

Who Is Ignorant: A Study of Cultural Conflict between Sports Journalists and Sportspeople in Contemporary China

Ping WU

This article studies dispute between Chinese sports journalists and Chinese sports elites in a socio-cultural context. Based upon a number of case studies, the professional features of Chinese sports journalism and Chinese elite sport are elaborated and the different characteristics of Chinese sports journalists and Chinese sportspeople are examined. The study then investigates how the cultural differences between Chinese sports journalists and Chinese sportspeople affect their understandings of news values and the duty of the news media and concludes that the different understandings of the media's duty are often the trigger of dispute.

Keywords: Chinese elite sport, sports journalism, cultural differences, conflict, news values and the media's duty.

Based upon a qualitative research study involving over 40 interviews with working sports journalists from Australia, UK and New Zealand in the mid-1990s, Rowe (1999) suggests that sports journalists have to cope with the contradictory professional demands made on them. On the one hand, contemporary sports journalists are forced to be more sceptical and therefore more professional by pressures from both inside and outside media organisations. On the other hand lack of distance from their main sources may prohibit them from being more sceptical and professional. Boyle and Haynes (2000) agree on this paradox in sports journalism. Henningham (1995) tries to explain, at least partly, the professional characteristics of sports journalists with age, gender and educational background according to the quantitative data generated by a national survey of Australian sports journalists in 1992. Garrison and Salwen (1989 & 1994) conducted similar studies in the United States. One of the pressing forces that make sports journalists

struggle with their contradictory professional roles comes from sportspeople, including professional athletes, coaches, managers, sports officials and sports promoters, i.e. their main news sources. Telander (1984) provides an overview of the conflicts between professional athletes and sports journalists, and their different attitudes towards these conflicts. He suggests that the solution of these conflicts in player-press relations depends upon players' understanding of the role of the press in professional sport and the knowledge and empathy of sports journalists. MacNeill (1998) investigates the relationship between the news media and players, and the data came from a national survey of 1,200 high-performance Canadian athletes. The survey revealed that the majority of athletes ignore their legal rights when dealing with the media and sports officials. At the same time, there are many misunderstandings about the responsibilities and roles of the news media among athletes. Bourgeois (1995) discusses the tension between sports journalists and their source of information; and also suggests some tactics used by sports journalists as a means of dealing with the conflict of interests. Academic studies on mediated sport remain limited in China and most scholarly investigations focus on the changing strategies employed by the Chinese news media in reporting elite sport and covering mega sporting events (see Li, 2007; Liu, 2002; Ni, 2003 and Ouyang, 2003). The relationship between Chinese sports journalists and Chinese sportspeople is a barely touched upon topic in academia.

This study attempts to fill in this gap by analysing cultural conflict between sports journalists and sportspeople in contemporary China. The author was a full-time sports journalist in China between 1997 and 2003. Naturally, data were mainly collected through complete participant observation. In addition, some cases analysed in this study are high-profile news events which had been widely reported by the Chinese news media and therefore this type of data were collected through searching previous media coverage.

Wenner (1998) who developed the concept of 'sports/media production complex' into the so-called 'MediaSport institution' insisted that any attempt to understand the interplaying of the media and sport should start from the understanding of the broader social, political and legal climates. Accordingly, before a detailed discussion of the cultural differences between Chinese sports journalists and Chinese sportspeople is developed, this study will first examine the political and economic structure which defines the social roles of Chinese sports journalists and Chinese sportspeople.

Within the Political and Economic Structure

The Party's Mouthpiece. The communist system of news media took its initial shape in the 1940s when the Communist Party of China (CPC)

established its government in Yan'an. In the 1940s and 1950s, Mao Zedong, the leader of the CPC back then, defined some basic functions of the Chinese news media: to interpret and propagate the CPC's policies, to educate the masses, to organise the masses and to mobilise the masses (Mao,1999a; Mao, 1999b¹ and Mao, 1999c²). The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established under the dictatorship of the CPC in October 1949 and in the following 30 years the news media were defined in the party jargon as 'the frontline where the CPC led the proletariats fighting against the bourgeoisie'. Since 1978, the CPC has carried out an open-door policy and the party's central task has become economic reform. Accordingly, the news media now put more effort in interpreting reform policies and propagating the achievements of the ongoing economic reform. The news media have been encouraged by the CPC to make news stories less politicised (see Li, 1990³), but it is worth noting that the initial change of news content and reporting style was a decision made by the CPC but not by the news media. No matter what they are reporting now, the news media are always ready to shift their focus according to the CPC's priority. As Zhao Yuezhi (1998: 7) points out, the results 'signify a change in the content of news media rather than in the nature of the news media, which still operate as instruments of the Party's policy initiatives'.

