Analyzing The Policy Impact of The Olympic Strategy on The Soccer Professionalization in China

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In 2015, The Mid-to Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football (2016-2050) was promulgated by the Chinese government. As the first national long-term development plan for soccer in China, it elevated the significance of developing soccer to an unprecedented level. Two years later, the Chinese Football Association established a series of broadly-questioned regulations on the U23 players in domestic professional leagues. Since its implementation of the imposed age limits, the policy has been under substantial criticisms for multiple claims including deteriorated quality of play and shrinking league brand value. More importantly, the regulations are deemed overshadowed by the “Olympic Strategy”, as U23 being the current age restriction at the Olympic Men’s soccer tournament.

Existing research in Chinese soccer has focused on various factors leading to the policy conflicts between soccer professionalization and the Olympic Strategy (Hu & Henry, 2017). Several studies highlight the nation’s unique administrative model in general and especially, in the governance of soccer (Hong et al., 2005). One common finding is that the General Administration of Sport, which is the government department for sport, possessed tight control of the Chinese Football Association (Fan & Lu, 2013; Tan & Bairner, 2010; Liang, 2014). Some researchers have also recognized the tension between clubs and national sport administration over youth development and national team recruitment (Liang, 2013). Yet such policy conflicts at the elite development level, particularly since the reform and development plan in 2015, is insufficiently covered.

Although the role of state and the Olympic Strategy in the soccer professionalization in China has been explored under different theoretical frameworks, few study systematically examines how national-level elite development policies might contribute to the unsatisfying situations in professional soccer, notably the widely-criticized U23 regulations. Meanwhile literature in mega-events legacy studies demonstrates a bifurcated nature of elite development legacy, which entails not only the Olympic athletes but also the professional athletes (Green, 2004). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to understand how the elite sport policy documents that are closely associated with the Olympic Strategy frame the significance of developing Olympic athletes over others, in this case, professional soccer players.

A total of 23 salient policy documents by various organizations ranging from governing bodies to the party’s central committee were analyzed. Descriptive, process, and theeming coding methods were conducted to develop themes regarding framing patterns (Saldana, 2013). The researcher identified three major patterns: performance, organization, and ideology-based, in which policymakers of the Chinese elite sport system frame the prioritization of developing Olympic athletes.

This analysis builds on the empirical knowledge of the imbalanced status of the current elite development of soccer in China, and in larger contexts, the unfulfilled aspects of the nation’s efforts to further soccer professionalization in recent years. Also, the findings provide new perspectives on evaluating the Olympic Strategy as a sport development legacy of the Olympic Games more comprehensively. To inform praxis, this study could serve as theoretical basis for policymakers on reconciling the policy conflicts between different elite development initiatives.