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Policy transfer in elite sport development: The case of elite swimming in China

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Abstract

Research question: This article explores policy transfer in the context of (non-professional) elite sport development through a detailed examination of Chinese elite swimming organisations since the early 2000s. The analysis is structured according to the five main aspects of policy transfer: rationale, actors, sources, elements and content, and conditioning factors.

Research methods: Data were collected from 15 semi-structured interviews with officials, coaches and scholars. These interviews were complemented by a content analysis of official and semi-official documents from both relevant sports governing bodies and influential Chinese media.

Results and findings: The major findings are that (1) the most important factors propelling the policy transfer were poor performances at major international sports events and a desire to be successful at the home Olympic Games; (2) the key policy transfer actors included government ‘insiders’ and foreign experts; (3) Australia was the main source of new policy because of a combination of political, geographical, economic and sport-specific factors; (4) the policy content transferred focused mainly on ideas, methods and techniques rather than deeper-level structures and ideology; and (5) source nations sought to constrain the policy transfer process.

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Implications: Although policy transfer can be effective, there can be unintended negative consequences. Policy transfer is a bilateral process which is reliant upon the support of organisations or individuals from source nations. This research can stimulate elite sport programmes to consider the merits of pursuing policy transfer, when to pursue policy transfer and how to pursue policy transfer.

Keywords: policy transfer; elite sport; China; elite swimming; policy transfer

Policy transfer in elite sport development: The case of elite swimming in China

Introduction

This research examines the policy transfer processes in the context of (non-professional) elite sport development through a detailed examination of Chinese elite swimming organisations since the early 2000s. Policy transfer occurs when ‘knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 5).

Policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000) explains what, why and how autonomous actors learn from others. However, despite the prevalence and wide applicability of this concept, there is a relative dearth of sport-related policy transfer research. An examination of policy transfer in a non-professional sport in a non-western nation where elite sport is a prominent public policy area remains uncharted territory. Moreover, most existing research focuses on the role of recipient nations, often ignoring the source nations’ role. These gaps may limit the understanding of the practice of policy transfer and the domain-specific features of policy transfer in academic terms. Accordingly, this research interrogates the policy transfer process and outcome in the context of a government-funded Olympic sport. Specifically, the study is contextualised within a salient sport discipline (swimming) in a prominent sporting nation (China).

China’s emergence as a sporting superpower is a remarkable characteristic of contemporary international sport (Tan & Green, 2008; Tan & Houlihan, 2013). Learning from leading swimming nations was a critical factor underpinning China’s newfound success in elite swimming (GAS, 2012, 2014). Although China boosted its medal share after the 2008 Olympics (see Table 1), the seeds for success were sown in the early 2000s. Elite swimming was prioritised in both *The Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan:*

2001–2010 (GAS, 2002) and the *119 Project*. The remainder of the paper comprises four additional sections – literature review, methods, findings and discussion.

[Table 1 about here]

Literature review: Policy theories and policy transfer

Through communist and capitalist countries alike, there is a widespread systematic government-led and government-funded approach to elite sport development (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). These include China, where elite sport is highly politicised and government organisations are almost omnipotent (Zheng, Lau, Chen, Dickson, De Bosscher & Peng, 2018). Elite sport in China is an integral public policy domain of the government (Zheng, Tan & Bairner, 2017). Accordingly, theoretical perspectives from the public policy literature are utilised to provide the theoretical foundation.

Several meso-level public policy frameworks (i.e., those that focus on national sport organisations) have been used by scholars to analyse sport policy. For example, Parrish (2003) and Green and Houlihan (2005) used the advocacy coalition framework to analyse sports policy in the European Union, and in the UK, Australia and Canada respectively. The multiple streams framework was used to examine New Zealand sport policy (Chalip, 1996), sport policy within UK local authorities (King, 2009), and the impact of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games on sport policy in Australia (Sotiriadou & Brouwers, 2012). The policy community framework was also applied to elite sport policy in South Korea (Hong, 2012). However, none of these sport policy studies focused on how policy is transferred from one context to another.

Being a ‘common’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, p. 357) phenomenon, policy transfer is a process in which ‘knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements,

institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system' (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 5). Rose (1991, p. 22) argued that policy transfer 'cannot be politically neutral, because politics is about conflicting values and goals [and] there is rarely complete political consensus, even about scientific and technical matters'.

Policy makers are largely motivated by practical needs, such as dissatisfaction with the *status quo* (e.g., poor Olympic performance) rather than a desire for new knowledge. Policy makers are attracted to policies that have success elsewhere. Therefore, policy transfer is almost always problem-driven. In some cases, policy transfer is prompted by a lack of time and knowledge to identify and pursue ideal policy solutions (Evans & Davies, 1999; Rose, 2005). Hence, policy transfer is often implemented in pursuit of a 'quick fix' to problems (Dolowitz, Greenwold & Marsh, 1999, p. 729).

A variety of actors are involved in the policy transfer process (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Evans, 2009). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) divided policy transfer actors into nine categories: elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/civil servants, pressure groups, policy entrepreneurs and experts, transnational corporations, think tanks, supra-national governmental and nongovernmental institutions and consultants. Most policy transfer research focuses on official actors, or government participants (Stone, 1999, 2000).

Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) summarised the content of policy transfer into six categories: policy goals, structure and content; policy instruments or administrative techniques; institutions; ideology; ideas, attitudes and concepts; and negative lessons. The sources of policy transfer and learning can be both foreign and domestic, as well as contemporary and historical.