Since the late 1980s, liberal Chinese intellectuals have pleaded that the news media should be a public sphere. As a reaction, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) started a national movement to criticise this 'extremely-wrong' idea in September 2004. The movement continued for several months and showed clearly the determination of the CPC to maintain the news media as its own mouthpiece. According to the CPC, control over the news media is vitally important for the CPC's power and governance (Jiang, 1990 and Li, 2004). In general, the CPC's control over the news media falls into three different categories: pre-publication control, mid-publication control and post-publication control. Pre-publication control refers to direct supervision of the qualifications of a medium; mid-publication control refers to censorship of news content; post-publication control refers to punishing those which have breached the laws, regulations or challenged the party line (Zhou, 2002). Among them, the most effective control is exercised and guaranteed by state ownership. All the news media are owned by the state in China and no private ownership is allowed. All the news media 'are broadly answerable to Party policy and more directly supervised by Party groups and committees both within and above' (Polumbaum, 1990: 49). Moreover, the CPC hold the power of appointing leading personnel in the news media (see Chen, 1999; Jiao, 2005; Lu, 1982; Su, 1994 and White, 1990) and 'no chief editor could ignore the power of political authorities to appoint and remove leading personnel at news organisations' (Polumbaum, 1990: 51). While the destiny of leading personnel of the Chinese news media is in the hands of the party committee of a higher political rank, the destiny of ordinary reporters

and sub-editors is in the hands of their president and chief editor. In such a system, it is not difficult to understand why 'self-censorship' is so common (see Polunbaum, 1990 and White, 1990). As to this point, Su Shaozhi (1994: 84) makes a brilliant comment: 'In the Leninist state the truth of authority replaces the authority of truth'.

Winning Glory for the State. Being introduced into China from the West to realise the nation's salvation and rehabilitation, modern sport was first played in the Chinese army as part of military training at the end of the 19th century (Hu, 2002). From the very beginning modern sport was entrusted with the mission of 'strengthening the country and the race'. In the early stages of the modernisation of sport in China before 1949, the development of sport was inseparably connected with the political fight for rejuvenation, independence and sovereignty of the nation. The elite sport system was formally built up soon after the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and was entrusted with the political mission of 'extending the political influence of China and building a brilliant image of China' (Han, 2000). The Chinese government has tried to make many areas of social life less political since 1978; however, elite sport was not one of these areas. On the contrary, the political function of elite sport was strengthened. Today, the achievements of Chinese elite sport have been interpreted as the "great successes scored in the ongoing economic reform" and 'a symbol of the prosperity and development of the nation' (Chang et al, 1998: 74). Nationalistic fervour has run higher and higher as the Chinese economy keeps on booming (Ma & Deng, 1999). Chinese nationalists argue that Chinese athletes have a duty to win in international competitions and other nations will respect China for its great sporting achievements (see Han, 2000; Sun et al, 2000 and Tian, 2003). Li Zhijian (2001: 6), the former general secretary of the party committee in the General Administration of Sport (GAS), once stated very clearly that the mission of Chinese elite sport was to satisfy Chinese people's 'deep feeling of great power and patriotism'.

In order to guarantee that elite sport would fulfil its political function of 'winning glory for the state', a special system, whose features are 'state-funded' and 'government-run', was established in China. This system is responsible for all the affairs concerning elite sport, including selecting and nurturing talented young athletes, establishing and training national teams, and deciding which athletes will represent China at the Olympics or other important international competitions. The ultimate goal of the system is to win gold medals for China (see Bao, 1998; Han, 2003; Hong et al, 2005; Long et al, 1999 and Zhang & Tang, 1999). This system is now known as 'the whole-country support system [juguo tizhi]'. The highest-ranking sports official defined the 'whole-country support system' as a system that took the national interest as its highest goal,

and mobilised and allocated all the relevant resources in the whole country, both spiritual and material, to achieve something of great importance or significance on a worldwide scale (see Li, 2001 and Yuan, 2002).

Half Government, Half Business. Among all the changes brought by economic reform which started in 1978, the one with the most distinctive ‘Chinese characteristics’ may be that many government departments are allowed to pursue economic benefits with their institutionalised power. Many government departments including the news media and the sport authorities are, in fact, playing a mixed role of ‘half government, half business’ in today’s China.

Before 1978, all the Chinese news media were 100 percent dependent on government subsidy. On May 14, 1979, the CPD formally approved the ‘experiment’ of resuming advertising (Chen, 1999). The advertising income of all the news media in China was 15 million yuan in 1979 and reached 5 billion yuan in 1992 (Fang, 2000). By the mid-1990s, advertising had already become the most important source of income of the Chinese news media. By 1992, most Chinese newspapers were no longer subsidized by the government, but many of them had already achieved financial independence at this stage (Zhao, 1998). ‘It was not until 1992 that media commercialisation became more visible in policy and reality’ (Chan, 1993: 25.2). In 1992, the CPC formally justified the concept of ‘socialist market economy’; and the ‘commercial nature’ of the press was openly approved (Liang, 1992). The advertising income of all the news media in China reached 25.9 billion yuan in 1998 (Fang, 2000). Since 1995 more and more tabloids have been launched and readers have become ‘masters’ with the right to decide what to buy.

