provincial governments and hence there is no direct leadership relationship, or

administrative accountability between the National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre on the one hand and provincial management centres and provincial teams on the other. The link between the National Management Centre and regional management centres (including those at the provincial, municipality and autonomous regional level) is defined as a mentoring or supervisory one (see Figure 1),¹³ which opens the door for potential tension between the National Team and provincial teams for elite cycling where there is a low degree of common or shared but a high degree of conflicting interests.¹⁴

(Figure 1 about here)

The tension between the National Team and provincial teams

Provincial, municipality and autonomous region teams have long been an integral part of the pyramid of elite sport in China due to their fundamental role in cultivating sports talent most notably elite athletes and coaches. The morale of provincial teams is underpinned by provincial rivalry by virtue of domestic competitions most notably the National Games. However, provincial rivalry is a double-edged sword the impact of which varies according to different sports where the influence of provincial teams relative to the National Team differs. Different from most 'fortress' sports, the negative impact of provincial rivalry and the tension between the National Team and provincial teams in elite cycling is more evident, especially before 2000, in the form of protectionism of the cyclists from the same home province by coaches in the National Team and the reluctance to send top cyclists to the National Team by provincial teams. This leads to another key culprit hindering the performance of cyclists of the National Team: the prioritization of provincial interests often at the sacrifice of the National Team.

'The negative competition between provinces and provincial rivalries have undermined the benefits of the National Team. Many provincial cycling teams prioritize the performance at the National Games over the interests of the National Team. There are provinces standing behind elite cyclists in China, even in the National Team. In order to minimize the

distraction such as the potential injury risk due to the training in and competitions for the National Team, many provincial teams, especially previously, often refused to send top cyclists to the National Team. Even in the National Team, “protectionism” was once very pervasive as coaches of one province tended to promote athletes from the same province, at the sacrifice of the development of promising and talented cyclists from other provinces’.¹⁵

This tension, in combination with the prevalence of parochialism, or rather protectionism in the National Team, significantly narrowed the talent base of the National Team and therefore impaired the interests of the National Team, which forced the National Team to adopt innovative approaches to recruit young talent. Also, provincial teams’ prioritization of the National Games over the Olympic Games and relatively more substantial financial incentive provided by provincial governments often leads to cyclists’ better performance at the National Games rather than the Olympic Games.¹⁶

As noted above, there is no direct accountability or affiliation between the National Cycling and Fencing Management Centre and provincial cycling governing bodies, which provides provincial teams with a loophole to take advantage of to negatively respond to or to resist the demand of the National Team. In provinces where there is a highly competitive team or there are potential gold medal-level cyclists at the National Games, the governments are very financially generous. The ‘Olympic gold medal fever’ at the central level has been transformed into ‘National Game gold medal fever’ at the provincial level.

Another factor contributing to the relatively more influential position of provincial cycling teams in comparison to many traditional sports is the National Team’s relatively flexible structure regarding the composition of athletes (non-centralized regime for non-key events) and coaches (a large proportion of coaches temporarily transferred from provincial teams for non-key events) and the dispersed training regime for non-key events, all of which

resulted in a high degree of reliance on provincial teams for athletes, coaching and training.

According to Yang's (2012) categorization of elite national teams in China, the National Cycling Team adopts a flexible system comprising both centralized and 'federal' elements.¹⁷ For events in which China has a real chance of winning medals or gold medal potential in major international competitions, namely women's short-distance track events, there is a regular National Team, which is long congregated for collective training in the Laoshan Base in the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre in Beijing. In comparison, there are no regular National Teams for men's track events, women's medium- and long-distance track events, BMX, mountainbike, and especially road events.¹⁸ As for non-road non-key events, there are regular collective training events for top cyclists in the Laoshan Base during a year. But provincial teams are primarily responsible for the training of top cyclists in these events. In preparation for major international cycling events such as the Olympic Games, the UCI World Championships and the Asian Games, according to recent performance in domestic and international competitions (usually a point system), cyclists and coaches of these non-key events are temporarily selected (usually based on the same provincial teams) and the National Teams are formed.¹⁹ Road cycling is even looser. Due to its high degree of commercialization and professionalization and China's almost zero possibility of winning medals in major international competitions, road cycling is strategically given up at the National Team level.²⁰ Immediately before major competitions, a temporary National Road Cycling Team is formed and cyclists and coaches are selected based on a point system.