Nations absorb lessons from other nations in the hope that a successful formula

can be identified and transferred (Rose, 2005). However, policy transfer outcomes are conditioned by many factors. According to Benson (2009), policy transfer processes and outcomes are conditioned by (1) demand side constraints (i.e., policy demand and potential resistance); (2) programmatic constraints (i.e., uniqueness and complexity of the programme); (3) contextual constraints (i.e., path dependency, existing institutional structures, political context and degree of politicisation, resources and ideology compatibility); and (4) application constraints (i.e., institutional substitutability and structure, scales of changes and programmatic modification and adjustment). Policy transfer is more likely to be successful under the following conditions: high policy demand, low resistance, more generic and less unique and less complex programmes, favourable path dependency, an enabling, supportive and more feasibly substitutable institutional structure with low structural density, less intense politicisation, adequate resources, ideological consistency, smaller-scale changes and a low degree of programmatic adjustment (Bache & Taylor, 2003; Benson, 2009; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). Resources are not just for the financial type. Rose (2005) highlighted the role of political leaders' commitment whilst stressing also that, 'qualified personnel are required to deliver many types of public programmes' (Rose, 2005, p. 110).

The political institutions within which actors operate constrain the policy transfer process (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). The institutional environment and situation, including aforementioned existing structures, institutional resources, institutional ideology and institutional substitutability, create the policy transfer context where uncertainty, power and conflicts impact the policy transfer processes and outcomes (Augestad, Bersgard & Hansen, 2006). Decision makers are inclined to pursue policy solutions (e.g., policy transfer) that are fundamentally woven into the environment in which the organisation resides (Dolowitz, 2000). But there remains a major limitation –

all these factors focus on the attitude and institutional context of the recipient rather than source nations of the policy transfer.

Policy transfer outcomes are often uncertain, unpredictable (Stone, 1999) and ‘difficult to steer’ (Dunlop, 2009, p. 307). Successful policy transfer is therefore never guaranteed (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Marsh & Sharman, 2009). Nevertheless, governments ‘are increasingly likely to look for “solutions” abroad’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 21) when searching for policy solutions to new or changing issues. Policy transfer has reasonable utility across a range of nations and policy domains (e.g., Cox, 1993; Dolowitz, 1997; Radaelli, 2000). To elaborate, Dolowitz (1997) used the policy transfer to examine the efforts of the British government to emulate the American government’s welfare-to-work system. Similarly, the concept of policy transfer underpinned Radaelli’s (2000) research on policy diffusion and institutional isomorphism in the European Union (EU). Premised on three in-depth case studies – the single currency, tax policy and media ownership policy, Radaelli (2000) concluded that the legitimacy-weak EU pursued policy transfer through isomorphic processes.

There are some critiques on the concept of policy transfer. For example, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 21) stressed that policy transfer is not ‘the sole explanation of any, let alone most, policy development’. They caution that ‘all we are suggesting is that an increasing amount of policy development, and particularly policy change in contemporary polities is affected by policy transfer’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 21).

While there has been a steady rise in research on policy transfer in various policy domains, there is a dearth of research applying policy transfer to China. One exception is the recent investigation by Zhang and Marsh (2016) into the ‘Reform and Open Door Policy’. Zhang and Marsh (2016) investigated six issues (1) who transfers policy; (2) why do governments engage in policy transfer; (3) what elements of policy are

transferred; (4) what type or degree of transfer is involved; (5) where are policies transferred from; and (6) what factors affect the success, or otherwise, of the transfer. These key dimensions of the concept of policy transfer, which are consistent with key aspects explored elsewhere in the literature (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000), frame the specific questions of this research.

Despite some notable exceptions (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Hoye & Nicholson, 2009; Houlihan, Tan & Green, 2010; Sakka & Chatzigianni, 2012), the application of policy transfer to sport is relatively rare. Green and Houlihan's (2005) research on elite sport policy in the UK, Australia and Canada was first to apply policy learning to elite sport development. Hoye and Nicholson's (2009) study about sport for all and social welfare bridged sport policy and policy transfer. The key findings of Hoye and Nicholson (2009) were that policy transfer underpinned sport policies to promote social capital in Australia and this was mainly propelled by institutional similarities between policy agencies and trans-state communication. The most recent work by Sakka and Chatzigianni (2012) explored the degree and impact of the Europeanisation process on Greek sport policy, although again, the focus was not elite sport. It is also noteworthy that in their study, policy transfer only supplemented the study's key concept of Europeanisation.

Houlihan, Tan and Green (2010) shifted the context to non-western countries and professional sport when they applied policy transfer to China's pursuit of (professional) basketball policy from the USA. Houlihan et al.'s (2010) study highlighted the ability of the 'importing' country to control the policy transfer partners and the extent to which policy can transcend starkly different political and social-cultural environments. Equally importantly, Houlihan et al. (2010) noted the potential for policy transfer-related tensions between individuals and the government. In so doing, the study also highlights clearly

the relevance of policy transfer to Chinese sport policy. Nevertheless, after a careful scrutiny of existing literature on policy transfer, elite sport policy transfer between nations within sports that are not fully professional has not been investigated.

Research methods

Research questions and research design

This research examines the policy transfer processes in the context of (non-professional) elite sport development through a case study of elite swimming in China. The research questions that guided this study are:

- 1a. Why does a nation seek the transfer of elite sport policy and lessons from foreign nations?
- 1b. What are the critical junctures and context for a nation to initiate and further pursue policy transfer in elite sport?
- 2a. Who are the key actors involved in this policy transfer process?
- 2b. What are their roles in the policy transfer process?
- 3a. What foreign nations are the sources of the policy transfer?
- 3b. Why are these nations selected?
4. What is the policy content that has been learnt?
5. What factors impact the outcome of the policy transfer?