The result of commercialisation of the Chinese news media is a unique institution, which commits itself to the ‘new’ interests of capital while still committing itself to the ‘old’ interests of political authority. This new institution guarantees the Chinese news media large monopoly profits; and the financial incomes, in turn, help to consolidate the present system rather than loosen it (He, 2003). Nevertheless, the Chinese news media can now make most of the decisions as to their editing and reporting and this autonomy has resulted mainly from commercialisation. In order to attract the audience, the Chinese news media have to throw away their old conventions of reporting and editing and become capable of changing their news focus in time to reflect the ups and downs of real social life (see Chan, 1993; Huang, 2001; Liu, 1998; Plumbaum, 1994; Zhao, 1998 and Zhou, 2002). However commercialisation has neither changed the Chinese news media’s nature as the CPC’s mouthpiece nor loosened the CPC’s absolute control over the news media. Nowadays, the Chinese news media are commercial enterprises run by the government (He, 2002).

Commercialisation has changed the Chinese news media from a propagating tool of state communism to a propagating tool of state capitalism (He, 2003).

Although it is called ‘the last island of planned economy in the ocean of market economy’ because of its heavy dependency on government subsidies, elite sport cannot be immune from the great power of economic reform in China. In the 1990s, the central government started to push sports authorities to the market. As a major part of the reform, the ‘professionalism experiment’ commenced in 1993 and men’s football became the first ‘experimental plot’. ‘Professional’ football clubs were set up in China. Later, ‘professionalism’ was also introduced into basketball, table tennis, badminton and volleyball. In 1994, the overall income of the Chinese football leagues reached 20.07 million yuan. In 1998, the overall income of the whole domestic football market was more than 700 million yuan. In 2004, the Chinese Football First Division League (CFFDL) was ‘promoted’ to the China Super League (CSL), whose income reached 78 million yuan in the first season.⁴

However, so far the reform has not introduced a real professional league system into Chinese elite sport. The so-called ‘professional’ clubs in China are actually just a simple renaming but not a reforming of some provincial sports teams. In China, it is those administrative centres in charge of different sports subordinate to the GAS that own the professional leagues (Liang, 2005). These administrative centres are playing an intriguing dual- role: they are the ‘referees’ and, at the same time, also ‘players’ (see Liang, 2002 and Zhou & Yang, 2000). For example, the Chinese Football Association (CFA), on the one hand, administers football affairs for public good; on the other hand, runs the professional league for their own good (Guo & Lu, 2002). Most sports do not have domestic professional leagues in China, but the administrative centres of these sports still gain considerable economic benefits in the process of commercialisation with their absolute monopoly of competition resources and sports human resources. At the same time, Chinese sports administrative organisations are still mainly funded by the government, therefore, they are not really dependent upon commercial sponsorship.

The news media and sports administrative organisations are both entrusted with the political mission of strengthening the CPC’s authority. Neither the Chinese news media’s nature as the CPC’s mouthpiece nor Chinese sports administrative organisations’ nature as government departments has been changed by economic reform. Different economic interests are the fundamental reason why the Chinese news media and Chinese sports administrative organisations sometimes find themselves in conflict, but not all the disputes between them are caused by different economic interests. The sub-cultures of the news media

and elite sport in China are very different and this cultural difference is often reflected in different understandings of the media's duty.

Different Professional Features.

On a daily basis journalists deal with the latest information and it is not an exaggeration to say that they are standing on the frontline of this information era. Being a journalist, one has to have a keen nose of news and keep an open mind. In general, they are willing to learn and accept new ideas. Chinese sports journalists show no difference in this respect.

A typical Chinese comprehensive daily newspaper publishes 3 to 4 pages of sports news every day. A typical Chinese sports newspaper publishes 3 editions every week and 32 pages for every edition. That means a sports journalist working for a comprehensive daily has to contribute to a space of 3 or 4 pages every day; and a sports journalist working for a sports newspaper has to contribute to a huge space of 96 pages every week. All these sports pages must be filled and there is no other option. In fact, almost every Chinese sports journalist is working under great pressure. No matter whether they like it or not, sports reporters have to write some news stories almost every day and sports editors have to find out what they can use to fill the vast numbers of sports pages almost every day. Therefore, Chinese sports journalists pay most of their attention to routine sports affairs and investigative journalism is rarely employed. The production of sports news is highly routinised. Sports journalists write pre-match reports, match reports, post-match reports and analyses day in day out. Match-orientated news forms the bulk of sports news produced by the Chinese media.

Another feature, also a great difficulty, of sports journalism is that the process and the result of most sports matches are highly predictable and often boring, but sports stories must be sensational to hold the attention of the reader. Therefore, sports journalists have to be nosier and more intrusive than their colleagues who report other issues. When nothing abnormal or sensational took place during the reported match, sports journalists often attempt to 'create' thought-provoking stories or interpret the match in a controversially negative way. This very feature is demonstrated clearly in the reportage of table tennis in China.

[Case 1] Only when Chinese table tennis loses can it make headlines.