When it comes to coaching, the National Cycling Team adopts a combined method of contract hiring and temporary transfer from provincial teams in terms of coaching. The hiring of regular coaches serving the National Team is usually under contracts, the duration of which covers an Olympiad, starting immediately after the National Games one year after the previous Olympic and ending after the Olympic Games. Akin to other Olympic sports, the appointment of the head coach of the National Cycling Team needs to obtain

the approval from GAS. Key criteria considered in coach recruitment include the candidates' past sporting and coaching experience, their non-doping records and so on. In addition, the knowledge, academic ability and English proficiency of the candidates have become increasingly important.²¹ Successful candidates can maintain their previous salaries and administrative positions in provincial teams and enjoy additional benefits provided by the National Team including training subsidy, rewards and equipment.²² Due to the nature of the National Team especially a non-regular National Team system for non-key events, the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre and the National Cycling Team transfer a certain number of temporary coaches from provincial teams before major international competitions.²³

The National Team organizes quarterly trainings. However, compared to the concentrated training system of some 'fortress' sports, the training system of the National Cycling Team tends to be more dispersed, or at least combined. Cyclists of non-key events do not regularly stay with the National Team. Instead, provincial teams are mainly responsible for their training. Even at the national team level, the training system is much looser and more diverse. Instead of congregating in Beijing, the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre selects several coaches undertaking dispersed training and their home provincial teams become the organizations in charge of the training of these cyclists of non-key events representing the National Team. Hence, cyclists can be located in different provinces.²⁴ The Cycling and Fencing Management Centre stays in contact with the dispersed training groups and coaches are required to provide regular training records. In addition, officials and coaches of the National Team regularly visit these dispersed training bases to examine the training outcome. The dispersed training regime is mainly supported by corresponding provincial sports governing bodies including the provision of equipment. The National Management Centre provides certain funds to dispersed training in the form of training subsidies, living and catering costs and so on.²⁵ The Cycling and Fencing Management Centre and the CCA adopt a punitive system on the coaches and provincial units to enhance the quality of dispersed training. Units and coaches failing to submit training materials or meeting the training requirements suffer a subsidy deduction.²⁶ In

extreme cases, the units and coaches are deprived of training qualifications and the punishment is reported to provincial sports bureaus. However, the training of these events is by no means in the form of dispersed training solely. The Cycling and Fencing Management Centre and the CCA organizes concentrated training for the National Team regularly according to the needs but the events are selective (road cycling is not included) and the training venues are often dispersed in several provinces.²⁷ It is also pertinent to point out that the National Team needs to pay for the training in the velodromes of provincial teams, as they are the assets of provincial sports bureaus and administrations rather than the National Team.

Although the flexible and combined approaches to the composition of athletes and coaches of the National Team and training regime help better utilize provincial resources and are expected to enhance the morale of provincial teams, they are also inclined to weaken the dominance of the National Team by devolving more power to provincial teams and to encourage provincialism and parochialism, despite certain policy instruments implemented ranging from incentive and inducements to sanctions.

The dominance of the government-led system and the limited development alternative sources

Except for road cycling which is more commercialized and professionalized, the development of elite track cycling, mountain bike and BMX relies overwhelmingly on government subvention in China. Regular National Team is only established for women's short-distance track events which are the paramount priority. All the other events are primarily developed by provincial teams and hence, these cyclists are primarily funded by their corresponding provincial governments. Although detailed funding figures are not available to public, it is known that following the *Olympic Glory Plan* and the committed pursuit of Olympic gold medals, GAS provides sufficient financial support to events in which China has a chance to win Olympic gold medals and multi-dimensional support for potential gold medallists is secured by GAS.