A single-case study (Yin, 2009) approach examines one sport (swimming) in one nation (China). Swimming and China were ‘chosen deliberately on the basis of specific significant attributes’ (Denscombe, 2007, p. 39). Swimming, with 34 events at Rio 2016, was second only to athletics in terms of the number of available medals. Moreover, swimming in China receives considerable policy attention and subsequent government

support. China was selected because of its ever-rising geopolitical profile in the world and the longstanding prominence of elite sport. In addition, data were highly accessible from documents, website sources, and interviews, which resonates with the related issues of ‘convenience and feasibility’ (Denscombe, 2007, p. 41) in case selection. Finally, the Chinese National Swimming Team was commended by General Administration of Sport of China (GAS) as a model sport/discipline for implementing interacting with and learning from foreign nations (Zheng, 2015). Therefore, elite swimming is a ‘typical/representative’ (Stake, 1995, p. 4), or ‘exemplifying’ (Bryman, 2016, p. 62) case.

Contextual uniqueness is an innate characteristic of social phenomena and qualitative studies. Thus, the aim of this research was not to seek an all-powerful formula explaining policy transfer in elite sport policy. Instead, the study pursued a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 3) of the policy transfer process in China’s elite swimming programme, with a strong emphasis on the context (Bryman, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such an approach enables researchers and practitioners to critically assess the transferability of the study’s findings to other contexts.

Data collection

Data were sourced from semi-structured interviews and official and semi-official documents from both sports governing bodies and influential media in China. Fifteen people were invited to participate. This research employed a combination of ‘judgemental sampling’ (Blaikie, 2010, p. 178) and ‘snowball sampling’ (Goodman, 1961) strategy. Judgemental sampling ensured that prospective interviewees were able to provide substantial in-depth and first-hand information on the policy transfer process relevant to elite swimming in China. This approach resulted in initial interviews with five participants: the National Swimming Team leader, a renowned professor of sport policy

in China, an official of the National Aquatics Management Centre (NAMC), an official of the Personnel Department of GAS, and the Deputy Head Coach of the National Swimming Team. Then, a snowballing approach expanded the interviewee network.

Ten interviews were conducted between late-July and mid-August 2015. This period was selected because of the availability of most interviewees and the convenience of the interviewer. The timing here reflected the intent to capture the notable progress of Chinese elite swimmers between 2011 and 2015. Two interviews were arranged in 2013, one year after Chinese elite swimmers' improved performances at London 2012. Additional/follow-up interviews were conducted in January 2017 to explore the new developments after Rio de Janeiro 2016. These interviewees included two participants in 2015 and one participant in 2013. In total, there were 18 interviews conducted with 15 participants (see Table 2). All the interviews were conducted in Beijing, the centre of Chinese elite sport.

[Table 2 about here]

The interview questions were framed by the research questions (i.e., five key aspects of policy transfer). While most interviewees were more willing to talk in length, others were more guarded, perhaps constrained by a combination of sensitivity, personality, and interviewer unfamiliarity. Some of the participants were known to the interviewer because they had met at conferences. Interview durations ranged between 30 minutes to two hours with an average of one hour. A translated Chinese version of the ethical checklist was provided to all participants. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and were recorded digitally with interviewees' consent. Interviewees were given a copy of interview transcripts for verification and correction.

The secondary data included printed publications and online content published by GAS, the NAMC, and the Chinese Swimming Association (CSA). These official documents were supplemented by content from domestic media such as Xinhua News Agency and ifeng (a Hong Kong-based media company), and international media such as the *Courier Mail* (an Australian daily newspaper). Moreover, the non-English academic publications on elite sport studies of Chinese scholars were also examined. These materials were sourced from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the most influential Chinese academic database. Although the main text of CNKI papers is written in Chinese, the database contains an English version of abstracts and keywords. All articles in the databased are peer reviewed by Chinese experts.

Data analysis

Both the primary and secondary data were subjected to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis process began with a translation from Chinese to English. Back translation was then conducted prior to formal coding. Two bilinguals were employed, 'one translating from the source to the target language, the second blindly translating back from the target to the source' (Brislin, 1970, p. 186), to ensure quality and equivalence.

All of the English data were coded by the first author, with the assistance of two postgraduate students. Themes were identified on the basis of repetitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions, and similarities and differences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These elements were then processed according to the research questions and the various dimensions of policy transfer. The analysis also incorporated additional themes such as the (expected and unexpected) outcome of the policy transfer process. Transcripts were subjected to numerous readings until themes

emerged (Devine, 2002). Transcripts were also discussed by the researchers, who acted as ‘critical friends’ (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Findings: An analysis of policy transfer in Chinese elite swimming

This section is structured according to the research questions: rationale, key actors, source nations, content, and conditioning factors.

Rationale

A series of poor performances at major international sports events in the 2000s and the significant political event of Beijing’s successful bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympic Games were the two most notable underlying factors behind China’s elite swimming policy transfer efforts. A fear of being outperformed by a major rival nation (Japan) was also important.

Poor performances: The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and the 2007 World Aquatics Championships

Chinese elite swimming reached rock bottom at Sydney 2000. Chinese swimmers, for the first time since Seoul 1988, failed to win a single Olympic medal. An internal policy document stated, ‘we are far lagging behind leading swimming nations, and Chinese elite swimming is in its most difficult period since the 1990s’ (GAS, 2001). This poor performance prompted a series of policy responses including *119 Project*, promoted by the then Director of GAS, Weimin Yuan. In the wake of China’s poor performance at Sydney 2000, Yuan (2001, p. 8) declared:

There were 119 gold medals generated from the two foundation sports/disciplines of athletics and swimming, and water sports (rowing, canoeing and sailing) at

Sydney 2000, but we only won one gold medal in total. The competitiveness in foundation sports/disciplines is an important manifestation of a nation's overall elite sport strength. We cannot evade or underrate this issue. Instead, we have to be determined to work hard and invest heavily to restore our confidence, make more progress and enhance our performance in these three (clusters) of sports/disciplines. Only by doing this could China really achieve overall competitive advantage on the international sport stage.