There is a famous saying about Chinese table tennis: 'only when a Chinese table tennis player loses in an international competition will he make headlines'. Chinese players have dominated the sport for more than 30 years and Chinese people have got used to their victories. Only when a Chinese player is defeated by a foreigner will Chinese people want to know why. Therefore, each time

they report an international competition, in which Chinese table tennis players are participating, many Chinese sports journalists actually want their compatriots to lose. In May 2003, the author covered the 47th World Table Tennis Championships in Paris. At the early stage of the tournament, many matches were held simultaneously. The Chinese sports journalists covering the tournament on site had to decide which match was worth watching. The chosen one was normally the match in which a Chinese player was predicted to have the best chance of losing to a foreign player. In 2005, the 48th World Table Tennis Championships were held in Shanghai, China. After the last final was over, a Chinese sports journalist covering the tournament told the author: 'What can I write about this time? They (the Chinese table tennis players) won all the five champion titles again! It's boring! I will have to write something about who and who being in love. Do I have any other choices?'

The administration of Chinese elite sport has been highly militarised and barely changed since the establishment of the system. Most national teams and provincial teams train behind closed doors throughout the year. In general, a professional Chinese athlete spends at least 10 years living and training in a relatively enclosed environment.

[Case 2] The professional life of Kong Linghui and Liu Guoliang.

Kong Linghui and Liu Guoliang are both sports superstars in China. Kong was the men's singles champion at the Sydney Olympic Games and the 43rd World Table Tennis Championships. Liu was the men's singles champion at the Atlanta Olympic Games and the 45th World Table Tennis Championships. Kong and Liu were both promoted to the second string of the national table tennis team⁵ when they were 12 and to the first string of the national team⁶ at the age of 16. In 1994, they, both 18, became leading players in the national team. In 2001, Liu's career as a professional player came to an end. He then became a coach in the national team. In 2003, Liu was promoted to be the head coach of the national men's team. In October 2006, Kong retired as a player from the national team, and then started to coach the national women's team.

The experience of Kong and Liu is very representative of that of most Chinese elite athletes. Many former Olympic champions or world champions in China have become professional coaches and sports officials, and the overwhelming majority of Chinese sports officials are former professional athletes. Not only is the training of Chinese elite athletes enclosed, but the whole elite sport system is also an enclosed one to a certain extent.⁷ Such an enclosed system has some extraordinary features.

Firstly, discipleship is highly valued and deeply rooted in Chinese elite sport. The saying that 'who has been my teacher for one day, will be my father for life' defines the Chinese views of the relationship between the pupil and the mentor. Often, a Chinese elite athlete is trained by one coach for many years. The same coach is also responsible for supervising the athlete's private life. Military discipline always emphasises the importance of absolute obedience and Chinese elite athletes have been used to submitting themselves to their coaches' orders since childhood. When they themselves become coaches or officials, they, in turn, require the athletes they train or the staff they lead to be absolutely obedient to them; and remain obedient to those who trained them or who are leading them. Within Chinese elite sport, this discipleship is of great importance and personal loyalty is highly valued and often regarded above responsibility. The discipleship has been made rather 'vocal' in Chinese gymnastics as shown in the following case.

[Case 3] The two 'master grandpas' of Chinese gymnastics. Zhang Jian and Gao Jian are both former gymnasts. After leaving the national gymnastics team, they both became coaches. In the late 1990s, Zhang was promoted to be the director of the Gymnastic Administration Centre (GAC). Gao was promoted to be the deputy director of the GAC. At that time, Huang Yubin was the head coach of the national gymnastics team under the leadership of Zhang and Gao. Huang is also one of the former gymnasts trained by Zhang and Gao, and he himself, as a coach, has trained many famous gymnasts such as Li Xiaoshuang (the men's all-around champion in the Atlanta Olympic Games) and Li Xiaopeng (the men's parallel bars champion in the Sydney Olympic Games). When Huang mentioned Zhang and Gao to the gymnasts he trained, he seldom called Zhang and Gao by their official titles. Rather he usually referred to Zhang and Gao as 'the two master grandpas [shi ye] of yours'.⁸

Secondly, there is an 'authority cult' in Chinese elite sport. Most Chinese professional coaches were the best players of their generations and are highly respected by those who they train. A winner's experience is valued and often accepted without question.

Thirdly, Chinese sportspeople in general lack 'sportsmanship'. 'A winner is a king, a loser is nothing but a bandit' is an ancient Chinese saying still widely believed in China. On the one hand, the function of elite sport has been heavily politicised in China since the establishment of the PRC. Those who 'won glory for the state' were always set up as national heroes by the government, no matter whether they won fairly. The government is tacitly encouraging Chinese sportspeople to win at any cost. On the other hand, only those who are Olympic champions or world champions will be guaranteed a job by the government

after they no longer play elite sport. In order to win in important international competitions, desperate Chinese athletes are willing to pay any price.