Akin to many other Olympic sports in China, Chinese elite cycling in general and non-road cycling in particular mainly relies on the traditional spare-time sports school and sports school system and the three-level training network for talent recruitment and athlete cultivation. Even in the early 1980s, large-scale scientific talent identification of elite cyclists was conducted in many provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions across China.²⁸ This further demonstrated that China is an early adopter of systematic talent identification as even in a non-major sport, systematic talent identification has been implemented for more than three decades. The traditional three-level training network and the (spare-time) sports school system dominate the cultivation of elite cyclists in China. However, due to a lack of cycling culture and poor mass base,²⁹ many coaches complain that it is very difficult to find promising cycling seed-corn in China.³⁰ Cyclists successfully entering provincial teams become full-time athletes and enjoy administrative appointments and salaries. However, only 5% of athletes can survive the ruthless elimination and finally become full-time athletes,³¹ while the remaining 95% leave sports schools with a shattered dream and are very uncompetitive in the job market due to poor educational background.

A more critical consequence of the dominance of the traditional three-level and sports school system and the separation, or partition between the development of government-led elite cycling and that of amateur cycling is the exclusion of social resources, which further narrows the quantity of elite cyclists available to full-time teams. It is also noteworthy that due to the dominance of the traditional talent selection and progression method, most of the cyclists spring from relatively poor background, while social, especially urban cycling resources, including human resources are not entitled to represent the National Team.

Coaching quality

Despite a certain degree of progress in the last two decades, the overall level of elite cycling coaches in China is still far behind that of leading countries in

the world, which hinders the further progress in the development of elite cycling in China.³²

‘Despite the financial and system support from GAS, the overall competitiveness of cycling coaches in China is very limited, which is a stumbling block for further breakthrough of Chinese cycling in the world. The vast majority of cycling coaches are retired athletes and 99% of elite cyclists come from relatively poor rural areas. Their horizon, leaning ability, knowledge and comprehensive ability are deficient. Especially, the level of cycling coaches working at the grass-roots level is very limited, which affects the mastery of rudimentary basics of elite cyclists in China’.³³

In addition to the quality problem, the quantity of elite cycling coaches is also worrying. According to Zhao (2007),³⁴ there were only 150 elite cycling coaches serving full-time cycling teams in China the majority of which were young and middle-aged.

Competition opportunities

The National Games is undoubtedly the most significant domestic event for elite cyclists in China in general and cyclists of provincial teams in particular. Cycling was included as an official sport in the inaugural National Games in 1959 (road cycling only while track cycling was an unofficial sport discipline) and cycling has never been absent from the National Games ever since. Many provincial governments invest heavily in cycling and they become the major engine of the development of non-key cycling events in China. GAS and the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre fully exploit the leverage of the National Games to promote the development of cycling at the basic level and guarantee the sources of talent of the National Team. Key measures include the ‘policy medals’ transferred from the Olympic Games to the National Games and the double-point system according to which a medal is added to both the home province of the medallist and the PLA delegation for PLA athletes. As a senior official inside the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre and the CCA said: ‘If there were no National Games or cycling were

not included in the National Games, elite cycling, at least many non-key events would have disappeared in China'.³⁵ This also explains why better performance is often seen at the National Games rather than the Olympic Games, which was especially pervasive during the period when the tension between the National Team and provincial teams was fierce and provincial teams overwhelmingly prioritize the National Games over the Olympic Games.

Previously, due to the facility and velodrome restrictions, it was difficult to organize frequent domestic cycling competitions.³⁶ Competition environment has been improved since the early 2000s with the increase in the number of advanced cycling velodromes and facilities established across China. There are National Championships and National Cycling Champions Competitions held annually, specifically for track cycling, road cycling, BMX and mountain bike.³⁷ There are also National Youth Cycling Championships held in order to expand the talent base and promote the development of cycling among younger age groups.³⁸ Yet, competition opportunities for Chinese elite cyclists are still fewer than those available to their Western counterparts.³⁹ Especially, grass-roots and amateur competitions are very scarce.