Despite the high expectations derived from China's successful Olympic bid, China won only one silver and one bronze at the Melbourne 2007 World Aquatics Championships. At this critical juncture, the Director of GAS (i.e. Peng Liu) issued four instructions to the Director of the NAMC (Hua Li): 1) Prioritise by concentrating resources in the most promising events; 2) Invite high-level foreign coaches to help to improve training quality; 3) Facilitate opportunities for China's best swimmers to train overseas in leading swimming nations; and 4) Reduce the size of the National Team and focus on the most competitive athletes (Li, 2011). Two of the four strategies involved collaboration with foreign nations. As Li (2011) recalled, 'the timely and decisive strategic decisions made by leaders of GAS on swimming in China bore fruit at Beijing 2008, contributed to our major breakthrough, liberated our minds and fundamentally directed our global involvement'.

Defining moment and significant political event: Beijing's successful Olympic bid

Beijing's successful bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in 2001 was a milestone political event in China. The 2001 announcement elevated both government and public expectations of home soil success, which led to increased policy and financial

support. One year after Beijing was awarded the Games, and for the first time since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the President of China convened a national sport meeting in the name of the State Council. Here President Zemin Jiang stressed, 'sports teams need to carry forward patriotism, collectivism and the traditional Chinese sports spirit, to achieve excellent elite sport performance and fight for glory for the nation and people' (Jiang, 2003, p. 3). At the same meeting, the Vice Premier Lanqing Li mentioned the problem of China's 'relatively lagging position in foundation sports/disciplines most notably athletics and swimming' (Li, 2003, p. 4). He also stressed that the home Olympics would 'entail a higher requirement for our elite sport performance ... and we should do our best to achieve good results in publicly popular and influential sports and disciplines most notably athletics, swimming and collective ball sports' (Li, 2003, p. 7).

Swimming experienced an increased level of government emphasis and support in the lead-up to Beijing 2008, as per *I19 Project* (Interviewee O, 20 January 2017). Zhili Chen, the successor of Lanqing Li and a member of the State Council, made it clear that 'for potential advantage sports/disciplines (including swimming), we need to seriously summarise the experience and lessons, and learn from leading foreign nations for training ideas and methods to realise new achievements and progress' (Chen, 2007, p. 5). A key central government powerbroker had just encouraged her elite swimming officials to pursue a strategy of policy transfer.

A fear of lagging behind major rival nations: Competition with Japan

There is a high degree of rivalry between China and Japan. Before taking on the world, China first fixed its sights on overtaking Japan as Asia's most successful sporting nation. *Emulating Japan* was a slogan that guided Chinese elite athletes in throughout the 1970s,

most notably in swimming, artistic gymnastics and women's volleyball (Interviewee C, 28 July 2015; Interviewee J, 13 August 2015). This rivalry is highly evident in swimming at the Asian Games, the Olympic Games and the World Championships. Japan's superiority *vis-à-vis* China in swimming at the Olympic Games 2000-2008, and at the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games led to a variety of initiatives, including policy transfer. For China, 'being overshadowed by Japan in gold medal tally at any of these events would be humiliating for the National Swimming Team, and intolerable for media and general public' (Interviewee A, 22 May 2013).

In summary, the expectations, or high policy demand, of GAS and NAMC provided the impetus for China's elite swimming policy transfer initiatives.

Key actors

In this next section, the roles of senior party officials, civil servants and foreign experts in the policy transfer process are discussed.

Senior Party officials

The party officials discussed here refer to political leaders at the general level rather than those working specifically in the sport industry, although most of these sport-specific actors are also government officials within China's political regime and sport system. Within the largely one-party political system, key government officials are almost synonymous with political leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Elite sport is a prominent issue on the CCP's agenda. The ideology, philosophy and thoughts of the CCP leaders dominate the policy process, including the highly politicised area of elite sport (Hong & Xiong, 2002). Political leaders' support for elite sport is evident in the development and implementation of 'Invite In and Go Out'.

Less than two years after Beijing was announced as host of the 2008 Olympics, the then member of the Politburo Standing Committee and Vice Premier Lanqing Li, led the development of a fundamental sport policy document entitled *CCP and the State Council's Opinions on Further Promoting and Improving Sport Development in a New Era* (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2003). This landmark policy document clearly stated that 'we need to closely follow the new trends of international elite sport, and strive for relatively notable breakthrough in athletics and swimming' (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2003). This proclamation officially secured swimming's position in China's elite sport landscape, and again signalled policy transfer aspirations.

Civil servants working in sports governing bodies

In 2001, immediately after Beijing was announced as host of the 2008 Olympics, the then Director of GAS – Weimin Yuan led the formulation and issue of the *The Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan: 2001–2010*. This strategy would fundamentally direct China's preparation for elite sport success at Beijing 2008. In this document, swimming was identified as being 'gold medal-abundant', 'influential and with the opportunity of "breakthrough"' (GAS, 2002). In addition, there was a relatively detailed definition of 'Invite In and Go Out' within this policy document:

(We need to) expand international communication, and further elevate the degree of 'Invite In' and 'Go Out'. (We need to) organise the foreign visits and competition participation of teams of key sports/disciplines in a purpose-built and planned way, and create more training and competition participation opportunities for athletes and coaches of key sports, disciplines and events. (We would) select coaches and send them abroad to study advanced ideas and methods on training

and management, and recruit foreign experts and scholars for either long-term coaching or short-term lectures in China (GAS, 2002).

Similar sentiments still pervade the most recent version of the fundamental elite sport policy document, *The Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan: 2011–2020* (GAS, 2011), which seeks to ‘escalate and further expand “Invite In and Go Out” and learn lessons from leading foreign nations’ (GAS, 2011).