Different Personnel Characteristics

A survey in 2003 revealed that 43% of Chinese news workers did not sign any contracts with their employers (Li & Sun, 2004) and therefore, the employees of the news media demonstrate the strongest labour mobility among all professions in China (Sun & Liu, 2006). Many media organisations only employ university students who apply for internship or young part-time workers, because their labour is cheap (Li & Sun, 2004). For example, in the two years between 2004 and 2006, 'fresh blood' replaced two-thirds of the sub-editors of the Titan Sports Weekly, the best-selling sports dedicated newspaper in China. The number of full-time reporters working for the paper increased as well. Most of the 'fresher' journalists were younger than 25. Out of all Chinese journalists, sports journalists, in particular, show the strongest labour mobility (Qu, 2006), for the policies of reporting sport employed by the Chinese media are very similar across the country and sports journalists encounter little difficulty in adapting to a new working ambience. For example, more than 50 editors and reporters left the South Sports Weekly, one of the top three sports newspapers in China at the time, for other sports newspapers between 2000 and 2005.

Most Chinese news workers are well educated. Almost 100% of Chinese journalists who are younger than 40 are university graduates. The proportion is credible even without statistics drawn from a large sample. Since the late 1990s, a policy implemented by all the media in China required that no one should be employed as a journalist without a Bachelor degree and Chinese sports journalists are no exception.

The overwhelming majority of Chinese sports journalists are young, well educated, and ready to job-hop (Qu, 2006), and these characteristics have both positive and negative impacts on the production of sports news. On the one hand, Chinese sports journalists, especially the young ones, have liberal views of journalism (Qu, 2006) and want to report Chinese elite sport in a more critical way. They care less about their leaders' opinions than those of older generations do and therefore, dare to touch some sensitive and controversial topics. If they are criticised because of their critical reporting, they often just leave for another job. On the other hand, as Bi Xidong, the former chief editor of the Youth Sports Weekly points out, young Chinese sports journalists in general lack a sense of responsibility and professional creditability.⁹ They do not have a big salary and have to earn more by writing more. They, sometimes, dare to create

sensational stories out of nothing. If they are caught for a false story, they cannot care less and just quit the job.

There is a well-known saying about sportspeople in China: ‘Their arms and legs are overdeveloped, while their minds are underdeveloped’. Chinese athletes started training regularly when they were very young. In sports training schools, they did not receive a normal education as other children did. After they were promoted to provincial or national teams, they seldom learnt general knowledge. Most Chinese elite athletes did not even complete primary school. Only when a young athlete is thought not good enough and ‘refused’ or ‘dumped’ by provincial or national teams could he or she possibly continue education in a normal school. However, almost all Chinese professional coaches and sports officials are former professional athletes who stopped playing sports when they were already adults. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of Chinese sportspeople, including professional athletes, coaches and sports officials, have not received a good general education.

[Case 4] Hao Haidong talked about his education level. Hao Haidong is arguably the most renowned footballer in China. In an interview with the Central China Television (CCTV),¹⁰ he said that he was promoted to the football team of the People’s Liberation Army¹¹ when he was only 10. He admitted that he did not even finish the 3rd grade in primary school and therefore, he regarded himself as ‘a person without general knowledge’.

Chinese elite sportspeople are barely qualified for any work other than sport because of the poor education they have received. The problem has been exacerbated by a policy employed by the government since the late 1990s. Having given up the responsibility of finding jobs for retired athletes in general, the government orders Chinese universities to enrol active and retired Chinese elite athletes as a kind of compensation. Almost all Chinese universities, institutes and colleges are state-owned and government-run, therefore the leading personnel of Chinese higher education are ready to comply with government policy and are happy with the advertising effect of ‘celebrity students’. Many athletes, who had not completed their education in primary school, were enrolled in universities. For those who are still serving in professional teams, their university studies have never really started. For those who really went to university to study, the universities had to give them special tuition and lower the pass standards.¹² The reality that Chinese sportspeople are not well educated has not been fundamentally changed.

Mainly due to their lack of general knowledge and formal education, Chinese sportspeople have some distinctive characteristics.

First, Chinese sportspeople are in general narrow-minded and conservative. They are easily influenced by extreme and radical ideologies such as narrow nationalism and personality cult. Also due to the heavy politicisation of the function of elite sport, Chinese sportspeople are used to being regarded as national heroes and being deified. Now, they deify themselves and refuse criticism in the name of the national interest. Xiao Tian, the Assistant Minister of the GAS once told the journalists of the *Xinhua News Agency* 'proudly': 'Are there any other organisations in China that can win glory for the state on the international stage in a no-nonsense way as we do? No!'¹³ It is not an exaggeration to say that the elite sport circle is one of the most conservative and ideologically backward areas in today's Chinese society.

Secondly, Chinese sportspeople in general lack common courtesy and manner in their dealing with other people, especially those outside their circle.¹⁴ Chinese athletes live and train in a relatively enclosed environment and have few chances to experience an ordinary social life. Their everyday life becomes highly militarised and routinised. Their coaches take care of everything for them. When they have to face the outside world, often, they feel nervous and uncomfortable, and this nervousness often develops into a defensive or even aggressive attitude towards those they cannot really understand, especially when they have to deal with sports journalists.