Limited international influence

The Nationalist China became a member of the UCI in 1939 but the People's Republic of China government quitted the UCI in 1958 because of the Taiwan issue.⁴⁰ In 1979, China returned to the UCI and the CCA is the only official representative of the People's Republic of China in the UCI.⁴¹

Unlike many key sports, China's position in the UCI is extremely marginal, which, to a large extent, echoes China's competitiveness in cycling in the world. There is not any Chinese member in any organs of the UCI including the Executive Board,⁴² Management Committee,⁴³ Professional Cycling Council,⁴⁴ and even any of its more than ten Commissions.⁴⁵ The UCI is predominantly occupied by Western countries and even the very limited Asian members are from South Korea and Japan.⁴⁶ It is no exaggeration to say that China is totally excluded from the decision making inside the UCI. In fact,

China has been disadvantaged by many decisions made by the UCI, including the exclusion of China's traditional advantage of women's 500m time trial since Beijing 2008 and the deprivation of China's gold medal result in women's team sprint in London 2012.⁴⁷ What a senior official working inside the CCA said can summarize China's peripheral role in the world.

'We do not have any person working inside the UCI, even for an insignificant position. Hence, we have very limited discursive power and are very vulnerable to unfair decisions. We are disadvantaged in the establishment of rules, the event setting at the Olympic Games and specific match arbitrations. What is worse, because of a lack of presence in the UCI, it is extremely difficult for us to protect our rights when unfair decisions fall on us. The exclusion of our previous only hope - women's 500m individual time trial - once greatly shocked us and significantly disrupted our preparation for Beijing 2008. China is a policy taker rather than a policy maker or even a participant in the UCI'.⁴⁸

Key changes and developments in the last decade

In spite of the sporadic medal performance at the Olympic Games and limited overall competitiveness in the world, Chinese elite cyclists' progress has been dramatic, which is unequivocally associated with several major changes and developments taking place in the last ten to 15 years.

'Invite in and Go Out'

Chinese elite cycling has been a beneficiary of GAS' 'Invite In and Go Out' strategy. Overseas training of key cyclists and the cooperation with leading foreign coaches have born substantial fruit, which are widely assumed as key contributory factors of the notable progress of Chinese track cyclists on the international stage since the early 2000s.

As a lagging sport, Chinese cycling has benefited from UCI's international programme targeting non-traditional cycling nations. This also prompted the national cycling governing body to innovate talent recruitment method by

sending coaches to grass-roots level to directly select young talent. Shuang Guo and Jinjie Gong, the pillars of Chinese National Cycling Team in the last two Olympiads, are not fostered by the traditional three-level network. Different from the traditional three-level delivery system, coaches of the National Team directly went down to provincial and city teams and even grass-roots sports schools to seek and recruit young talent (mainly 12 to 13 years old) at the very beginning of the Twenty-first century. It is noteworthy that Jinjie Gong had previously been engaged in athletics and hence this was an example of talent transfer. Provincial teams were required to recommend promising talent. However, due to their prioritization of the National Games, many provincial teams recommended very 'raw' (inexperienced) children instead of more 'processed' and experienced cycling talent, or budding stars of their own youth or reserve teams. For cyclists, to represent the provincial teams to compete in domestic competitions may result in more return than to represent the National Team.⁴⁹

Young talent, both recommended by provincial and city teams and identified by the coaches of the National Team, directly entered the National Team, skipping the provincial level. The most successful representatives, such as Shuang Guo and Na Li, later becoming China's only two world champions until 2013, received the opportunity of training in the International Training Centre in Switzerland in the early 2000s, following the coaching of renowned foreign coaches and sponsored by Olympic Solidarity. Of particular note was the contribution of non-domestic financial support in the form of Olympic Solidarity, which was rare for Chinese elite athletes. This was even rarer in China's 'fortress' sports which tend to be self-sufficient. This illustrates that even in a highly self-funded (mainly government-funded) 'whole country support for elite sport system', China still employs foreign resources including financial resources. Cycling, as a lagging sport in China especially back in the 1990s, the situation of which was exacerbated by relatively limited central support and vicious provincial rivalry, was one of the very few sports in China which received and benefited from substantial financial support provided by International Federations' international programme. As noted above, the recipients of the Olympic Solidarity, Shuang Guo and Na Li, who were

included in the UCI programme, sent to train in Switzerland and led by leading foreign coaches, were China's only two cycling champions so far.⁵⁰ In particular, Shuang Guo became the pillar of the Chinese Cycling Team, winning four Olympic medals between Beijing 2008 and London 2012. The fruit also prodded the cycling governing bodies to take more substantial steps to further promote international cooperation.