Recruiting foreign coaches to work in China, collaborating with foreign coaches, and sending athletes overseas to train were key aspects of the ‘Invite In and Go Out’ campaign. Backed by the Central Committee of CCP and the Director of GAS – Weimin Yuan, Hua Li (the then Director of the NAMC) and Xiutang Shang (Vice Director of NAMC) selected swimmers to train overseas. Later, the Leader of the Scientific Research Team of the NAMC – Yifan Lu, and the then Head Coach of the National Swimming Team – Yadong Zhang, would also select athletes for overseas training and therefore they are all key actors facilitating China’s elite swimming policy transfer process.

To summarise, key political leaders, including both CCP officials, and key political leaders of GAS and the NAMC were demonstrably committed to policy transfer.

Foreign experts: Australian swim coaches

Denis Cotterell was the coach of Grant Hackett, gold medallist in men’s 1500m freestyle at Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 (Courier Mail, 2008). By 2007, Cotterell had fallen out of favour with the Australia’s swimming hierarchy. Cotterell was attractive to China because he possessed ‘all of the “esoteric” methods and experience for fostering World Champion-level swimmers, evidenced in the success of Grant Hackett’ (Interviewee A, 22 May 2013). In addition, ‘every progress and training detail can be benchmarked

against Grant Hackett, so the most excellent standards can be consistently applied in training and uncertainty could be effectively avoided' (Interviewee A, 22 May 2013).

Cotterell accepted the invitation to coach some Chinese elite swimmers, motivated by the financial remuneration and the opportunity to remind Swimming Australia of his coaching prowess (Interviewee H, 7 August 2015). Soon after the 2007 World Championships, Lin Zhang, was the first of many Chinese swimmers to live in Australia and train under Cotterell. Following Lin Zhang's historic medal breakthrough at Beijing 2008 and gold medal performance at the Rome 2009 World Championships, more Chinese elite swimmers worked with Cotterell and other leading Australian swimming coaches such as Ken Wood and Brian Kin. A number of Olympic and World Championship medallists, most notably Yang Sun, Shiwen Ye and Zetao Ning, spent considerable time in Australia under the tutelage of Australian coaches. In sum, China's policy transfer initiative would have failed without the support of Australian swim coaches.

Considered collectively, senior party officials, civil servants and foreign experts (i.e., Australian swim coaches) were key actors in the policy transfer process. The role of government 'insiders', particularly party officials reflect the distinctive political system of China where one party dominates the government agenda. This finding also resonates strongly with Rose's (2005) conclusion that qualified personnel are key to policy transfer outcomes.

Source nations

China initially set its sights on three nations, Australia, the USA and the UK. As the Team Leader explained, international elite swimming is mainly dominated by two groups: the USA, which wins approximately half of all Olympic swimming gold medals, and a

second-tiered group comprising Australia, European nations and Japan, which accounts for most of the remaining medals (Interviewee A, 12 January 2017, revisit).

Japan was excluded from the list of source nations for policy transfer. According to a senior insider of elite swimming in China, ‘Japan Swimming Federation had many concerns about the swimming communication between China and Japan, because of a reluctance to share expertise with a major rival nation’ (Interviewee E, 31 July 2015). Japan was not the only nation to be concerned about sharing ‘trade secrets’. This became a main stumbling block in the NAMC’s implementation of the ‘Invite In and Go Out’ strategy (Interviewee N, 12 January 2017).

Some Chinese swimmers, such as the World Championship medalist Peng Wu did train in the USA. But the USA’s ‘protection mechanisms’ (Interviewee H, 7 August 2015) did not allow the nation to become a systematic source of policy transfer. As a National Swimming Team coach explained, most elite swimming programmes in the USA are university-based and these universities would not permit Chinese elite swimmers to train with their swimmers, even if the Chinese team was willing to pay money (Interviewee G, 6 August 2015).

Regarding the UK, the NAMC sent some swimmers including the Olympic champion Zige Liu to national training centres in the UK. But the training quality and methods were actually below those in China. A Chinese swimming official commented ‘in many cases, it is our swimmers introducing advanced ideas, methods and skills to British coaches and swimmers rather than we “absorbed” advanced knowledge (in the early 2010s)’ (Interviewee A, 22 May 2013).

Locked out of the USA swimming system and underwhelmed by UK swimming expertise, China would focus its policy transfer efforts on Australia. Li (2011) summarised the Australian connection this way:

‘Since 2010, we have organised visits to Australia involving leaders of the Management Centre and other relevant staff, to watch and investigate Australian experience in swimming training for high-performance swimmers and the coaching of top Australian swimmers ... We recruited three foreign experts as the coaches and consultants (to serve our National Team). In addition, we invited renowned foreign coaches to be technical instructors of the National Swimming Team. Moreover, we formulated and refined measures and policies on overseas training and the invitation of foreign experts for training instructions in China’.

In addition to Chinese swimmers joining world-leading swimming coaching squads, there are other factors that made Australia appealing to Chinese swimmers. As Yifan Lu, the Leader of the Scientific Research Team of the NAMC stated,

‘Time difference is not a significant issue when we undertake trainings in Australia, which is only one to two hours earlier than China. Australia resides in the Southern Hemisphere, and it is summer in Australia while it is winter in Beijing.’ (Interviewee K, 14 August 2015).

Furthermore, most swimming pools in Australia are 50m, in contrast to the 25m pools prevalent in the USA. Elite swimming programmes in the USA are university-based and hence available only to students of respective universities. It is difficult for most Chinese elite swimmers to meet the education and English language criteria to enroll at these universities because of a lack of education and English proficiency. In comparison, swimming in Australia is club-based, with relatively low cost and easy-to-meet membership criteria. Last, most Australian swimming coaches are independent contractors, and as long as their swimming clubs agree, there are few restrictions on their

ability to coach non-Australian swimmers. Australian coaches were enthusiastic about coaching Chinese swimmers because of the Chinese team's willingness to pay a premium for their services.