Different News Value Orientations

During the 30 years between 1949 and 1978, timeliness of news was not important for the Chinese media. Rather, the importance was always attached to how to propagate the success of the CPC's politics and governance through a certain news event. The news value of a sports event was that it provided a 'platform' for political propaganda. The process of an event and the feelings of the people involved in the event were not regarded as important, and the media focused on interpreting the event politically.

The 15 years between 1978, when the Chinese news media started to lose government subsidies, and 1994, when the 'professionalism experiment' was introduced into Chinese football, were a period of transition for Chinese sports journalism. Although the Chinese news media still stuck to propaganda principles, the clichés in Mao's era such as 'great victory of Mao Zedong's Thoughts' and 'good testimony of the advantages of Communism' gradually disappeared from sports stories. Instead, the victories of Chinese elite sport were more often interpreted in a context of nationalism or patriotism. Moreover, political interpretation of a sports event was no longer the focus. Rather, the focus shifted to the sports event itself and the sportspeople involved. Collectivism was

still advocated, but at the same time, characters, struggles and some anecdotes of individual athletes were also reported. The language became softer and more interesting, and sometimes, even showed a sense of humour. In general, Chinese elite sport was still reported positively during this period. The very few criticisms on Chinese elite sport were mainly about the technical reason why certain Chinese athletes or teams were defeated in international competitions.

The value orientation of sports news in this period of transition is still most welcome for Chinese sportspeople. Chinese sports officials like sports reports emphasising power of 'collective' and leadership. They think their administrative achievements should be propagated by the media. Chinese coaches like sports reports focusing on matches rather than the stardom of athletes. They think the media should play the role of 'cheerleader': always propagate their victories and forgive their failures. Chinese athletes like sport reports focusing on their sporting skills and performance rather than their private lives.

The CFFDL was unveiled on April 17, 1994 and drew great media interest and public attention. Almost at the same time, stories of some biggest European football leagues, which were translations from the originals published by the European media, appeared in Chinese newspapers. The European style of reporting football has been copied by the Chinese media in their reporting of Chinese football. As Xie Yi, the former chief editor of the Football Weekly, pointed out, from the very beginning, the Chinese news media's coverage of the CFFDL was not affected too much by the traditional propaganda model.¹⁵

The local media usually report local football teams positively and understandably cast a critical eye on the rivals of the local teams at the same time. Therefore, critical reports on domestic football have been common since the establishment of the league. Then, gradually critical reporting spread to every aspect of Chinese football. The Chinese men's team is not the top gun in Asia and has a long history of being defeated by South Korea and Japan. The Chinese news media not only dare to criticise Chinese footballers' poor performance and the managers' poor decisions, but also dare to criticise the policies of the CFA and the whole administrative system of Chinese football as well.

When reporting Chinese football critically becomes a common practice in sports news production, the Chinese news media also put the private lives of Chinese footballers under scrutiny. Football news is the pioneer of tabloidisation of sports stories in China. Now this trend of tabloidisation has spread to reporting of other sports, especially which the news media cannot criticise too much or too openly.

Being Ignorant in Each Other's Eyes.

Different professional features, different personnel characteristics and different news value orientations between the Chinese news media and Chinese elite sport often result in dispute between sports journalists and sportspeople. Although most disputes are apparently about disregard on both sides, they are actually underlined by the very different understandings of the media's duty.

Wang Junsheng, the former deputy president of the CFA, once famously suggested to the sports journalists who had come from all over China in a press conference: 'We are family!' After the 2002 Soccer World Cup, Ma Dexing, the chief football reporter of the *Titan Sports Weekly* spoke out in a CCTV interview:¹⁶ '*How can the media and the CFA be family? It is just impossible!*' *The relationship between the Chinese media and Chinese elite sport before 1978 can, indeed, be described as 'family'*. In that era, when Chinese athletes participated in an international competition, the journalists sent by the national media, especially the *People's Daily* and the *Xinhua News Agency*, often travelled as members of the Chinese delegations. The only difference was that journalists and sportspeople made different contributions to completing the same political mission: After the Chinese athletes had 'won glory for the state'; the Chinese news media reported and propagated their victories. If the Chinese athletes lost, the Chinese news media reported very little and briefly, or did not report at all.

However, such a reporting policy was dumped by the Chinese media after economic reform forced them to satisfy their audience and readers. Nowadays, most Chinese news media take Chinese elite sport just as the subject for report. As Ma Dexing pointed out, 'the news media need the readers to buy their news products. What the news media want to do is completely different from what the CFA wants them to do'.¹⁷ Interestingly, most Chinese sports officials and coaches still believe that reporting Chinese elite sport positively is a kind of duty of the Chinese news media. When they find the media have reported them negatively, they often complain 'you did not support us!' For them, a sports story is either supportive or destructive and they don't really care whether the story is true or not. Similarly, for them, a sports journalist is either their friend or their enemy. Such a simplistic understanding of the media's duty often irritates Chinese journalists, who in general believe that it is the audience/reader but not the reported that they need to serve. The following case illustrates the different understandings held by the journalists and the reported sports figures.