What is evident from the direct selection and recruitment of young talent was the emphasis given by provinces to local interests instead of the interests of the National Team and the influence of provincial teams. Hence, it demonstrated the tension between the National Team and provincial teams. It also revealed the National Team's limited control over provincial teams. It is noteworthy that direct recruitment of potential cyclists at the grass-roots level by the coaches of the National Team was an attempt to shorten the implementation chain and hence it tried to solve one of the problems of effective or perfect top-down implementation identified by Hogwood and Gunn (1984) that 'that there is a single implementing agency which need not depend on other agencies for success or, if other agencies must be involved, that the dependency relationships are minimal in number and importance' can improve the smoothness of top-down implementation.⁵¹

Overseas training has made a great contribution to the cultivation of top Chinese cyclists. As noted previously, the pioneers of overseas training were Shuang Guo and Na Li, who were selected to receive training in the International Training Centre in Switzerland in the early 2000s, following the UCI's programme of promoting cycling in Asia, sponsored by Olympic Solidarity and led by top foreign coaches.⁵² In the Beijing Olympiad, Shuang Guo followed the coaching of Daniel Morelon abroad and the training with the French coach further improved her performance. After the official appointment of Daniel Morelon as the head coach of the National Team in 2009, more cyclists of the National Team including Shuang Guo's partner in women's team sprint in London 2012 - Jinjie Gong, acquired the chance to train abroad.⁵³ However, the overseas training of Chinese National Team is still relatively new and the scale is very limited. Currently, it is only confined to

women's short-distance track cyclists, reflecting again the emphasis on these events.

The CCA adopted the 'Go Out' policy more than a decade ago and key measures included sending top cyclists and budding stars abroad for training.⁵⁴ However, in comparison, the National Cycling Team is a 'late adopter' of 'Invite In'. The National Track Cycling Team did not officially hire any foreign coaches in the Beijing Olympiad. 2009 was a milestone in the history of elite cycling in China as the National Cycling Team, for the first time, officially recruited the Frenchman Daniel Morelon as the head coach of the Chinese National Cycling Team after the Shandong National Games.⁵⁵ The fruit of official recruitment of leading foreign coach soon became discernible, which underpinned Chinese cyclists' unprecedented medal success at London 2012. Prior to that, Daniel Morelon had been Shuang Guo's coach and helped her win a bronze medal at Beijing 2008.⁵⁶ In fact, before Daniel Morelon was hired by the National Team in 2009, there had been foreign coaches (from France, Russia, the USA and so on) serving several provincial cycling teams.⁵⁷ Daniel Morelon regularly went to the base in Beijing to deliver guidance. But instead of a French team, Daniel Morelon's work in the National Team was mainly assisted by a Chinese coaching team. As officially defined, the relationship between Daniel Morelon and the National Cycling Team was cooperative.⁵⁸ At the same time, key athletes went overseas to follow Daniel Morelon's training for a certain period in a year. The National Cycling Team achieved progress in a wider range of events and more competitive cyclists emerged in the London Olympiad, to which Daniel Morelon made a great contribution. In addition, some provincial teams hire foreign coaches to prepare for the National Games.⁵⁹ The progress in London 2012 secured the continuity of the hiring of high-level foreign coaches for women's short-distance track events at least in the Rio de Janeiro Olympiad,⁶⁰ following GAS' requirement that key events need to have high-level foreign coaches.⁶¹

Last, China has hosted several continental and international cycling events in recent years, most notably the 2008 UCI BMX World Championships in Taiyuan.⁶²

More focused policy and financial support and the prioritization of women's short-distance track events

Another key feature of the development of elite cycling at the National Team level in the last ten to 15 years has been the establishment and deepening of the priority position of women's short-distance track events. This niche area was where Chinese cyclists achieved Olympic medal breakthrough and what has contributed all China's Olympic medals in cycling. GAS and the Cycling and Fencing Management Centre's prioritization is multi-dimensional, illustrated by reference to an overwhelming bias towards cyclists of these events covering the areas of funding, the system of the National Team, the availability of coaches, scientific support and training.

First, following the 'gold medals take all' philosophy, GAS secured financial support for all events with a reasonable chance of winning Olympic gold medals. In the case of cycling, women's short-distance track events are unsurprisingly the largest recipient of funds provided by GAS and the financial support provided has been sufficient⁶³.