In summary, favourable conditions and coaching and training quality are main factors considered when choosing the source nation in the case of Chinese swimming organisations. However, these factors are only necessary but not sufficient. A number of other factors combine to influence the selection of a source nation, or even whether it would be feasible to actually implement the policy transfer ambition. These factors include the source nations' willingness, training groups (i.e., club vs. university-based), coaching structures and coaches' economic conditions, the governing system (particularly the rigidity between the sports governing bodies and coaches), and geographical convenience.

Policy transfer content: What was transferred?

The NAMC recognised the value of policy transfer for managers, coaches and athletes (Li, 2011). This policy transfer process was defined as the 'Modern Self-Strengthening Movement' of Chinese swimming (Interviewee A, 22 May 2013). This section discusses five types of policy transfer content.

Benefits of increased training intensity

Historically, Chinese elite swimming coaches were cautious about the degree of high intensity training. According to the Deputy Head Coach of the National Team, 'we used to be overly conservative in identifying the limit of the training intensity, which did not fully stimulate the potential of our elite swimmers' (Interviewee L, 14 August 2015). However, they observed that the Australian coaches exposed their swimmers to a much

greater volume of intensity training, which inspired Chinese coaches in the training.

Quality aerobic training

The policy transfer initiative exposed Chinese swimming coaches to the benefits of integrating quality aerobic training with higher intensity training (Interviewee B, 27 May 2013). Jing Zhao's breakthrough at the 2010 Asian Games was closely associated with her five-week quality aerobic and intensive training in Australia before the Games (Li, 2011).

Systematic approach to recovery training

Chinese elite swimmers used to see training and recovery as discrete. According to the Leader of the Scientific Research Team of the NAMC (Interviewee K, 14 August 2015), post-training recovery activities were all but non-existent in Australia. The Australian approach was to embed recovery sessions within the swimming programme, and maintain intensity levels. 'It is overseas training in Australia that enabled us to deeply understand the importance of recovery training. In simple terms, we need to address the issue of recovery training within, rather than after, the training sessions' (Interviewee K, 14 August 2015).

Emphasis on technique

Chinese swimming coaches began to emphasise technique more after learning from overseas coaches. The Deputy Head Coach of the National Swimming Team stated 'we have strengthened skill learning and communication, frequently invited foreign coaches to deliver skill guidance in China, and collaborated with scientific research experts to conduct technical analysis and discussion' (Interviewee L, 14 August 2015).

Periodisation insights

Overseas training in Australia provided insights about periodisation for managers and coaches of the NAMC and the National Team. Periodisation refers to the progressive cycling of various aspects of a training programme during a specific period. As the National Swimming Team Leader stated:

‘We came to know that to maintain a high level of competitiveness for a long period may not necessarily contribute to excellent performance at the Olympic Games ... As a consequence, the National Team reduced training and competition pressure in the year after the National Games (which is held one year after each Summer Olympic Games)’ (Interviewee A, 12 January 2017, revisit).

Most of the knowledge transferred was technical knowledge related to swimming performance. Compared to structural, system and ideological changes, this content was less complex and smaller in scale. Given these features, the technical knowledge was not likely to conflict with the core values of the recipient institution and therefore more likely to be transferred successfully.

Although policy transfer outcomes were largely positive, there were also unintended, negative consequences. Many elite Australian swimmers were celebrity endorsers, well-schooled in fighting for and occasionally winning arguments with Swimming Australia about their personal endorsement rights. One of the unintended, negative consequences was the emergent individualism and materialism amongst some top male Chinese swimmers who were less willing to fully comply with the collective requirements of the National Team and more proactive in striving for their individual benefits (Interviewee D, 30 July 2015; Interviewee M, 5 January 2017). This conflicted with the traditional values of patriotism and collectivism. This tension was manifested in

a dispute over individual and team sponsors, which resulted in the world champion Zetao Ning's exclusion from the National Team in early 2016, following his personal endorsement of Yili Dairy, a main competitor to the team sponsor of Mengniu Dairy (ifeng, 2017).

This conflict of values was a salient example of the ideological divergence between the source nation and the recipient nation. The fundamental ideology of a highly centralised and politicised institution demarcated what was acceptable. In specific terms, while Australian training thoughts, approaches and skills, and Australian coaches were welcomed, deeper-level transfers which compromised traditional values and ideologies were opposed.

Conditioning factors

Many factors conditioned China's elite swimming policy transfer process. As noted above, GAS and the NAMC (including the National Swimming Team) sought policy transfer from leading foreign swimming nations most notably Australia. This was facilitated by the commitment of political leaders and high policy demand, indicative of relatively low demand side constraints. The NAMC possessed adequate policy and financial resources provided by the Central Government and GAS, and qualified personnel through the active involvement of leading Australian swim coaches. Thus, from the perspective of contextual constraints, there were sufficient resources to facilitate the policy transfer process. In terms of programmatic constraints, most of the policy transfer content was related to athlete development, which was less complex and unlikely to conflict with the deeply entrenched values and ideology of GAS and the NAMC. Concomitantly, in the context of application constraints, the scale of change was limited compared to changes to institutional structure, or the *modus operandi*. Concerning both

application constraints and programmatic constraints, there was no need for major institutional structure substitution or programmatic modification (other than coaching techniques). For this level of policy transfer, the structure of GAS and the NAMC was neither resistant nor restrictive. All these propelled the largely successful outcomes of the policy transfer process.

The most notable constraint to the policy transfer process was the actions of the Australian and USA swimming governing bodies. Underpinned by a fear of losing a source of competitive advantage, these organisations sought to limit policy transfer. Swimming Australia created policy transfer obstacles by trying to prevent coaches from supporting Chinese elite swimmers, seeking to ban swimmers from nations with suspicious drug practices (including China) from training at any affiliated swimming club in Australia (Balym, 2014). China's 'drugs baggage' (Magnay, 2012) helped to legitimise Swimming Australia's restrictive measures.