[Case 5] I will inform you when it can be reported. In January 2002, the deputy head coach of the Chinese athletics team handed in his resignation to the Athletics Administrative Centre (AAC). An 'insider' working in the AAC

leaked the story to the author who was a professional sports journalist at the time. When the author phoned the deputy head coach to verify the story, he was astonished and said: 'How on earth can you get to know this?! You must not report it! When it can be reported, I will inform you.'

The sharp contrast between their educational backgrounds and ways of thinking makes it difficult for Chinese journalists and Chinese sportspeople to develop true friendship or harmonious relationship. In the eyes of many Chinese journalists, Chinese sportspeople are in general rude and ignorant and the following two cases explain the reasons for such a point of view to a certain extent.

[Case 6] I never credit the words of a so-called 'an official'. On December 10, 2002, at a press conference held by the Volleyball Administrative Centre (VAC) in Beijing, the deputy director of the VAC told the journalists including the author: 'I am not sure if the women's league could be held in time next season'. One month later, the author quoted him but did not name him in an analysis of the women's league of volleyball.¹⁸ The director of the VAC was not happy with this analysis. In an interview he gave to a Shanghai-based newspaper, he claimed that he never credited the words of so-called 'an official' in any news stories, 'if someone is not named in a report, I am pretty sure that his words are fabricated.'¹⁹

[Case 7] The reporter is brainless. On October 18, 2005, the *Beijing Entertainment Daily* reported that Wang Dexian, a coach of women's long distance running, told some journalists who would be the women's 10,000 meters champion at the 10th National Games of China had been decided behind closed doors before the final. Some other newspapers, including the Beijing Daily, reported Wang's words as well. In a press conference held on that day, Feng Shuyong, the deputy director of the AAC criticised the Beijing Entertainment Daily and the reporter who broke the news, saying: '*We have talked with Wang Dexian and he denies that he has ever said that. We have talked with the reporter who wrote the news as well and she confessed that she was wrong about it.*' He also said: '*The reporter who wrote the news is brainless. She does not understand athletics at all.*' Then, the female reporter Liu Jing, who broke the news in the *Beijing Entertainment Daily*, stood up, questioning Feng: 'In fact, you did not investigate the case. On such a basis, do you think your harsh criticism of the reporter is proper? Yesterday, at least 7 or 8 reporters heard Wang's words. Now, you criticise her so rashly and claim the reporter is brainless. Do you think such a rash criticism is proper in your position?' Feng asked her: '*Did you hear what he said yourself?*' Liu Jing said: '*Of course I heard what he said and then reported what he said, that is it!*' A reporter of the *Yangzi Evening News* backed up Liu by declaring that he himself heard Wang's words as well and he could prove Liu Jing had not lied. This incident was widely reported by the

Chinese news media including the *Xinhua News Agency*. On October 19, 2005, the *Beijing Entertainment Daily* published a statement refuting Feng's criticism and Liu Jing declared that she had never spoken to any one from the AAC that she was wrong about the news.²⁰

In the eyes of Chinese sportspeople, Chinese sports journalists are equally ignorant and know very little about sport. As a matter of fact, very few Chinese sports journalists are former professional athletes or had a profound understanding of the sports that they report in terms of techniques and tactics. Even experienced sports journalists are unlikely to understand a sport in a way or at a level similar to that of professional coaches and athletes. When being asked '*unprofessional*' questions by journalists, many Chinese sportspeople find it difficult to answer, and feel that they, the interviewees, are not duly respected. The following case is not an unusual example.

[Case 8] The table tennis coach refused to answer. During the 47th World Table Tennis Championships held in Paris in May 2003, a Chinese sports reporter, who had just started to cover table tennis, asked a coach of the Chinese table tennis team what the so called 'outward-pimpled rubber' and 'inward-pimpled rubber' were about. The coach thought that this was the most basic knowledge of table tennis and the reporter should have known it. Therefore, the coach refused to answer the question and complained to other journalists: 'Why is he (the reporter) here? He knows nothing about table tennis. Why is he, but not someone who knows table tennis better, sent to cover the World Championships by his boss?'

Chinese footballers, whose lives are scrutinised by the Chinese news media, cast a more critical eye on sports journalists. They often ridicule: 'You have to protect yourself from fires, thieves, and journalists as well'. Chinese athletes, especially those who are regarded as celebrities, argue that Chinese sports journalists dare to try anything to zero in on their private lives and very often they are deliberately misquoted and their off-record conversations with friends are made public unduly by the media.

Conclusion

The policy of reporting Chinese elite sport currently employed by the Chinese news media gradually took shape after 1994. As long as they do not offend the CPC and government, the Chinese media will report Chinese elite sport as objectively as possible rather than propagate it. However, Chinese sportspeople still hold on nostalgically to the outdated views of sports news.

They take it as the Chinese media's duty to propagate the achievements of Chinese elite sport and Chinese elite sport should be positively portrayed.