Second, within the relatively flexible and combined system of the National Cycling Team, only cyclists of women's short-distance track events athletes enjoy centralized support. Cyclists in the National Team, especially of the women's short-distance track group, mainly stay at the National Base at Laoshan, Beijing for collective training. Basically, the training of elite cyclists in China, especially those of the National Team, occupies ten months of a year and top cyclists need to train for six days a week. Regular coaches contractually hired by the National Team instead of temporary coaches transferred from provincial teams are also provided for these cyclists. The vast majority of coaches hired with contracts work for women's events (five for women and one for men in 2013) and women's short-distance track events attract the largest number.⁶⁴ More importantly, foreign coaches recruited by the National Team including Daniel Morelon and previous leading foreign coaches who cooperated with Chinese cyclists in Switzerland mainly serve

female short-distance track cyclists, while cyclists of other events rarely obtain the opportunity to follow the coaching of foreign experts.

Third, female cyclists specializing in short-distance track events also enjoy a wide range of preferential treatment in training. This is most evident in the type of cyclists sent abroad for Olympic Solidarity-funded UCI Programme in the early 2000s and subsequent regular overseas training noted above. Overseas training has been a notable development of 'Go Out' for Chinese elite cycling in the new century. However, it is only confined to women's short-distance track cyclists, reflecting again the emphasis on these events. The prioritization of women's events in general and the position of women's short-distance track events as top priorities is also evidenced in domestic training. In order to improve the performance of key female cyclists, many male cyclists act as the ladder players. For example, Shuang Guo and Jinjie Gong often have one-on-one or even one-on-two competitions with male cyclists in the training.⁶⁵

Last, female short-distance track cyclists, especially potential Olympic medallists receive more systematic scientific support including day-to-day support provided by a scientific team staying in the National Team and the attraction of the vast majority of research programmes.

The prioritization of women's short-distance track events led to a relatively less centralized approach to other events and other cycling disciplines where the reliance on provincial teams is more significant. To guarantee the success of key events and the sufficiency of resources they require, non-key events especially road cycling at the National Team level has been largely abandoned.

'We do not have the resources to spread the money across a wide range of events. Especially, road cycling is a highly professionalized and commercialized international sport discipline. The international competition is significantly intense and the result of the Olympic Games is extremely unpredictable. China has almost no competitiveness in road cycling and there are only four gold medals at the Olympic Games. It will

be a misuse of money to invest in these highly difficult and unpredictable events with very limited medals available but a large number of strong competitors.⁶⁶

The development of commercial elements

Although elite non-road cycling in China is overwhelmingly funded by governments, it is overstating the matter to say that there is no commercial element. The CCA has several commercial partners and the National Cycling Team has been continuously sponsored by some commercial enterprises.⁶⁷ Provincial cycling associations and teams obtain commercial sponsorship including title sponsorship as well.⁶⁸ As a highly professionalized and commercialized sport discipline, the development of road cycling in China is largely different from that of track cycling, mountain bike and BMX. In addition to domestic competitions such as National Champions Competitions, China has organized several international road cycling tours including Tour of Qinghai Lake, Tour of Chongming Island, Tour of Beijing, Tour of Hainan and so forth.⁶⁹ Among them, Tour of Qinghai Lake is the most famous and influential, which has attracted many foreign teams including some renowned professional cyclists who have competed in Tour de France.⁷⁰ The event has attracted substantial commercial investment from domestic enterprises.⁷¹

As noted previously, traditional sports school system and three-level network still play a dominant role in producing elite cyclists in China.⁷² However, there is evidence of the development of alternative approaches most notably the development of commercialization and professionalization of road cycling in China noted above. A number of private road cycling clubs have been established, which recruit both foreign and domestic talented cyclists including those representing the Chinese National Team.⁷³