Swimming Australia reinstated Cotterell as a national team coach, an appointment which enabled them to prevent him from coaching Chinese swimmers. However, Cotterell later accepted an NAMC invitation to live in China and coach Yang Sun and other top Chinese elite swimmers (Affleck, 2017). This was an effective tactic of the Chinese National Swimming Team to circumvent Swimming Australia's restrictions. No longer an employee of Swimming Australia and domiciled in China, Cotterell was immune to any pressures from Swimming Australia. Policy transfer constraints highlight that policy transfer is by no means a unilateral process. The efforts to facilitate (or at least allow) or constrain policy transfer is an essential variable in the elite sport policy transfer equation.

Discussion

Five key aspects of policy transfer directed the study: rationale, actors, sources, content, and conditioning factors (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). The key findings of this research are that: (1) The stimulus for the policy transfer initiative was a series of poor performances at major international sports events, significant political events most notably the successful Olympic bid and the competition with and a fear of lagging behind major rival nations; (2) The key actors involved in the policy transfer process were political/party leaders, general sport and swimming-specific officials, and foreign experts; (3) The source nations were the UK, the USA and Australia, but Australia provided the most policy content because of combined factors of source nations' coaching and training quality, willingness, training groups, coaching structures and coaches' economic conditions, the governing system particularly the rigidity between the sports governing bodies and coaches, and geographical convenience; (4) The content transferred was largely technical, relating to coaching and training; and (5) The policy transfer process was facilitated by factors in relation to policy demand, political leaders' commitment, institutional structure, resources, scale of change and lack of programmatic complexity, but constrained by the restrictive efforts of the source nations.

This research has both academic value and practical utility. In academic terms, the ability of the five key aspects of policy transfer to effectively analyse elite sport policy transfer between two nations is evident. More specifically, the rationale for China to engage in policy transfer in elite swimming included dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. A succession of poor medal performances at elite swimming events prompted the NAMC and the National Swimming Team to seek a 'short cut' to enhance Chinese elite swimmers' (gold) medal performance on the international stage. Therefore, the desire for a 'quick fix' may underscore other policy transfer initiatives.

Key actors were mainly government ‘insiders’, but it is noteworthy that non-government participants, most notably foreign experts played a significant role in the policy transfer process, evidenced in the case of elite swimming in China. In this case, the role of elite Australian swimming coaches is crucial. Australia was the main source nation because of this nation’s favourable conditions and coaching and training quality for China *vis-à-vis* other nations. The content of the transferred policies, compared to structural, system and ideological changes, was less complex and smaller in scale. These changes were therefore less likely to conflict with the core values of the recipient institution and therefore more likely to be successful.

The value of this research transcends the confirmation of existing research on policy transfer. Three elements of this research are likely to further advance relevant studies on policy transfer. The first theoretical contribution is the further reification of the dissatisfaction rationale for policy transfer within elite sport policy. Based on the observations of the case study of elite swimming in China, this dissatisfaction can be evidenced in three ways: 1) crisis, most notably poor performances and significant decline in medals; 2) focusing events, most notably significant political events beyond elite sport *per se* and the concomitant expectation to perform well at the home Olympics; and 3) a strong desire to outperform major rival nations. Three comparable conditions underpinned the ‘Australianisation’ (Zheng, 2015, p. 319) of British sport – a poor (gold) medal performance at Atlanta 1996 Olympics, a successful bid in 2005 to host the 2012 Olympics, and a longstanding sporting rivalry with Australia.

Second, the source-nation constraint fills a significant gap in existing research on policy transfer and highlights some distinctiveness of the policy area of elite sport. Although the domestic political and institutional environment supported the policy transfer initiatives, exogenous factors, most notably the reluctance of swimming

governing bodies in USA and Australia in China's case, created major policy transfer obstacles.

Policy transfer requires consideration of both the source and recipient contexts and is certainly not a unilateral decision. Existing research focuses overwhelmingly on the recipient nation and the institutional features which promote or constrain policy transfer processes. It is suggested that source nation's efforts to restrict outbound policy transfer are more notable in the context of elite sport compared to some policy areas where national competition or rivalry is less intense (e.g., welfare, education or public health). Given the 'global sporting arms race' (Oakley & Green, 2001), the reluctance of nations to share their sporting secrets is unsurprising. Successful policy transfer is more likely when both the recipient and source nations are supportive. The selection of an ideal and feasible source nation that is both worthy of emulation and willing to transfer is another issue that recipient nations need to address.

Third, the outcome of the policy transfer process has been positive and is reflected in the improved performances of Chinese elite swimmers in this case. However, as noted earlier, policy transfer is not politically neutral, and consensus is rare (Rose, 1991). This is a powerful explanation of the tension between competing sets of values amongst the stakeholders. Our study highlights the potential for deeper-level value- and ideology-related conflict when the policy transfer transcends fundamentally different political systems. First there is the collectivism and patriotism, values synonymous with China and its Communist government. On the other hand, there is the increased individualism and materialism, both readily associated with Capitalism and Western society. Chinese sport organisations are still fundamentally subject to China's domestic political system, traditional values and institutional ideology. More specifically, patriotism and collectivism are still the dominant ideology that is deeply ingrained in

traditional Chinese culture and China's political system where elite sport has long been a highly centralised and politicised area. While athlete coaching techniques imported from Capitalist nations are welcomed, some ideology-related Western values are rejected when they conflict with the Communist regime's deep-core values. This feature of the 'Invite In and Go Out' strategy resonates with Stone's (1999) assertion that the outcomes of policy transfer are often unpredictable, and potentially negative. Moreover, the value conflict and China's generally cautious attitudes to sourcing deeper-level content from Western capitalist countries need to be understood within the context of China's communist ideology and politicisation of elite sport.