The Chinese news media have struggled in the market to earn their own living for more than 30 years. It should not have been very difficult for anyone to understand why the Chinese news media have changed their policy of reporting Chinese elite sport. However, the unique professional features and personnel characteristics of Chinese elite sport result in a kind of stubbornness which is not common in other areas of Chinese society. When generally poorly educated, narrow-minded, conservative and self-deified Chinese sportspeople have to face generally well educated, open-minded, liberal and maverick Chinese sports journalists, conflicts in a cultural sense are almost inevitable. The interviewers and the interviewees often find themselves in confrontation. The cultural difference is not only reflected in the different understandings of the purpose of interview, but also in the different manners of asking and answering.

It is necessary to clarify one key point. The different understandings of the media's duty are fundamentally structured by the broader political and economic structure. It is impossible for the Chinese news media, as the CPC's mouthpiece, to stick to the same principles held on to by the Western media. If they had not been under great pressure in the market, the Chinese news media would not have reported Chinese elite sport in the current style, even if many Chinese journalists have accepted the rules and values of Western professional journalism. Professional features and personnel characteristics are both shaped by the political and economic structure as well, although they are very often regarded as cultural differences. The valued discipleship in Chinese elite sport and the poor education received by Chinese sportspeople are not choices freely and actively made by Chinese sportspeople. They are 'products' of the whole-country support system; and then they themselves become part of the system.

Notes:

1. It was originally published in the *China Workers Monthly* on February 7, 1940.
2. It is a letter written by Mao Zedong on January 12, 1958.
3. It is a speech in the National Forum of News Work on November 25, 1989. Li Ruihuan was a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee who was in charge of propaganda at that time.
4. See the report 'Zhongchao Qunian Juesuan Shouru Jin 7800 Wan [The Income of the China Football Premiership Was Only 78 Million Yuan Last Year]' in the *Competition Daily*, February 25, 2005.
5. This string is actually the junior national team.
6. This string is actually the senior national team.
7. See the Xinhua News Agency's in-depth investigative report 'Zhuanxiang Xiuxian de Wanju, Bozu

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- Zhongguo Tiyu Hquhecong [What Will Cripple Chinese Elite Sport Become, A Leisure Toy?]' dispatched on August 26, 2004: http://news3.xinhuanet.com/sports/2004-08/09/content_1742895_1.htm
8. Huang used the special title many times when he was interviewed by the CCTV. The author heard him use this title several times when covering gymnastics as a sports journalist.
 9. Bi Xidong expressed his views in July 2002 when he was interviewed by a Chinese website. See the interview on: http://www.1soccer.com/news_show.php?ID=2790
 10. On June 11, 2006, CCTV4 broadcast an interview with Hao Haidong as an episode of 'Meeting Sports Celebrities'.
 11. The People's Liberation Army of China has its own professional sports teams whose administrative rank is the same as that of provincial teams.
 12. See the report 'Youxiu Yundongyuan Shangxue Bunan Xuecheng Nan [It Is Not Difficult for Chinese Elite Athletes to Go to School. It Is Difficult for Them to Graduate]' in the China Youth Daily, September 8, 2004, p.A8
 13. See note 7.
 14. Xie Yi, the former chief editor of the Football Weekly expressed similar views in July 2002 when he was interviewed by a Chinese website. See the interview on: http://www.1soccer.com/news_show.php?ID=2790
 15. Xie Yi expressed his views when he was interviewed by the Sohu, one of the biggest comprehensive websites in China in 2003. See the interview on: <http://sports.sohu.com/76/50/blank212875076.shtml>
 16. After the 2002 Soccer World Cup, CCTV made a documentary named Milu Shidai [The Era of Milutinovic]. Ma was interviewed in this documentary, which was broadcast on CCTV5 in December 2002.
 17. Ibid.
 18. See the report 'Nvpai Liansai zai Zhongji xia Qingxie [The Women's Volleyball League Becomes Unstable Under Pressure]' in the Titan Sports Weekly, January 6, 2003, p. 23.
 19. See the report 'Qiujiie Renshi Pibo Liansai Wuyong Shuo [Key Volleyball Figures Refute the Proposition that Domestic League Is Meaningless]' in the Shanghai Morning Post, January 7, 2003.
 20. See the report 'Xinbao Jizhe Beipo Fanjie Feng Shuyong [The Reporter of the Beijing Entertainment Daily Refuted Feng Shuyong]' in the Beijing Entertainment Daily, October 19, 2005.

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Ping WU is a senior lecturer of the Department of Physical Education and Sports Studies at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. She was a professional sports journalist in China between 1997 and 2003 and covered many international sporting events including the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, the 2002 Men's Soccer World Cup and the 2002 Pusan Asian Games. Ping was awarded a PhD degree for her research on the complex relationship between the news media and sports administrative organizations in contemporary China in 2007. Her research mainly focuses on the sociology of mediated sports production. She has published in a range of books and journals on topics such as the interdependence between sport and the media, media treatment of sportswomen, the media build-up of the Olympic Games, and the Chinese elite sports system. E-mail: Wu.Ping@beds.ac.uk