Conclusions

Chinese elite cyclists' limited success, which is incommensurate with China's position as the 'bicycle kingdom'⁷⁴, is attributed to a number of culprits. In

essence, there is no competitive cycling culture or tradition in China.⁷⁵ Cycling is 'more a means of transportation than an entertainment or lifestyle choice in China'.⁷⁶ In comparison to many Western countries, cycling is still a young sport in China.⁷⁷ The lack of mass base is the most essential cause of the underdevelopment of cycling including elite cycling in China. If the tradition, the mass base or the popularity is the deep-level reasons, then the sports system especially the elite sport system in China has, to a large extent, aggravated the dilemma. First, the hegemonic dominance of the traditional three-level pyramid in talent cultivation and athlete delivery,⁷⁸ has precluded the entry of and association with amateur, or non-government cycling resources including cycling talent,⁷⁹ which has artificially further narrowed the talent base. Second, even the limited cycling base cannot be fully used by the National Team as a result of provincial rivalry and the prioritization of the National Games, despite provincial teams' significant contribution to the development of Chinese elite cycling. The central government, through its representative of GAS, cannot escape its responsibility either. While it would not be objective to say that the central government and GAS does not support cycling, it is fair to say that the support is less systematic in comparison to more high-profile sports. There is no policy document targeting cycling as opposed to 119 Project that included most of China's non-fortress sports, which is a demonstration of the lack of systematic support mentioned previously. Cycling is the only sport with more than ten gold medals at the Olympic Games that was not mentioned in GAS' official book summarising the history of sport in China between 1949 and 2009.⁸⁰ Moreover, cycling shares a management centre with four other vastly different sports.

In spite of these problems, Chinese elite cycling in general and women's short-distance track cyclists in particular has made notable progress in the last decade. Another significant change is the positive development in the implementation of the 'Invite In and Go Out' strategy and the attitude towards foreign coaches. China's performance at London 2012 was unprecedented and the recruitment of world-leading foreign coaches was perceived as a key contributory factor. In fact, the use of foreign expertise and the recruitment of top foreign coaches is a demonstration of China's interaction with the world. In

addition, the increased number of domestic coaches officially recruited by the National Team, the prioritization of women's short-distance track events, the increased number of domestic competitions held and international competitions held and attended, the increased degree of centralization in terms of national team structure and training regime especially for key events, the innovative measure of directing recruiting young talent for the National Team and the organization of overseas training and other measures attempting to dilute or mitigate the tension between the National Team and provincial teams are all contributory factors propelling Chinese cyclists' notable progress. Moreover, the notable progress made in the commercialization and professionalization of road cycling, in conjunction with the promotion of commercialization and professionalization in sports including football, basketball and table tennis, also represented a new trend of sport development in China.

While the progress of Chinese cycling in general and women's short-distance track cycling in particular is undeniable, it is still too early to be complacent as the gold medal dream has not been fulfilled. For a country like China where 'gold medals take all', China's progress in cycling is far from a success. The objective for Rio de Janeiro 2016 is simple: to realize the gold medal breakthrough.⁸¹ In comparison to this seemingly realizable objective, what seems difficult to change in the short term is China's absence, or at least extremely limited influence in the UCI. Cycling in China can be seen as a good representative of China's overall limited discursive power (except for some fortress sports) in the world especially the peripheral role in International Federations of non-key sports. However, as a popular Chinese proverb goes, 'a weak nation has no diplomacy'. In order to earn more respect in the world and gain more power in the UCI, China needs to learn from the UK and try to improve the overall competitiveness of the National Team and strengthen its hard power in international cycling.

Cycling also provides an insightful lens whereby China's approaches to non-traditional yet medal-abundant Western-dominated non-collective sports could be understood. Although as a component of the whole country support for

elite sport system in China, elite cycling is dominated by government forces and underpinned by the traditional three-level system and (spare-time) sports school regime and provincial teams, it has some distinctive features. Its sharing of a governing body with other sports and a lesser degree of organizational specialization, the flexible system of the National Team concerning both athlete and coach selection and composition, combined training regime, use of foreign funds, very limited international influence and more importantly the high degree of tension and low degree of common interest between the National Team and provincial teams does not apply to China's 'fortress' sports. The burgeoning of commercial elements in road cycling is also rare in other traditional sports in general and non-collective sports in particular, although the strategic abandonment of road cycling in terms of elite performance and the overwhelming prioritization of women's short-distance track events also renders cycling a distinctive subject for the analysis of elite sport in China.

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