It is also noteworthy that despite the ever-accelerating pace of China's exchange of products and knowledge from almost all corners of the world and the generally supportive context provided by the recipient government most notably the provision of adequate economic and personnel resources, China's importation of foreign expertise appears conditional on that no substantial changes in the political system (including elite sport) are valued. These institutional and political constraints, to some extent, illustrate China's distinctiveness. More specifically, deeper-level changes and policy transfer may not be a 'taboo' in countries with a more liberal political and elite sport system, especially when learning from similar or friendly countries.

The practical utility of this research resides in its provision of the 'thick description' and subsequent ability to guide the decision to whether or not a country should pursue a policy transfer initiative and how best to conduct such an undertaking. Of equal importance, the case study highlights the risk of the various constraints compromising the policy transfer outcomes. Elite sport policy makers can reflect on the following questions: 1) If policy transfer from other nations is considered important and feasible, then what would characterise an appropriate policy window for policy transfer

(Kingdon, 1984)? 2) Who are salient stakeholders for the policy transfer? 3) Which nation(s) can be targeted and what are the key political, geographical, economic and sport-specific factors in both the recipient and source nations that should be considered? 4) What content is acceptable for both the recipient and source nations? 5) To what extent are key decision makers/political leaders committed to the policy transfer initiative and how strong is the opposition? 6) To what extent is the policy transfer compromised by the institutional structure, ideology and political context of either the source or recipient nation? and 7) What strategies can circumvent a source nation's unwillingness to facilitate the policy transfer process?

Thus, this research also contributes to the broad elite sport literature through its explanation of how nations exploit and manage policy transfer. Successful transfers have the potential to be a 'quick fix' solution, as demonstrated by the improved performance of Chinese elite swimmers. Future research can examine other sports in China and other nations where policy learning and transfer from leading nations are also evident. Comparative studies are likely to provide richer knowledge and further advance this stream of research. Researchers are also encouraged to further explore the impact of source nations' willingness or restrictions on the outcome of the policy process. These studies can compare elite sport with other policy domains including safe or less competitive sectors such as social welfare, and the more sensitive and 'secretive' sectors such as defence and technology.

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Table 1. Chinese elite swimmers' performance at the seven most recent Summer Olympic Games: From Barcelona 1992 to Rio de Janeiro 2016.

Edition	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total	Gold Medal Table Position
Barcelona 1992	4	5	0	9	4
Atlanta 1996	1	3	2	6	8
Sydney 2000	0	0	0	0	-
Athens 2004	1	1	0	2	10
Beijing 2008	1	3	2	6	7
London 2012	5	2	3	10	2
Rio de Janeiro 2016	1	2	3	6	7
Total	13	16	10	39	4

Source: International Olympic Committee (IOC, 2017).

Table 2. Profiles of the interviewees.

Interviewee	Organisation(s)	Position(s)
A 22/05/2013 & 12/01/2017	NAMC and the National Swimming Team	Team leader of National Swimming Team
B 27/05/2013	National Swimming Team	A senior coach (female)
C 28/07/2015	Beijing Sport University	Professor A of sport policy, renowned sports researcher
D 30/07/2015 & 07/01/2017	The Personnel Department of GAS	An official of the Personnel Department
E 31/07/2015	NAMC	An official of the Office of the NAMC
F 06/08/2015 & 16/01/2017	The Anti-Doping Division of the Science and Education Department of GAS	An official of the Anti-Doping Division of the Science and Education Department
G 06/08/2015	NAMC and the National Swimming Team	A fitness coach of the National Swimming Team
H 07/08/2015	NAMC	A leader of the NAMC
I 13/08/2015	China Anti-Doping Agency (ChinaDA)	Vice Director of ChinaDA
J 13/08/2015	The Science and Education Department of GAS	A former official of the Science and Education Department
K 14/08/2015	The Scientific Research Team - NAMC	Leader of the Scientific Research Team
L 14/08/2015	NAMC and the National Swimming Team	Deputy Head Coach of the National Swimming Team
M 05/01/2017	Beijing Sport University	Professor B of sport policy, renowned sports researcher
N 12/01/2017	National Swimming Team	A senior coach
O 20/01/2017	The Elite Sport Department of GAS	An official of the Elite Sport Department

Supplemental File. Interview outline and sample.

Policy Transfer Concept	Sample Questions
Rationale/Motives	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Is there evidence of policy transfer and experience learning for elite swimming in China?2. Why did China decide to learn from foreign nations?3. What were the key factors considered?4. Was this policy transfer voluntary, spontaneous or passive?5. Did internal or external forces drive it?
Actors/Subjects	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Who were key actors, including initiators and participants, involved in this policy transfer process?2. Whose role(s) was(were) the most significant, and why?
Sources	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. From which nations and international organisations has China transferred in the case of elite swimming?2. Amongst these sources, which foreign countries and international organisations have most significantly influenced elite swimming in China, or acted as the main source of this policy transfer?3. Why?
Contents/Objects	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What has China transferred from other nations? For example, organisational structure, managerial approaches, science or training methods and philosophy, or combined?2. Was the policy transfer specific, or confined to ideas and philosophy at the micro level?
Conditioning factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Have there been any difficulties during this transfer process?2. What were the main challenges?3. What might contribute to these problems?4. Were they expected or unexpected?5. How were they addressed?
Positive and negative consequences and key contributory factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Was the policy transfer successful or unsuccessful, or to what extent has it been successful?2. Were there any unsuccessful situations?3. What contributed to the unsuccessful transfer? If there were another chance, how would you do to remedy the situation and avoid the failure?4. Was there any negative impact derived from this policy transfer?5. What were these negative consequences?6. What were the remedies?
